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Playful Culture and the Glamorization of Everyday (Virtual) Life: Elements of Play in Facebook Applications

In the general frame of a "ludification of culture" (Raessens, 1)we are witnessing the rise of hybrid entertainment products such as Facebook Applications, media phenomena difficult to define as "games" or "play", that carry a large share in the responsibility for social interaction within social networks.

Are Facebook Applications and its clones in other networks like Bebo or MySpace a form of casual games, are they "just for fun", how do they participate in the general cultural trend that incorporates play elements in non-play environments?

This paper, in order to answer these questions, relates to the two separated fields of game studies and media sociology, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the role of play in media culture, as well as enter the recent discussion on casual games from a lateral perspective, introducing elements from media psychology and anthropology.

This presentation is preliminary to a qualitative research on the use of Facebook Applications among Facebook users, whose results are still not complete.

The Playful Culture

The practice of introducing the modes and structures of play in otherwise "serious" activities is becoming increasingly pervasive, reshaping education and art as well as entertainment. Raessens (2) imputes the phenomenon to the ratification of computer games as a mainstream medium, suggesting that "computer games are deconstructing the hidden, naturalized, pedagogically presupposed rules" of media, setting the grounds for a "ludification of culture" that invests all cultural practices.

On other fronts, a generalized usage of interactive and playful forms as ways to induce consumer's engagement with brands is a trademark of the "experience economy", which,

through the pursuit of marketing strategies founded on sensorial and emotional stimulation, is getting closer to what Zygmunt Bauman calls "the management of the spirit" (14) in its strive to arouse the emotion of "fun" as a way to "connect to the brand".

In this regime of "affective economics" (Jenkins1, 69), traditional media such as television and newspapers are beginning to employ the same strategies, by adding interactivity or participation to traditionally "passive" consumption modes, and promote collaborative structures that can often be seen as "playful".

"Free play" is at the core of participatory culture as a means for the consumer to "look for meaning at a more profound level" (Jenkins1, 18), and play as "the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem solving" is listed as the first of the needed skills in a reformed education for the 21st century (Jenkins2 6).

The vast range of perspectives opened by the pervasiveness of the play mode can lead to extreme interpretations: Castronova talks of the advent of a "fun revolution" (192), in which games (in his example virtual worlds) "will force the fun into the policy agenda", and by "pointing society in the direction of things that matter, such as emotional well being" he proposes virtual world game design as an example for public policy to follow. Brian Sutton Smith foresees play as a new religion stemming from individualism, "a branch of existential utopian philosophy, carrying us absurdly forward with optimism and confidence in the life we are leading" (256).

Is this a comeback of play such as described by Huizinga "before the commercialization of leisure in the 18th century", a form of play "carrying social values, structuring life, cementing relationships" (191-195), or is it something else?

This "prevalence of play" has been occurring only in recent years, while the civilization process and rationalization of work in the modern era, according to Elias, excluded or regulated play remodeling it into leisure, which has been since "perverted into consumption" (Oldenburg 9). Accordingly, combined with a generalized (media) trend re-proposing play as a principal communication mode, we find numerous complaints about the lack of socialization areas where one can express the playful spirit proper to human nature: Oldenburg calls these "great good

places" or "third places" (8), they exist in addition to "work" and "home", a contemporary version or the agora, the tavern, the café, where people can be together and unwind.

The dichotomy between organized play (often sustained by corporate interests) and free play and playfulness as in socialization is especially visible in social networks.

Social Networks as "Third Places"

Online communities were originally built as "electronic agora" (Rheingold 18) and can easily be seen as virtual "third places", which Oldenburg calls "the political forum for the common man" (80).

MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) have recently gained consideration as virtual "third places", because of their "informal sociability and their potential function in terms of social capital" (Steinkuehler, Williams 2).

Although reflection in that direction confirms that the general need for third places can find some fulfillment in "virtual third places", it is still debatable whether virtual places can actually offer all the opportunities of third places.

Oldenburg's eight characteristics of "third places" (from Steinkuehler, Williams)

Neutral Ground	Third places are neutral grounds where individuals are free to come and go as they please with little obligation or entanglements with other participants.
Leveler	Third places are spaces in which an individual's rank and status in the workplace or society at large are of no import. Acceptance and participation is not contingent on any prerequisites, requirements, roles, duties, or proof of membership.
Conversation is	In third places, conversation is a main focus of activity in which

Main Activity	playfulness and wit are collectively valued.
Accessibility & Accommodation	Third places must be easy to access and are accommodating to those who frequent them.
The Regulars	Third places include a cadre of regulars who attract newcomers and give the space its characteristic mood.
A Low Profile	Third places are characteristically homely and without pretension.
The Mood is Playful	The general mood in third places is playful and marked by frivolity, verbal wordplay, and wit.
A Home Away from Home	Third places are home-like in terms of Seamon's (1979) five defining traits: rootedness, feelings of possession, spiritual regeneration, feelings of being at ease, and warmth.

Most of the features of "third places" can be retraced in Facebook; this paper focuses on the expression of the "playful mood" and its role in the overall structure of social networks. While in "third places" the mood is established as "playful" by "frivolity, verbal wordplay, and wit", and by the feeling of "human warmth" deriving from "being apart together" (10), in Facebook the generation and maintenance of a playful mood is partially delegated to Facebook Applications.

Facebook Applications as Casual Games

Are Facebook Applications actually games?

An article in the Guardian boldly states: "Facebook is a game: the goal is to win friends and influence people", raising the indignation of Facebook users and gamers alike, who are quite sure

of the "serious" status of social networks.

Facebook Applications were marketed as games until 2008, when the category "Just for fun" was added to the other, mostly thematic, categories, increasing the confusion about the Applications identity.

Both categories, "Games" and "Just for fun", often propose the same applications in their top lists, making the distinction between the two very undefined.

When Facebook Applications do in fact fulfil the definition of "games", then it is usually as "casual games", a particular kind of games performed online that is, among other things, "easy to learn, online, no multitasking, "for all" (no violence), fast rewards, forgiving the player error, simple controls and simpler gameplay", (sometimes just one click) (Kuittinen et al 4)

Facebook Applications often present an even simpler structure with regards to casual games, and rather than "playing them", users play "with them" or "through them".

If we consider the directory of Facebook Applications, we see it features games (or game-like activities) that can be compared to the genres in casual games.

Game genres in casual games	Applications over 150.000 users
Action: shooting, fighting, exploration, gathering	Jetman, Speed Race, Petrol Head, War Book, Oregon Trail
Simulation: city building, pet raising, God-like	X-me, SuperPoke, FunWall, SuperWall, Bumper Sticker, Growing Gifts, Hatching Eggs, Free Gifts, Booze Mail, Cities I ve Visited, My Aquarium, Moods, My

games, social simulation	Heritage, Acebuck,
Platform	(none)
Role Playing	Vampires, Slayers, Werewolves, Fight Club, Zombies, Good vs Evil,
Strategy	Friends for Sale, Compare People, Acebuck
Puzzle games/Quizzes	Scrabulous, Quizzes, Movies, Hot or Not, Honesty Box, What kind of eyes do you have? What city should you live in? Are you normal? What is your stripper name?
Parlour games/gambling	Texas Hold'Em Poker, MindJolt Games

A number of largely used applications related to flirting, dating, meeting new people, or promoting causes (Meet New People, iLike, Top Friends, Are You Interested? Circle of Friends, Entourage, Causes, Characteristics, You are a Hottie, Flirtable) can hardly be classified under any casual games genre, although they can be seen as playful activity.

At a closer look, only some strategy games and parlour games feature actual gameplay as in the mode of casual games; most of the other "action" "role playing" or "simulation" games present an extremely stylized structure that associates them to narrative rather than games. (Rao 4)

Where is the gameplay?

If we consider Juul's four components of a game: *rules, fiction, duration,* and *interaction* (69), we see that most Applications have very limited rules, even more limited than most casual games. Fiction is pervasive, in the sense that real elements are transfigured by small fictional

supplements, but it is mostly textual: visual elements are only representions and play is not enacted visually. Duration is very short, and the interaction very simple, often just one click. An example of this process is the application "Vampires" (and its many clones: Zombies, Werewolves, Slayers, Pirates versus Ninjas, Good versus Bad, etc): the conflict is initiated when a user decides to use her Vampire to attack another Vampire. It has to be a Vampire in the same network of friends.

This decision takes one click.

The screen then asks you "Do you really want to attack this person?"

Confirmation of the decision is a second click. The outcome is a short narrative, for example "You bit some chumps! Soon they will join your Vampire army! Mwuh ha ha ha HA HA!", or "You... lost. [Friend's name] just smacked you upside your face. Your FACE. Ouch.". This outcome is usually random, although it takes a minimum of strategy in choosing fights with weaker Vampires rather than with stronger ones.

While in many casual games the interaction is so compelling that the user will go through all the moves many times, like for instance in Solitaire, most Applications are played (or performed) only a few times in sequence.

Another prominent feature is asynchronous play, in which "multiple players play in sequence, not in tandem" (Bogost 9). Most play in Facebook is not performed to achieve anything, and the battles' destiny depends on chance, so asynchronous play is mostly simulated. Facebook's strategy of creating a feeling of synchronous play is somehow closer to social television rather than casual games, in which an ideal audience is pictured through icons at the bottom of the screen to give a sense of community and participation without any actual co-presence.

Finally, Facebook Applications are different from casual games because they feature a wear or absent "lusory goal", that, as Suits (148) points out, is the first element to characterize play.

Toward an Enlarged Definition of Play for Social Networks: From Gameplay to Social Play

Most videogame criticism seems to revolve around Roger Caillois' seminal notions of *ludus* (play regulated by rules) and its opposite *paidia* (unregulated play, make believe) (27). Between ludus and paidia, ludus has been receiving more attention, possibly due to the fact that most digital games are strongly regulated by rules, goals and conflict (Juul, 31).

Now that other types of game practices like pervasive games, alternate reality games and possibly other hybrid forms similar to Facebook Applications are becoming mainstream, they call for more attention to the "paidia", and possibly for a larger definition of what constitutes play, beyond rules and make believe, extending, as Mayra suggests, to "non–digital play experiences and use contexts" (5).

Walther distinguishes between play as "being there, somewhere" and game "being there with a purpose" a "progression" (8); Facebook applications appear to privilege presence over purpose, but still in the definition of "play" there is some form of mutual contract, involved, what Huizinga calls "magic circle". When starting play, one enters a "contractual relationship" and, in Walther's words, one "does not not-play".

A characteristic feature of Facebook Applications is the peaceful co-existence of fictional and everyday elements, without any perceived "magic circle".

In this sense the use of Facebook Applications seems closer to social play among animals and small children: animal play is said to be "repeated, incompletely functional, behavior differing from more functional versions structurally, contextually and autogenetically, and occurring voluntarily when the animal is in a relaxed or low-stress setting" (Bekoff, qtd in Nolen, 11). While there are some warning signs that the players are about to enter the play state, what Bateson calls "play-signs" (178), to indicate that the following actions will denote something different from what they seem to denote, still in animal play and small children's play the participants can go in and out of conventional states of play without much effort or transgressive behaviour.

Something very different happens among older children and in adult play, where a ritual construction is entailed in play relationships (Meire 32).

What Bateson calls "the state of fictionality" can thus be weaker or stronger; an analysis of social play in Flickr by Sigrid Jones compares Flickr to a playground, where the main purposes are to join a group", to "pretend", and to "master" certain abilities, although there are no explicit play instructions.

In Facebook, the level of fictionality is also very low, actually the thin imaginary layer present in Facebook Applications (as opposed to the "seriousness" of the profile and the messages between users) seems rather as an extension or a fictionalization of everyday personas and activities, too brief in time and small in scope to enter a properly fictional, "narrative" dimension, with constant reference to non-fictional elements, in an ironic dimension.

We can make a distinction between social play as ritual, within the boundaries of a magic circle, following the rule of non-reflexivity (if a player thinks about the fact that she is playing, it puts her in an outside position as "an observer who observes the division between play and non-play", (Walther 6), and social play as observed among animals and small children.

Among the latter there is also pretence, but it is not "sacred", because it does not pertain to a ritual sphere, related to the lack of lusory goal and consequent effort in *will* (will to gain, will to believe, or will to perform a suspension of disbelief).

      Fun and Fun Simulacra

 When social play is characterized by a weakness of purpose, positioning itself at the lowest degree of an ideal scale going from paidia to ludus, the distinction between "play" and merely "fun" is blurred.

Different definitions of fun as "a sensation, a feeling, an element of happiness" (Castronova 96), as the balance between skills and tasks, boredom and anxiety (Chikszentmihalyi qtd in Koster 43) and fun as mastery and the biological response of the brain (release of endorphins) when discovering patterns (Koster 128), seem to agree that *in order to have fun it is not necessary to enter any contract, any magic circle, or suspension of disbelief.*

Can the distinction between play and fun thus be seen in a lack of (lusory) goal?

Fun as an emotion is still a very debated subject - from Huizinga's description of it as "rapture and enthusiasm" to the deep absorption of children at play portrayed by Jenkins: "the fun of gameplay is not non-stop mirth but rather the fun of engaging attention that demands a lot of you and rewards that effort" (Jenkins2 21). In both cases it is suggested that these emotions should be arising from some sort of *activity*.

On the other hand, most Facebook Applications seem to offer just the description or the dramatic tale of the action instead of the action itself; there are no patterns to discover, very few or no tasks to achieve, and much reward if compared to the often minimal (one click) demand for engagement.

Several Facebook Applications are by definition "just for fun" (although as discussed earlier often the same applications are classified under "games" as well), still in their structure they could be defined as "simulations" or "simulacra" of games rather than actual games**.** Baudrillard distinguishes between "representation", where the sign is worth something only in relation to a specific meaning, and "simulation", where the original meaning is effaced and the sign becomes a reference to itself (167).

The simulative nature of Facebook Applications is evident when the narrative substitutes the actual moves of a game and textual cues take the place of its visual elements, like in Vampires and Oregon Trail. When some relevant gameplay takes place, like in parlour games or card games, then an added frame of sociability, encouraging the user to compare herself to other players, reframes the game within the larger frame of the social network, thus adding an additional layer to the "pure" gameplay experience.

Playful Mood

    Going backwards toward an ideal "zero degree of play", before the emotion of fun we find a mood: the playful mood.

Huizinga mentions a play-mood preliminary to play (20); mood is different from emotion because it is lasting, while emotion is fleeting and event-related. In Dewey's words: "Playfulness

is a more important consideration than play. The former is an attitude of the mind; the latter is a passing outward manifestation of this attitude" (qtd in Parker-Rees 61).

Several interpretations of play-mood still consider it as involving some sort of contract; according Apter, Kerr the *paratelic state*, meaning the decision to engage in play (followed by the *paraludic state*, the understanding of the rules of the game), is not only a "disposition", an opening, but is also said to leave behind the conventions of the life world domain (qtd. in Nieuwdorp 7).

Similarly, Suits' *lusory attitude*, preliminary to a *lusory goal*, as the "knowing acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur", can exist as a function of some sort of activity (151).

A playful mood can be seen as disjointed from actual activity, a mere prelude to play, the knowledge of the "affordance to play"; it can involve fun, but, unlike fun, it doesn't necessarily call for a goal or a "preliminary contract", and it does not require activity.

Playfulness can be seen as a disposition, "a way of coping with the tension between physical freedom and social constraints, which characterizes all forms of interaction" (Parker-Rees 64). Barnett also highlights the inherently social quality of playfulness in her evaluations of the playful mood, which is constituted by: cognitive spontaneity, social spontaneity, physical spontaneity, manifest joy, and a sense of humor (371-393).

Therefore, playfulness is manifestly linked to social situations and cannot exist without them, just as a playful mood is natural to third places.

Let me point out that a playful mood in "real life" third places and social situations is also strongly related to the physical dimension: Barnett's "physical spontaneity" and Bekoff's conception of (animal) play as "motor activity" seem to correspond to the "human warmth" described by Oldenburg as peculiar to "great good places", which derives from the co-presence of fellow human beings.

In virtual third places, this physical "warmth" cannot exist, and has to be substituted by other elements in order to create the same effect.

Facebook Applications seem to exist as an attempt to add physical depth to playful interactions in a virtual setting, interactions that would otherwise require physical elements to convey a playful feeling (sound of laughter, back-slapping, buying beer, smiles, in the case of a bar or a café).

Experience design regards playfulness as a design element parallel to usability, something necessary and measurable, setting up people's expectations, whose first function is to "engage people's attention or involve them in an activity for recreation, amusement, or creative enjoyment" (Follett).

Some of the qualities of playfulness in design are: fast rewards and a lot of positive feedback for user interaction; no negative consequences for experimentation; the ability of build on someone else's work (open collaborative structures); and what Follett calls "frivolous interaction" or "interactive silliness", such as in Facebook.

It is interesting to note that some of the qualities of playful design, like sure reward and license to make errors, are shared by casual games as well, indicating some kin relation between different playful products whose main role is to stimulate the playful mood and generalized "fun", and some casual games, in opposition to "bona fide" games, oriented toward strong lusory goals.

Virtual Spaces and Glamorization

Real life "third places" don't need fun simulacra, virtual third places do.

A number of Facebook Applications are devoted to reproducing physical acts (hug, throw cake, send beer), possibly to supply to this deficiency.

Still, these representations are in the order of "simulations" or "simulacra" rather than actions; in this sense, we cannot see virtual third places relying on just co-presence in order to generate a playful attitude, like real life third places do.

The presence of fun simulacra, hanging around like paintings on the walls, representing people having fun as an encouragement for costumers to have fun themselves, denunciates an ongoing process of "glamorization" or "re-enchantment".

Ritzer (89) describes "glamorization" as the method through which industries dissimulate the real nature of consumption places (such as shopping malls) under layers of fictional meanings, in order to make the consumption places seem something different from what they really are. "Re-enchantment" is what happens after the original "enchantment" of a place (the affective relationship one could have with a particular bar or street, deriving from experience) is destroyed by the rationalization performed on it by industry, in order to make it more efficient (McDonalds instead of that old café); the means of producing re-enchantment are, as Debord puts it, "the result of the creation of spectacles" (qtd. in Ritzer 206).

The seduction of spectacle takes the place of the original relationship between a person and some tangible element and substitutes this actual relationship with a fictional one based on fictional elements, in Ritzer's words: "the play and power of illusion of seduction [take] over the complete clarity and visibility (disenchantment) of the modern world".

These two concepts are relevant to the topic of the construction of the playful mood in virtual third places, and, in other fields, could be used to distinguish between "real fun" and fun simulacra.

Possibly virtual third places need spectacularization because the medium is so "cool" (McLuhan, 45), or possibly Facebook participates in that process of rationalization and efficiency so that it needs some additional charm (in this context, "glamorization" can be seen basically as a value judgment for "branding").

Still, the utility of Facebook Applications seems to go beyond re-enchantment; although their status as "pseudo-games" or "simulacra of games" sets them in a corner, so to speak, with respect to casual games, their playful potential deploys itself at a larger scale, and their role seem to be of greater importance than just being the representations of playful actions in order to stimulate playfulness.

The Ritual Construction of Place: the Original Game?

Was the Guardian so far off by defining Facebook as "a game", then? Such a statement can be seen as misguided in the frame of reference of common knowledge that automatically thinks of "videogames" or "role-playing games"; still, perhaps that comment could see something the media-sophisticated users could not see, that the whole of Facebook is the simulation of a playful environment, and the construction of that simulation can be interpreted as play. But what kind of play?

While there is a distinct lack of ingenuity and non-reflexivity in Facebook Applications, similar to that observed in social play, the use of Facebook Applications in the larger frame of the social network can pertain also to the ritual play realm, and the game is: "let's play we are playing". Hence, sending a beer, biting somebody's neck, attacking them with the Force, sending them a Hatching Egg, Hugging them or throwing cake at them, giving a fine to somebody's car, knowing which serial killer you are, showing your bookshelves or letting the world know the places you've visited, can be seen, in this perspective, as Facebook users participating in a fictional process (while this can not be said if we consider a single Facebook Application, as the fictionality is too fractioned to make sense in itself).

This fictional process can be seen as ritual play, in the sense of play invested with willing suspension of disbelief (Turner 85), involving a regression (Huizinga 17) - or non-reflexivity (Walther 6) - with regards to the play itself.

This play is the foundation on which the identity of Facebook as a "third place" is built, in absence of other explicit shared goals, like in the case of MMOs.

In this context, the usage of Facebook Applications can be seen as ritual acts, performed in a "serious" pursuit of fun, within the "serious" context of social networks. The play then is regressed, as it should be in rituals, to put the emphasis on the goal, in this case the place identity construction.

As this identity construction of Facebook happens in a mediated environment, charged with commercial interests lurking in the background, the building process is likely to be closer to that happening in Ritzer's "cathedrals of consumption" rather than in Oldenburg's "great good places".

Conclusions

We are witnessing the rise of a new product category, constituted by items of "interactive silliness" (Follett) or "pervasive narrative" (Rao), that look like games and feel like games, but are not games.

Their main function is fulfilled in the larger frame of an "experience", be it viral marketing, transmedia storytelling, alternate reality gaming, or brand construction of a place such as in Facebook.

Their role is to stimulate the playful mood, in an imitation of the dynamics peculiar to "third places", in order to facilitate socialization and encourage participation, but also to fulfil the less disinterested goal of stimulating consumption.

Through the enactment of playful actions, the identity of Facebook as a "third place" is established socially, in a permanent interchange between corporate content (in our case Facebook Applications) and user generated actions and content, in a context of use analogue to that described by Ritzer as "rationalization, dis-enchantment, and re-enchantment" (199).

To distinguish between "pure" sociability and "marketed" social play should become a priority issue, in order to keep the different realms of "real fiction" (as in play and make-believe, or ritual) and "fictional reality" (as in brand construction of identity) distinguishable and separated.

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