

Perpetual Game Space in *Crime City*: Game Design in the Age of Social Network Gaming

By Andrew Young

It would be a great mistake to argue that video gamers have historically been solitary and anti-social, though common misperceptions of "gamer" culture might lead one to this conclusion. Social network games, such as *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009), *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* (EA Mobile, 2012), and *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012), are intriguing not only because of their diametric opposition to such a stereotype, but also because of the degree to which social networking is a key component in overall design, gameplay (particularly given its status as a freemium product), and what could be called "real" vs. virtual social networks. Gree's *Crime City* (2010), though less popular than those games listed above, is an excellent example of this game type in that it shares many of the key characteristics of social network games. In particular, *Crime City* offers a clear view into the role of the social networks (real or otherwise) within social network gameplay. Of course, what constitutes a "real" social environment in the modern age lies fraught with the inadequacies of claiming anything in the digital age to be real. In order to better understand the manner by which preconstituted social networks relate to this particular subset of casual gaming it seems particularly useful to look at Jesper Juul's five casual game design principles as a means of further examining how *Crime City*, and other social network oriented games, have altered player relations to casual games. It is also particularly necessary to explore the impact that freemium products have on emphasizing the import of social networks through game design (as well as the monetization of social relationships). To get at the heart of this shift, it is important to briefly explore the misconceptions of social gaming in order to recognize that it is not, in fact, a completely new phenomena.

Cooperative and competitive "real world" social environments have been at the heart of video games as far back as William A. Higinbotham and Robert V. Dvorak's *Tennis for Two* in 1958.¹ In fact, the arcade was a community-building social space, within which (at a local level) players built social status and position based on head-to-head competitive gameplay, interpersonal relationships, and the inherent social capital of arcade cabinet top score lists. Though these misconceptions about gaming have been curtailed considerably, and most likely derive from a simple misunderstanding of the actual social history of video gamers, there is a certain degree of actuality to the limitations of video gaming as a social medium until quite recently in their technological development. Though (industrial and fan based) gaming expos and conferences have certainly played their part in expanding the social gaming community, spontaneous social interaction between members of the video game fan culture have largely been limited by the development of communication technologies and of local gaming spaces (arcades, gaming cafés, video game clubs, etc.), both spatially and in terms of their larger social influence. By the early 2000s, though, with the advent and mass adoption of the Internet, and the eventual emergence of large-scale Internet gaming, this dynamic has changed considerably. More recently, even social networking sites such as MySpace (2003) and Facebook (2004) have begun integrating video games as an important component of their business models.²



Crime City's Title Screen

With over 6.5 million active users (5.5 million on Facebook and another 1 million on iPlatforms),³ *Crime City* is certainly an excellent example of both the popularity of freemium content, as well as the reach of casual gaming. The game tells the largely generic story of the rise of a criminal (the player) from the city streets, chronicling the creation of their own criminal empire. Primarily comprised as a role playing game (with some elements of the Combat and Collecting genres, per Mark J.P. Wolf's classification structure⁴), in *Crime City* players shake down businesses, assassinate informants, and bribe judges (among a long list of other unsavory practices, all of which cost either "energy" or "stamina" which recharge over time) in order to increase their criminal influence. Interestingly, with such a dark and violent narrative, *Crime City* doesn't entirely fit in with the more general characteristics of casual gaming, as Juul argues that, "casual games almost exclusively contain fiction with positive valence."⁵ That being said, the game story and gameplay style de-emphasize this darkness to the extent that the story is merely a tenuous link between the next steps in collecting items, building social networks, and developing characters. This reduction of the importance of narrative is furthered in promotional and community materials released by Funzio to support the game. For example, the description of the game for the *Crime City* section of the funzio.com forum states, "Rule the streets in Crime City Facebook! Discuss ideas, get help, and find new friends or rivals."⁶ Certainly, a forum is intended to be a social space in which players assist one another, but it seems interesting that within the structure of *Crime City*'s forum any notion of game narrative barely exists, beyond of course the aforementioned call to "rule the streets." Instead, the social aspects of the game are repeatedly brought to the fore (with sections labeled general discussion, technical issues, user to company feedback, mafia invites, and, most interestingly, an area to post user created content).



The Rivals screen lets you select other players to attack

As articulated by Juul, the five common casual design principles are fiction, usability, interruptibility, difficulty, and juiciness.⁷ In the interest of brevity, we'll primarily look at interruptibility, but a brief note regarding fiction seems worthwhile. Superficially speaking, the fiction of *Crime City* is disseminated and consumed in a similar manner to nearly all commercial gaming products: word of mouth (both industrial and fan made) and game samples (demos and trailers). In this case, though, word of mouth takes on a range of forms including automated Facebook posts retelling the exploits of a given player's "mafia," as well as individual profiles dedicated to the game. In addition to fan-to-fan word of mouth (such as posting between friends and discussions outside of Facebook) *Crime City* also has a Facebook presence both as an app, as well as on Funzio's own company page.⁸ As an ostensibly "free" product, *Crime City* also serves as its own demo in that the majority of the game's content is available to the non-paying player.

From a game design perspective, it seems interesting that *Crime City* is a server-based game in which there are no specific save points. Instead, the game world is perpetually in play and every action that takes place, both within and outside of the player's time inside the game world, is recorded. For example, as an extension of the social networking component of the game, users can attack and rob one another's "hoods" in order to gain experience and make money to build and purchase items of their own. As a result, unless protected through the game's "vault" feature which allows players to hold aside their money to protect it from attack (with a 10% fee), players can lose quite a bit of their collected game assets to other more enterprising users. Though the idea of perpetual game space is nothing new, the more recent implementation of social networks as a central component of gameplay has inexorably altered not only the nature of casual game design, but it has further expanded game space not only onto social networking platforms (such as Facebook), but into "real" digital and analog realms. According to Juul, "casual game design can reach new players by allowing them to play in short bursts, to interrupt a game and put it on hold, but without preventing gamers from engaging in longer sessions."⁹ In the case of *Crime City*, this is a key element in identifying it as a casual game. The core gameplay experience is built so that a player can leave at any time (buttressed by the save system and perpetual game space), but gameplay is initially concentrated so as to pull the player in, then systematically spread out so as to entice them into interacting with other players. As a result, at the beginning of the game the player is almost constantly leveling, completing tasks, and robbing other players. Several hours in, however, tasks begin costing more "energy" and the time spent between missions becomes greater. By later stages of the game, the missions become so spread apart that the gameplay is more centered on the process of building one's "hood." What fills in these gaps of gameplay differs significantly from player to player, as they can last anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours depending on how far the player has advanced in the game. Primarily, though, the idea is that these pauses are designed to offer an opportunity for player-to-player communication, or if played on Facebook to do so within one's own pre-constructed social network.



Your hood allows you to build up your empire, but is also a target for other players

This plays a significant role in *Crime City*'s business model in that this is clearly a call for players to invite members of their friends lists to join in the game (even the iPad version has some degree of Facebook integration), and in the process widen the game's overall user base. Social networks even contain some degree of social currency within the game as players who invite more members into their "mafia" receive a sizable advantage in combat because for each additional member added they are able to equip one item from each equipment class (gun, car, explosive, etc.), all of which increase their attack and defense abilities considerably. In such a way, social network gaming expands genre through the incorporation of social elements into game mechanics. As already mentioned, *Crime City* fits neatly within Wolf's system of genre definitions, but it seems worth viewing both the social network and the game as extensions of one another. In such a way, breaks in gameplay as experienced either within the game space or on Facebook act as extensions of the experience rather than departures from it.

The "freemium" status of this game is one of many reasons for its particular emphasis on social networking, but this shouldn't necessarily be viewed as an entirely new phenomenon in gaming, or elsewhere. As Chris Anderson has argued, the origins of freemium product have their roots as far back as the attempt in the late 1800s and early 1900s to sell Jell-O by giving out free recipe books,¹⁰ though it more than likely reaches back even further than that. In essence, *Crime City* seeks to increase its user base in order to pull in more players that might pay for premium content; in this case certain weapons and buildings can be purchased with gold bricks that, beyond the ten bricks given to the player at the beginning of their game, are only available as premium downloadable content (DLC). As a result, though a large number of gamers will more than likely not purchase any items, they are essentially paying their way by bringing their vast social networks into the fold as potential paying customers. In place of Jell-O giving out recipe books, as "free information that could only be used if the consumer bought the product,"¹¹ what Funzio and many developers like them have realized is that by offering a free product to create a large user base, they have also exponentially increased potential income from DLC sales.



The marketplace lets players purchase gold bars or money to give them a leg up in the game

The result is a game that is largely designed not around narrative, or the particularities of its gameplay (as it is a highly generic point and click RPG), but rather around the accumulation and conflict between social networks. This should not be seen as representing some great break from the longer traditions of social gaming (witnessed in arcades, homes, and elsewhere for several decades now); rather it is important that we recognize the intricacies of a game space that is more concretely expanding into what can be construed, incorrectly, as the realm of digital and analog "reality." Though it would probably be incorrect, and too far a reach, to argue that social networking has become a defining element of modern casual gaming, the wide adoption of gaming on social networking platforms such as Facebook and MySpace make it a grave error to ignore the increasing impact of social networking on the design of video games.

NOTES

1. "Pre-PONG: Tennis For Two," TheDotEaters.com (29 July 2013). .
2. See "MySpace Welcomes Social Gaming Developers," MySpace (21 May 2010) and Shervin Pishevar, "What's Next for Social Gaming," Facebook.com (18 November 2008).
3. Dean Takahashi, "How Funzio's Crime City Shot to the Top of the App Store," VentureBeat.com (15 August 2011).
4. Mark J.P. Wolf, "Genre and the Video Game," *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005)
5. Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p.33
6. "Funzio Forum," Funzio.com (Web. 29 July 2013).
7. Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution*, p.30.
8. "Crime City," Facebook.com (29 July 2013).
9. Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution*, p.36.
10. Chris Anderson, *Free: The Future of a Radical Price* (New York, NY: Hyperion Books, 2009), p.9.
11. *Ibid.*, p.9.



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