

A Garden of One's Own: Reclaiming Agency at a Free-to- Play Playground

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The free-to-play business model has been widely criticized for subpar gaming experience (Alha et al. 2014), 'dark patterns' of game design (Zagal, Björk, and Lewis 2013) and commodification of social connections (Nieborg 2015; Consalvo 2011). The 'farming' genre, best represented by the pioneering FarmVille series, became the common object of such criticism in game media (e.g. Johnson 2010). In the meantime, empirical studies that involved players of FarmVille games has rendered them as possible spaces of productive sociality and reciprocity (Burroughs 2014; Gruning 2014), valuable for their accessibility (Söbke 2015). As a counterargument to their negative side, which is exploitative economies, farming games offer relaxing and entertaining experiences that bring together millions of players worldwide, allowing them to choose between casual and 'hardcore' styles of play. One such meaningful experience is creation of a personal virtual space. In this paper, I demonstrate how such spaces are created, what kinds of meanings they convey, and how players of a farming game negotiate their agency and contest the rules established by the developers and withstand aggressive monetization. Insights into such practices of countergaming can be provided by visual analysis of the game space, as described below.

The object of this study is a social farming game *Royal Story* (FunPlus 2012), which has been running on Facebook for over a decade. Same as in any farming game, players manage plots of virtual land that allow them to grow crops, keep farm animals, collect resources, produce and trade goods to reinvest in their virtual farm. The main monetization technique in the game is based on the 'economics of impatience', in the words of Elizabeth Evans (Evans 2015): when playing the game for free, players spent a lot of time waiting for the results of their actions in the game, and they can pay real life money to decrease the time of waiting. It is not uncommon for dedicated players to keep playing for many years, and they continue investing time into the game long after its main quests have been mostly finished. To such players, the game offers seasonal quests that require major investments of player time and/or real-world money. Prizes for such quests typically include unique decorations and animals that are not necessarily required to progress in other quests. Players are free in decorating their farm as they wish, and the most active (and wealthy) ones have an impressive galore of decorations on display, arranged in various patterns on their virtual land.

This paper presents the ongoing small scale longitudinal research of conspicuous consumption and the consequences of digital abundance in *Royal Story*. The goal of the study is to characterize value of game objects that were obtained in the 'hardcore

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more' of playing a casual game and/or purchased for real world money. It compares the data about digital assets owned by players collected in February 2017 to the similar data collected throughout 2023. At the first stage of research, I collected and codified the data about spatial arrangements of valuable decorations on the farms of the most dedicated players. Namely, I described and meaningfully interpreted the structure of virtual story spaces dedicated to the seasonal quest for St. Valentine's Day, recreated by 60 dedicated players. Some of these players have remained in the game for over 5 years, and I revisited their virtual farms in 2023. At that point of time, their farms were either completely buried under the abundance of decorations or carefully cleaned from most of them. To these players, 'rare' decorations have lost their initial economic value assigned by the game publishers, but their careful arrangements and welcome messages from the players confirmed the importance of reciprocity, social ties, and fantastic storytelling as the primary values in the game.

My preliminary results support previous observations about freeform social play that happens on casual digital playgrounds. The agency of players of a free-to-play farming game is realized in their impulse "to create their own personal game space" (Evans 2015, 567). Further building on that, I conceptualize farming games as "magic nodes of spatial relations" (Lammes 2008) that produce new meanings through their liberating spatiality. While individual attitudes towards game rules and techniques of monetization may differ, players assign a variety of personal and social meanings to digital assets, which can be 'read' from their arrangements. Eventually, in the environment of digital abundance, dedicated players treat the free-to-play game in the same way as a premium game e.g. *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016).

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