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The sociality of asynchronous gameplay: Social network games, dead-time and family bonding

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Introduction

Popular images of multiplayer digital games are diverse and dynamic, often showing us friends or siblings playing a *FIFA* or Madden game in their living room, a family engaged in multiple sports games with their Wii, or a guild gathering together via remote locations to fight through dangerous dungeons in *World of Warcraft*. Alternately that multiplayer image can be quite negative, presenting profanity, misogyny and homophobic slurs rising up from player vs player (PvP) style games such as *League of Legends*, where players will denigrate and abuse not just their opponents, but their own teammates as well. Yet sociality of all types is not just a feature of synchronous gameplay – it is also a key (but understudied) component of asynchronous multiplayer gameplay. Even when players are not engaged together in a persistent game-space at the same time, sociality is possible and can become an important part of not just the gameplay but the larger online networked experience. Rather

than seeing it merely as a design limitation, the element of asynchronicity can instead be viewed as an affordance for fostering different and rewarding types of social interaction not offered by simply synchronous play. This chapter will explore the concept of asynchronicity, particularly as it relates to social network game (SNG) design as well as how families play such games 'together' and how the concept can be better theorized as an important component of sociality in digital games.

In comparison to other multiplayer computer and video games, SNGs are unique in that they are designed to be played with the people in a player's online social network(s), and players do not normally play them at the same time. Early research on SNGs focused on their limited social affordances, where sociality was defined merely as instrumental: in order to progress, players often needed a certain number of 'friends' or 'neighbours' to advance, players had to request items from others to complete quests and challenges, and visiting the game-spaces of their friends offered no real chance for meaningful interaction (Rossi 2009; Wohn et al. 2011). In this sense, players 'used their network' (Consalvo 2011) more than they played *with* their network. Yet the limited social interaction was often blamed on one common feature of such games – their asynchronous design.¹ Although players relied on each other for progression, they did not play in the same game-space at the same time (Järvinen 2009; Bogost 2004). This particular design element is still present and prevalent, but deserves a more careful examination. Asynchronicity influences the types of sociality possible, and so it is suggested that players learn to negotiate the different types of sociality that are possible through asynchronous gameplay (Stenros, Paavilainen and Mäyrä 2009). For many, the asynchronicity of SNGs allows players to engage in a leisure activity with members of their social network without a direct commitment.²

Social media sites have become a staple in maintaining social and familial bonds (Vitak, Ellison and Steinfield 2011). Sites such as Facebook allow users to post status updates, upload pictures and share online content. But family ties are developed through more than just the exchange of personal information and direct interaction. Families also bond through repetitive and often mundane activities on a daily basis; watching television or cooking dinner can strengthen a familial bond as it enables them to 'be' together without having to exchange meaningful information. With the increased popularity of online SNGs, families that are separated by distance now have a space to engage in leisure activities that have the ability to bring family members together yet do not necessarily rely on a 'meaningful' exchange of information. Social network sites and SNGs more specifically, provide families with a space of leisure where they can engage with each other in a way that allows them to

feel connected without the obligation of direct, purposive interaction (Wen, Kow and Chen 2011).

This chapter will look at the affordances and limitations of the design of SNGs, the impact of asynchronistic gameplay on forms of sociality, the importance of dead-time and, drawing on our previous research on families and Facebook games (Boudreau and Consalvo 2013; 2014), how asynchronous social network gameplay enables family members to interact with each other in a less direct, purposive, yet still meaningful way.

The design affordances and limitations of sociality in SNGs

In defining social games, Consalvo explains that 'Social games typically feature a single player component, coupled with basic forms of multi-player interaction embedded in the design' (2010, 189). In order to address the ways in which SNGs foster different types of sociability, the following section looks at a few design elements that either afford or limit social interaction in and around SNGs.

Combining design theories from Rao (2008) and Bogost (2004), Järvinen (2009) explains five design drivers for designing SNGs: symbolic physicality, spontaneity, inherent sociability, narrative and asynchronicity (Järvinen 2009, 97). Together, these drivers create what Järvinen calls 'interaction design for social playfulness' (98) where SNG design is aimed at creating 'story- or community-based justifications for the resolutions of events in their games' as compared to more traditional video game design which is primarily concerned with creating 'skill-based justifications for resolution of events' (99). The following section addresses the aspects of *inherent sociability* and *asynchronicity* by looking at the different ways current SNGs structure gameplay and sociality.

SNGs are designed specifically to be played on and with one's online social network. With the specificities of the platform the games are being played on and the asynchronous conditions of play, SNGs are played not only within the designed boundaries of the game-space, but are also intended to extend into the player's social network space. This includes request notifications sent to other players that show up in their social network site's news feed and notification tabs as well as wall posts that announce one's attained achievements for the player's network to see. Gameplay also tends to extend far beyond the boundaries of the digital space of social network sites into the everyday lives of players as the game becomes a point of conversation in

telephone calls or face-to-face interactions, much like the weather or current events (Wen, Kow and Chen 2011; Boudreau and Consalvo 2014).

Excluding turn-based games played over social networks such as *Texas Hold Em*, *Scrabble* and *Lexulous*, most SNGs are inherently single-player in that the active gameplay within the game-space is performed by one person (typically the person whose social network profile is logged in). While SNGs are designed to encourage players to draw on friends within their social network in order to advance in a game (Rossi 2009), the extent to which players need their friends varies depending on the game. For example, in match-three games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, gameplay is not dependant on the player's network in that they can play and advance without the help of their friends, though friends can give each other extra lives or share bonuses with each other that make gameplay easier, and can compete 'against' each other via in-game scores and leaderboards. In contrast, a game such as *Pioneer Trail* pushes players to ask their friends for items in order to complete quests that make up gameplay progression. When a player asks for help, the 'friend' is sent a notification of the request. Interestingly, this does not occur inside the game-space, but in the friend's social network space, separating the request from the player's gameplay. In this context, sociality occurs during the asking and reciprocating phases of play that mediate the player's game, rather than within the game itself.

Although players do not play within the same game-space, in some games it is possible for players to see the avatar of other 'friends', for example, watering crops in *Farmville* or as a customer in *Café World*. However, these friends' avatars are not actively played by their owners in these moments. In this way, it could be argued that players are reminded of their friends' contribution to their advancement within the play-context, making them part of the play experience. Added to this is the fact that there are often no in-game means to communicate with other players when they do actively visit each other's games. The inability to interact with other players during gameplay (within the game) removes any ability for direct social interaction. Of course, some games offered different forms of in-game asynchronous communication. For example, in *Farmville* it was possible to leave sign posts with messages to be read by the farm's owner; however, these were still read asynchronously (messages left while players were actively in the game-space did not show up until the player re-logged into the game). Nonetheless, direct forms of functional and social interaction in SNGs are rare and most interactions are designed to occur primarily outside of the boundaries of the game.

Another element relatively unique to the design of SNGs that shapes how players 'play together' is that helping others does not directly impact one's own gameplay. Although players can help each other by sending extra lives

or items, depending on the game, each player's game-space is separate from other's spaces and has no real bearing on their own progress.³ But in considering the *inherent sociality* of SNGs in that they obligate players to draw on their network for help, by helping others, it has been argued that players are building social capital (Wohn et al. 2011). So while helping others may not directly impact one's own game, the social capital gained in helping others results in those players potentially reciprocating item and gift requests. Along with an increased sense of obligation for players to help members of their social network with whom the player is close to (Boudreau and Consalvo 2014), this capital in turn results in a virtuous cycle where other players become more willing to help those who help them leading to the reciprocal nature of social networked gameplay.

Finally, we should note that although SNGs originated as browser-based games played primarily through social network sites such as Facebook, they have now expanded to standalone game apps on tablets and smartphones as well. This has challenged how SNGs are both designed and played since different platforms have different technical and social affordances. From offering different level limits (and tweaks in level design as can be seen in *Candy Crush*) to removing the player from the social network site completely, players who play together across platforms have fundamentally different gameplay experiences which influences the degree of asynchronicity and the types of sociality afforded not only by the game but by the platform and play-context. In this chapter we concentrate on players' experience of SNGs on social network site, but acknowledge that more work must be done examining how play experiences change as players access the games via different devices.

(Re)defining asynchronous gameplay and its impact on sociality

Bogost outlines four features of asynchronous gameplay: (1) it 'supports multiple players playing in sequence, not in tandem'; (2) 'it requires some kind of persistent state which all players affect, and which affects all players'; (3) 'breaks between players are the organizing principle of asynchronous play'; and (4) 'asynchronous play need not be the defining characteristic of a game' (2004, 2–3). Bogost's goal is not to define all possible types of asynchronous gameplay across types or genres of games, but when considering SNGs specifically, asynchronous gameplay exhibits some of these features to varying degrees while challenging others wholly.

In considering the first feature listed, that asynchronous gameplay supports play that occurs in sequence rather than in tandem, we argue that for SNGs play occurs both sequentially and in tandem, in that each player can play in their own game at the same time, yet the parts of gameplay that require the player to draw on their network occur in tandem. So while asynchronicity is an important part of the gameplay, not all social network gameplay is asynchronous. Similarly, the second characteristic – a persistent state that all players affect and which affects all players – is not a necessary feature for asynchronous gameplay in SNGs. While van Meurs states that the most important of Bogost's characteristics is the 'persistence of game state' (2011, 5), we would argue that it is not a fundamental feature of asynchronous gameplay in the case of SNGs in that a player's actions may not often (if at all) change the status of another player's game, even if they are playing within the same game 'space' of a city, farm or puzzle. Likewise although players can sometimes help one another advance in certain ways, players can experience smaller and larger gaps in time between their play sessions, and their different experiences of asynchronicity will do little to affect the play of others, particularly if they also continue to 'help' other players with actions taken 'outside' of the game-space.

To say it another way, players are never in the same game at the same time therefore negating the need for persistence as a defining characteristic of asynchronous gameplay. Rather, the asynchronous element of social network gameplay is better identified during the 'down-time', or periods between active play, whether it is the player requesting help with a quest item or the player who sends the requested item. While it is true that both players must have the same game installed in order to help each other, and that the game world that each player is playing in must be persistent so that progression can be tracked, what each one does in their own game often has no impact on other players' game-world or progression. As such, social network gameplay does not necessarily require persistence of a shared game-world in as much as it requires the persistence of the reciprocal exchange of items between players. There are always exceptions of course, as some requests for quest items or gifts may also benefit the reciprocator as well (Tyni, Sotamaa and Toivonen 2011), but those gifting their friends do not necessarily always need (or use) the reciprocal gift and this has no consequence on the requesting friend's gameplay.

Of the four characteristics, we would argue that the most important one for SNGs is the third feature which iterates that 'breaks between players are the organizing principle of asynchronous play'. In thinking about the reciprocal nature of social network gameplay, the breaks in play that exist in the time between the player asking a friend for a quest item, the time that it takes

the friend to send the item, and the time it takes the player to log back in and use the requested item creates a multifaceted timeline of gameplay with several breaks between each step of active play; whether it's the requesting, sending or using of the game item. Fundamentally, it is in these breaks that opportunities for sociality occur in social network gameplay. Two important aspects emerge from the breaks between players (and play) in SNGs that influence sociality: the different types of play that occur within these breaks, and the notion (and importance) of dead-time (van Meurs 2011) in the process of gameplay, sociality and bonding.

Beyond the in-game mechanics that shape the intended types of interactions between players necessary for gameplay to occur (adding 'neighbours', item requests, etc.), 'dead-time' does not constrain the types of sociability that occur 'around' the game. Van Meurs notion of dead-time expands on research in game studies on time and temporality in gameplay.⁴ In the case of SNGs, van Meurs explains that the notion of 'waiting' is built into the gameplay of SNGs. From waiting for cranberries to grow (7) to waiting for a neighbour to send you a quest item, dead-time is the breaks in between moments of active gameplay – whether on part of the player, the game's mechanics or friends who help along the way. As van Meurs questions 'can we consider this kind of this waiting time as a form of dead-time? And if so, what would be the benefits of doing so? Waiting is definitely unchallenging from a gamer's perspective' (7). To this we would answer yes, this form of waiting could be considered a form of dead-time in that although players may navigate away from the game while they wait, their waiting is still framed by the game's design. The benefits of viewing dead-time in this manner would be to consider the spaces in between gameplay where no alleged action occurs as instead *fundamental* to opportunities for sociality that are shaped in part by the game even in its absence. According to van Meurs, dead-time 'accounts for both the halting of player time as well as the persistence of the engine/server times during a player's absence. Yet it is sufficiently flexible to also account for the waiting times when a player *is* present' (7). In this respect, dead-time becomes an important contributing element to sociality in that it is in these moments that players may contact each other to ask if they received their item request or to talk about other aspects of the game while waiting on the game to progress.

Of course there are other types of sociability that occur within this 'dead-time' beyond the waiting and active discussion about the game between players. Tyni, Sotamaa and Toivonen (2011) describe spamming (posting game-related messages to a player soliciting friends' help with an item or announcing that they have progressed in the game) as a form of sociability in stating that 'seeing friends' game posts and clicking on them maintains

the relation to the game even when the player is not “truly” playing’ (26). These wall posts communicate information about the game to other players (and often to people who do not play the game as well). In the case of SNGs, communication between individuals within and about the shared experience of the game creates the potential for social bonds to form. As such, interactions that occur in moments of dead-time clearly delineate different types of sociability that are mediated by the game while not being in the immediate presence of the game itself. They also raise questions concerning if and how play persists in such moments outside of what is formally considered ‘active’ gameplay.

Whether it is in being reminded that a friend or family member is playing a game through wall notifications or through offline discussions about SNG quests, there is no question that gameplay continues to occur in dead-time. It is in these moments of extended gameplay, beyond the confines of the game-space, and through the shared experience of play, the opportunity for social and familial bonding occurs.

Families, asynchronous gameplay and social bonding

Fundamentally, sociality can be defined as a shared or collective experience (Fiske 1992). In this sense, players do not need to be actively playing together to share the collective experience of playing SNGs. For those who play the same game, whether actively or not, the shared experience of playing SNGs can create social and familial bonds by simply knowing that another person plays the same game even if they are not ‘neighbours’ in your game. As Tyni, Sotamaa and Toivonen explain ‘instead of playing simultaneously, the feeling of sociability and shared experience is mainly based on being aware that others play the same game as well’ (2011, 27). Thus knowing that others have similar experiences with and within the game creates a bond between players.

When considering players who already have an existing bond prior to gameplay such as family members or close friends and who are already connected through social network sites, the ability to play games together can potentially add an extra dimension to their leisure time, especially for those who are geographically dispersed (Boudreau and Consalvo 2014). As our previous research found (2013; 2014), family members who played SNGs together often felt a sense of closeness without feeling obligated to engage in more active forms of sociality. From visiting each other’s farms to tend

to a crop, to leaving messages on signs in each other's games to sending decorative gifts to one another, there are multiple ways for family members to communicate with each other without engaging in discussion. By sending item requests or sending gifts to each other, family members could signal that they were thinking of one another without needing to interact directly, much like sending annual holiday cards through the mail. The asynchronous nature of gameplay and the types of sociality it affords offers families (or close friends) a playful, interactive leisure space that allows them to feel connected without the more direct pressures of social interaction in synchronous digital gameplay or face-to-face, turn-based play. For family members, the existence of dead-time in SNGs extends the game-space beyond both the game and the social networking site itself.

Yet even if players do actively use a SNG's dead-time as a way to continue playing in particular ways, that activity is often carefully focused. So although as Fiske writes, '... people are fundamentally sociable ... they generally organize their social life in terms of their relations with other people' (1992, 689), we found that family members who play SNGs have more of a tendency to organize their SNG play around the needs of their family members and close friends as compared to strangers, more distant friends or colleagues that they were not exceptionally close to or with whom had a pre-existing bond. In our previous research that looked at the practices of social network gameplay between family members (Boudreau and Consalvo 2013; 2014), some family members interviewed stated that they started playing SNGs solely through a sense of familial (or social) obligation, they also expressed a sense of shared experiences that they otherwise would not have had. For those who had stopped actively pursuing progress in a particular game due to a loss of interest, they often still continued to help other family members with that game by responding to help requests. Importantly, it was partly this sense of obligation and shared sociality that prevented players from deleting/uninstalling such games from their Facebook account completely and that ultimately contributed to strengthen social and familial bonding over time.

This sense of obligation and bonding can be explained through Fiske's work on different forms of sociality (1992). Addressing communal sharing (CS) specifically, he writes that 'people in a CS relationship often think of themselves as sharing some common substance (e.g. "blood"), and hence think that it is natural to be relatively kind and altruistic to people of their own kind. Close kinship ties usually involve a major CS component ...' (Fiske 1992, 691). This could explain why family members – even those who have never met face-to-face but who share bloodlines – may feel more obligated to help other family members when they are sought out to do so. Over time, the act of CS through social network gameplay could lead to a deeper sense

of belonging between family members even if the interactions shared never occurred in synchronous time.

Furthermore, 'in the context of a Communal Sharing relationship, people treat material objects as things that they have in common' (Fiske 1992, 693). As families become geographically dispersed and turn to the tools found in an increasingly digitally mediated world for interaction with one another, we can thus consider the objects shared through SNGs as *symbolic physicality* (Järvinen 2009, 97) that further bind family members together. Although grounded in the physicality of familial bloodlines, shared leisure experiences mediated by the asynchronous gameplay of SNGs enable family members to expand the ways in which they socialize both actively and in dead-time in ways that were not previously possible online.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored how asynchronicity can function as a beneficial component of gameplay, particularly in the context of social/familial bonding found in social network gameplay. Although its name is unfortunate, the concept of 'dead-time' or the time between acts of gameplay is a useful one for understanding complex dynamics of player activities. So although the time may be 'dead' in that a player is not actively within a game-space, players are still using that time productively to advance in the game, help others advance and manage familial and other social relationships through the context of the game. Thus SNGs and their requirement of dead-time provide families with tools to interact with one another, to feel connected on their own terms, in low-stake, leisurely and informal ways. In doing so games contribute to familial social bonds, not through creating a multiplayer synchronous environment in which to interact, but through the sending of requests, the sharing of advancement and creative acts, talk about games in other environments and a common topic of interest among potentially disparate individuals.

In sum, asynchronous gameplay can be considered as a potential booster to social interactions, even if the tools offered by games themselves for sociality (item requests and boast posts) are rightfully critiqued as socially deficient. This activity 'outside' of the game-space also raises questions about how best to classify it – is it still a part of play surrounding the game or is it something different? If players are actively using the tools provided – the paratexts of requests and wall posts – how then can we define the game-space, and its potential boundaries? Clearly early definitions of 'game' do not apply here, but more work on SNGs would be useful in exploring these questions.

Notes

- 1 There are SNGs that rely on synchronous gameplay, including strategy games as well as poker and other gambling games that have emerged, but the majority of the most popular SNGs are still asynchronous-play in their design. As of March 2014, the top Facebook game apps included *Candy Crush Saga* (#1), *Farm Heroes Saga* (#2) and *Pet Rescue Saga* (#5), none of which rely on synchronous gameplay with friends (Lafferty 2014).
- 2 For a detailed description of gameplay in SNGs, see Wohn, Lampe, Wash, Ellison and Vitak 2011.
- 3 Zynga's *Cityville* did attempt to link players' progress in some ways such as the inclusion of one player's 'franchise' in another player's city and their strategy themed *Empires & Allies*, which allowed players to gain strength from attacking friends. However, such elements are rare and non-existent in the currently popular *Saga* games.
- 4 For list of authors cited and theories explained, see pages 2–4. Available online <http://www.digra.org/digital library/publications/and-then-you-wait-the-issue-of-dead-time-in-social-network-games/>.

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