In Perpetual Beta? On the Participatory Design of Facebook Games

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ABSTRACT
This paper proposes a new way of looking into the 'sociality' of social (network) games. On the basis of looking closely at the development of Frontierville, a popular Facebook game, and more abstractly at the development of its fellow Zynga Facebook-based games (such as Farmville or Cityville), we argue that various network-based forms of participatory design are increasingly becoming both influential and indispensable in social (network) based game design than ever before. Although participatory design in gaming is not new, the way in which participatory design is being used in social (network) games is new, giving the player a greater and more immediate role in the game design than ever before. Whether this is for better or worse, this form of participation fostered by the structure of social networks has allowed social (network) game players to become much more powerful than previous in their relationship to the game industry.

Keywords
social gaming, social networks, participatory design, game design

INTRODUCTION
What is a 'social game'?

Perhaps one of the most problematic and disputed terminologies in the field of game studies, 'social gaming' has evolved into a true polysemy. On the one hand, social gaming refers to the *playing of a game as a form of social interaction*. On the other hand, as a result of the launch of development tools for social networks, like Facebook and its *Facebook Platform* in 2007, 'social gaming' has taken on an additional meaning, *a game playable on a social network***.**

The overlap between these two definitions has resulted in an increased amount of discussion concerning whether 'social gaming' is in fact the most accurate name for these social network-based games. It is true that social network-based games often give the appearance of some form of sociality in the fact that often the games include and make use of the peer connections made by the player (the 'contacts' or 'friends' a person has

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added to his or her network). This being said, often when addressing the social functions and mechanics of the game design, despite the presence of the player's peers within the game, the actual interaction between the player and his or her peers is very limited. In games in which peers appear as a mechanic, the most frequent form of use is to treat the peer as a non-player character[i] or an object, in which the peer acts as a resource to be used by the player within the player's own structured playing experience, as opposed to the presence of the peer being treated as a fellow player, contributing to an environment based around the social interaction between players (Jacobs, 2011). In this way, it could be argued that the player's relationship to his or her peers in the game is not inherently based on social interaction. At the same time, despite the fact that often peers are used more as resources than fellow players, the mechanics disguising that fact are, at points, social in nature. For instance, cooperation between players is necessary in order to complete certain tasks (requiring players to send each other items on a daily basis). In this way, it could also be argued that the player's relationships to his or her peers in the game does require a trace of social interaction. Therefore, often when research tackles social gaming and the social aspects of multiplayer online games, it focuses on the relationship between players within the game environment, qualifying the 'social' aspect of the game description through player to player interaction alone**.**

In this paper however, we look to step outside of the circles of interaction between players, their fellow players (peers), and non-players, and instead propose a new approach to understand the 'sociality' of social games; one based on the interaction of the player with the developers of the game. Although it is important to continue discussion on the mechanics of social gaming and the kind of player experience it structures (e.g. Jacobs, 2011; Tyni et al., 2011; Shin & Shin, 2011) it is also important to look beyond this when addressing the sociality of games. To look at the relationship between player and developer, we will embark on a case study of Zynga's series of *-ville* games, and address how various forms of social interaction and player participation have (re)structured the standard game design process, and explore the effect this (re)structuring has had on the community within the game and the evolution of the design of the game itself. What makes a social game 'social' should perhaps not just be based on the default condition that a direct interaction between players is required, but rather also consider the form of interaction between player and game developer, resulting in a form of gameplay based around the creation of a cumulative result, the game itself, that all players within their own unique developer relationships socially produce.

PARTICIPATORY GAME DESIGN

In the context of multiplayer online gaming, game developers have always relied on acquiring information about their player audience and maintaining a form of dialogue with the players, both directly and indirectly. In general, there are two forms of dialogue most commonly implemented between player and developer: direct participatory design and silent participatory design (Glas 2010).

Certain game developers, particularly those with relatively small communities, have preferred to establish a direct relationship with a handful of the most active and most vocal members of the community. These players are most frequently consulted through the formation of select user groups or message boards monitored by a member of the development team, or, in other cases, personal communication with a member of the

development team on a one-to-one basis.[ii] These select members are asked to give the developers their thoughts concerning alteration and additions to the game, most frequently the alterations or additions which the developers feel will heavily affect the dynamics of the gameplay (and therefore often the community as a whole). In this form of participatory design, players act as conscious participants in the game design process, working together with the developers to contribute to the continued stability and balance of the game environment.

However, this form of player-developer relationship is unbalanced itself, as, in this structure, the majority of the players of the game do not have access to the developers, and therefore only a minority of opinions are represented. On top of that, the kind of players that most commonly are selected to be a part of this exclusive form of participatory design, are either the most hardcore players or the most socially active players, whose opinions are often not akin to the majority of the players (Glas, 2010). Even when developers put an open forum for all players to leave suggestions or ideas in, the ideas put forward by the players are still often filtered through the same smaller group of players, as the developers do not have the time (or often the experience) to sort through which ideas have merit and which do not. Therefore, ideas often come from either the intense, challenge-seeking hardcore players or the casual players who's core game experience is socializing and networking. Even if the majority of the players honestly believe an idea is good (and beneficial to the entire community) the idea frequently gets thrown out as the two player types doing the choosing often have different motivations than the general mass of players.

On the other hand, some game developers, such as those of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), make use of silent participatory design (Taylor, 2006; Glas, 2010). In this form of player-developer relationship, the logged actions of all players who access the game world contribute to the decisions made concerning the game design. This form of contribution is used by the game developers in the hopes that including such an all-encompassing, unbiased viewpoint in future game design will help the developers maintain a well-balanced game environment. If the developers notice the players are all struggling in a specific section, or take much longer than expected to complete a task, or all quit at a certain point in the game, they can take that information and use it to fix the balancing as they know exactly where the problems are, without having to filter that information from the players themselves. In this form of participatory design, players act as unaware participants in the game design process, and only indirectly contribute to the game design by their actions within the game itself.

In this form of relationship, although all players are equally represented, the foundation for decisions on development by the developers are still limited, as the player's actions within the game and the feelings of the player about that action do not always match up. Just because a player repetitively does an action, does not mean that the player believes the action to be well produced or enjoyable.

In both of these instances, the goal of the player-developer relationship is to work toward maintaining the balance of the game by involving both the player and the developer in the process of the game design. However, the manifestations of this relationship are far from uncomplicated in practice. Online multiplayer game development has customarily resulted in arduous and time-consuming iterative cycles, where it has often been too difficult in the end to incorporate player perspectives, despite

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the developer's best interests. However, we think that this situation is different in Facebook gaming.

In the case of Facebook gaming, a different game design process has been created, resulting in games that are *launched rapidly and updated frequently*, therefore, remaining in a 'perpetual beta' phase, despite the fact some of these games have been around for over three years. Everything the players of these games do is part of the design process, from sending gifts to peers to not accepting upcoming quests, with the actions being carefully monitored by the developer company (Tyni et al., 2011). Not only are the actions of the player's monitored, but the communication on the forums are actively monitored as well, leading to a combination of the direct and the silent participatory designs in social (network) gaming.

In the next section, we will explore how Zynga's Facebook game, Frontierville, has been modified and designed by the actions and discussion of its player, and the kind of game design strategy that has resulted from this form of participatory design.

IN 'PERPETUAL BETA'

Before we continue, it is important to reiterate here that the argument is not that participatory design in online gaming is new, nor that the participatory design seen in the Zynga games are a new form of it. Rather, the argument is that what is seen in Facebook gaming is a *new implementation* of it with *new results* from that form of implementation.

As described in the previous section, Zynga uses both silent and direct participatory design. Zynga carefully studies data gathered from player actions – such as which quests the player accepts and completes, and how long it takes the player to complete them – (Tyni et al., 2011), and Zynga also carefully monitors the community forums for feedback from the players – such as suggestions or comments on game aspects the players would like to see changed, added, or removed. These methods are, again, not new forms of participatory game design. However, what is new, is the way in which Zynga uses the feedback provided from both of these methods. While traditional online game developers may take months if not years to decide whether or not to act on a specific feedback, Zynga in many instances implements feedback almost immediately in as short of a time period as mere days. For example, at the beginning of the launch of *Frontierville* may players gave feedback concerning the balancing of a special food item they could buy to receive additional energy. In a matter of a few days, the item had been modified as requested by the players. On another level, at the same time, Zynga also announced changes to the energy balancing (going from 1 energy per 3 minutes to 1 energy per 5 minutes) and leveling (how many experience points were needed to level). This appeared to have been more based on the result of the game play as opposed to player request. Not only does Zynga implement the feedback given by the players, but Zynga also makes sure to communicate the changes to the player, and Zynga's 'gratitude' to the player for helping them maintain the game.

Because these games are launched frequently and updated rapidly, even though the games have been very successful (in terms of revenue and player based) it's easy to notice that many of Zynga's old games drop in player numbers after the initial few weeks or months of launch. For instance, *Farmville* went from over 80 million monthly active users (MAU) in 2010 (Cashmore, 2010) to just 30 million MAU in August 2011. *Cityville* is beginning to see the same pattern, going from 100 million MAU in January

2011 to 88 million MAU two months later and, at the time of writing in August 2011, it has now dropped to 76 million MAU. Interestingly, some time after all of these games start to lose players, a new game is launched, and additional content continues to be added on an almost weekly basis to the old game. *Farmville's* decline led to *Frontierville* and *Frontierville's* decline led to *Cityville*. Zynga does have other games than these three, but in the 'ville' franchise a pattern begins to become plausible: Zynga replaces a slowly depleting game with a new iteration. It appears that these games have a very limited lifespan, one year at most, before a new game is launched. So what does this mean about the design of the games? And how does this relate to the participatory design?

We argue that, through implementing the feedback gathered through direct and silent participatory game design, Zynga has indeed begun to base their game design around a core 'supply and demand' narrative created through the dynamic of the relationship between player and game developer. This narrative is based on the player feedback (metric data and comments in the forums) Zynga gathers. Zynga creates an environment that has scarcity, like most games, where some items are available readily and others are much more difficult to acquire. Zynga then launches the game and allows players to enter the environment. By watching their playing habits (what resources they run low on, what quests they choose to do for what rewards) and listening to their feedback (comments on the forum about there not being enough of a resource, suggestions on what kind of resource management would be helpful) Zynga then allows the player to influence the game design *based on the player's wants*. Therefore, the player violates the ultimate design taboo – design based on what the player wants in the game as opposed to design based on what the player should be motivated to want and get in the game. This is the ultimate problem when allowing players to participate in the design – often they participate in the design from a player point of view rather than a game designer point of view. They want things to be added that improve their current situation (lacking something, requiring too much time to do something, etc.) as opposed to keeping an eye on the actual balance required to make the environment engaging, challenging, and sustainable. Because the games are balanced this way, most end in huge inflation – players with too much money or resources – with little done to decrease the inflation, besides adding new resources needed to complete new challenges, which then results in an overwhelming game environment with too much to do and too much to manage.

This also appears to be the case as instead of implementing feedback on elements of gameplay outside of this supply and demand base, Zynga refuses to add any change that would affect the control they have as developers over the supply and demand. This can be seen in their response to player's requesting a trading house:

"Hello Pioneers, After much discussion with the higher ups, it has been decided that there will not be a trading option on the forums. I have, with the help of others, consolidated every trade thread we could find. Please DO NOT post any more trade threads. These new ones will also either be locked down or deleted. … Give aways are treated the same as trading, and, as such, are not allowed either. Signatures may still included an add-me link, but may not contain trading information for Frontier Ville since trading is not allowed anywhere on the Frontier Ville forums."

We argue the reasoning for the decision is based on the fact that allowing players to trade items easier would then destroy the supply and demand balance that the game is based around. Making capital from the game is based around this scarcity (if you don't

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have an item, you either advertise to your friends for it, or you pay money for it). Were Zynga to allow players to have an easy access trading forum (thus no longer requiring the player to recruit friends and make wall posts to get items) the entire market Zynga has created is destroyed.

Despite the fact they frequently don't make game design changes like this (which as seen in the previous example, ironically are often against all elements that would make the games actually social), they do make sure to provide feedback to the players so the players can see they are being listened to. For example, the players of *Frontierville* began to complain about the balancing of the meals (an energy replenishment). Very soon after the *Frontierville* admins responded: "Due to the Community feedback, the team has made rebalancing of meals a major priority on the agenda. They wanted me to tell you this and let you know it is being worked on!" The same can be seen at a later point "The FrontierVille team heard your voices for the last couple days and we've been working very hard on improving the game's performance." In this way the feedback system becomes an aspect of social enjoyment in the game (feeling listened to), and Zynga plays heavily on it in all of their games, not just *Frontierville*. They allow the players to feel control over the game design, but Zynga can continue to ultimately have an environment in the end controllable by them. Instead of having a sustainable narrative they just add more resources and start the supply and demand process again, allowing the players to 'design' the path of the new game, and when that begins to destroy the balancing they can abandon the game and move on to a new one.

Thus, we can argue that not only is a game like *Frontierville* in perpetual beta through its constant renegotiating of game balance by players and developers, the series of *-ville* games can be viewed in the same way, with changes being made over different games rather than in different updates of the same game. This participatory approach to game design forms a new dimension of what could be called the 'sociality' of social games, and deserves at least as much attention as its two more commonly used meanings.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that it is important for game studies to look outside of the traditional 'sociality' side of online gaming studies – referencing the circles of interaction between players, their fellow players (peers), and non-players – and instead look at the interaction of players with the developers (and community managers) of the game. Using a case study of Zynga Facebook games, we have shown how traditional forms of participatory design in online gaming – silent and direct participatory design – are being implemented in a new fashion; one that is immediately launched and updated frequently. This creates a game that is in a constant state of fluctuation, resulting in a 'perpetual beta' state.

As discussed in the previous section, at the moment it appears that Zynga chooses to replace a game that gets too congested with features and additions with a new game, instead of trying to actually fix the issues in collaboration with the player base. Zynga bases their game design around a 'supply and demand' balance, centered around player feedback (both metric data – how the players play/what they run short of – and player feedback – what the players ask the developers to fix). Players begin to design the game based on a player perspective (wanting what is scarce in the game) as opposed to a designer's perspective (creating scarcity in the game to generate gameplay). Zynga

searches and generates demand from the earliest point in launching the game, and over time slowly offers supply in return for media value and economic capital. Zynga is quick to implement any feedback that positively affects the balance (generating more capital for Zynga), but slow to implement any feedback that would upset that 'supply and demand' balance that they have worked so hard to create using player feedback (such as adding features requested by players to make the game more social). Thus in the end, the game environment becomes unbalanced, to the point where either new resources are launched (that were not previously in the game) or a new game is launched, fresh for 'rebalancing'.

This may seem like a negative view on participatory culture in social (network) gaming, however, it is the hope that addressing this apparent imbalance will pave the way for more constructive forms of quickly and often updated participatory game design. Moreover, it would be interesting to address whether player contributions like this can be positive, or whether player-perspective game design only creates games that slowly deplete over time. In addition, it should also be considered that perhaps players enjoy having a say in the game design, which could make an engaging, well-balanced game environment less critical in some situations. Again we return to our original argument, that perhaps in these games, the social relationship between developer and player is a motivation to play, beyond traditional reasoning of gameplay. The player plays not for the interaction with the game environment, but for the rewarding experience of interacting with the developer while pursuing the storyline in the game. In a way gameplay as a review process.

In the end, it will be curious to see how these games continue to evolve, and how the participatory design of them also continues to progress and whether the price for collaborative game design is really 'destructive game design' or if there is another alternative yet to be uncovered.

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[i] A non-player character (NPC) is a character not directly controlled by a player. In the case of computer games, it is a character controlled by artificial intelligence. NPCs are most commonly triggered by certain actions or dialogues done by the player within the game.

[ii] A usergroup is a group of players, often selected by the developers, who can advise the developers on changes and additions to the game.

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