



Players of facebook games and how they play



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the characteristics of people who play social network games—games that incorporate network data from social network sites. Using the framework of uses and gratifications with social cognitive theory, we conducted a survey ($N = 164$) of Facebook game players and identified four motivations and unpacked play into seven different types. We then looked at the relationships between motivations, types of play, and individual characteristics such as gender, age, and cultural differences. We found that motivations previously identified as being “social” split into two categories: building common ground with existing acquaintances, and design-driven reciprocal behavior. Building common ground was associated with stronger use of space customization, spending real money, communicating about game achievements, and exchanging gifts. However, we found that more people were using the games as a coping mechanism and to pass time rather than using it for social purposes. Individual differences are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social network games (SNGs) are digital games applications that use network data from social network sites such as Facebook. SNGs are defined by their platform rather than content or game play [44]; the fact that they can pull network data from social network sites is what distinguishes them as a unique subset of digital games. SNGs have become extremely popular in the past few years. As of October, 2012, the top ten games on Facebook each had more than 17 million average monthly users, and *Texas HoldEm Poker*—the most popular Facebook game—alone had more than 39 million average monthly users [2]. While tens of thousands of articles have documented the rapid growth of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster [9,30] scholarship on SNGs is still in an infant stage.

SNGs are a collection of different game genres, all of which have different play mechanics. Some games, such as *Farmville* or *Café World*, are simulation games about resource allocation and customization, while games like *Mafia Wars* or *Castle Age* are similar to traditional strategy games. Other SNGs are adaptations of previous popular casual games [18] and include board, word, card, and arcade games.

Despite these genre differences, SNGs share many functional commonalities. Because they are connected to social networking sites, this allows for many types of social interactions—some take place within the game, but others extend outside of the game as well. Interviews with Facebook game players showed that people are not

only playing with their existing friends, but also meeting new ones through online forums only for the purpose of playing games [45]. This type of “Friending” behavior may seem unsocial, but even if one has added another person as a Friend on their social network for the sole purpose of game-play, the action of adding Friends allows users to see other player’s personal profiles and receive their status updates through their news feed. This creates an environment in which game play is not completely confined within the game application, fostering interaction that takes place both within the game and through use of other social network site features.

Communication scholars have argued that popularity and rapid growth are only superficial reasons for why digital games should be studied. By acknowledging digital games as a new media that fosters social interaction and relationships, the core question is why people are adopting games and how they serve as a form of communication. This is a question that we must answer before we begin to address the social impacts of these games on human relationships. In this paper, we take a uses and gratifications approach to explore why individuals play SNGs and how they are playing, specifically focusing on unpacking the different types of play. We then look at the relationships between motivations, types of play, and individual characteristics such as gender, age, and cultural differences.

2. Theory: uses and gratifications

In this study, we examine SNGs from a mass communication perspective using the uses and gratifications paradigm. Uses and

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gratification has been a guiding research paradigm for mass communication studies. Uses and gratifications is a theoretical framework used to study how people use media to fulfill specific personal needs [32]. It assumes that media users are actively aware of their personal needs and will actively seek different media to gratify these needs.

There have been many different models incorporating uses and gratifications, but most stem from the work of Rosengren [31] and Katz et al. [19]. According to Rosengren [31], media use is a determined by basic needs, individual differences, and social influences. These three components all contribute to different patterns of media use. Similarly, Katz et al. [19] said that media use is based on social and psychological origins; which generate expectations of the media. This, in turn, leads to different patterns of media exposure. The uses and gratification approach has been widely used for studying new media technologies [33], especially to explain people's motivations for using new media such as blogs [20], personal websites [28], and social networking sites [17,29].

There have been a few seminal studies on videogames that have used the uses and gratifications paradigm. The earliest studies [36,41] focused on arcade game use, as home videogame game consoles had not yet been developed. About a decade later, Sherry and colleagues [37] did a comprehensive study identifying motivations based on focus group interviews, and then looked at how those motivations affected video game genre preference and amount of game use through a large-scale survey. This study was a major contribution to the field because the domain of videogames had drastically changed in terms of technology.

We are again at that point in time where the videogame industry is undergoing a major change in terms of technology, social status, and outreach. First of all, in contrast to graphic-intense, action-intense games, we are seeing a rise in casual games [18] which are defined by as the industry as simple, non-violent games that can be played in short intervals [7]. Secondly, mobile devices, such as handheld game devices and mobile phones, are becoming a popular platform for games; in 2010, 42% of heads of households reported playing games on wireless devices [10]. Thirdly, more games are incorporating multi-player use through network features [11,42]. Once the realm of game aficionados (e.g., MMORPG and Xbox Live players), networked games have become more mainstream through applications such as those for the mobile phones or Facebook.

SNGs reflect all three of these new trends. Compared to large-budget games designed for console play, SNGs are very simple in interface and game play mechanics. They are also inexpensive, easy to access, easy to play, and can be played for very short intervals at a time. Due to the simplicity of the game, most SNGs can be played on mobile devices or web browsers without separate installation of a game client and have the unique feature of being embedded within a social network site or connected to a social network site that pulls network information from the social network site into the game.

Of the many characteristics that SNGs have, we would like to focus on this last component: integration with social network sites. Indeed, many studies have tapped into interpersonal dynamics among players in social games, mainly in the context of massively multiplayer online role playing games MMOs [11,38,42] but SNGs are unique because the nature of being integrated with social networking sites facilitates social interaction between players both inside the game and in the larger context of the social networking site [45].

2.1. Research questions

We applied the uses and gratifications framework from the perspective of social cognitive theory [3]. This approach posits that performance of behavior is determined by the expected outcomes of the behavior. An expected outcome is a way of measuring motivation or individual needs of game play. LaRose et al. [22] found

that measuring expected outcomes instead of the traditional gratification measurements produced better predictions of internet use. This may be because traditional gratification measurements did not account for the perceived likelihood of achieving the outcome [8]. An individual's expected outcomes reflect their current beliefs about a future behavior based on their overall assessment of personal motivations, resources, and abilities. Based on these studies, our first research question seeks to examine what are the expected outcomes of playing SNGs.

RQ1: What are the expected outcomes of playing SNGs?

The concept of "use" is a key variable in uses and gratifications. In studies of video games, the concept of different "uses" has been examined in the context of classifying players into player types. One of the most popular player typologies was proposed by Bartle [4,5], based on his observation of players in text-based multiplayer underground dungeons (MUDs). Bartle proposed that players in MUDs could be classified into four player types: *achievers*, *explorers*, *socializers* and *killers*. Achievers enjoy earning game achievements, whether it is winning over other players or their own personal record. Explorers enjoy exploring new things, learning about game mechanics and role playing. Socializers are not driven by achievements or game design; they are motivated by interactions with other players, and killers enjoy ruining other player's fun. Bartle's player types have served as a general framework for other game researchers [38,45] and a guideline for game designers, but they only apply to specific types of games such as MUD or massively multiplayer online games. Some researchers have found that when applied to different forms of digital games, players often fall between different player types [16,21] which may be because these player types are not necessarily mutually exclusive [46].

This led us to shift the focus from identifying types of players to identifying the types of play, by unpacking the different types of uses that occur when playing SNGs. This would be more consistent with other mass communication studies that identify different uses of the medium. Studies have found that instead of focusing on a media as a whole, different uses must be distinguished to better explain variance. For example, in the case of television, Heeter [15] used the concept of "channel repertoire" to explain how viewer motivations affect how many different channels they watched. Ferguson and Perse [13] categorized different types of use for the World Wide Web.

Similarly, we decided to examine the different uses (play features) of SNGs, leading to our second research question:

RQ2: What types of behaviors (uses) are people engaging in when they play SNGs?

Once we have identified the expected outcomes and uses, we wanted to see how these dimensions affect each other and the total time spent playing games.

RQ3: How do expected outcomes explain overall time spent on the site?

Since social cognitive theory emphasizes a reciprocal relation between cognition (expected outcome) and behavior (uses), we posed the following research question:

RQ4: What is the association between SNG expected outcomes and uses?

The theory also predicts that individual differences will affect behavior. We can thus expect to find differences between different groups of people. Thus our final research question was:

RQ5: How do individual differences affect SNG expected outcomes and uses?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Data for this study was collected in late 2009 through a survey of 164 respondents using snowball sampling (chain referral

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