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Data-driven design in social gaming: Community perceptions in a shifting landscape of code and information

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A major design trend in the gaming industry over the last half a decade is the growing popularity of social gaming amongst a myriad of audiences with vastly differing tastes and sensibilities. Social network games present an unprecedented level of complexity in the layering of applications on social networking sites, such as the game Farmville or Cityville on Facebook. These games have been criticized for their lack of actual game value by more established game designers, and we are increasingly becoming aware of the issues associated with linking one's online/offline social grid when engaging in matters of personal entertainment. In our investigation of this emergent and increasingly sophisticated industry, we explore the shifting contours of this phenomenon that implicates powerful data mining practices, as well as the social tensions between business, art and design.

Is there any truth to the provocative assertion that, "An MBA can now design a game better than an art school grad?" Through an ongoing series of in-depth interviews with a handful of executive level members of the globalized production of social games, we are only at the beginning of an exploration of how the very nature of data-driven social gaming has created a point of contention between ideas of these games as artistic, technical, and ideological artifacts. The interviews conducted for this project were semi-structured containing three sections on the relationship between social gaming and social media, role of data mining, and emerging trends in data mining user generated content, according to the viewpoints of our research participants. We also use the additional insights gathered from observations and informal interviews with stakeholders at industry meetings, such as conferences and social games events. Some of the topics under investigation considered their work experiences before arriving in their present role in social games, in which types of data they were interested, and current struggles in the gaming industry as it pertains to social gaming, design, and business objectives.

While the initial research design focused on the themes surrounding social gaming and data mining, this tension between game design and business imperatives became increasingly prominent in our data, causing us to probe further into this emerging theme for this paper. We found it helpful to draw upon Shoshana Zuboff (1988), who described the effect of the integration of computers into the workplace and the automation of information tasks. According to her, "when the technology also informs the processes to which it is applied, it increases the explicit information content of tasks and sets in motion a series of dynamics that will ultimately reconfigure the nature of work and the social relationships that organize productive activity" (p.11). What is significant about this sociotechnical shift in power from information-to-data, inspiration-to-calculation, is how these practices

have become simultaneously opaque and yet continue to uncover more debates in game studies.

This paper synthesizes the debates between the viewpoints of game designers as well as the more fatalistic prerogatives of an increasingly systematized practice of creativity and commerce through social games. Under significant consideration here is the increasingly prominent role of data in driving the game design, and how the games industry in flux is changing its attitudes and practices in development, distribution, and production. What do these practices mean for the future of the games industry, and the gamers who manifest in design data?