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Situating social games in the everyday: an Australian perspective[1]

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This paper explores some of the ways in which social games – games played with others through social network sites such as Facebook - are situated within the everyday. It argues that social games are more than just games; they perform a range of interactive and integrative functions across and within people's lives and therefore need to be investigated as such. Social games enable spaces for and practices of creative expression, and identity management. They also form a mechanism through which relations can be enacted and maintained across and outside of the game environment. This argument requires the researcher to consider the panoply of ways in which people integrate social games within their lives and everyday practices. Part of a larger project, this paper explores some findings from an exploratory survey of Australian game players about their management and integration of game play within the everyday with a particular focus on gender.

Keywords: social games, social network games, gender

Introduction

This paper argues that social games (also often referred to as social network games) are more than just games; they perform a range of interactive and integrative functions across and within people's lives and therefore need to be investigated as such. Social games enable spaces for and practices of individual creative expression, social interplay and identity performance management (Willson 2015). Social games also form a mechanism through which relations can be enacted and maintained across and outside of the game environment. This argument requires the researcher to consider the panoply of ways in which people integrate social games within their lives and everyday practices.

Social games are games accessed and played within social network sites such as Facebook or downloaded as apps. They generally operate using a freemium model (free to play but offer microtransactions –small monetary transactions – as an option within the game to enhance player game experience). They are played through a variety of technical devices and platforms: desktop computer, laptop, smart phone or tablet which means they can be played within a range

of locales. Game play does not require large blocks of time commitment inasmuch as players can play for short periods of time. As a consequence, game designers build in a range of game attributes to encourage continual and timely return to the game. Social games are also relatively accessible in terms of the level of technical and game proficiency required in order to play - very little skill or knowledge is required to participate successfully. The capacity of low cost (or free) game play requiring little time investment, little game knowledge and little technical skill offered within popular social networking sites has opened up the game industry to a range of players who fall outside of traditional game demographics. 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 …."

Social games such as Zynga's *Farmville* have been widely derided as poor gaming experiences or as disguised financial and data extraction processes (Bogost 2010; Rossi 2009). This paper largely leaves aside such issues as whether social games are proper games, or whether they are social: the primary critiques made of social games. Given the majority of social game players play with members of their personal networks, the widely discussed demographic differences between social game players and console and PC-based game players (Wohn 2011: 199), and the differing game mechanics and experiences involved, these broader contexts invite a consideration of social gameplay within the diverse milieu of everyday life (Crawford, Gosling, and Light 2011). For the purposes of this paper, gameplay is considered from the perspective of Australian players and Australian play practices, with a focus in particular on gender play patterns.

According to a study in 2013 of 1220 Australian households and the 3398 individuals (of all ages) living in those households, 53 per cent of game households now use a PC for games, 47 per cent of game households use mobile phones, while tablet computers have shown significant increases to 26 per cent of game household use (Brand, Lorentz, and Mathew 2013). Games are played in multiple locations: within the workplace or home but also in public places such as on public transport and in other varied locations. The devices on which they are played differ according to the affordances of the devices, their location and the rationale for play. Therefore the locations, times and ways that people play as well as their motivations are also of interest. Social games play a multitude of functions according to a range of different factors within people's everyday lives. The ways in which they do so vary according to individual life situations and needs (Wohn and Lee 2013).

And they have been adopted by vast numbers of people: According to a Facebook developer blog post (March 2014) about an internal study that had been undertaken in September 2013, "an average of 375 million people play Facebook-connected games each month. " These numbers are not insignificant. At the height of its popularity in 2010, the game *Farmville* reached numbers in excess of 80 million daily average users (DAU), in 2014, *Candy Crush* was recording figures of 93 million DAUs (Makuch 2014). Jin (2014: 29) notes, according to the industry research firm Gartner, there are at least 750 million social game players.

This paper recounts the initial findings of an exploratory study into the ways in which Australian social games players integrate game play into their everyday routines and practices. As noted in Boudreau and Consalvo's (2014) paper on families' use of social games, exploratory research is appropriate in the context of social game use where there are few research studies to date and the research questions to be investigated are identified and emerge in part out of this exploratory process.

An online survey was distributed over a two month period in 2014 using snowball sampling techniques. Once the data was collected, the findings were analysed according to gender in order to see whether there were noticeable differences in social games practices or patterns of play, motivations and so forth. Gender was not the primary driver behind the data collection however the capacity to be able to compare these characteristics alongside the much touted claim from industry (and also many academics) that more social game players are middle aged women (Hou 2011) prompted the question as to whether there were identifiable patterns or discernible differences between the genders according to how they played and then to follow on from there, whether this might suggest that social games may be instantiated in the everyday in different ways and for different reasons in people's lives in part according to their gender. The remainder of this paper discusses both the survey itself and its initial findings.

Method: The survey

Given the location of the activity which was being analysed, social (network) game play, an online survey (using survey monkey) was deemed appropriate and was employed. This survey was distributed using a snowball distribution method. A snowball distribution method was decided as the most appropriate way to locate participants. A link to the survey was circulated through the researcher's personal networks through Facebook, and twitter, and to a number of Australian media listservs to which the researcher subscribes. It was distributed locally to staff (professional and academic) at the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the researcher's institution. In addition, the survey link and a short description urging participation was advertised on the university's e-news student letter.

The survey request asked people to complete a short online survey on social games and the everyday that would take between five and ten minutes to complete. It also asked them to distribute to others: friends, family, colleagues. The survey was open for a period of roughly two months (30/7-25/9/2014) and it received a total of 154 responses.

The survey itself consisted of 27 multiple choice or ranking questions (with the possibility to add comments after some of the questions) and also a final open ended text box to add any additional comments about the participants' observations or uses of social games in their everyday. At the outset, the survey defined social games as online games played through social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook or GooglePlus where players interact in the game with family or friends. Respondents were advised that games such as Farmville 2, Sims Social, Candy Crush or Words with Friends are all social games, but that there are many others also.

The responses were then collated. One of the questions asked for place of primary residence – these were coded as Australia or international. As there is little data specifically available about Australian player social games practices, the ability to extract and analyse information in relation to Australian players and their practices was of specific interest. This was also taken into account with the survey distribution method; as noted above, Australian distribution lists were chosen rather than international lists for this reason.

At the outset, a number of anomalies or distortions became evident as a result of the distribution methods chosen. There were, for example, an abnormally high number of participants who possessed graduate and/or postgraduate qualifications. There were also a disproportionate proportion of female respondents. The latter point could be due to a number of factors: the researcher's personal network composition may have had an effect; or it could be simply that a

higher number of females are said to play social games and therefore were more likely to respond favourably to a survey of this nature. The issue of female player percentages will be discussed in more detail below. For now, it seems necessary to acknowledge that the results cannot be seen as generalizable across the adult population. However, this does not negate the study: As will be demonstrated, the results are still valuable as a mechanism to identify areas worthy of further investigation.

The survey was addressed to both players and non-players of social games, although the survey and the invitation to participate were titled 'Social games and the everyday' which would have led to some degree of self- selection being involved. As noted, the first questions were largely demographic and were addressed to both players and non-players. The survey asked questions about age, gender, education level achieved, household arrangements, size of household and questions about communication technology ownership.

The next section asked about social game play: Of the 154 responses, 82 identified as players, 65 said they didn't play social games, three were unsure and four did not respond at all. On closer inspection, the three who were unsure all indicated they played games that could be classified as social games but included the possibility of accessing the game from outside of social network sites (for example, Angry Birds or Candy Crush can be played outside of Facebook and they can also be played alone without the involvement of the player's social graph). Given some of the ambiguities around social and casual games in terms of definition and their shifting use in terms of platforms used and ways accessed (Deterding et al. 2010), these respondents were included in the player group. If respondents identified as non-players, they were asked why they did not play. Players were asked to list the games that they most commonly play (a later question asked about what aspects of game play they enjoy). Of the total respondents, there were 68 respondents identified as Australian players.

At the end of these demographic questions (end of question 11), the participants were told that the remaining questions were directed towards those who play social games. If they nominated as a non-player, they were thanked for their time and advised they did not need to complete the remainder of the survey. They did however have the capacity to enter comments at the end of the survey about any observations they had about social game play.

The remaining questions were directed to understanding social game play in the everyday: questions as to who people play with; what devices they use; how often they play; where they play and similar were asked in order to begin garnering a sense of how social games might sit within the fabric of people's everyday lives, routines and practices. The data was then analysed according to a range of criteria. The following discussion is focussed on some of the areas identified for further consideration when a comparison of game play practices and engagement was undertaken through the lens of gender and Australian players. At the time of writing, the researcher was unable to locate any specific studies that address Australian players and their social game use.

The results

The age of survey respondents ranged from 17 years or younger, to over 60 years with the majority (62 per cent) falling within the 30-49 year age group. When non-players were removed from the dataset, this percentage increased to 86 per cent. As noted above, there were a high proportion of female respondents overall (94 females to 58 males, two other/do not want to specify gender). When the data was focussed on just Australian players, this higher response rate was

still evident with a total of 49 female players, 18 male players and one other completing the survey.

When the data was analysed on the basis of male and female gender, a number of noticeable differences in game play preferences and patterns became evident. In particular, the regularity of play, the most common locations where SNGs were played, the types of devices used for play, the motivations for play and the people played with, displayed differences that suggest the need for further investigation. A number of these differences are discussed below in more detail.

The first noticeable difference to be revealed was around the issue of the amount of time spent on various devices. Respondents were asked about their social game use in relation to the amount of time they spend on various devices (desktop/laptop and mobile/portable devices) for their game play. According to these responses, (Table 1) it is apparent that females overwhelmingly use portable mobile devices for their game play with 25 out of 35 (ten did not respond) respondents noting they spent no time at all on desktop or laptops for game play on average whereas only four out of 45 (four did not respond) females spent no time on mobiles. This contrasted strongly with male respondents whose time was more easily spread across devices (with the exception that half of the male respondents spent more than one hour /day on mobile/tablets).

Table 1: Average daily time spent on particular devices playing social games

Desktop/laptop use

Time spent	female	male
No time	25	6
Less than one hour	7	5
More than one hour	7	5

(39 female respondents, 16 male respondents)

Mobile/Tablet use

Time spent	female	male
No time	3	3
Less than one hour	18	5
More than one hour	12	8

(45 female respondents, 16 male respondents)

There are obvious difficulties in assessing time spent on game play given that many people may multi-task with games running in the background while they undertake other duties, or engaging in game play while doing things like watching television (for example). As one of the female respondents in the survey noted, "[I] use automated features so that game is going in the background while I do work tasks - I work from home."

There are also difficulties in self-reporting of time spent, given the above but also, as a result of perceptions as to the 'value' of playing these games and thus possible negative connotations associated with too much time being 'wasted'. According to a number of studies examining gender and game play, although both genders typically underreport time spent, women's underreporting is significantly more extensive. For example, in a study of the MMO (Massively

multiplayer online) game EverQuest II players, when comparing player self-reported data to data collected from game servers, Williams et al. (2009: 713, 717) found that the women underreported their playing time roughly three times more than their male counterparts with server time revealing that women players typically spent three hours a week as compared to the male players' one hour a week.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the locations and times that the different genders nominated in terms of how long and on what device they played are still worth attending to. (These may flag different technology ownership practices however speculation as to this is outside the scope of these survey results). When linked with other survey data about when people are likely to play and where, these differences point to different allocations of time and types of activity undertaken within everyday routines. As Paavilainen et al. (2013: 810) note, "Social games fit into the players' daily rhythms. The appointment (offline progress) mechanics enable the player to schedule their playing to fit their weekly schedule." Consideration of gendered play differences point to the likelihood of different weekly schedules and everyday practices.

Play patterns

Differences were also noted in terms of locations where people play their games. When asked to nominate where they most commonly play (tick all that apply), and given a list of locations to nominate, females overwhelmingly nominated 'on the couch' at 84.8 per cent as their most common location. This differed noticeably from their male counterparts who nominated equally 'in my room' and 'in my study' as the most common locations, with 'on the couch' receiving less priority at 33.3per cent. While females also ranked 'in my room' higher than the males at 47.8per cent, it is the contrast in locations in relation to the popularity of couch play, that is most startling. This difference would indicate a range of possible reasons and differences in everyday life practices and the ways in which social game play is undertaken within this.

Table 2: Where do you most commonly play?

	Male per cent	Female per cent
in my study	40.0	26.1
in the kitchen	13.3	17.4
in my room	40.0	47.8
on the couch	33.3	84.8
at work	26.7	17.4
at lunch location	13.3	15.2
out and about	33.3	26.1
commuting	26.7	45.7

There are a range of possible reasons as to why this might be the case – differences might indicate as early studies on television viewing indicated (Walker, 1996), that women have less control over the programming choices made for the main television screen in the house; it might be that all members of the household could be using multiple screens but the women are choosing social game activities as they indicate that they play for different reasons than their male counterparts; or they are undertaking more activities generally in the lounge area (while supervising

children, for example). However, these rationales are all purely speculative and further study is warranted. It is worth also noting that playing on the couch is enabled more readily by play on tablet or mobile devices (correlating with females indicating a high allocation of play time undertaken on these devices).

Respondents were asked about their play patterns in a typical day. Jesper Juul indicates that one of the attractions of casual games (social games could be classed as a loose subset of casual games, see Juul (2010: 50) for an overview of casual game characteristics) is their interruptibility which means that they can be played episodically. As Juul notes (2010: 12), "Casual games just fit in better with my life." I was interested to see in what ways the survey respondents played and whether their play fit this pattern. The results when approached by gender were more complex (Table 3)

Table 3. Play patterns: How often do you typically play in a day?

	Female (percentage)	Male (percentage)
Once a day	29.8	43.75
Several times a day	42.6	37.5
2-3 times a week	14.9	12.5
Once a week or less	12.8	6.25

As Table 3 indicates, female play patterns in terms of regularity of play differed from their male counterparts who nominated once a day (43.75 per cent) as their most common play practice. Women nominated several times a day at 42.6 per cent. However, when play as 'once a day' or less was aggregated, both groups indicated that they were more likely to play only once a day or less frequently (57.5 per cent females, 62.5 per cent males).

Table 4. When do you most often play social games? (Tick all that apply)

Answer options	Female Response per cent	Response count	Male Response per cent	Response count
While watching TV	57.8	26	46.7	7
While cooking	4.4	2	6.7	1
While waiting	**62.2**	**28**	26.7	4
While travelling	35.6	16	40	6
At work	6.7	3	20	3
While studying	6.7	3	20	3
In-between tasks	44.4	20	**66.7**	**10**
morning	20.0	9	20	3
lunchtime	11.1	5	6.7	1
After work	26.7	12	20	3
evening	57.8	26	53.3	8
weekend	35.6	16	26.7	4

Female (45 responded, 3 skipped), Male (15 responded, 3 skipped)

These figures lead to the question as to when people are most likely to play and what they most enjoy about these games. The question as to when people were most likely to play produced some expected and also some less expected responses from respondents. In terms of expected, it was not altogether unexpected that respondents would nominate the evening as the most likely time in the day when they were likely to play. Similarly, the playing of games while also watching television was not unexpected.

However, somewhat more difficult to interpret was the responses when given a range of options as to when people are most likely to play. Here, as indicated in Table 4, the female players highest responses were noted as 'while waiting', whereas male players nominated 'in-between tasks' . This is an interesting differentiation. While perceived differences between what constitutes waiting and what constitutes in- between-tasks could arguably be suggested to infer the same or similar activity, the deliberate differences in the choices made by both genders raises some interesting questions about everyday activities and how these might map onto gender roles in Australian society.

Further insight may be gained in relation to this differentiation when the responses to what aspects about these games people enjoy most.

Passing Time or Building?

Respondents were asked what aspects of game play they enjoy most and given a range of options to choose from in order of preference. These choices were distilled from previous studies alongside observations drawn from consideration of the various activities made possible within these games. Differences again were noted in terms of the responses given by male and female respondents as noted in Table 5.

Table 5. What aspects of the games do you enjoy most?

	female	male
Quests	2	3
Designing, maintaining building activities	3	4
Interaction with others	4	0
Competition	3	2
Passing Time	12	2
Relieving Stress	11	0
Mental Stimulation	9	2
Sense of achievement	2	1

(Table shows the aggregated 'enjoy most' (ranked 1) responses)

According to Wohn and Lee (2013: 175) findings from their study of gender play practices in social games indicated that "Coping was the only motivation that had significant gender differences, t (159) =2.78,p< .05. Females (M= 3.27,SD = 85) played games to cope more than males(M= 2.68,SD = .95)." The results would seem to accord with the finding that women play social games more often to cope (here represented within the categories of relieving stress and passing time), or at least this is the aspect of the game they enjoy most, whereas their male counterparts indicated they enjoy the elements of quests and building (with relieving stress as not

even receiving any first preference responses). Importantly, this assertion is made on the basis of a relatively small sample and therefore the inferences that can be drawn are limited. However, it is notable that none of the male players noted relieving stress as one of the most enjoyable activities (again possibly pointing to different gender stress relief practices).

The use of social games as a way of managing the stress of the everyday is noted also in the open-ended comments (comments relating to stress management were only offered by female respondents):

- It's like the equivalent of a smoking break for a non-smoker like me
- I find it useful to get my mind off work. Otherwise I would only use my devices to answer emails, look up research etc. Playing Candy Crush diverts my interest and forces me to switch off
- it's just something i [sic] do during "me" time

Sociality and Phatic Communication

…. participants perceive three outcomes of their social game use on their social relationships: *maintaining*, *initiating*, and *enhancing* relationships. (Wohn et al. 2011: 1, emphasis in the original)

Considerable research has been devoted to investigating the sociality of social games (Wen et al. 2011; Wohn et al. 2011; Boudreau and Consalvo 2014; Rossi 2009). Critics have claimed the games are not social – the games position player's friends as purely resources, and the possibilities for in game communication are extremely limited raising questions about the types of sociality enacted (Bogost 2010; Rossi 2009; Consalvo 2011). Other researchers more recently note the way social games act as mechanism to allow people to stay in contact and to enact phatic communication practices easily (Burroughs 2014; Wen et al. 2011). Kelly Boudreau and Mia Consalvo (2014) note the way social games appear to act as a way for families to stay connected whereby family can stay in touch through their activities in game but without having to make a separate and possibly involved direct communication. Elsewhere, Boudreau and Consalvo (forthcoming) note that one of the valuable aspects to the asynchronous element of most social game play is that it enables people to maintain connections with family across different times and different places. Others have noted that while there is minimal capacity in most social games for in-game social communication – apart from acts of exchange, gifting etc. - that the game itself and the ways in which it is embedded within a SNS is important even if only as providing a means of common reference point for conversations (Wen et al. 2011). These observations accord with some of the written comments noted in the survey:

- I value that it keeps me 'in touch' with people I wouldn't normally spend time connecting with constantly.
- It's a way of maintaining links with people without being really intense - especially international work colleagues.
- I play with my younger son (10yrs) and we enjoy it together - keeps up a   connection with him
- It takes too much time but the "family" aspect and the way we all have to work together to achieve tasks keeps me online. …. People in our group discuss all sorts of global

events from the perspective of "family" members in many different countries. It can be interesting and enlightening

However, in the survey data recounted here, sociality in terms of the people with whom the respondents played was a less commonly noted activity. When asked who they most commonly play with, males noted that they play equally by themselves (26.67 per cent) and with family they live with (26.67 per cent), whereas women overwhelmingly chose by themselves (40 per cent) and then friends elsewhere (26.09 per cent). Again this points to possibly different gender role patterns in terms of the ways in which games are instantiated in everyday routines. For example, one reading of these findings would be to suggest that the males may be using the games as a way of building relationships with their family members at home, whereas the females use the games as a way of keeping in contact with their broader social network of friends. Clearly, more research is needed as a result.

Discussion

There has been extensive research in the past on gender and media practices (Walker 1996; Shaw 2013; Butsch 2000) and gender and gaming more specifically (Romrell 2013; Royse et al. 2007; Jansz, Avis and Vosmeer 2010; Bryce and Rutter 2002). Similarly, there is a smaller but growing academic literature that considers casual and social gaming and gender more specifically. For example, Wohn and Lee (2013) examine gendered play practices in social games and note that gifting and space customisation practices are practiced more commonly amongst women than men. Similarly, they note that women play 'to cope' more frequently than men. Williams et al. (2009) also note sufficient differences in gender play practices to argue that they are a significant area of research and thus that gender considerations should be included in games research. The survey findings recounted here point to some noticeable differences in the ways in which Australian male and female respondents engage with social games and how they fit their game play into their lives and everyday routines.

Adrienne Shaw's work suggests that some of these differences may be a result of the expectations and behaviours that are built into socialised and cultural understandings of particular genders. Drawing on Judith Butler's work on performativity and identity, Shaw (2013) writes,
People are not simply playing parts in different social contexts. Rather, for Butler the performance of gender is like much more like a speech act (Austin, 1962). The performance of gender is what constitutes gender. These performances must draw on a broader system of meaning which helps render those utterances, those performances, intelligible.

Gamer identity and game play practices have often been characterised in the popular media and the industry as the purview of young males (Bryce and Rutter 2002). While this characterisation has been rigorously contested and critiqued (Shaw 2012), females are not always (and as the recent GamerGate controversy highlights still are not) comfortably accommodated within game playing spaces. Writing about Korean women's uptake about mobile games, Jun et al. (2013) note that mobile games in particular offer an alternate gaming space outside of the more male dominated public spaces in which Korean game play has frequently taken place. Ok further adds to this observation noting, "Many women see online and offline game worlds as constructions of masculine space and feel social restraints or societal pressure in navigating these worlds, and they feel comfortable with mobile games" (Ok 2011: 334). Bryce and Rutter (2002) and Carr (2005) similarly note the gendered nature of many public game spaces as potentially con-

tributing to the lower visibility and/or uptake of gaming by female players. Social games by contrast are most frequently played alone and on private devices such as tablets, smart phones and computers and therefore are potentially more discrete and private activities.

Relatedly, social games have been commonly categorised by commentators and developers as being played predominantly by women (Jansz, Avis and Vosmeer 2010; Hou 2011) and therefore largely targeted as such. This may have an impact on whether a male who plays these games is comfortable with identifying as playing these games or at least feels more comfortable identifying as playing and preferring particular types of social games. These speculations are purely that as they cannot be answered as a result of this particular study.

Conclusion

This paper discusses some of the results of an exploratory survey conducted in 2014 on Australian social game players with a particular focus on gender play patterns and practices. Gender was not a focus of the study but when the results were examined using the differentiation of gender some interesting differences were noted. The research recounted here as result of this exploratory study points to sufficient differences across Australian gender play of social games being evident and therefore warranting further investigation. In extending this study and exploring the issue further, we may gain not only a greater understanding of gendered play patterns, but we may also gain greater insight into various gendered patterns of everyday routines and practices within an Australian context more broadly.

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