

## **Killing Time in Diner Dash: Representation, Gender, and Casual Games**

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In the ongoing debates concerning the emergence of game studies, ludologist approaches often dismiss or marginalize narrative and visual elements of games while privileging games as formal systems of rules and game play mechanics. Indeed, the visual representation of games is frequently gendered—for example, when Espen Aarseth dismisses the visual importance of Lara Croft or when Chris Crawford refers to graphics as “cosmetics.” This discourse inevitably reinscribes stereotypical gender formations where the “hardcore,” abstract, formal, mathematical systems privileged by these approaches to games are masculinized while the “casual,” material, visual content, and non-essential aspects of games are feminized. This gendered distinction seems eerily similar to the recent fears and anxieties expressed by the hardcore gamer community over the rise of casual games which can be linked to a distinctive gendering of the hardcore as masculine and the casual as feminine. Thus, this paper will analyze the hardcore “fetish” (in gaming and in game studies), attempting to expose the gender dynamics that structure and subtend the distinctions between the hardcore and the casual.

Through a close reading and close playing of the “time management” game Diner Dash, the supposedly non-essential visual representations and narrative elements within the game are shown to be essential for interpreting its structure and its political import. As many have indicated, attempting to limit game studies to the analysis of a game's formal system is unnecessarily exclusionary; using Diner Dash as its lens, this paper attempts to critique the blind spots which result from a dismissal of visual representation and narrative. For example, Ian Bogost's recent claim that Diner Dash is “videogame kitsch” relies on the argument that its game mechanics are a simplification and reduction of complex game play and that Diner Dash exudes sentimentality through its redeployment of hackneyed “ideals of the Protestant work ethic.” What goes missing is any serious investigation of the actual narrative and/or visual elements in the game which reveal a complex, highly gendered investigation of “women's work,” the recent rise of female entrepreneurship, and the gendered impact of contemporary time pressure. While kitsch is often described as essentially apolitical, this paper seeks to recover Diner Dash as a complex and contradictory feminist document. Understanding Diner Dash as “not just a game” but as a complex cultural document requires that one embeds the game within its cultural and historical situation, that is, within its own time. The larger argument in this paper links the marginalization of visual representation in a certain strain of game studies to a particular effacement of historical temporality, to a killing of time where the “cosmetics” or visual “fashions” of games are understood as casual, ephemeral elements which cover a more unhistorical, permanent core of games as formal systems. Ultimately, recovering the importance of these “so-called” casual elements will counter the fetish of a synchronic approach to games with a historically embedded, diachronic approach to game studies focused on historical determinants which influence video games as cultural artifacts.

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