This is the pre-proof version of an article published in *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies.* Currently available via Online First: http://con.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/02/18/1354856514567052.full.pdf+html?hwshib2=authn%3A1446979233%3A20151107%253A482568cb-e13e-41fd-aaa1-ea55ae672207%3A0%3A0%3A0%3AivdOxh%2BGJEyg0zAEwN2VPQ%3D%3D

The Economics of Free:

Freemium Games, Branding and the Impatience Economy

Elizabeth Evans

University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

The gaming industry has seen dramatic change and expansion with the emergence of 'casual' games that promote shorter periods of game play. Free to download, but structured around micro-payments, these games raise the complex relationship between game design and commercial strategies. Although offering a free gameplay experience in line with open access philosophies, these games also create systems that offer control over the temporal dynamics of that experience to monetise player attention and inattention. This article will examine three 'freemium' games, *Snoopy Street Fair*, *The Simpsons' Tapped Out* and *Dragonvale*, to explore how they combine established branding strategies with gameplay methods that monetise player impatience. In examining these games, this article will ultimately indicate the need for game studies to interrogate the intersection between commercial motivations and game design

and a broader need for media and cultural studies to consider the social, cultural, economic and political implications of impatience.

Keywords

Gaming, mobile gaming**,** attention economy, branding, digital culture.

The gaming market has undergone significant shifts since the start of the twenty-first century. As console-based games have developed higher quality graphics for high-end game consumers, more intuitive interfaces such as the Wii, PS Move and Kinect have been marketed to the less dedicated gamer. Jesper Juul has labelled these changes the 'casual revolution', arguing that the release of the Nintendo Wii has led to a re-articulation of both what gameplay can be and who a 'gamer' is: 'the simplicity of early video games is being rediscovered, while new flexible designs are letting video games fit into the lives of players. Video games are being reinvented, and so is our image of those who play the games' (2009: 2). Since the time of Juul's research, the casual revolution has become even more pervasive. The development of tablet computers and smartphones has led to the emergence of numerous app-based games that promote 'casual' modes of gameplay and economic strategies that are both familiar and new.

Jason Wilson et al, however, argue that rather than being a revolution in gaming, the often simple nature of casual games is part of the continuous process of technological development:

> When we look back over the history of games and mobile platforms, what we see is not so much a recent 'casual revolution' that has brought about the success of a range of games with broad appeal. Rather, we detect a long history of simple games playing a crucial role in 'breaking' specific technologies, and ensuring their mass uptake (Wilson et al, 2011: 352)

Ingrid Richardson similarly links the casual game form to the nature of mobile technology:

> Mobile phone use and mobile gaming is often characterized as a mode of engagement that requires only sporadic attention up to a threshold of around five minutes, hence the popular notion that casual games are the mobile phone's predominant game genre, and the labelling of 'casual gamers', who play at most for five minutes at a time and at irregular intervals, as a key market in the mobile game industry. (Richardson, 2011: 423)

The simplicity and short, but frequent, playing times serve an important function in the diffusion of new gaming technologies. To a certain extent, app-based games such as *Angry Birds* (Rovio, 2009) or *Paper Toss* (Backflip Studios, 2010) are to console games what YouTube videos are to film and television. Whilst not denying the potential for prolonged or repetitive engagement, they are gaming's ephemeral form, 'temporally compressed media that can be viewed or consumed in seconds or minutes' (Grainge, 2011: 2), involving short bursts of activity rather than prolonged engagement with a gameworld.

A closer examination of app-based casual games, however, reveals the complex ways in which evolutions in gameplay are intersecting with broader developments in the digital economy. 'Freemium' (see Anderson, 2009) games serve as a particularly pertinent example of these intersections and raise the importance of considering the wider industrial and economic context of gameplay design, especially as commercial strategies shift. Initially available for free but exploiting in-game commercial strategies, many such games are becoming incredibly financially successful, with *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012) making an estimated $850,000 per day as of September 2013 (www.thinkgaming.com). However, their gameplay and economic strategies are equally attracting the disdain of game reviewers and the traditional gaming industry (Alexander, 2013; Spence, 2013). This article will consider the freemium game market and the way it raises important questions for game studies concerning the relationship between game design and commercial motivations. It will then focus on three examples of freemium games: *Snoopy Street Fair* (Beeline Interactive, 2011), *Dragonvale* (Backflip Studios, 2011), and *The Simpsons' Tapped Out* (EA, 2012).[1] This article is explicitly concerned with thinking about these games both as content and as the result of economic or commercial strategies and decisions. The following analysis will focus on the gameplay strategies built into the games along with the paratextual materials that surround them, including loading screens, developer websites and iTunes app store pages. Each game was played for a period of eighteen months to two years but the aim here is not to consider actual instances of gameplay or the responses of real players. Instead this article will examine the way the games are

designed, how gaming pleasures are built into the construction of tasks and goals and how their design intersects with broader commercial concerns and economic strategies.

Between them, *Street Fair*, *Tapped Out* and *Dragonvale* epitomise the range of economic and gameplay strategies occurring throughout the freemium game market. Whilst initially available for free, two key economic strategies emerge in these games that twin gameplay and game design with commercial sensibilities. The first is based around the exploitation or development of brands; the second is concerned with a sub-section of the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) in the form of monetising player impatience. These two strategies are far from mutually exclusive and are common across a range of freemium games other than those discussed here. Both strategies speak to not only changes within the gaming market, and consequently a change in gameplay styles, but also broader changes within digital media culture. They raise the importance of considering digital games within their broader industrial and economic contexts.

The Economics and Gameplay of Freemium Games

Beyond a few key texts, the industrial or economic context of game development, and how that context intersects with gameplay design, remains under explored. As Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argued over a decade ago:

> Much writing about digital gaming focuses on the interaction between player and game. We, however, argue that the moment of gameplay is constructed by and embedded in much larger circuits – technological,

> cultural and marketing – that in turn interact with one another within the system of information capital. (2003: 270)

Aphra Kerr offers a similar position, identifying a range of economic models for emerging 'mini games' (2010 [2006]: 61) and raising the potential for similar research. However, these implicit calls to pay attention to the wider forces at work in digital games have not yet been fully answered. Whilst other media-related disciplines have seen a growth in research that positions them within their industrial or economic context, games studies is yet to experience a similar turn. More recently, Randy Nichols has returned to this earlier work, arguing that:

> If we want to understand the significance of any game, whether it is *Pac-Man* (1980), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), *Bully* (2006) or *Manhunt* (1983), or even *America's Army*, one of the things we need to know is how making a game serves the interest of its producers. (2014: 6)

Whilst the 'interest of its producers' may naturally be creative, it may equally be of more commercial origin. As these scholars recognise, there is still much work to be done in interrogating the relationship between game design and industrial or economic forces. This article seeks to address this gap by bringing together game studies approaches with those from branding and new media studies that are concerned with the relationship between economics and digital engagement.

The games market has changed dramatically since Kline et al and Kerr were writing thanks to the 'casual revolution' discussed above. Since the games market crash of the 1980s, the games industry has had a relatively stable economic structure. A game is developed and then sold for an upfront cost. The

emergence of the app market and freemium games has disrupted this and seen new economic strategies emerge, strategies that have shaped and promoted particular forms of game play. Elsewhere in their, book Kline et al demonstrate the interconnectedness of commercial strategies and gameplay design. When discussing the 1980s crash, they argue that the shift from an arcade-based system, where individual instances of gameplay cost small amounts of money, to the console system, where consumers had to pay significant costs upfront for permanent access to games, required a shift in the way gameplay was thought about:

> while it was one thing to spend a quarter at the arcade to find out the games were no good, the price-point of home game systems deepened the frustration. When parents saw kids retire systems to their closets after playing for five minutes they were unlikely to hand out money for new cartridges. (2003: 105)

From the early days of digital games' industrialisation, there has been a link between economic strategies, upfront costs and gameplay and this link continues to play out in contemporary games culture. Just as the shift from arcade to home based gaming resulted in both a shift in economic system and gameplay, so too has the emergence of the app-based games market.

The differences brought about by the app gaming market, and epitomised in the form of freemium games, are both technological and economic. The devices required to play them are multi-functional with less processing power or memory than computers and games consoles. This, along with the economics of the app market privileges small packets of software sold at very low or no

upfront cost. Freemium games do not need to prove through graphics or complexity of gameplay that they are worth a £50 price tag. However, freemium game companies must still operate to generate a profit, just as AAA games developers do, but they must do so within a different market context. They must utilise different forms of gameplay and monetise that gameplay through different mechanisms. Examining the forms of gameplay offered by freemium games alongside how they are monetised reveals a clear and direct relationship between game design and commercial strategies. As such these games offer a particularly fruitful way to respond to the calls made by Kline et al, Kerr and Nichols.

In many ways, the three games examined here call on gameplay genres and formats familiar from the long history of console and PC gaming. These are then combined with more recent approaches to gameworlds found in online gaming and non-game digital forms such as social media. The three games share a number of structural similarities and core gameplay principles, based on a form of strategic personalisation seen in games such as *Civilisation* (MicroProse, 1991–) and *Sim City/The Sims* (Maxis/EA, 1989–) that provide the framework for their economic strategies. They are not the only form of freemium game available and others, such as motor-skills based games including *Candy Crush Saga* and *Plants vs Zombies* (PopCap, 2009), exist. However, all freemium games employ similar commercial strategies and demonstrate the same relationship between money, time and attention. It is therefore useful to briefly establish their common gameplay strategies before moving on to consider how this gameplay intersects with the games' economic strategies.

Strategy based simulation

Each game involves the player building a virtual location and collecting in-game currency and experience points (XP) from virtual items that are bought through the in-game market. In *Street Fair*, the player builds various stalls in the streets around Charlie Brown's house (see fig 1); in *Tapped Out*, the player must rebuild Springfield after Homer Simpson has destroyed it in a nuclear meltdown (see fig 2); in *Dragonvale* the player builds a dragon park, breeding various dragons to live on a set of floating islands (see fig 3). Each game's goals are based around generating the most money and acquiring the most in-game assets as possible. Reaching these goals is rewarded with additional coins and XP or animations that occur only when a goal is reached.

However, the level of agency offered to the player can vary. Ian Bogost, in his highly critical evaluation of freemium games, argues that, 'these challenge-free games demand little more than clicking on farms and restaurants and cities and things at regular intervals' (2010: online). For Bogost, players are compelled to return to a game that only requires trivial effort and that ultimately amounts to little more than clicking on items at times determined by the game. These games work not along the lines of input in the game narrative, there are no events that play out that narrative and the player does not have to solve quests or defeat enemies. Rather than agency over narrative events, these game's prioritise the personalisation of a virtual story space. The process of acquiring assets to enable this personalisation is at the core of these games' economic strategies.

Neverending gameworld

The narrative of each game is limited to worldbuilding, rather than any kind of linear or branched storyline and there is no 'end point' to the narrative. Although games have a cap on the level that a player can reach this cap is often raised periodically or the game is constructed as such that the player can continue playing even once it is reached. As will be explored later, this is a core characteristic and potential issue for these games as they have no clear end point and can potentially run, and be played, indefinitely.

Short, frequent playing times

Unlike most console based games or MMOPRGs that can result in long periods of gameplay, these games follow the growing tradition of mobile gaming that exploits dead time (Hjorth and Richardson, 2009; Moore, 2011) and encourages players to engage with them briefly, but often. After an initial period of set up, in which the player is encouraged to build several items at once and move through levels quickly, each game settles into a pattern that encourages accessing the game for a short period of time many times a day, rather than longer, but less frequent, periods of gameplay. Play is interspersed with stretches of non-play, identified by Ian Bogost as 'asynchronous gameplay [which] relies on meaningful use of these disruptions as wellsprings for game experiences. This means that good asynchronous multiplayer games design these fissures as centerpieces, rather than detours' (2004: 2; see also Juul, 2009: 149–150). These gaps in gameplay become, as we shall see, central to these games' economic strategies.

Socialbility

Each of the games discussed here privilege interaction between players, though they do this in ways that distinguish them from console or online games. The short playing times of each game do not encourage communal playing experiences as described by Gareth Schott and Maria Kambouri as 'social play' (2006: 120–122) or the collective gameplay experience that can be found in MMPORGs (see Li, Jackson and Trees, 2008). Instead these games use the logic of social networks to encourage sociability through virtual connections. Many operate through social networks sites such as Facebook (see Consalvo, 2011), though the examples discussed here are instead accessed via individual apps on the iOS or Android operating system. These games allow players to 'visit' other players who they are either connected to on social media, or they have shared a unique code with. Visiting friends' game spaces not only builds a sense of competition (see Consalvo, 2011: 2) but also lead to in-game rewards, normally through the ability to gift friends with virtual assets or additional in-game currency. The rewards are often limited to a set number per day from each connected player and as such are structured to privilege multiple connections that are accessed semi-frequently, rather than a smaller number of more frequent connections.[2]

In-game currency

A key part of these games' economic strategies is their interaction with external, real-world economic structures. All are initially available for free download with the ability to purchase in-game currency in exchange for real money whilst playing. This in-game currency operates on a two-tier basis. The first (coins in all games) is collected from in-game assets. A second form of 'premium' currency is

available to purchase with real money through a transaction, via the iTunes store or Android marketplace. This premium currency (dollars in *Street Fair*, gems in *Dragonvale*, donuts in *Tapped Out*) can be used to buy certain premium items within the game. As such they function as what Vili Lehdonvirta calls a 'virtual asset market' or 'an interface between a virtual economy and the real economy' that follows an 'economic integration strategy' (2008: 8). Unlike MMORPG marketplaces, in which players can become sellers, these games operate as monopolies as the game developers serve as the only provider of virtual assets so are in a position to set prices and control trade.

However, the economic imperatives of freemium app games are not limited to the player paying real money for premium assets. Each of the gameplay structures listed above emerges from and constructs a larger economic strategy that combines both direct and indirect forms of monetisation. To return to Nichols' call, in order to understand the significance of freemium games it is necessary to consider how 'making a game serves the interest of its producers' (2014: 6). This leads onto understanding the commercial imperative behind the games and how they monetise the gameplaying experience. In particular two key ways emerge that encapsulate not only how these games serve the commercial needs of their producers but also what they reveal about the relationship between digital gaming and broader media culture: the role of these games in branding strategies and the monetization of gameplay itself by exploiting player impatience.

Beagles, Homers and Backflips: Freemium Games as Brand Components

In many ways, freemium games such as *Street Fair*, *DragonVale* and *Tapped Out* exploit economic strategies that are already well established and significantly pre-date the emergent app market. Most notably, concepts of branding, which have become increasingly important across the media spectrum, emerge as core strategies in these games. Adam Arvidsson has argued for the need to take a multi-faceted understanding of branding, writing that they are more than logos or slogans and, 'now become something of an omnipresent tool by means of which identity, social relations and shared experiences (like spending a night in bed talking about Apple products) could be constructed' (Arvidsson, 2005: 3). Following Arvidsson's argument, the branding strategies at play with these games are only partially about the games themselves, they also function within social communities and indirect economic exchanges whilst serving as components of larger brands.

The increasing importance of branding in the creative industries has seen prominence in recent scholarship relating to older media forms (Grainge, 2008; Johnson, 2013). Within games studies, however, the relationship between digital games and branding has seen less academic exploration. Kline et al have offered the most useful consideration of the intersection between digital games and branding in arguing that there is great economic benefit to using titles that bring a brand identity with them: 'Games are developed around characters and narratives that have already been tested in the entertainment marketplace. The pursuit of licensing agreements is therefore a marketing-driven approach to game design that aims to minimize investment risk' (Kline et al, 2003: 226). Whilst Kline et al recognise the value of branded content to game design and

development, freemium games raise the complexities of this value. An extension of console-based licensed games emerges in relation to many freemium games including *Street Fair* and *Tapped Out* and other games based on, but not limited to, *The Hunger Games* (Funtactix Ltd, 2012), *Game of Thrones* (Kongregate, 2014), *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Ubisoft, 2013) and the *Skylanders* console games (Activision, 2012). Such a strategy calls on ideas of transmediality that have become increasingly prevalent over the last decade across all media forms (Jenkins, 2006; Evans, 2011) and issues surrounding trademarks and licensing agreements. In addition, however, and despite considerable similarities in game structure and format, a second branding strategy also emerges. Non-licensed freemium games similarly work within branding logics, but rather than supporting an already established media brand, they instead work to promote their developer's brand within an increasingly competitive market. Considering both cases provides the opportunity to expand Kline et al's work and explore the complexities of branding's relationship to digital games, the multiple ways in which it can shape the pleasures these games construct and their value to developers and brand owners.

Transmedia Brands

Street Fair and *Tapped Out* epitomise the first category in their direct connection to the pre-existing branded media franchises of *Peanuts* and *The Simpsons*. Both games feature the design, animation style, music, settings, characters and voice cast from each franchise and the presence of such diegetic components is key to their promotion and gameplay. The *Street Fair* App Store entry refers to the game's diegetic origins frequently, identifying the chance to 'recruit your

favourite PEANUTS characters' and the availability of 'a plethora of much loved icons from the PEANUTS universe'. The most expensive stalls, which equally pay out the most in-game money, feature characters from the original comic strips and spin-off television specials. Each of these stalls feature short animations when they are collected, animations that do not occur on standard stalls. *Tapped Out*'s App Store entry similarly emphasises the presence of locations and characters recognisable from the television series. In the game itself, characters from the television series are slowly 'rediscovered' after the nuclear meltdown as the player builds their associated buildings. Placing the Kwik-E-Mart allows the arrival of Apu, for instance, who the player must then make complete a shift in the store. These games are equally tinged with the ironic, self-aware tone of the television series, for example in cut scenes when Homer is seen picking up large dollar bills and XP symbols, just as the player does or when he comments on his willingness to spend 'real money' to create a 'better' Springfield.

In many ways, these games follow a decidedly pre-digital economic structure that has been at the core of the entertainment industry for decades. Television and film content have long been funded not just by direct payment but also through cross-promotional strategies and merchandise. It is not just the content, but also the exchanges *around* and related to the content that form a core business strategy. In transmedia branded games such *Street Fair* and *Tapped Out*, branding logics are infused within the games' structures and intended pleasures and designed to generate consumption outside of the game itself. Moments when the recognised brand emerges through the gameplay are twinned with gaming rewards in the form of exclusive animations, more currency or XP points. As a

result the gaming pleasures of achievement are tied to extending an emotional relationship (Freling and Forbes, 2005: 150) with the media brand and its key properties. Each game's goals are based on the player gradually 'earning' the core transmedia components of the narrative, with an ultimate achievement being collecting all the familiar buildings and characters of Springfield or Charlie Brown's home town.

These games also twin the logics of branding and game design through more direct links between gameplay and other branches of the brand franchise. Throughout *Street Fair* the player earns black and white *Peanuts* comic strips by collecting the coins and XP points from stalls. Players can purchase a Comic Stand with Snoopy dollars, which then unlocks the chance to collect colour comic strips. Links on the game's homepage connect the player to a webpage that promotes *Peanuts* products, most notably digital and hard copy versions of the comic strip collections. The game now acts, in effect, like the various *Peanuts* television specials did by widening recognition of the *Peanuts* brand, encouraging consumer loyalty but ultimately (ideally) increasing purchases of books, DVDs and merchandise. The consumption of non-gaming *Peanuts* texts becomes integrated into the gaming experience of *Street Fair*. *Tapped Out* enacts this connection to an even greater extent, explicitly directing the player towards the core brand property of the television series. In the run up to Halloween in 2012, for example, the game ran a quest based around the series' annual 'Treehouse of Horror' episode. During the first stage of the quest, the player collected pieces of a Mayan calendar. Once they had them all the game told them to: 'Watch October 7 Treehouse of Horror episode. Answer trivia question about

it.' If the player correctly answered the multiple-choice question, based directly on events in the episode, they received a bonus of premium currency. The game explicitly attempted to move the player back to the core media brand product: the television series. Playing the game and watching the television series became intertwined, with gameplay extending into periods of television viewing and vice versa.

Both *Peanuts* and *The Simpsons* have clear legacies of transmedia storytelling, having appeared across a range of media including film, television, console games, comic strips and theme park rides for decades (Gray, 2010). *Street Fair* and *Tapped Out* therefore both serve as a 21st century version of each franchise's long established transmedia expansions. *Street Fair* is clearly part of the transmedia *Peanuts* because Charlie Brown looks and sounds like Charlie Brown, complete with famously pessimistic catchphrases; the buildings of your own personalised Springfield look just like those in *The Simpsons*. On the one hand, the replication of the animated characters themselves and the stylistic qualities of the original texts serves to legitimise these games as transmedia extensions, position their gameplay within a larger, coherent diegesis and offer players the pleasures of playing within a familiar narrative world (see Jenkins, 2006: 96). On the other hand, they serve as a key commercial motivation for the games' existence, providing indirect revenue streams for both the brand owners and the game developers.

As well as giving these new games the legacy of the *Peanuts* and *Simpsons* brands, the value of branding also works in the other direction, to give both

properties a presence in an emergent app market space and access to an emergent and growing audience. In the case of *Street Fair*, for example, this was a conscious decision as part of a broader digital strategy aimed at updating an old media property that had seen no new material since the death of creator Charles M. Schulz in 2000. The chairman and CEO of Peanuts Worldwide owner Iconix, Neil Cole has stated 'We want to keep *Peanuts* accessible to the next generation. The plan is to make *Peanuts* "an immersive experience"' (Cavna, 2011: online). Cole's comments indicate a clear strategy of using freemium gaming as a way of instilling new life in an already established, but not necessarily lively, brand.[3] The closed nature of licencing agreements makes it impossible to determine exactly how this brand development benefits the core companies involved. However, the labelling of the Iconix/Beeline relationship as a 'partnership' (Peanuts Worldwide, 2011: online) suggests perceived economic benefits for each significant party.

The status of *Street Fair* and *Tapped Out* as transmedia brand extensions therefore filters through both their value to their owners/developers and the forms of gameplay experience that they encourage. They bring new audiences to established media brands and the sociability that is inherent in each game encourages players to tell their friends, thereby expanding the brand's reach. At the same time they offer new ways to for those players to engage with the brands and so find pleasure in playing in their diegeses. Gameplay is built around the player's knowledge of, and desire to acquire, recognisable narrative components. In turn, gameplay is structured to lead back to other commercially

valuable activities. As a result they demonstrate one way in which freemium games integrate branding logic with game design.

Developer Brands

Dragonvale does not call on a pre-existing media brand and so does not have the familiarity or economic stability that a licensing deal can offer. Instead, game design merges with branding strategies that relate only to the developer themselves, Backflip Studios. With no pedigree in the console game market or established media brand, Backflip instead used *Dragonvale* to establish themselves within the freemium sector of the gaming market and establish their own brand identity.[4] The only visible branding throughout the game is the studio logo, which features on the opening title screen as well as in the corner of the app's icon. Elsewhere in the game, the presence of an entity behind the game emerges implicitly and often. During the loading screen, banners appear labelled as 'A Word from the Wizard' announcing new dragons or special deals, constructing the game's developers as busily working behind the scenes to increase the gameplay opportunities for players. Within the game itself, images of a wizard appears every time the player breeds a new dragon, addressing the player in first person and commenting on the dragon they have just bred, often in mildly humorous ways. These 'wizards' similarly offer free gifts at key moments such as the anniversary of *Dragonvale*'s launch. This reminds players that there is a community of people behind the game, humanising the otherwise invisible game production process and, in turn, Backflip, as a brand. It equally positions the 'wizards', and so Backflip, within the game's actual gameplay, as

characters within the game's narrative world that the player is somehow indirectly interacting with (see fig 4).

The value of using freemium games to establish a developer brand emerges in the connections emphasised between a brand's gaming products. *Dragonvale* is one of a range of games offered by Backflip, some of which following similar 'freemium' strategies and others that require direct payment. *Dragonvale* is promoted heavily on the Backflip Studios website and serves as a benchmark of quality for the company's other games that include the popular *Paper Toss* (2011). *Dragonvale*'s page on the App Store alerts potential players to other titles in Backflip's catalogue and a link in the game's 'Options' page provides easy download of these titles, raising awareness of the company and their association with these particular game titles.

This strategy echoes Celia Lury identification of brands as a 'set of relations between products in time' (2004: 2). Branding for developers such as Backflip, who do not have recognised media titles to support them, functions as a way to collectively pull their products together and give their work an assurance of quality. Just as individual programmes may serve a channel brand (Johnson 2012: 125), or individual technologies such as the iPhone or iPad collectively serve Apple's corporate brand, *Dragonvale* contributes to the overall branding and quality assurances of its developer. Again, branding logics combine with game design and the value of games to their producers. Backflip position themselves within players' experience of *Dragonvale* and then use that position

to both create a brand and provide markers of quality assurance in a rapidly expanding sector of the gaming market.

'Wow, I'd spend any amount of money – real, actual money – to have a town like this!': The Economics of Impatience

Whilst, to a certain extent, freemium games operate in ways that reflect techniques used by older media forms and consumer goods, their design equally exploits characteristics of emerging digital culture. In particular they highlight the dichotomy between digital culture as open access and increasingly commercial. The fact that these games require no immediate payment in order to play them echoes the philosophy of open access and its fundamental opposition to more capitalist approaches. As Steven Weber has argued 'the conventional notion of property is, of course, the right to exclude you from using something that belongs to me. Property in open source is configured fundamentally around the right to distribute, not the right to exclude' (2004: 1; see also Vaidhyanathan, 2001: 153–159). Such an approach can be seen in the evolution of apps more broadly, with software increasingly becoming cheaper and a large number of small software tools being available for free. These games operate along similar lines, promoting an inclusive economic strategy that makes them accessible to anyone with a tablet or smartphone without further economic outlay.[5] However, this philosophy of open access only goes so far and a deeper examination of the games' structures reveals that the opposite side of the dichotomy, the commercialisation of digital culture, is also fundamental to their gameplay and economic strategies. This is characterised by the direct transactions between

game developer and player subsequent to the initial free 'purchase' of the game and how they exploit the temporal dynamics of gameplay.

The most explicit form of monetisation is in the exchange of money for digital items within each game. Economic systems based on virtual assets are not unique or limited to emergent app culture. MMORPGs offer complex economic systems (Lehdonvirta, 2008) with real money exchanged for virtual in-game assets. As Mia Consalvo explores, within certain gaming contexts, involvement in real-money trading is looked down upon by gamers and considered a form of cheating:

> None of the players who I talked with admitted to using real money to buy in-game currency, items, or accounts. That is probably due to the stigma that the practice still carries for many players as well as its violation of most games' terms of service agreements. (2007: 94)

Accessing rewards that are otherwise only available via skill and perseverance via non-gaming means is seen within much of games culture as an antithesis to gameplay. The motivations behind the conflation of real world money and virtual items in the freemium games discussed here, however, are significantly different from the large scale MMORPGs discussed by Consalvo and Lehdonvirta. They are single player games and so avoid the many consequences that multi-player environments generate whereby multiple players are engaged in uneven contests based on willingness (and ability) to take part in real world monetary transactions (see Consalvo, 2007: 162–162) rather than ability to perform well within the game system. The use of economic means to progress ultimately only

impacts the player themselves, rather than potentially adversely affecting the progress of other players around them.

To a certain extent, in these 'freemium' app games real world money allows the player to buy a virtual asset within the game. If the player wishes to own Woodstock's Marshmallow Stand in *Street Fair*, add the Duff Brewery to their version of Springfield, or purchase the latest limited edition dragon, they can do so by paying real money for it. However, the economic structure of these games is more complex than a relatively straightfoward real money to virtual asset exchange. Richard Bartle, in a report written for interactive entertainment funders the Themis Group, explores core 'pitfalls' in the merging of real-world money and virtual assets. He ponders, 'what, exactly, is the shelf life of a virtual object?' (2004: 11), going on to argue that this becomes a problem for developers sanctioning such transactions:

> It's not unreasonable, therefore, to point out to players that virtual worlds can and do close, and that they should factor this into their assessment of how much a virtual object is worth. This only applies for unsanctioned trades, though: for sales direct from the manufacturer (i.e. the developer), players can expect the same kind of security that they get under regular consumer protection laws. (2004: 12)

Any of the games discussed here could close down and while the app may still exist on an individual's device, many of these games rely on contact with the developer's server to run. If the developer were to cease supporting the game any items paid for via in-app purchases would suddenly vanish.[6]

The ‘neverending gameplay’ of these games is a key indicator of their commercial structure. On the one hand it is possible to see the continuing economic function of these games as evidence either that players accept these risks and are happy with the risk-value balance that the games offer or that such an eventuality does not occur to them. However, on the other hand, there is more going on in these games that suggest it is not necessarily ‘assets’ in and of themselves that players are buying. In particular, the way the games rely on, and exploit, player impatience, points to an additional dimension to their economic structure. Real money in these games does not simply function in the exchange, or ownership, of virtual assets, but also to control the temporal dynamics of the gameplay experience. This offers a key difference between freemium games and console games or even MMORPGs with built-in markets in terms of both economics and gameplay. Aphra Kerr argues that games function as ‘commodities’ to be ‘sold in those markets that are rich enough to afford them’ (2010 [2006]: 1). Whilst console games or objects within MMORPGs act as tradable commodities, freemium game economics are not about selling assets or objects but about selling the *experience* of gameplay, of monetising the player’s ability to control their play and, most significantly, the time and attention they take to play.

A core theoretical framework of digital media scholarship has been that of the attention economy. Rather than rely on the exchange of money for goods or services, digital media exchanges the attention of the viewer, player, reader or user (Goldhaber, 1997). In many ways, the importance of attention is nothing new. The branding strategies described earlier are all based on securing and

maintaining an audience's prolonged attention on a particular brand. Ben Roberts offers a critique of Goldhaber's model, arguing that attention has always played a key role in cultural economics: 'Goldhaber has nothing to say about the tendency of consumer capitalist economies to organise attention through the agency of advertising and public relations' (2012: 4). The same can be said of all media. Television and film require their audiences to pay attention to them enough to turn the television on, purchase a ticket or buy a DVD or digital copy. Gaming itself places continued player attention at its core; whereas film and television can run in the background whilst the audience does other things a game must be played and so attended to.

As with all media, the games discussed here require attention from their players, however the 'asynchronous play' structure (Bogost, 2010) of the game, as discussed above, allows that attention to be intermittent. They are the epitome of what Daniel Argman and Peter Jakobssen argue is gaming's 'colonisation' of the everyday (2008: 234); they are designed to be played in brief moments separated out by the other activities of daily life. Rather than monetising the attention the player is paying to the screen by extending that attention (for instance as YouTube monetises viewership through adverts played before the main video), these games instead monetise the player's opportunity (and assumed desire) to limit enforced time *away* from the game. As a result, the opposite of attention becomes equally central to their gameplay and the act of waiting is a core part of each game examined here. Dragons in *Dragonvale* take set times to both breed and incubate, with those that generate more income taking longer. Stalls in *Street Fair* or buildings in *Tapped Out* similarly take time

to build. In each game, currency and XP is generated only after a period of time. The player must wait in order to see progress in their park, fair or town.

However, the commercial structures of these games provide a way to cut through their pauses and enforced waiting periods. In each game premium currency can be used in each game to speed up breeding and stall building, hatch dragons immediately, or remove the delay before in game assets will pay out. *Street Fair* even allows the player to purchase 'Snoopy's Cash Dash' in which Snoopy rides around the fair on a skateboard collecting cash and XP points, meaning the player does not need to tap on each item in their fair and both can be collected more quickly. In addition, each game has evolved to build in a sense of urgency around the acquisition of certain items. *Street Fair* and *Tapped Out* operate sales in which premium currency items are available either at a reduced rate or for a limited time. *Dragonvale* regularly releases dragons that are only available for a short period of time, increasing the time pressure for players wishing to breed them and complete their collection.

This process is, of course, further emphasised by the social aspects of the game. By encouraging players to see how their friends are doing, the potential for competition, and players' desire to 'beat' their friends, becomes greater. With *Dragonvale* this social aspect has evolved into web communities that share breeding suggestions, and therefore attempt to help players avoid trial and error in trying to breed a new dragon, all potentially undermining the game's drive towards purchasing, rather than breeding, dragons. More recently, however, Backflip have even begun economically exploiting such advice, introducing a

scheme whereby players can purchase official 'Breeding Hints' in exchange for gems. Whilst players certainly do not need to follow Backflip's direction, and the online communities continue to offer players free breeding hints, all of these strategies serve to emphasise immediacy and temporally enforced scarcity. For players who do not breed a dragon within the limited time it is available, using real money becomes their only option for acquiring it.[7]

These strategies are not dictatorial and can be circumvented; players can deliberately play against the games' economic strategy by refusing to pay any real money. Each game provides its premium currency for free, but again only at key intervals, either when a player levels up or after playing everyday for a certain number of days. Ultimately, if the player is patient they can purchase every item in *Street Fair*, breed every dragon and build a fully complete Springfield for free. However, the monetisation of impatience remains central to each game's design and players' ability to control their own gameplay experience. If players wish to progress through the game more quickly, build a stall or building immediately, or guarantee they have a limited time dragon in their park they must purchase premium currency in exchange for real money. This economic strategy is ultimately concerned with monetising a player's impatience and desire to avoid waiting for the game's progression.[8]

Player impatience has long been a part of engagement with video games. The circulation of walkthroughs, offering detailed guides on how to complete console games, offers a historical example of player impatience and acts as a precursor to the design of freemium games. Mia Consalvo connects these activities with the

temporal demands of gameplay: 'For many players, there isn't enough time in their schedules to play as much as they'd like, or they are in a hurry to acquire items or skill levels as soon as possible – sooner than normal gameplay allows' (Consalvo, 2007: 162). The games discussed here offer a different, but related, temporal relationship between player and game. Rather than requiring extended periods of play in order to perfect and complete the game, these games require short periods of play interspersed with extended periods of waiting. At the same time, the connotations associated with impatience in console games and MMORPGs, that circumventing the time component of games is 'cheating', are resisted within the gameplay structure. Rather than breaking the 'magic circle' of gameplay (Bartle, 2004: 15; Huizinga, 2004: 13–14) shortcuts are integrated into it. However, the core temporal issue evident in both arguments, of player impatience and the potential to limit or exploit it, remains highly relevant.

The focus on player impatience as a source of revenue within these games offers a representation of the broader expansion and exploitation of the attention economy in digital culture. Geert Lovink argues that 'real-time is the new crack' (2011: 11) and that 'there is simply no time to enjoy slow media. Back in Tuscany mode, it is nice to lean back and listen to the offline silence, but that is an exception reserved for quality moments' (2011: 12). The games discussed here simultaneously counter this idea of a 'have it now' culture and monetise it. If you are patient you can play for free, but if you buy into a real-time instant gratification approach then you must pay for it.

There is some evidence that this reliance on branding and player impatience may not be sufficient for sustaining a prolonged, commercially motivated, gameworld. In early 2013, *Tapped Out* brought in the character of Gil Gundersen, the recurring salesman character from the television series, who would aggressively market limited time deals to the player to encourage them to spend premium currency. In Spring 2013, *Street Fair* introduced Curly Mo, a walking piggy bank through which players could earn premium Snoopy dollars by signing up to offers with a number of non-game related partners. Beeline even began releasing *Street Fair* items that could only be bought for a one-off purchase with real money, by-passing the in-game economic structure completely. *Dragonvale* similarly started employing more aggressive strategies in Autumn 2013 with a series of limited time challenges. Players needed to collect items to exchange for special dragons. However the time frames became increasingly short, making it almost impossible for players to collect everything without using real money.

These developments suggest the limits of an impatience-based games economy and it is naturally impossible to predict how long such games will last. However, these apparent limitations are matched by the increasing evidence of impatience-based business models within other media industries adjusting to the digital economy and as such, the relevance of examining impatience to fields beyond games studies. The film industry is decreasing (and occasionally removing) the traditional delay between cinematic and home entertainment releases (see Nelson, 2014: 65–66); the television industry has similarly responded to global piracy by shortening the gap between broadcast dates in different nations. The games discussed here therefore indicate a broader need

for media and cultural studies to consider the social, cultural and political implications of *impatience* and the ways in which media industries are exploiting and monetising that impatience.

Conclusion

Tablet computer, smartphones and the accompanying development of app-based freemium gaming have created a range of gameplay experiences that both build on pre-existing game forms and economic models and exploit reconfigured uses of time and the evolution of the attention economy. The apparent embracing of open access philosophies in these games is twinned with a series of distinctly commercial strategies. Some strategies, such as using the games to either develop an emergent brand or emphasise and strengthen pre-existing ones, call on indirect economic approaches that are well established. On these occasions, the games aim to make existing brands appear relevant and adaptable in an increasingly transmedia environment or to establish newer content brands. However, in addition to monetising the attention actually paid to the game via brand promotion, these games also monetise the player's desire to reduce the time away from the game. By building in deliberate periods of waiting into the gameplay and combining that with limited time offers, the developers seek to generate and exploit a 'get-it-now' attitude. Player impatience becomes a resource to be managed and ultimately monetised in ways that are echoed across the media industries and as such offers a fruitful avenue for further consideration by media scholars.

The convergence between gaming, the appearance of an open source philosophy and brand or time based monetisation strategies is becoming a foundational ethos of the casual gaming market. Game studies, however, has yet to fully turn its attention to the impact of such commercial sensibilities on game production and design and fully interrogate what freemium games can reveal about the nature of gameplay and the games industry. *Street Fair*, *Tapped Out*, *Dragonvale* and the countless similar games available on iOS and Android emphasise the necessity for games studies to consider the ways in which game design and gameplay intersects with the industrial and commercial context in which games emerge. This article has offered just three example games and two economic strategies, but the multiple ways in which the economic logic of the games market can shape the way games are built or how engagement with games is constructed is open to further examination and interrogation.

References

Alexander, Leigh (2013) 'The five reasons freemium sucks (according to QWOP's developer)' [online] URL: http://indiegames.com/2013/03/the_five_reasons_freemium_suck.html accessed 13/09/2013

Anderson, Chris (2009) *Free: How Today's Smartest Businesses Profit by Giving Something for Nothing.* London: Random House.

Argman, D. and Jakobsson, P. (2008) Do You Believe in Magic? Computer Games in Everyday Life. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11(2) pp. 225–243.

Arvidsson, A. (2005) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. London, Routledge.

Bartle, R. (2004) *Pitfalls of Virtual Property* [online] http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/povp.pdf [accessed 26 November 2012]

Bogost, I. (2004) Asynchronous Play. Paper presented at Other Players Conference on Multiplayer Phenomena, Copenhagen Denmark, December. Available: http://www.bogost.com/downloads/I.%20Bogost%20-%20Asynchronous%20Multiplay.pdf [accessed 14 January 2013]

Bogost, I. (2010) Cow Clicker: The Making of an Obsession. Online available: http://www.bogost.com/blog/cow_clicker_1.shtml [accessed 14 January 2013]

Cavna, M. (2011) 'PEANUTS' launches major digital and social-media expansion. *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2011 online, available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/peanuts-launches-major-digital-and-social-media-expansion/2011/08/02/gIQAqEydrI_blog.html [accessed 14 February 2013]

Consalvo, M. (2011) Using your friends: Social mechanics in social games. Paper presented at *Foundations of Digital Games 2011*, 29 June–1 July, Bordeaux, France. Available online: http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2159391&dl=ACM&coll=DL&CFID=254210221&CFTOKEN=41532557 [accessed 14 January 2013]

Evans, E. (2011) *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life*. London: Routledge.

Freling, Traci H. and Forbes, Lukas P. (2005) 'An Examination of Brand personality through methodological Triangulation' in *Brand Management* 13 (2) November pp. 148–162.

Goldhaber, M. H. (1997) The Attention Economy and the Net. *First Monday*, Volume 2, Number 4, 7 April, available: http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArtic

le/519/440 [accessed 14 January 2013]

Grainge, P. (2008) *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* London: Routledge.

Grainge, P. (2011) *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube* London: BFI.

Gray, Jonathan (2010) *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* New York: New York, University Press.

Hjorth, Larissa and Richardson, Ingrid (2010) 'Playing the waiting game: complicated notions of (tele)presence and gendered distraction in casual mobile gaming', in H. Greif, L. Hjorth, A. Lasén and C. Lobet-Maris (eds) *Cultures of Participation*: *Media Practices, Politics and Literacy*, Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 111–125.

Huizinga, J. (1955) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* Boston: The Beacon Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide* New York: NYU Press.

Johnson, C. (2011) *Branding Television* London: Routledge.

Juul, J. (2009) *Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players.* Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Kerr, Aphra (2010 [2006]) *The Business and Cultures of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay* London: Sage.

Kline, Stephen, Dyer-Whitford, Nick and de Peuter, Greig (2003) *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press

Lovink, G. (2011) *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lehdonvirta, V. (2008) Real-Money Trade of Virtual Assets: New Strategies for Virtual World Operators in Ipe, Mary ed. *Virtual Worlds*, pp. 113–137, Hyderabad, India: Icfai University Press.

Li, Nan, Jackson Michele H. and Trees, April R. (2008) 'Relating Online: Managing Dialectical Contradictions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game Relationships' in *Games and Culture* 3(1) pp. 76–97.

Lury, C. (2004) *Brands* London: Routledge.

Moore, C. (2011) The magic circle and the mobility of play. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17(4) 373–387.

Nichols, Randy (2014) *The Video Game Business* (London: Palgrave Macmillan)

Nelson, Elissa (2014) Windows into the Digital World: Distributor Strategies and Consumer Choice in an Era of Connected Viewing. In Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson eds. *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming & Sharing Media in the Digital Era* New York: Routledge.

Peanuts Worldwide (2011) Beeline(TM) and Peanuts Worldwide Partner to Develop Smartphone Social Game Based on the Peanuts Characters. Press Release [online] Available at: http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=arAnDgQ42qoI

Richardson, I. (2011) The Hybrid Ontology of Mobile Gaming. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17(4) pp. 419–430.

Roberts, B. (2012) Attention Seeking: Technics, Publics and Free Software Individuation. *Culture Machine* 13 [online] available:

http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/issue/view/24

Spence, Kevin (2013) 'Candy Crush represents everything that's wrong with mobile gaming' [online] available: http://www.gameskinny.com/1b054/candy-crush-represents-everything-thats-wrong-with-mobile-gaming accessed 13 September 2013]

Schott, G. and Kambouri, M. (2006) 'Social Play and Learning'. D. Carr et. al. eds *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, Play* Cambridge: Polity, pp. 119–132.

Vaidhyanathan, S. (2001) *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity* New York: New York University Press

Weber, S. (2004) *Success of Open Source* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wilson, J. et al (2011) Distractedly Engaged: Mobile Gaming and Convergent Mobile Media. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17(4), pp. 351–355.

Notes

[1] *Snoopy Street Fair* will subsequently be referred to as *Street Fair* and *The Simpsons' Tapped Out* as *Tapped Out*. Each game has been analysed through its iOS version; all three are also available on Android.

[2] In some games, particularly those primarily based within social media sites such as Zynga's *Farmville* and *Cityville*, such a network of connected players is essential in order to progress in the game. In these games players rely on friends within their social media network to provide

[2] In some games, particularly those primarily based within social media sites such as Zynga's *Farmville* and *Cityville*, such a network of connected players is essential in order to progress in the game. In these games players rely on friends within their social media network to provide them with key in-game assets that allow them to complete tasks and reach higher levels.

[3] This strategy has since continued with the release of three further app-based games and a *Peanuts* movie.

[4] Some games may become their own licensed brand, for example the merchandising extensions to *Cityville* (Zynga, 2010) or *Angry Birds* (Rovio, 2009).

[5] I do not wish to deny issues of the digital divide here. Naturally the games are not fully inclusive as players still need access to expensive hardware. They are, however, inclusive to players who already have access to such technology.

[6] *Street Fair* is a notable exception in not requiring a server link to run; it is more common, however, for such games to require internet access to work as is the case with *Tapped Out* and *Dragonvale*.

[7] Similar strategies appear in skill-based freemium games in which players buy lives, power ups or access to higher levels.

[8] In late 2011, Dragonvale also introduced Kairos, a dragon that reduced any time specific activities in the player's park by six hours. However, this dragon was itself only available by the player either playing mini-games numerous times or spending large amounts of premium currency.

Biography

Elizabeth Evans is lecturer in film and television studies at the University of Nottingham. UK. Her research focuses on the relationship between technology and audience engagement with narrative forms. She is the author of *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (Routledge, 2011) and her research has been published in a number of edited collections, *Media, Culture and Society* and *Participations*.