



Social, Casual and Mobile Games

The Changing Gaming Landscape

Edited by Tama Leaver and Michele Willson



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**Edited by Tama Leaver
Michele Willson**

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For Henry, Tom and Rose. (T. L.)

For Ben and Asha. (M. W.)

*The next generation of game players,
developers and, just maybe, researchers.*

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Building on the inspirational papers at this event, and supplemented with a wider call for papers, we have drawn together an excellent range of contributions, including researchers at all stages of their career, across a number of countries and institutions, addressing a range of technologies, game genres, platforms and perspectives. We are very pleased with the final result and would like to thank all of the contributors for their chapters, their patience and their generosity as this collection has slowly taken its final form.

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1

Social networks, casual games and mobile devices: The shifting contexts of gamers and gaming

Tama Leaver and Michele Willson

While the term 'gamer' probably evokes a particular image for many people – perhaps the stereotype of the nerdy white male teen playing on multiple screens in his parents' basement, wearing a headset and rarely seeing sunlight – the term has never been representative of all or even the majority of people who play video games (Shaw 2012). Indeed, the US-based Entertainment Software Rating Board have noted that the average age for video game players is not underage, but between eighteen and forty-nine years, with almost as many female players as there are male (Entertainment Software Rating Board 2015). The games industry has seen an increase in the number of women producing games as well, further challenging any singular stereotyping of gamers or game creators (Tomkinson and Harper 2015). Yet perhaps the biggest change in the gaming landscape is the increase in the range of devices and platforms on which games can be played. As online social networks such as Facebook facilitate social games played with a user's social network, and mobile devices such as phones and tablets mean almost anyone can take a suite of game apps wherever they go, games have become increasingly ubiquitous.

Mobile games, played on tablets and smartphones, mean that games are never further than arm's length. Train carriages are often filled with players pulling back digital slingshots and assailing bad piggies in *Angry Birds* or attempting to match rows of brightly coloured sweets with a satisfying pop in *Candy Crush Saga*. While only a minority do, games on mobile devices can also explicitly make use of geo-location information, at times bringing information about physical spaces and locations into the games themselves. Several chapters in this collection, for example, explore Google's locative game *Ingress*, which overlays the game onto the physical world through the mobile device's interface. As location-based games enter the mainstream, increasingly there is a push for them to find a sustainable business model. As geo-location information essentially provides a traceable and archivable record of exactly where someone is, real privacy concerns can emerge, with serious questions about privacy needing clear answers before the role of locative games in an app economy is clear (Leorke 2014).

One of the most immediately obvious challenges when talking about the contemporary gaming landscape is how to situate the types of games and game practices being enacted through this multiplicity of devices. Juul's (2010) seminal text, *A Casual Revolution*, identified a genre of games and, relatedly, game players, that were emerging, which were unlike the stereotypical gamer, who came from a wider demographic spectrum and often played in short bursts of time. Yet even these characteristics of casual game players quickly become problematic because experience shows that games designed to allow brief periods of play can also be compelling enough to be played in as long and focused a manner as many of the most hardcore games.

Similarly, debate and disagreement about what constitutes a game abound through the historical game literature. As new technologies have been introduced or new game genres have been developed, debates have opened up as to whether these should be considered games and whether those who play them can be considered to belong to the category of gamer. This difficulty is evident even in the shifting uses of the nomenclature of social, casual and/or mobile games themselves. There is a lack of clarity evident at times that is suggestive of these difficulties between the understanding and use of the terms of social games – or social network games as they also called – and casual games, and between casual games and mobile games and so forth. Such a lack of clarity is productive as it raises critical questions as to how each category can be understood and defined, but it is problematic in terms of enabling concise and clear discussion. Ostensibly, it would seem that, at the time of writing, social (network) games can be understood almost as a subset of casual games, and that these games can be mobile also if playable on a mobile device (as many, though not all, are). However, mobile also indicates

a level of potential engagement with the surrounding environment and geo-location input that is unnecessary or not evident in much casual mobile play. Clearly these markers are purely indicative of general characteristics in a constantly moving and developing landscape of games, technologies and players. The same claims can be made about the categorization and labelling of the various game genres discussed in this collection.

One of the factors inhibiting the acceptance of social, casual and mobile games has been a level of cynicism about their design, not helped by the fact that some games companies were as cynical as the critics. Zynga, the company behind the iconic *Farmville* social game, have infamously touted that they were actually a metrics and analytics company that happened to make games as a way of generating big data about their players whom they could then analyse in order to determine the best way to encourage players to part with cash for virtual goods (Willson and Leaver 2015). This, in turn, added to the perception that players of *Farmville* were being duped into the experience rather than being 'real' game players. Zynga's close relationship with Facebook, and the many, many messages that users received inviting them to play *Farmville* by gifting everything from a golden egg to a smiling cow, similarly meant that social games for many people felt, for a period of time, perilously like spam. Data analytics aside, though, the popularity of social games indicates that they are much more than just the game mechanics – the experience of shared sociality facilitated by social games can often be at least as compelling for the players as the game setting itself (Willson 2015).

What is undeniable is that social, casual and mobile games in all of their forms are being adopted by increasing numbers of the population, being played in multiple locations and being incorporated in multifaceted ways into people's lives (Willson 2015). For example, MacCallum-Stewart (2014, 151) claims, 'Facebook and Android games have attracted more players than any other gaming genre to date . . .' and therefore 'Facebook and the app market for games represent a site of tension when defining the game community since they are very different to traditionalist configurations of the gamer . . .' This fact alone opens a range of new possibilities and questions from access to business models that call out for investigation.

This collection begins with *Part One: The (new?) gaming landscape*, which explores some of the difficulties with classifications and generalizations in relation to the categories of casual, social and mobile games. The authors here consistently argue that the binary offered by a hard distinction between casual versus hardcore games (or alternately as hardcore and other, whereby the hardcore category is the point of reference) is inaccurate and fails to accommodate the multiple nuances and variations of game design, gameplay and even of gamers themselves. They also strenuously criticize the common,

largely derogatory and dismissive characterizations of these 'new' game forms as less valuable, less serious and therefore less worthy of serious critical attention. Instead they suggest that this new gaming landscape embraces a wide range of game forms, understandings and design and play practices that need to be accommodated in any critical engagement.

One of the most commented-upon changes introduced into this gaming landscape is the adoption of free-to-play (F2P), or freemium, approaches as an increasingly dominant economic model. The emergence of this model alongside other production changes are often pointed out as indicative of the less desirable elements of these new games, again contributing to the sense of social, casual and mobile games being of a lower quality or value. However, these changes, along with changes in production practices, have also opened up the production field to a wider range of game developers. This section therefore includes consideration of a range of perspectives – from user, to developer, to game analysis – in order to position these games as enmeshed in a broad and complex ecology.

Lina Eklund's study of Swedish gamers, *Who are the casual gamers? Gender tropes and tokenism in game culture*, asks the question as to who plays casual games and suggests that players might not actually be those who have been often suggested in various game studies. In particular, she critiques the methodologies and approaches used in studies of gamers as problematic, including some of the bases for the distinctions drawn between hardcore and casual games as well as the way in which these appear to be entwined with assumptions about who plays in terms of gender. Her research suggests that the distinctions made between types of games on the basis of time spent are problematic, that casual games can also involve similar amounts of time, they are just consumed differently – something that accords partly with Juul's (2010) observations and is noted also in Keogh's chapter in this collection. However, more striking is the way in which gender and assumptions about play preferences appear to be misrepresented and entwined with descriptions and critiques of casual gameplay. Eklund points to token theory as one way of interpreting these results, arguing that the 'feminization' of casual games and its associated characterizations stems from an attempt by previously dominant gamer groups (predominantly male) to retain control and claims of expertise over game culture, game practices and understandings.

Brendan Keogh's chapter, *Between aliens, hackers, and birds: Non-casual mobile games and casual game design*, continues questioning the simple dichotomy drawn between hardcore and casual games through his discussion of non-casual mobile games – games played on mobile devices but games that fit within a more traditional games classification. He suggests that a more

useful way of understanding games and their design would be to focus on the varying modes of player attention demanded by different game mechanics as well as the devices upon which they are played (and their various affordances). Keogh reframes the ways in which casual games are viewed in terms of time and labour spent as less about the seriousness or frivolity of these games and more positively as incorporating flexibility into how time and labour are expended. He explores the modes of attention employed with these games, refocusing and reframing casual and hardcore games across a continuum of varying modes of attention in order to map a complex ecology of game design and game practice.

Whereas Eklund examines casual games through an examination of the players, and Keogh in part through the attributes of the games themselves, Laureline Chiapello's chapter, *Casual gaming: The changing role of the designer*, explores the definition and understanding of casual games through investigating the experiences and self-perceptions of game designers and their changing design practices as a result. Employing Schön's epistemology of practice as a conceptual framework, Chiapello develops two profiles: designer-agent and designer-gamer. Through a series of interviews and mapping against these profiles, Chiapello is able to uncover not only the tensions experienced by designers as a result of the derogatory perceptions and classificatory details of casual games that earlier contributors have detailed, but also the subtle shifts and changes that emerge as game design develops and practices are changed as a result.

Tom Phillips's chapter *Discussions with developers: F2P and the changing landscape of games business development* also draws attention to tensions evident in the industry but this time in relation to understanding what a true or good game is and the types of inferences drawn as a result of underlying economic models. Drawing on feedback from a workshop with game industry professionals, Phillips notes the huge appeal of the F2P model within the industry, with various strategies employed to maximize profit generation. These strategies include paying special attention to those the industry pejoratively refer to as 'whales': players willing to pay significant amounts of money in a F2P game to either progress the game or gain status. These strategies are contentious for some game designers opposed to the freemium strategies who view paid progress options within the game as itself a marketing strategy antithetical to good game design and play practices. This is a challenging position when games are part of a commercial industry that requires profit to continue.

From who plays and the problematizing of previous categorizations of gamers, of the games themselves, and also of the design and self-understanding of designers of games, the collection turns to questions

around the motivations for play. Why do so many people play these games and what is their appeal? The authors in *Part Two: Reasons to play* explore these questions in relation to particular types of social, casual and mobile games. Through interviews, analysis of game activity and consideration of the ways people play, they identify some of the reasons why these games are so popular – despite the sustained critiques that have been directed towards them. Unique game features are linked to motivations for play: family connectivity, exchange of affection, the possibilities of mobility for integration of gameplay within the everyday, and the generation of affective responses due to a range of game design features are among the considerations noted.

Kelly Boudreau and Mia Consalvo take a look at family play in their chapter, *The sociality of asynchronous gameplay: Social network games (SNGs), dead-time and family bonding*. Social games – or as Boudreau and Consalvo refer to them, SNGs – have been critiqued for their instrumental, or indeed complete absence of any, sociality despite the fact that they are situated within and reliant upon a player's social network. Boudreau and Consalvo argue for a re-examination of the criteria used to evaluate these games, suggesting that there are some unique characteristics to SNGs that have been under-recognized and are important for the game's sociality and functionality. In particular, they explore the contribution of dead-time (periods between gameplay or while waiting for something to happen), the asynchronicity of SNG play, and the cross-platform and cross-game communication as design features of SNGs that offer important forms of maintaining connections with family and close friends in 'low-stake, leisurely and informal ways' without necessarily requiring direct engagement.

Lindsay Grace's chapter, *Digital affection games: Cultural lens and critical reflection*, investigates the genre of affection games as a unique subset of casual, social and mobile games. Affection games are those where acts of affection – hugs, kisses, flirting, sexual expression – are the currency exchanged and primary focus and means of game progression. Unlike online dating, which Grace suggests is more like a simulation of offline activities that involve complex and rich range of contexts and interactions, affection games are seemingly more transactional and limited, following very simple (often stereotypical) narratives or story lines and characters. Arguing that these are a unique game phenomenon, more akin to spin the bottle or adolescent teen games than dating or role-play simulations, Grace makes the point that these games have been subject to minimal research attention. Through a number of detailed surveys of web and mobile affection games, he catalogues not only the range of games and behaviours availed, but also suggests that their existence and uptake may provide useful insights into a range of cultural and social practices and values around issues of gender and also a desire for fantasy and the motivations/rationale behind these.

In a similar vein to Keogh's earlier discussion about varying modes of attention availed by games across various technologies, Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson's chapter, *Mobile games and ambient play*, argues that the affordances and experiences of mobile gameplay eradicates the notion of the magic circle. The concept of ambient play – play that is embedded within the everyday, is managed across multiple spaces and places, and across multiple modes of presence and attention – is offered in its place. Hjorth and Richardson's notions of co-presence, emplacement and ambient play are all advanced as a way of understanding how people playing mobile games navigate and situate their gameplay and their gameplay experiences in very specific but shifting experiences of place, space and presence in their everyday lives.

Fanny Ramirez's chapter, *Affect and social value in freemium games*, adopts a slightly more sinister tone as she critiques the ways in which the affective dimensions of casual game design, play practices and the common underpinning freemium economic model encourage players to compulsively play their games and to part with increasing amounts of time and money as a result. Using the games *Tap Fish* and *Candy Crush* as illustrative examples, Ramirez discusses the multifaceted ways in which the design elements and gameplay practices combine to induce and compel behaviour in an affective manner that raise questions about manipulation, addiction and transparency.

Part Three: Locative play focuses on locative play and on games and applications which typically utilize geo-location technologies in mobile devices. These games are centred on physical locations in the material world, which are interpreted, overlaid or engaged with via digital means. Stacy Blasiola, Miao Feng and Adrienne Massanari's chapter *Riding in cars with strangers: A cross-cultural comparison of privacy and safety in, Ingress* examines the way that Google's augmented reality game (ARG) *Ingress* blends material and digital layers, creating new game experiences which also provoke new questions about collaboration, community and privacy. Meeting with teammates, spying on opposing teams or negotiating digital play in material locations with at times bewildered non-players, all take place as informatic and physical planes mesh during gameplay. Utilizing a survey of over 1,800 players globally and comparative interviews with Chinese and US-based players, the chapter explicates the complex ways that players navigate physical spaces, form communities and manage privacy as online pseudonyms are, at times, traded for face-to-face meetings and interactions. Far from happenstance, the research reveals many complex and thoughtful strategies that players employ to negotiate if and when they meet other players in the material world.

Erin Stark's *Playful places: Uncovering hidden heritage with Ingress* also examines *Ingress*, this time focusing on the way that the game makes

unfamiliar banal everyday spaces and new digital layers force players to view the physical realm with fresh eyes. Motivated by in-game achievements and competition, *Ingress* players engage with their everyday spaces as new hybrid digital–physical realms where the unseen or ignored can be given new prominence due to game requirements. Looking through the lens of heritage studies, Stark argues that *Ingress* players not only come to new understandings of physical locations that are traditionally considered heritage worthy, but that players also create their own sense of which physical spaces are worth drawing deeper attention to in the process of highlighting these as potential *Ingress* portals.

In Jamie Henthorn’s chapter examining the way the game *Zombies, Run!* allows runners to renegotiate and rewrite the neighbourhoods they run in, she argues that ‘zombies are interesting because they are the ultimate pedestrians, moving through spaces with complete disregard for city planning’, a disregard facilitated by locative play. Following de Certeau, the design of streets and urban spaces are rewritten as runners flee from zombies, both encouraging them to run outdoors and lessening the boredom that can be part of running for fitness. Moreover, the unpredictable nature of the digital zombies can lead to new pathways and experiences of seemingly dull urban areas, augmenting spaces with digital narratives largely conveyed as auditory experiences.

In the chapter *The de-gamification of Foursquare*, Rowan Wilken looks at the evolution of one of the most recognizable locative media apps and asks why the company behind it ostensibly appears to be jettisoning the gamified elements – the badges, mayorships and points – just as gamification is gaining mainstream recognition as a marketing and advertising technique. Wilken argues that rather than removing the gamified elements, Foursquare are redeploying them in particular ways, situating the company as a platform rather than a game or a single app, and that the gamified elements persist but have largely been repositioned inside Foursquare’s Swarm app while the core property has been rebuilt as a location recommendation engine. Wilken suggests that the game elements will remain to appeal to Foursquare super-users who originally found the badges and leaderboards appealing, but these elements will be secondary as the locative media layer and database becomes the company’s most profitable and important element.

Mark Balnaves and Gary Madden’s chapter is the first in *Part Four: New Markets*, focusing on the new marketplaces in which social, casual and mobile games circulate. They begin by tracing the history of games and gaming devices from the earliest dedicated gaming consoles in the 1970s through to the much wider array of technological platforms available today, of which mobile phones and tablets are currently the fastest growing segment. Each different platform facilitates particular revenue models, they argue, but with

the additional affordances of the Internet and the diversification of gaming devices, there is a much wider range of potential revenue streams for games of all sizes and types. Their chapter also highlights the substantial growth of mobile gaming in China, with potentially far greater growth still to come as more and more Chinese users gain access to the Internet, mobile devices and, subsequently, mobile and casual games. Balnaves and Madden end with the provocation that due to sheer size and scale the social, casual and mobile gaming markets may one day be the largest segment of the video game profitability, eclipsing even the big budget triple A games.

In *Angry Birds as a social network market*, Tama Leaver analyses the success of the iconic *Angry Birds* games from Finnish company Rovio. He argues that the success of game apps can be understood by viewing them as part of a social network market wherein the value and success of the games is, in large part, due to the attention and recommendations received in online social networks. Leaver suggests that game developers not only have to create compelling games, but also actively engage with players and fans on social media. Success in this arena can also allow existing game apps to promote newer ones, harnessing the power of recommendation. Games designed with this interaction in mind can also lead to alternate revenue streams such as merchandising and licensed products, the value of which can potentially be greater than the usually quite small charge, if there is one at all, for the games themselves. He ultimately argues that *Angry Birds* is not only very successfully part of a social network market but that Rovio have, in fact, harnessed the dynamics of social network markets *within* the suite of *Angry Birds* games.

David Nieborg's chapter examines the prevalent myth that the app economy and the vast number of mobile devices have radically changed the games industry from a symbiotic relationship between big hardware developers and large games studios to one where the comparatively few resources needed mean that small companies and even individuals can access an app-based games market to huge success. Rather, applying a political economy model, Nieborg uses the example of Apple's App Store to demonstrate the increasing concentration of visibility and success among a tiny fraction of the developers offering games in the App Store. The challenge of network effects and getting the attention for new entrants in a vastly populated app ecology mean that already dominant players are evident and at an obvious advantage. While there are still examples of tiny developers achieving great success, such as the infamous *Flappy Bird*, Nieborg argues these will be fewer and further apart as the app market coheres and, in this context, 'the role of Apple in the value network is all encompassing and pervasive'.

Opening *Part Five: Cheating, gambling and addiction*, César Albarrán-Torres's chapter, *Social casino apps and digital media practices: New*

paradigms of consumption, examines mobile and social gambling and casino apps which offer the experience of specific games of chance but, due to restrictions in many jurisdictions including Australia and the United States, do not involve the actual exchange of money. Instead, success is recognized in these apps in terms of leaderboards and other rewards, including social kudos and credibility of various kinds. Significantly, social casino and gambling apps have become the target of anti-gambling campaigns in Australia, with interest groups and government departments arguing that these can serve as a gateway to more serious gambling at a later time, despite no direct evidence existing that one leads to the other. That said, Albarrán-Torres does acknowledge that by 'simulating real wagering and establishing procedural connections to social networking sites and video games, social casino apps aid in the normalization of gambling-like procedures, bringing them closer to the realm of casual social gaming'. Social casino apps in which real money does not change hands do not unproblematically and directly create gamblers later in life, but the accessibility of these games on mobile devices, exposure to the mechanics of gambling as play, and situating this play socially, can, Albarrán-Torres argues, situate gambling in a more familiar and favourable light.

Marcus Carter and Staffan Björk's chapter on *Candy Crush* engages with the fact that during interviews a considerable number of players of this puzzle game consider the legal purchasing of additional lives and resources within the game to be a form of cheating, despite these in-app purchases being the main revenue model for King, the game's developer. They argue that cheating is most usefully conceptualized as a contextually understood 'rhetorical resource to delineate unacceptable play' rather than any formalist understanding, including gaining unfair advantage as this definition, too, is contextual. Notably, from their interviews, Carter and Björk discovered most players found technical strategies – such as altering the time on an iOS device to regenerate lives more quickly – was acceptable, but some found the purchasing of extra lives unacceptable, and all found purchasing extra powers unacceptable, despite being structurally part of the game's architecture (and King's main financial strategy). This finding reinforces the notion that cheating as an idea is highly contextual, and that whether personally motivated (to overcome the games' challenges) or socially motivated (to compete on high score boards with friends on social networks) matters a great deal as to what is seen as fair and acceptable play.

In the afterword's concluding chapter, *Reflections on the casual games market in a post-GamerGate world*, Adrienne Shaw and Shira Chess situate the often abusive backlash from certain hardcore gamers as a reaction against perceived attacks on their games and their sense of a gamer identity. Yet

Shaw and Chess point out that the number of people playing games has never matched the people who readily identify with the term 'gamer'. Indeed, as casual, social and mobile games have often been dismissed or diminished as the province of bored housewives, their increasing prominence in the video game market has nevertheless further illustrated that the term gamer is representative of fewer and fewer of the people who play games. They argue that: 'It is impossible to think about GamerGate without considering the possibility that it is the diversity of market in casual, social and mobile gaming that helped to facilitate the outrage embedded at the core of GamerGate. What once belonged to a community that was specific, specialized and lacking in diversity can now belong to nearly everyone.'

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'This book is an exciting rogue's gallery of authors, games and topics at the forefront of modern gaming. The inclusion of issues discussing not only recent developments in design, playfulness and the definition of who plays games, but also attending to the darker aspects of contemporary gaming cultures such as the transition to Freemium, cheating and GamerGate is an important step in examining new pathways into games and gaming culture. *Social, Casual and Mobile Games* demonstrates through an impressive series of chapters how this genre of games needs to be taken seriously as a cultural marker of today's players and the games they engage with.'

Esther MacCallum-Stewart

Research Fellow, Digital Cultures Research Centre, University of the West of England, UK

'*Social, Casual and Mobile Games* captures a wide array of scholarship from all corners of Game Studies. The authors explore, from a variety of empirical and theoretical perspectives, a rich tableau of games and players that often disappear from dominant narratives about what makes a game or a game player.'

Casey O'Donnell

Associate Professor of Media and Information, Michigan State University, USA,
and author of *Developer's Dilemma*

'This terrific and timely book is an invaluable guide to the profound ways in which gaming – in all its casual, mobile and social glory – will never be the same again. Critical research for the rest of the (gaming) world has finally arrived.'

Gerard Goggin

Professor of Media and Communications, The University of Sydney, Australia

Social, casual and mobile games have challenged the stereotype of gaming as hardcore, dedicated play, refocusing on activities that fit into everyday life. With chapters discussing locative games, the new freemium economic model and gamer demographics, as well as close studies of specific games (including *Candy Crush Saga*, *Angry Birds* and *Ingress*), this collection offers insight into the changing nature of games and the impact that mobile media is having upon individuals and societies around the world.

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