

Paper Puzzle Games: The Original “Casual Games”

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INTRODUCTION

Casual games, we are told, represent a groundbreaking moment in the history of video games. Many scholars - such as Juul, Russoniello, Kultima, Stenros, Kuittinen, Consalvo, Tausend, and many others - have emphasised a number of factors which stress the profound importance of casual games to any chronology of video gaming’s past, present, and likely future. Analyses from these scholars and colleagues have emphasised the newness of the phenomenon, the growth of the gaming audience it has heralded, a change in the demographics of game-players, and the role of casual games as a focus for many companies within the games industry. In addressing ourselves to casual game scholarship, we therefore note that “casual games” are understood as being specifically digital in nature.

As such, the game designs and the players who constitute the concept of “casual” seem natively digital, and thus casual games are ultimately understood to be a particular moment in video game history, a claim with two central tenets: the contemporariness of the phenomenon, and that the phenomenon is limited to video games. Acknowledgements are sometimes made of other kinds of game with commonalities or historical relationships, such as board and card games, but these and their interactions with casual games are not developed beyond a passing mention. However, none of the literature on casual games addresses one kind of game which - we wish to argue in this exploratory paper - is an exemplary site of casual game design, casual play, and casual players. The games in question are not traditionally digital, and nor do they involve playing on any kind of “board” (unless one adheres to a very broad definition of a “board”). They do not involve the use of cards of any sort, and they require nothing more than a piece of paper and something to write with (although one could, with a good memory, play without the latter component).

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We are speaking, therefore, of paper puzzle games: of crosswords, sudoku, kakuro, kenken, word-searches, and their diverse ilk that are ubiquitous throughout newspapers and magazines the world over. These are games played by millions, perhaps tens of millions, and yet are entirely absent not just from the literature on casual games, but from the game studies canon as a whole. Although we do not disagree that the newfound expansion of casual video games is quite new phenomenon, we propose two issues with this dominant analysis to date. Firstly, we propose it has unduly conflated “casual video games” with “casual games”, which is to say games as a whole that share a set of design characteristics, and that this is an incomplete (at best) and flawed (at worst) proposition that elides a significant volume of other games valuably conceptualised as being casual. Secondly, although board and card games have been commented on by casual game scholars, paper puzzle games have been entirely unexamined by game scholars, and their study can complicate our notions of what a casual game (video or otherwise) actually is. For both of these reasons, we believe the examination of paper puzzle games is of significant value to game scholarship, and will push the study of casual games, gaming and players in valuable new directions.

The goal of this paper is therefore to offer what we believe to be the first game studies exploration of “paper puzzle games”, and in doing so explore two interrelated questions: to what extent do current understandings of casual games help us to shed light on this genre, and to what extent does this genre of game complicate and confuse our present notions of casual games? To do so, the paper begins with a brief review of the (sparse) existing literature on paper puzzle games. It then identifies the six most common or universal themes in casual game literature that define the “genre”: that they are fun and universally appealing in content and theme, they are quick to access, easy to learn, require little expertise, offer fast rewards to the player, and are designed with temporal flexibility in mind. We explore each of these, addressing the extent to which they adequately describe paper puzzles and their players, or the extent to which paper puzzle games complicate what is and is not a casual game. In doing so the paper will explore the particular material, economic and cultural constraints of paper puzzle games, which we argue are simultaneously distinctive enough to merit their own study, whilst still being undeniably comparable to what we otherwise understand as “casual games”. This duality allows us to stand on immediate solid ground when subjecting paper puzzle games to critical and scholarly scrutiny, whilst also suggesting a number of potential avenues for distinctive research into these forms of play that are likely to be mirrored nowhere else within game studies. The paper concludes from these six themes that paper puzzle games are casual games par excellence, and as such also complicate several unquestioned assumptions and positions about casual games as a whole. This paper is thus designed to challenge our notions of “casual games”, bring paper puzzle games into this discussion as an important historical antecedent to their present development, and open up paper puzzle games to broader game studies consideration.

BIO

Dr Mark R Johnson is a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the intersections between play and money, such as Esports, live streaming, fantasy sports betting, and gamification. He has published in journals including “Information, Communication and Society”, “The Sociological Review”, “Convergence”, and “Games and Culture”, and his first monograph, “The Unpredictability of Gameplay”, is due out in 2018 from Bloomsbury Academic. Beyond academia he is also an independent game developer, a former professional poker player, a

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Dr Simon Colton is a Professor of Digital Games Technology, holding an ERA Chair at Falmouth University, and a part-time Professor of Computational Creativity at Goldsmiths, University of London. He was previously a reader in Computational Creativity at Imperial College, London, and held an EPSRC Leadership Fellowship until mid-2017. An AI researcher for 20 years, he is one of the founding members of the Computational Creativity movement, with nearly 200 publications and national and international awards for his research.

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