Analysis of Online Games

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This is an extra-credit assignment for the CIS 101 class. It is worth up to two points (one per game reviewed and analyzed).

Your task is to do a review and analysis of one or two online, multi-player computer games that you have actually played more than once. Then write it up as a paper and turn it in on or before Friday, December 11.

Why Games?

Let's take Facebook as an example. Before the advent of third-party games, Facebook was mostly Twitter plus photo albums. On-line games created by non-Facebook sources have generated a lot of traffic. Besides Facebook, there are other examples, including things like World of Warcraft.

Games clearly fill a need. Your task is to analyze it and write it up.

To qualify, it must be (a) a game, (b) played online, (c) with players that interact in some way.

1 Writing the Paper

Your paper should be written for a standard 8.5 by 11 inch page layout. Margins should be about an inch to 1.5 inches. Font size should be 10 pt for body text, with larger font usable on titles and headings. If available, I request you use the Verdana type face. (Microsoft Office has it.)

1.1 Title, Author

Show the title as "Analysis of (game)" where (game) is replaced by the name of the game you are analyzing. 18-point is recommended.

Display your name below the title. This indicates that you are the author. 12-point is recommended.

Put "CIS 101, Fall 2009" on a line below your name. 12-point is recommended.

1.2   Name

Your first major heading is **Overview**. It (and all other major headings) should be bold font, 10 points or larger, and on a line by itself.

Your first sentence should give the name of the game again (even though it is part of the title). The rest of the first paragraph should briefly describe the game.

1.3   Access

Your second paragraph should start with the bold word **Access:** and continue with information on how you get to the game to play it. What is the URL? Does it cost money? If so, how much?

1.4   Fun Computer Games

Your second major heading is "**1. What Makes it Fun?**"

Many people will try a game once but it has to be fun and interesting or they will soon quit and move on to something else.

In one or more paragraphs, explain what makes this game fun to play. Here are some ideas to consider.

(a) Sensory experience: Does it have great graphics or sound (sometimes called "eye candy")?

(b) Mental stimulation: Does it present puzzles or challenges that let you demonstrate your brain power?

(c) Simulating life: Does it mimic a fun and interesting part of real life, such as growing a garden, making food, or tending an aquarium?

(d) Goods acquisition: Do you collect coins that can be spent for items which improve your enjoyment?

(e) Character development: Is there a sense of accomplishment as you earn experience points and level up, obtaining new or better skills, or access to previously locked resources?

(f) Winning: Can you actually win or lose? Or is this a game that never ends, gradually getting harder and harder? Does it eventually become boring?

1.5   The Time Element

Your next major heading is "**2. The Time Element**."

Developers want to keep you coming back. Often they build in time delays. You start something now but you have to wait a while before you can reap the benefits. Or you do something now but you must wait a certain "cool-down" time before you can do it again. Maybe it's five minutes. Maybe it's five hours.

What role does time play?

Are you limited to doing only a certain amount of things per day, or per hour, and you have to come back later to do more?

What happens if you are inactive for a long time, like a month, or like two years?

1.6   Multi-Player Interaction

Your next major heading is "**3. Multi-Player Interaction**."

Adding the multi-player element complicates things, but in a nice way. When you have more than one player, there is an emphasis on relationships.

For game developers, this is an important opportunity. If existing players will recruit their friends, the game can "go viral" by word-of-mouth advertising and get thousands of players in just a few days.

How do they convince you to recruit your friends? Beyond "Hey, play this game. It's lots of fun." the developers usually try to tempt you with personal benefits as well.

How is the multi-player interaction done?

(a) Do you compete or compare yourself with other players? (This is very weakly coupled interaction and goes back to the days of High Score lists on

arcade games.)

(b) Does having some number of friends unlock access to important resources or levels?

(c) Are you automatically connected to your friends, or do you need to go through a recruitment handshake to get them onto your team?

(d) Are you and your friends able to assist each other by, for example, periodically sending each other things that you cannot buy for yourself?

(e) Are you able to improve your own score by interacting with others as they play? By helping? By attacking?

(f) Is there any element of teamwork, such that you work together to accomplish a goal faster or larger than you could handle alone?

(g) Is interaction short-term for one event, or long-term over days or weeks working toward a common goal?

1.7   Developer Motives

Your next major heading is "**4. Developer Motives**."

Try to guess why the developer created this game. What's in it for them? (a) Just because developing games is fun? (b) For fame? (c) Because they can put advertisements in their game? (d) Because they can tempt you to buy in-game currency or objects using real-world money?

1.8   Your Personal Experience

Your next major heading is "**5. My Personal Experience**."

This must be a game that you have actually played more than once. Tell about your experience with the game.

(a) When did you start playing it?

(b) How many hours per week do you currently play it? How many sessions do you play per day and how long does each one last?

(c) Is this more or less than you played when you first got started? In the future will your play time likely go down, stay the same, or increase?

By moving the games online, players can be widely separated in a physical sense, but still be able to enjoy a shared activity. This can assist in the de-

velopment of relationships, both between people that have never physically met and also between people that are already acquainted. In both cases, the interaction can develop a sense of friendship, cooperation, and teamwork. It can increase the desire to spend time together face to face.

(a) Has playing this game online increased your friendship with a friend or relative that you actually meet face to face?

1.9   Other

If appropriate, you can include another heading: "**6.   Other**." However, this is optional.

Is there something significant or interesting about this game that is not already covered in the questions above?

2   Example

Starting on the next page, I include an example three-page writeup of a game that I am currently playing. It is included to give you a feel for what I want.

You can submit up to two separate papers (not one combined paper), each on a different game, each following this example.

I prefer that you submit the papers as PDF files sent by email. That makes it easier for me to look at them and we don't have to kill as many trees.

Analysis of Happy Aquarium

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CIS 101, Fall 2009

Overview

This is my analysis of "Happy Aquarium." Happy Aquarium is a Facebook game by CrowdStar. In this game you control one to four aquariums which you fill with a variety of fish.

Access: The URL is http://apps.facebook.com/happy-aquarium/. You must register through Facebook to be able to play. It is free.

1. What Makes it Fun?

The major attraction is doing what other people were doing. It's a family activity for me.

But maybe for most people it would be watching pretty fish drift around your tank. The graphics are maybe a bit lame, but not bad for a Facebook game. The sound track is very tranquil and relaxing, just like a fish tank should be. There is also a full-screen mode for watching the fish.

The main challenge is to build up your fish tank by buying cheap fish, raising them, and selling them for more money. Also you can make money by breeding fish usually for less money than it would cost to buy them directly.

To do this, you clean tanks and complete challenges to earn experience points. These are required to unlock higher levels of fish and additional fish tanks. Challenges are things like: Breed so many fish. Raise so many fish. Train your fish (not interesting to me, but would be to some people).

Coins can also be used to buy fancy props for your fish tanks. Divers. Mermaids. Crabs. Snails. Rocks.

There is no way to win or lose this game. You just advance from level to level getting better and better fish and making more and more money. You can also see what your ranking is compared to other players that are among your Facebook friends. Eventually I think it would become boring.

2. The Time Element

Fish mature over a period of several hours. The fastest fish is six hours. Later in the game, the more expensive fish take several days to mature.

After you buy the fish and feed the fish, there is not much to do except wait. And wait.

If I do not tend my tank for a long time, first the fish will run out of food. After three days of hunger they will all become sick. After three days of sickness they will all die. Then I start over with whatever coins and pearls I own.

I assume I could sell off all my fish and then be away for months without anything changing. I could come back at any time, buy new fish, and continue playing where I left off.

3. Multi-Player Interaction

Low Involvement: All of your Facebook friends that are in the game automatically get listed across the bottom of your screen, even if you did not know they were playing the game, and even if they have quit playing. Friends are sorted according to experience points, highest first. Your name appears in that lineup according to your own experience points. So, right from the start you are comparing yourself and being compared to your friends.

Low Involvement: The game is almost pesky about trying to get you to publish every little detail about life in your tanks. It's like Twitter on steroids. Fish had a baby. Fish laid an egg. New fish purchased. New level achieved. I skip past all of those but there seems to be no way to turn them off. A substantial fraction of people go ahead and publish the twitter-ish updates.

Medium Involvement: For each friend, you can clean their tank and get money from their treasure chest. This costs nothing to your friend. If I have 100 friends, each of them can get money from my treasure chest without me losing anything. But I can visit each friend's tank and get money too. This is allowed two to three times per day, apparently, and can get you an average of maybe four coins per visit, so with 100 friends, 400 coins two to three times per day. Clearly there is an advantage to having as many friends participate as you can. You also gain experience points by cleaning their tanks. Over time the tanks get dirty again, giving you more experience cleaning again.

High Involvement: Each day you can send up to 30 gifts. These can be fish food or tank props (like shells and plastic plants). You can send them to your friends. They can send them to you. You cannot send them to yourself (unless you have two accounts). Gifts cost nothing to send. They just create the need to communicate with others about the game.

High Involvement: Occasionally when you start the game it will inform you that you found a rare sea creature and you need to find a home for it. (You can't keep it. One of your friends can.) In this case you are practically forced to post it in your news feed so someone else can adopt it. Likewise, if you want one of these rare creatures (like squid and turtles), you have to periodically check your friends newsfeeds.

Aside from those things, there is really no multi-player involvement. You cannot send others anything that you own. You cannot buy fish for them. You cannot borrow money from them. You cannot team up to solve a challenge. The multi-player element is pretty tame.

4. Developer Motives

The developer advertises their other games every time this game starts up. Also, they have premium decorations that can only be purchased for "pearls" which are difficult to earn but can be purchased by credit card.

5. My Personal Experience

I started playing this game about a week ago. I started because several other people in my family were already playing it and I wanted to be part of that group.

Currently I play it about two hours per day. Long term it should be much less, but right now I am trying to catch up with everyone else. I spend about 30 minutes three times a day collecting experience points and coins by visiting neighbor aquariums and cleaning them. This is done by clicking on a scrub brush icon and the clicking on the tank up to 10 times as crud disappears. There is also a small treasure chest in each tank where I collect two to seven coins. The coins are good for buying fish, food, decorations, and tank expansions. The experience points unlock more advanced fish and decorations plus the ability to have up to three more tanks. I probably spend another half hour per day in five-minute sessions watching for rare creatures on the newsfeed and checking up on my fish and feeding them.

In the future I expect the income from my fish tanks will outweigh the income I could get by visiting all my neighbors. Then I should be able to cut back on the time required.

Playing this game has definitely gotten me more involved with this activity that others in the family were doing. It has been fun to work together on charts showing what various fish cost and how much they sell for and how long it takes them to mature.