

Progress Wars: Idle Games and the Demarcation of “Real” Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

If one subscribes to the social constructivist view that “games” is a social construct not a natural kind (Montola, 2011), this opens the basic knowledge sociological question *how* people shape, change, contest, negotiate, and reproduce said construct (Maassen, 2005). Contributing to this line of questioning, the present paper asks how games express and shape social norms about what counts as “real” games (Consalvo and Paul, 2013). To this end, it follows the curious history of so-called “idle” or “incremental games,” which reduce gameplay to a single repetitive interaction or even automate gameplay, making player input optional. As such, idle games break with conventions and expectations regarding games (Purkiss and Khaliq, 2015), making them an ideal case to observe the (re)negotiation of this construct. Analyzing idle games and surrounding designer and player discourses through the theoretical lenses of “game aesthetics” (Bateman, 2015) and “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1983), this paper explores how different social actors intentionally or unintentionally partake in working the boundaries of “real” games.

Idle games, the paper argues, began as *parodies*. Early titles like “Progress Quest” (2002), “StatBuilder Classic” (2008), “Progress Wars” (2010), or “Godville” (2010) chiefly aimed to critique “progress mechanics” and grinding loops originating in role-playing games (Zagal and Altizer, 2014): Just by investing time in killing monsters and collecting loot – repeatedly clicking on them –, players could generate “buffs” that would improve their ability to kill more monsters and collect more loot. Early idle games presented a *reductio ad absurdum* of progress mechanics to highlight that they did not involve “real” skill or accomplishment, and thus, were not “real” games for “real” gamers. They expressed the hardcore aesthetic that games ought to be about overcoming challenges (Bateman, 2015).

Parodist idle games increased in the late 2000s as a boundary-drawing response to two new gaming phenomena that put progress mechanics front and center: social network games and gamification. Perhaps the most iconic response, Ian Bogost’s “Cow Clicker” (2006) is a pivotal joint in the history of idle games: As Bogost himself later reflected

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(Tanz, 2011), although the game was intended to demonstrate the tedium of games without challenge, its massive success demonstrated an appeal unaccounted for by Bogost's own implicit challenge aesthetic: an aesthetic variously described as "submission" (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek, 2004) or "being in the zone" (Schüll, 2012).

Julien Thienot's "Cookie Clicker" (2013) and Aniwey's "Candy Box" (2013) artistically explored what it would mean to follow the grain of this rediscovered aesthetic. They in turn led to the recent wave of fully serious, highly polished, freemium-monetized idle games like "Clicker Heroes" (Playsaurus, 2014), "Make it Rain: Love of Money" (Space Inch, 2014), or "AdVenture Capitalist" (Hyper Hippo, 2015), which capitalized on the discovered appeal of idle games, in the course *normalizing* them (May and Finch, 2009). What started as an artistic inversion of game design conventions to demarcate the boundary of "real" games resulted in a sub-genre expanding rather than delimiting the category. In this, the history of idle games not just illustrates that the boundaries of "real" games emerge from active boundary work by different social actors: it shows that this work is always value-laden, and how the agency of actors involved in it is always subject to unintended consequences.

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