

Gaming in social networking sites: a growing concern?

Social networking sites have contributed to the creation of more opportunities to stay in contact with friends and, more importantly, to make money. Dr. Mark Griffiths, Professor at Nottingham Trent University, discusses how the development of social networking platforms has also impacted gaming opportunities.

The online social networking phenomenon has spread rapidly in the UK, and playing games via social networking sites like Facebook and Bebo has become very popular¹. Despite the fact that the minimum age for most major social networking sites is usually 13 or 14 years, just over a quarter of eight to 11 year olds have a profile on a social networking site². Some research has noted that content-generated risks from this new leisure activity have not been investigated in any detail, yet young people using these sites are able to gain access to gaming and gambling-like games.

It has been claimed that the potential of social networking sites to normalise gambling behaviour as part of the consumption patterns of a non-gambling leisure activity may change social understandings of the role of gambling among young people³. According to pilot research, there were 25 poker applications on Bebo (and over 500 separate poker groups), and over 100 poker applications on Facebook (and over 1,000 separate poker groups). These poker sites featured some with real prizes, some with cash-play options - and all easily downloadable by those under 18 - along with many free trial games.

A type of pseudo-gambling among 'Fluff Friends' has over 100,000 active users per month. In this social networking forum, users

(typically young girls) create 'Fluff' art. To do this they have to earn 'munny' - a type of virtual money earned through pet racing. Pet racing costs 1 point per race and winnings can be up to 4,000 points. Clearly, there is no money changing hands but young children are learning the mechanics of gambling and there are serious questions about whether gambling with virtual money encourages positive attitudes towards gambling in young people. For instance, does gambling with virtual money lead to an increased prevalence of actual gambling?

Social gaming on the internet is big business and not just the domain of the young. Profits have increased from \$600 million in 2008 to a projected \$1.6 billion in 2010, with a prediction that it could reach \$4 billion by 2013⁴. At present, one of the most popular online games on the social networking site Facebook is Farmville⁵. Farmville is a real-time market-based farm simulation in which players have the task to manage a virtual farm by planting, growing and harvesting crops, trees and livestock. Farm-simulation games are not new and farm-based simulation games like Harvest Moon have been around since 1996. Players earn points for cultivating crops and rearing animals depending on how successful they are⁶.

On signing up to the game, all players are given virtual money (in the form of virtual coins) to build their farm. Selling the harvested crops brings in extra revenue that can be used to help maintain the farm. To speed the game up and to progress more quickly, players can use real money to purchase virtual seeds, tools, and equipment to help tend their virtual crops⁷.

Farmville has a number of competitive elements. Not only do players compete with each other

for the best farm, but players also try to earn money by helping the farm's upkeep. However, like a lot of other online games, Farmville also has a cooperative component as it is possible to help other players on their farms by watering their plants and feeding their animals. Players can also earn virtual money from 'experience points', making the game a combination of real life simulation and a role-playing game. This activity shares many similarities with the Tamagotchi craze where children looked after virtual pets and often developed an emotional attachment to them⁸.

The rise of Farmville has been rapid. Since starting as a game application on Facebook in June 2009, it has established itself as one of the world's most played games with 82 million users. Recent reports claim that more people play Farmville than use Twitter. As well as being a guilty pleasure, some of the more sensationalist news coverage talks about the many downsides of Farmville. Some employers have claimed it as an issue that can affect workplace productivity. For instance, one company in Chicago installed software to track employee internet usage and found that 8% of their staff members were playing Farmville at work. There was also a recent case of a local Bulgarian politician losing his job after being caught milking a virtual cow on his laptop during an important committee meeting. There are also growing complaints by non-playing Facebook users about the constant promotion of the game via updates, encouraging players to post messages about Farmville in their profiles.

Others have written first person accounts of their own addiction to Farmville⁹, and there are also internet sites - such as the 'My Life Is Farmville' website - that are

dedicated to people talking about their excessive use of Farmville, positively and negatively. At the extreme end of the playing spectrum, a recent January 2010 television programme featured the case of a 'Farmville obsessed' mother who neglected her children to play the game¹⁰. Although no research has been carried out on Farmville, it appears to be the sense of reward that keeps people playing. Farmville could be described as virtual Lego, building something from scratch, and seeing it grow, gives players a sense of accomplishment and a psychologically rewarding experience.

On the face of it, Farmville appears to be fairly innocuous but there are similarities between the playing of the game and gambling. In March 2010, the British press reported the case of a 12 year old boy who spent £625 on his mother's credit card and £288 of his own savings playing Farmville without his parents' knowledge¹¹. The mother tried to get a refund from her credit card company. However, they advised her that she could only get one if she reported her son to the police and obtained a crime number. The family was forced to pay the money as the 12 year old boy lived at his parents' house. Facebook has since disabled the boy's account, and the company who created the game - Zynga - simply advised the boy's parents to use password protection on house computers in the future.

The mother has admitted that her son was at fault but claims that the main stakeholders (Facebook, Zynga and her credit card company HSBC) should take some responsibility in situations like these, and implement systems to stop incidents like this happening again, such as more thorough age verification procedures. Other critics argue that games like

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Farmville should not be 'monetised' to raise additional revenue for the game's owners and operators. Interestingly, the credit card company said that if the card had been used on an internet gambling site, the company would have investigated the incident as an example of unusual usage. However, in this case, purchasing £625 of Facebook credits within two weeks was not viewed as an example of unusual usage.

This article has attempted to highlight some new types of gaming and gambling-like experiences that people of all ages are now being exposed to and raises various moral, ethical, legal and social issues. Given that most of the issues highlighted here are somewhat anecdotal, more empirical research is needed in these new online activities as the lines between social gaming, non-financial forms of gaming, and gambling are beginning to blur.

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