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Affect and social value in freemium games

Fanny Ramirez

The number of casual players has increased significantly thanks to the growing popularity of social games for mobile devices and social network sites (SNS) (Alha et al. 2014; Wohn 2014). In matters of seconds, games of various genres ranging from puzzle to strategy can now be downloaded onto a device from any location as long as it has Internet access. Casual games are generally set in colourful and pleasant environments, have simple mechanics, provide a lot of positive feedback and don't require extended time commitments (Juul 2010). Casual games are also referred to as social games because they often have built-in structures that allow players to interact in-game with their SNS or mobile phone contacts (Hou 2011). These features make them appealing to a broad audience of players and have forced scholars to reevaluate what it means to be a casual player (Juul 2010).

The freemium model, also known as the free-to-play (F2P) model, after encountering substantial success in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre, has become the go-to model for many casual mobile, tablet and SNS gamers (Eldridge and Neal 2015). This chapter analyses the ways in which freemium social games, such as *Tap Fish* and *Candy Crush Saga*, are specifically designed to appeal to casual players and to incite the spending of real money in exchange for virtual goods or

services. Drawing on Juul's (2010) analysis of the game characteristics casual gamers find most attractive, I posit that positive feedback in the form of 'juicy' graphics and stimulating sound effects is used in conjunction with 'free' marketing strategies to produce affect in players and create new subjectivities of consumption. Furthermore, using critical theory about affect and immaterial labour, I explore how players are invited to perform various forms of affective labour in freemium games and how game companies turn these player-generated social values into real-world capital.

The history of the freemium model

Freemium or F2P games can be downloaded online at no cost from application (app) stores or SNS. While there may be no initial acquisition cost with F2P games, in order to access certain game content, players often have to pay a premium fee in the form of real money transactions. This concept is reflected in the name 'freemium' itself. Coined by Jarid Lukin and Fred Wilson, this neologism merges the words and meanings of 'free' and 'premium' to reflect the characteristics particular to its business model (Pujol 2011). Companies that develop freemium games rely on the monetization of virtual items, currencies or services to generate revenue and permit the general free distribution of their product (Wohn 2014). In other words, some players have to spend money so that the system can support non-paying users.

The rise of the freemium model can be traced back to a larger shift in consumer demands caused by the growing popularity of digital distribution and easy access to Internet services. The image-hosting service *Flickr* and its paying version *Flickr Pro* is a well-known example of the freemium model. Non-paying *Flickr* customers get access to a basic version of the photo storing and sharing service while a small number of paying pro-members benefit from additional product features. The few paying customers (around 5%) ensure the availability of the basic free of charge version (Anderson 2009). In freemium games, the ratio of paying users versus free users is somewhat higher. An analysis of the spending patterns in the Korean social game *Puppy Red* for example, revealed that about 26 per cent of the playing population had spent real money in the game (Wohn 2014).

From an economic perspective, free items are alluring because they signify the absence of financial commitment. Digital distribution further adds to the appeal because the free item can be obtained without physical displacement. Anyone with a smartphone can quickly skim through a list of free games, download them and store an abundance of games. Anderson (2009) argues that the easy acquisition of free items creates an immediate

sense of achievement and satisfaction in the buyer. This is because as Ariel (2009) puts it 'zero is not just another price . . . zero is an emotional hot button – a source of irrational excitement' (cited in Anderson 2009, 63). Ariely goes on to explain that part of this excitement is linked to the fact that with free items there is no fear of loss. When one puts money towards an item a certain level of anxiety is attached to the transaction because making a poor purchase decision also represents a financial loss. A free item, however, does not require any monetary investment and thus on the surface at least, always constitutes a favourable choice (Anderson 2009).

Social games and the freemium model

Freemium games for mobile devices and SNS pair the alluring concept of a 'free' product with the appeal of virtual goods and services in order to create new financial dynamics between players and game companies. By inviting casual gamers to spend real money via in-game microtransactions, freemium games turn players into repeat commercial users of abstract economies (Hamari and Lehdonvirta 2010). Defined as 'low value transactions at a high volume', microtransactions involve minimal sums of money (US\$0.99 or US\$1.99) and are spread out over long periods of time, thus making it difficult for players to track how much money they have invested in a game (Casual Games Association 2012). What do players spend money on? Hamari and Lehdonvirta identify several game features that promote virtual good purchases, including inventory mechanics that let players acquire new items for their game environment or avatar, and gameplay mechanics that give paying customers different user interface settings or augment certain aspects of the gameplay (2010, 26). Gifting practices represent yet another motivation for spending real money on virtual goods or services. Wohn notes that sending virtual gifts to friends is a common practice in social games, and that players, especially those who have a larger number of friends, are willing to spend real money on in-game items for their friends (2014, 3363).

F2P games that are played on portable devices are especially interesting because the mobility and convenience of the devices they are played on add additional layers of complexity to the control and affect dynamics between games and players. Handheld devices occupy a unique space in the world of gaming by reason that they are 'always on and always within arm's reach' (Casual Games Association 2012). Computer and console games engage players for as long as they are physically present in front of the machine. Play-time in these instances is tied to a specific location such as the living room or office, and once players decide to stop playing, they turn the system off and

are no longer bound to the virtual world of the game. Manghani, in his work on text messaging, has recognized that 'a significant attribute of the mobile phone is its ability to redefine how we experience time and space' (2009, 221). Portable devices have changed the relationship between players and games not just thanks to their ability to cross spatial boundaries, but especially by virtue of being constantly on. Casual mobile games are designed around the notion of constant accessibility and use push-notifications to update players about in-game happenings and invite them to return to the game. Under this new construction of continuity, players of mobile games never truly leave the game. In effect, unless push-notifications for particular applications have been turned off, it silently runs in the background while players go about their everyday business.

The mobilization of affect in freemium games

Expansive and yet intangible, affect is a kind of non-place that is highly dynamic (Negri and Hardt 1999). Ash, in his characterization of affect, refers to it as 'the force of an encounter', hinting at the fact that affect can influence behaviour and action (2012, 9). This definition supposes a certain dynamism and energy to affect, reflected in Teresa Brennan's (2004) observation that the transmission of affect has both behavioural and bodily effects. Difficult to define because of its abstract capacity and irreducibility to cognitive apprehension, affect is produced through interaction with people or an environment and belongs to the complex realms of emotion, passion and human motivation. One of the main goals of this chapter lies in understanding the function of affect as part of casual games' design model and, more precisely, the reliance by freemium games on affective responses from players to draw people in and convert free users into paying customers. The excitement that accompanies the acquisition of a free game is only the first of many affective responses players experience when playing social games that make use of the freemium model.

Indeed, affect is incorporated throughout the freemium model's operational structure. From the initial attraction to a free download to the application of excessive positive feedback, affect is a primary feature of many casual games that make use of the freemium business model. Juul uses Kyle Gabler's term 'juiciness' to refer to this exaggerated affective design element and explains that positive feedback 'gives the player an immediate, pleasurable experience' (2010, 48). Positive feedback is a form of extradiegetic praise that is 'tied specifically to feedback for the actions of players' and enhances 'the

experience of feeling competent, or clever, when playing a game' (Juul 2010, 47–9). Positive feedback then, is an affective design element that praises players directly with the hopes of generating an affective response.

While positive feedback can increase a player's enjoyment of the game, the same feature can also be used to further aggressive monetization strategies, placing 'short-term profits' above 'long-term player engagement' (Alha et al. 2014, para. 3). Pybus (2007), in her observations about the use of affective marketing strategies in the virtual pet game *Neopets.com*, argues that the aim of casual game companies is 'to expand their market share by forging strong relationships with consumers through the production of dynamic subjectivities' (para. 4). According to this rationale, players are progressively incorporated into the large-scale mechanisms of global capitalism through the emotional actions they perform in virtual spaces (Malaby 2006). Deployed by game companies to encourage in-app spending, affect is the impetus behind the production of new subjectivities of consumption (Pybus 2007, para. 2). Positive feedback is used not only to generate sensations of excitement and attachment, but also to encourage players to return to the game as consumers, to the financial benefit of the game companies.

Locating affect and positive feedback in *Tap Fish*

Tap Fish is an aquarium simulation and caretaking game developed by GameView Studios. The game invites players into a highly customizable aquarium management system where they can decorate their own aquariums and breed various fish and other marine life forms. The game's environment is highly picturesque and soothing and, while not exciting per se, *Tap Fish* is intensely appealing in its simplicity. The aquarium backdrop emanates sensations of relaxation and comfort and the game's interface is very user-friendly. It simulates actual aquariums as well as the emotional attachment one develops when caring for pet fish. In that regard, the game shares many of the qualities found in earlier types of virtual pets such as the Tamagotchi, an egg-shaped electronic toy that displays the image of a pet and requires regular engagement in order to stay alive (Wrye 2009).

In addition to providing players with virtual pets, *Tap Fish* also offers a lot of positive audio and visual feedback in the form of audible clicks and rings, as well as congratulatory messages which are accompanied by a shower of stars or hearts that fill the entire screen (Figure 9.1). Feedback of this kind provides positive reinforcement and lets players know that they are doing a good job, but more than that, it also has the potential to generate powerful

FIGURE 9.1 Screenshot of a Tap Fish 2 congratulatory message.

affective reactions. Game tasks such as loving one's fish, feeding them or cleaning the tank are repeatedly rewarded with positive feedback, leaving the player feeling accomplished. Although it operates on a simple reward system, positive feedback is highly exciting and increases players' enjoyment of the game (Juul 2010). Perceived enjoyment in turn, has been associated with purchase intention as well as continuous use intentions, thus showing that how players feel about the game is related to their spending behaviour (Hamari 2015). Developers of casual games therefore, I argue, use affective design elements to promote longer playing session and count on the resulting emotional ties to sell virtual items and services.

An analysis of the different currencies used in *Tap Fish* sheds light on how companies take advantage of players' affective connections to virtual pets to generate revenue from the sale of virtual items. *Tap Fish* has two in-game currencies: coins and Fish bucks. Coins can easily be earned by farming fish and then selling them for profit. Fish bucks on the other hand, are very hard to acquire unless they are purchased for real money through the in-game market store. Players get one Fish buck each time they level-up and sometimes Fish bucks can also be won by playing the weekly in-game jackpot lottery. What complicates the player's interaction with the game's virtual currency system is that some items can only be bought with Fish bucks and some only with coins. Safe to say, it is impossible to save up enough free Fish bucks to buy all the fish and decorations offered in the game or to be

competitive in events. In order to satisfy one's affective relationship with the game and access the most desirable features, one has to invest real money. This is why *Daily Show* correspondent Aasi Mandvi (2011) jokingly compares casual players' fixation with freemium games to drug addiction. During the sketch, Mandvi (2011) verbally confronts Rizwan Virk, the CEO of GameView Studios, by saying: 'You provide a product. The first one is free, and then as they get more accustomed to your product, the price rises. So you're a drug dealer' (<http://www.thedailyshow.com>). While his exaggerated observation was made mostly for laughs, the claim that freemium game companies are purposely taking advantage of people's desire for instant gratification has merit. Freemium games such as *Tap Fish* allow players to build up a basic emotional investment with virtual pets for free, but then create a dependency on real money for the continued maintenance of that relationship. When one considers that a large part of *Tap Fish's* audience is composed of children, the game's revenue strategies take on a rather sinister tone. As one parent whose child rung up an expensive iTunes bill aptly put it: 'there is a degree of callousness in the way these [games] prey on unsuspecting children like my son with whom these games hold great appeal' (Lui 2011, para. 12). Several scholars have criticized the F2P model's aggressive monetization strategies (Alha et al. 2014) and Bogost (2014) even argues that 'free-to-play games are a kind of classic racket' where players get swindled of their hard-earned money because they didn't realize the terms of the game at the outset (para. 9).

Locating affect and positive feedback in *Candy Crush Saga*

Other casual games such as the tile-matching game *Candy Crush Saga* may not exploit children's emotional bonds with virtual pets, but they still manipulate a player's range of affective experiences for monetary benefits. Games can be very addictive and the positive feedback of juicy games only increases the desire to act on these affective impulses. As Allison points out in connection with the Pokémon universe: 'once one enters this world, it is addictive – and addictively wired to one's own sense of ease . . . In this game whose objective is getting . . . the getting – and pursuit of getting – goes on and on' (2009, 96). Allison's remarks about addiction and the never-ending desire to accumulate more Pokémon can be applied across numerous game genres, but rings especially true for the F2P model. By limiting the content non-paying users can access, the free aspect of the freemium model becomes an obstacle to players' drive for more acquisition.

In order to exit this state of crisis and carry on with the game's emotional attachments, players have to become subjectivities of global capitalism's consumption economy by either spending money to sustain their gaming addiction or generating social value through the recruitment of friends. This particular subtype of the freemium model, because it makes paying real money a contingency for immediately continuing the game, is sometimes referred to as pay-to-play (P2P).

Candy Crush Saga is a good illustration of how what is initially a F2P game makes use of juiciness and affect to draw players in only so as to better convert them into paying customers via a P2P scenario or encourage them to produce social value by turning to friends for game-related help. Non-paying players can play all levels of *Candy Crush Saga* for free and have five in-game lives that replenish at a rate of one life every thirty minutes. When players run out of their allotted free lives, the screen presents them with the affective image of a personified crying heart and gives them the following three options: (1) wait up to thirty minutes for one life to replenish, (2) connect to Facebook and ask a friend for extra lives (thereby hopefully creating a new player for the game company) or (3) spend US\$0.99 in order to instantaneously be able to continue the game (Figure 9.2).

FIGURE 9.2 *Candy Crush Saga no more lives screenshot.*

Smith (2014) reflects on *Candy Crush Saga*'s imposed timeout by stating that players 'can never be completely satiated when playing', and that by abruptly interrupting their gaming experience, the game continuously 'leaves [people] wanting more' (para. 10). Not being able to continue playing when one runs out of free lives feels like a failure. This is why 'by not letting [people] play, the game actually becomes even more rewarding when [one is] let back into Candyland' (Smith 2014, para. 10). *Candy Crush Saga* simultaneously presents players with a problem and a solution to that problem: wait, turn to your friends or spend money.

The figure of the crying heart (Figure 9.2) is directly opposed to the otherwise excessive juicy and joyful atmosphere of the game. *Candy Crush Saga*'s 'No more lives' screen exemplifies an affective transformation from high to low. Before reaching this screen, the player was immersed in virtual play, consumed by the affective qualities of the game's juiciness. Positive feedback messages such as 'Tasty!' 'Divine!' and 'Sweet!' proliferated and made for an exciting gameplay (Figure 9.3). The switch to the crying heart screen represents an abrupt change of environment and a decrease in positive

FIGURE 9.3 *Candy Crush Saga*
accomplishment screenshot.

affective stimulus. P2P freemium games count on this affective transmutation and the ensuing shock to generate revenue from microtransactions and recruit more paying players.

Affective and immaterial labour in *Tap Fish*

Lazzarato defines immaterial labour as ‘the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (1996, 132). There are two aspects to this definition. Under information content, Lazzarato understands the shift from a mostly manual industrial workforce to an economy of services: ‘where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and horizontal control’ (1996, 132). This side of immaterial labour encompasses the production of freemium games and other types of cognitive work. Cultural content differs from the previous designation in that it ‘involves a series of activities that are not recognized as ‘work’ – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms and, more strategically, public opinion’ (132). The immaterial labour players carry out in caretaking simulations such as *Tap Fish* falls into the second category. Playing games is conventionally viewed as a leisure activity, engaged in because it is pleasurable and a welcome distraction from the toiling associated with professional labour.

Scholars have employed different terms to refer to the culturally produced iterations of immaterial labour. Allison, for instance, uses affective labour to denote the form of immaterial labour ‘that engages affects such as well-being, excitement and ease’ (2009, 91). Terranova understands the work provided by users of digital environments as free labour, qualifying it as ‘simultaneously voluntary given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited’ (2000, 33). Individuals who contribute their time to expanding and improving these social and cultural milieus of the digital economy are, according to Terranova: ‘acting out a desire for affective and cultural production’ (36). Their immaterial labour fuels the new digital markets of global capitalism, yet the majority of these amateurs don’t receive any monetary compensation for their contributions.

Affective labour, a subtype of immaterial labour, while prevalent in many casual games, is especially dominant in games that focus on caretaking and resource management. This section will therefore focus on the many forms of affective labour in *Tap Fish*. The affective labour performed by players in *Tap Fish*, includes activities such as feeding one’s fish, cleaning the virtual aquarium and decorating one’s tanks with appealing items to increase the happiness level of the virtual pets. These tasks are similar to the labour performed by

users of the Neopets site (Pybus 2007) and owners of Tamagochi toys (Wrye 2009) and don't require expert knowledge about game design or production. In *Tap Fish*, every three hours players have the opportunity to 'love' their fish by simply pressing a menu button. This action also impacts the fish's happiness scale and positively affects their selling price, making affective labour a central part of *Tap Fish*'s in-game economy. Players who devote the most time and resources to keeping their fish alive and happy are the ones who reap the greatest profits. While on the surface *Tap Fish* appears to be a simple, worry-free game, a closer look at the dynamics of affective labour in connection with the monetary features of freemium mobile games, reveals the complex relationship between players and immaterial labour.

Taking care of virtual pets in *Tap Fish* is very time-consuming and requires multiple playing sessions throughout the day. The game is not forgiving to players with low time commitments and if one forgets to check in on the fish for a few days, the virtual pets die. This threat of impending death creates a dependency scenario where players feel obligated to spend considerable periods of time engaging in affective labour just to maintain their virtual aquariums. The impending death of a virtual pet has been shown to cause considerable distress in some people. Wrye observes that: 'in some cases, people have even committed suicide, had nervous breakdowns, or become clinically depressed following the death of their virtual pet' (2009, 17). These reactions show that users are capable of forming strong emotional bonds with virtual pets. *Tap Fish* anticipated players' inability to dedicate enough time to the game and thus offers food bricks which keep fish content for several days or weeks for sale in the virtual in-game market. These alternatives to prolonged gameplay can be purchased with both gold coins and Fish bucks, but represent a substantial financial investment if players have a large system of aquariums. Game designer Bennett Foddy (2013), in an interview for the gaming news site *Gamasutra*, states that 'giving players the choice between paying or grinding', is a common tactic with freemium games (cited in Alexander 2013). These games are purposely designed to be very time-consuming so that players who want to succeed in the game find themselves having to pay real money in order to reduce the amount of time labour involved with playing.

Social value and viral marketing in *Candy Crush Saga* and *Tap Fish*

While only paying users are viewed as direct revenue contributors, one should not underestimate the value of free players as 'even those who choose not to pay anything play a crucial role in the success of a title by helping to spread

awareness of the game and boost its ranking and visibility in the app stores' (Holmes 2013, para. 9). The social value produced by non-paying players through indirect advertisement and recruiting mechanisms benefits the game companies. Additionally, non-paying players contribute to the prosperity of a game simply through their presence by 'creating the feeling of a populated community' (Tyni, Sotamaa and Toivonen 2011, 24). In *Candy Crush Saga* for example, players can compare their scores on a particular level to that of their friends and see how far they've progressed in the game in relation to others. The presence of others on the board game creates a sense of competition and community.

Freemium games rely on systems of contagion or viral marketing to expand their audience and are structured so as to facilitate the dissemination of game information across a large user base. By contagion I refer to the practice by which players directly and indirectly promote a game to others and thus help game companies acquire new users and broaden their field of exposure. *Tap Fish*'s main game menu has a 'social' option which lets players summon their Facebook, email and phone book friends to join the game. The game also lets players reach out to others for help with tasks such as feeding fish, cleaning tanks and reviving dead pets. Additionally, both *Candy Crush Saga* and *Tap Fish* make use of sociability within the game itself by offering players the opportunity to publish scores and screenshots on Facebook. According to Tyni, Sotamaa and Toivonen: 'game requests and wall posts serve as a regular reminder of the game being there and that other people are playing it' (2011, 24). All these actions represent forms of immaterial labour produced by casual gamers for their own pleasure, but with substantial benefits to game companies.

When players announce their game achievements on SNS they are doing important publicity and recruitment work for game companies. Mäyrä (2011) calls people who recruit new players through SNS 'viral agents', and explains that many casual games use 'mutual in-game rewards' to promote the spread of the game from one person to another (118–20). In addition to encouraging players to promote their scores on SNS, *Tap Fish* also invites players to visit other aquariums, an activity which introduces players to decorations and fish breeds they may not yet have. When players tap on a friend's aquarium features, the game prompts them with a purchase option. Here, players engage in free labour by working as advertisers for each other. The social value produced by players via SNS and other advertising avenues is vital to a freemium game's success.

While this type of promotion is beneficial to the game companies, phone contacts and SNS users who don't like games tend to find game-related

updates and notifications frustrating. In their research on social games and relationships, Wohn et al. (2011), found that non-players were frustrated by the amount of game-related updates their friends were posting on Facebook and, generally, were annoyed by the presence of freemium games on SNS. Paavilainen et al. (2013) claim that non-gamers are not the only ones who experience frustration in connection with the excessive advertising tactics of freemium games. Several of their interviewees who regularly played social games complained about 'the amount of spam [freemium games] create in the form of notifications, requests, news feed items, and wall posts' and stressed their attempts to limit game-related spam as much as possible so as not to annoy their SNS contacts (Paavilainen et al. 2013, 804).

Conclusion

As a business model, freemium has successfully penetrated the social games market by taking advantage of the gaming features casual gamers find most appealing and combining them with 'free' marketing strategies to encourage in-app spending. While the model relies on what can be considered the exploitation of players' affective relationships to virtual items, the social recruitment mechanism and the communities of players built around these games, are not inherently negative or abusive. The payment structure of freemium games is of great interest to the relationship between positive feedback, affective variance and in-game microtransactions, but it would be unfair to reduce the entire model to a purely financial system. As Mäyrä points out, some casual players benefit emotionally from the social system that is built into the freemium model and gain 'a sense of achievement and sociability' by helping their friends care for virtual pets (2011, 119). Sharing game-related tasks with friends can be a highly enjoyable activity, yet this same social component also has disadvantages. It is possible for players to experience recruitment fatigue, to feel taken advantage of, or to undergo a crisis in decision-making: Do I ask my friends for help yet again or do I wait 30 minutes for one of my free lives to replenish? Additional research is needed in order to explore the full extent of the social, cultural and economic ramifications of the freemium model on casual gaming. As evidenced throughout this chapter, various tensions surround the F2P business model and gaming experience. The multifaceted relationship between casual players and game companies, that arises when real-world financial dynamics are incorporated into the experiences of virtual gameplay and sociability, requires further inquiry.

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