

Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S1071-5819(18)30525-1
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2018.09.006>
Reference: YIJHC 2246

To appear in: *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*

Received date: 9 October 2017
Revised date: 15 August 2018
Accepted date: 6 September 2018

Please cite this article as: Joe Cutting, David Gundry, Paul Cairns, Busy doing nothing? What do players do in idle games?, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* (2018), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2018.09.006>

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Busy doing nothing? What do players do in idle games?

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Abstract

Idle games – games where waiting for extended periods is an important dynamic – are increasing in popularity. The game *Neko Atsume*, a mobile game about collecting cats, is an extreme example of this genre where progress can only be achieved when the game is switched off (so-called "progress while gone"). Do such waiting games engage players? To answer this, we conducted a large survey (N=1972) to understand what players are doing when they play *Neko Atsume*. Players are highly "engaged" in *Neko Atsume* as they interact with and around the game in four distinct ways: *Time spent playing*, *Direct sociability*; *Social media sociability* and *Checking frequency*. However, these characteristics of engagement in *Neko Atsume* do not fit well with existing models of engagement. We propose that, in future studies, game engagement in idle games could be considered as a habit which players acquire and maintain.

Keywords: Idle game, Waiting, Engagement, Player experience, Social

1. Introduction

The mobile phone game *Neko Atsume* [1] has been downloaded over 10 million times [1]. When you start to play *Neko Atsume*, you take ownership of a virtual yard which you can fill with cat toys: scratching posts, cat beds, toy mice on strings, and tiramisu-themed sleeping cubes — all to attract cats to your yard. Soon exhausting all the possibilities for interaction that the game provides, you close the game and do something else. But the game continues even when it is closed, and if you're like millions of other players, you'll still be checking the game several times a day for months to come.

Neko Atsume is a particularly clear example of "idling", a game dynamic which we will approximately define as *time spent away from a game while progress is made*. Idling is characteristic of idle games, and can be found in incremental games such as *A Dark Room* [2] and social network games such as *Hay Day* [3]. In some cases, the game must still be running for progress to be made, even if it requires no direct interaction in this time ("progress while on"). Where progress occurs even when the game itself is closed, this idling dynamic has also been called "progress while gone" [4].

Our understanding of engagement in games struggles to account for idling dynamics. This is in part because of the basis of a lot of empirical studies that study player experience. In all domains of game experience, including engagement, the "prototypical" digital game is an action game. Mekler et al. [5] performed a systematic review of quantitative studies on enjoyment in digital games. Of 87 studies, almost all of them were action games; the majority were first-person shooters, racing games or sports games. Even those studies which looked at more casual puzzle games, such as [6] and [7] considered only the experience of playing the game during a single session.

The prototypical game for player experience research, therefore, is played in relatively long, highly interactive and even intense sessions. The decision when to play the game is not itself a game dynamic. And crucially, the game state doesn't change while the player is not present.

Neko Atsume violates all of these assumptions. 1) It is played in very short sessions, 2) it affects the decision of when to play the game through its idling dynamics, and 3) it incorporates "progress while gone". Idle games are

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