
Tactics, Rhythms and Social Game Ethnography

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Abstract

A lot of attention has been paid to the mechanics, economics and business aspects of Social Network Games, however very little research has been carried out on the players themselves. Why and how do people play these games? The games themselves are designed for partial attention situations and as interstitials in the everyday, yet there isn't any detailed research into the quotidian of social gaming. In this paper I describe de Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics, and Lefebvre's Rhythmanalysis. These are useful, sensitizing positions with which to carry out ethnographic research into the context and situations of Social Network Game play.

Keywords

Social network games, games, ethnography

Introduction

"Time wasters"

"Lunch time fillers"

In focus groups on the diffusion between games and everyday life I raise Facebook games as a discussion question and similar responses come up from the participants. Even from self-confessed players of these games the responses follow the same theme. They are

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seen as marginal activities and although, when the discussion is continued, the players of these games have a sense of value in their play, the predominant surface opinion is that they are there to “waste time.” Which is a common view of social games [8].

“I will tell you why they are useful tools. Tools they are, and games I would say they are. America’s Next Top Model sucks. And my girlfriend of seven to eight years watches that end to end. She holds the remote and just watches that. So laptop out, Frontierville.”

But as this participant clearly shows, there is a much more complex relationship between so-called “wasted time” and the way these games are played. Social games are tightly woven into players’ use of time and the control of their everyday lives. This nuanced understanding needs to go beyond games being either fillers, or wasters of time [7]. A rich, qualitative study of players - their contexts, situations and activities - is a fruitful research direction. How is the time is being used? Why are they played in the ways they are played? The answers to these can be used to better understand the relationship between the players, their social network and the mechanics of game design.

Ethnography has a long history of involvement in HCI and systems design [3] as well as design generally. Within HCI the move from investigating systems design for the workplace to the design of consumer systems means we need to draw in difference approaches and disciplines for our understanding of ethnographic research [1]. These new approaches to ethnography need to draw upon disciplines such as anthropology, literary, cultural and media studies to give us an

understanding of how we relate to and draw meaning from cultural objects, systems and actions. With enough research in this mode, models of player behavior can be formulated, but even small amounts of ethnographic research can deliver significant design insights and can help improve game design.

There are many techniques that can be used to undertake this ethnography, but I propose that the research needs to be sensitive towards two interrelated ideas; the tactical use of time in everyday life and lived, physical-temporal rhythms. These concepts draw on the works of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre.

Strategies and tactics

In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau [2] outlines a relationship between media consumption and the reality of everyday life. He shows that what was generally thought of as a passive activity can be reinterpreted as a vibrant, proactive and resistive set of actions where the consumer is a user and tactically responds to a grand strategic situation. De Certeau even goes as far as to describe this as being a game.

He outlines two important terms that are vital to understand this approach: ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics.’ He derives these concepts from warfare and specifically von Clausewitz, and deliberately combative.

Strategies are effectively the situations, rules and frameworks that shape and constrain our lives. They are the things we cannot change in the world around us. These are such things as road layouts, working times, the format of media and the fact we have to eat. They can be a mixture of physical, tangible constraints as well as social and cultural ones. Tactics on the other

hand are the ways we, as consumers, users or players make use of the strategic game map in our everyday situations. The oppositions between these concepts can also be played out through thinking about global versus local and systemic versus individual.

With respect to social games, the strategies we are uncovering are things like internet access, game rules/mechanics, the Facebook interaction model etc. The tactics we might be sensitised to are things like the activities occurring around gameplay, the reasons for playing and the situated nature of that play.

Using the quote from the introduction we can see that the player is with his girlfriend, paying partial attention to the America's Next Top Model so that he can still socially interact with his girlfriend. He is using a laptop, there is a TV, it appears to be in a living room situation. He is playing the game so that he feels empowered in a situation that is not entirely of his choosing.

Rhythmanalysis

"Everywhere there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy there is a rhythm." [6]

Although a Marxist at heart and interested in power and flux, Lefebvre was reacting against the big ideas of economics and politics, instead focusing on the quotidian. His book *Rhythmanalysis* [6] describes his approach to using rhythms in his cultural analysis.

The idea of rhythms is highly intuitive, but is difficult to define. Lefebvre makes no attempt to do this, but instead describes it more poetically. This is French philosophy, so the meanings can be subtle and illusive.

Rhythms according to Lefebvre work at the physical and affective level. Music is the ultimate example, but when we apply it to games it is also the rhythms of button presses, waves of enemies in bullet storm games and the countdown of timers in social games.

Rhythms are based on repetition and difference, from a simple as on/off, back/forward, to much more complex constructions. Lefebvre starts with the idea of a physical flow or movement and a subjective sense of time. So that rhythms are humanly sensed, not mathematically described or defined. They can both be mechanical and organic, natural and manufactured.

Lefebvre's basic structure outlines two different types of rhythm, cyclical and linear. Cyclical rhythms continuously repeat and these rhythms tend to be tied into larger, often natural, systems. Linear rhythms have a beginning and an end. These rhythms are artificial and human created. They tend to be tied into the rhythms of the social and mechanical world.

Individual rhythms are not very interesting and also difficult to isolate. It is through their complex interactions, interweaving and integration that we are really aware of them. Lefebvre discusses four types of interactions between rhythms:

- Polyrhythmia - many rhythms going on at once
- Isorhythmia - where rhythms match frequency
- Eurhythmia - symphonic rhythms, in harmony and working together
- Arrhythmia - rhythms breaking down

The ideas of eurhythmia and arrhythmia are extremely important especially when investigating games. Games

of all sorts create isorhythms and eurhythms between the player and the game. When the rhythms of the game and the player work together there is a pleasurable aesthetic experience. When the rhythms of the game and player break down - arrhythmia - it is not a pleasurable experience [4].

Ethnographic Opportunities and Issues

These are not theories, frameworks or models for players and their activity. Neither are they methods for research, and even though Rhythmanalysis has the term 'analysis' in it, it is not an analytic technique. Rather these are ways for the researcher to sensitize themselves to the situations of play. There are a number of conclusions that can immediately be drawn.

The researcher needs to be bodily involved in playing the games to physically understand them because the relationship between the embodied nature of interaction and a subjective view of time. Which points to forms of various forms of participant observation. However this will create issues around access and authenticity.

It also raises ethical issues about whether a researcher plays via their own accounts, or sets up dummy accounts - which would violate the Facebook EULA [5]. How does the researcher gain access to, and select, research participants?

Care also needs to be taken to record the context of play, the total socio-technical situation of the player. This can be described via fieldnotes and photographs, but the temporal element is also very important and also very difficult to document.

"He lives by Farmville. It's so gay"

As this focus group quote shows, there is a strong gendering of social game play. They have raised heated debate within the game design community about their value and whether they are games. This raises questions of gendered, dominant and accepted modes of defining pastimes, games and playfulness.

Conclusions

In this position paper I've outlined the basics of de Certeau's concept of strategy and tactics and Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis. These are useful concepts when undertaking ethnographic research in social games. They can be used to design the correct approach to this research as well as sensitize researchers to the results. Ultimately, studies of time wasting are not wasted time.

Citations

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