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## **The Conflicts within the Casual: The Culture and Identity of Casual Online Play**

### **Introduction: the Emerging Culture of Casual Play**

It is relatively easy to find examples of deep, immersive play that has effects on personal or social identity: an intensive psychodrama, live action role-play, and even some massively multiplayer online (MMO) game players report experiences that have affected the ways they perceive themselves, or human condition in general. Most of contemporary play, however, is not deep or transformative in a similar manner. This article will focus on casual gameplay that takes place in common games such as Solitaire, or more currently in Facebook games such as *FarmVille* (which peaked at 80 million active players in February 2010), as well as through mobile phone applications such as *Foursquare*, a location-based game for smartphones. The aim is to discuss the significance and meaning making activities that takes place among this kind of games, and highlight their contributions to game cultures and to our daily lives in general.

The subtitle of this article – “the Culture and Identity of Casual Online Play” – is wide-arching and extensive, but it highlights my intention to take a look at the casual play through the lens of meaning-making. This involves both meanings at the level of individuals, their identities and their daily lives, but also at the level of culture where meanings are shared at a group or collective dimension, when meanings are made public. To give a quick outline, the article includes first of all discussion of ‘casual’ as a characteristic of games and ‘casual play’ as particular kind of player practice. Certain challenges in providing vocabulary and definitions will be highlighted, suggesting that we need to be able to differentiate between casual in play, player and in games. The key design features of ‘casual games’ are discussed, as well as characteristics of casual play, moving to suggest some portraits of ‘casual player’. Next, the relevant findings from several research projects are summarized to showcase a research trajectory moving from more general gameplay research into specified understanding of casual games and play. The expanding range of casual experiences will be discussed making reference to *FarmVille* and similar games, and then to *Foursquare* as a casual location-based game. In the conclusions, the certain cultural characteristics (and meanings derived from) casual play are tentatively argued.

## Popularity of Casual Play

The popularity of 'casual' is obvious in the field of gaming. While ancient in game culture, casual games entered the field of business attention first with early successes such as Windows *Solitaire* (1990) and *Tetris* (1984), which became particularly popular when it was bundled with the Nintendo GameBoy (1989), and then as a range of online games. The major expansion phase started at the end of 1990s and early 2000s, when dedicated web sites like that of PopCap Games started providing relatively small and simple Flash games that required no downloads or installation, free to play on a Web browser. The opening up of Facebook API (Application Programming Interface) to games and other applications in 2007 was another step expanding the field of casual gaming through a popular online networking service. In the fall of 2010, it was estimated that 200 million people were playing games in Facebook alone (Alexander 2010). The growth has been fast in this field, as in 2007 the Casual Games Association estimated that the entire casual game sector attracted the same amount, 200 million players monthly over the Internet (Casual Games Association 2007). The economic value generated by casual games is also considerable; the revenues of connected or online casual game industry were estimated to exceed three billion dollars in 2009 (Casual Games Association 2010). As major video game companies such as Nintendo with its Wii console and WiiWare service and Microsoft with its Xbox and associated Live Arcade service have entered the casual games market, it has become increasingly difficult to delineate where casual game industry starts and "mainstream" video games industry begins. Casual has slowly become the new mainstream.

Also our own research verifies that games commonly classified to the casual games category are indeed among the most popular when we take a look at gaming among larger populations. The University of Tampere Games Research Lab with its partners has been carrying out nation-wide surveys of game playing in Finland in 2007, 2009 and 2010, and each time it has been the Microsoft Windows *Solitaire* that has ranked as the most popular digital game that the informants' have recently played. Also the online casual gaming sites, puzzle games like (digital) Sudoku and "classic games" like Mahjong and Tetris are regularly featured among the most popular games in these surveys – which tell us a distinctly different story from the reality of game play as compared to that of the game best-seller lists published by the media. (See: Kallio, et al. 2008; Karvinen and Mäyrä 2009; Kuronen and Koskimaa 2011.) While the various "top 10 games" lists focus on video and computer games that are either the best-selling games from various outlets, or on games that receive top ranks in reviews, the actual most popular games are regularly older, cheaper and less spectacular in terms of content and technology than the recent blockbuster. While not probably

getting awards for innovation any more today, these games nevertheless form the almost unnoticed mainstream in everyday game cultures.

### Casual Game Characteristics

But how do we define what we talk about when we talk about “casual games” – what are the main characteristics of a casual game?

In our research project titled GameSpace (2006-2008; see Paavilainen et al. 2009) our research team adopted a grounded theory style approach to defining casual in games and harvested a large number of different materials that related to this field, then proceeding to create a synthesis. A wide selection of games literature and web page materials were analysed and a selection of expert interviews were carried out, producing a long list of characteristics, some of them appearing more regularly than others (see Table 1).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Easy to learn</b></li> <li>• Forgiving to player error</li> <li>• Downloadable or playable on a browser</li> <li>• Major user group is women age 40 and older</li> <li>• Players don't regard themselves as gamers</li> <li>• Inexpensive</li> <li>• Try-before-you-buy</li> <li>• Leave and pick up easily</li> <li>• Simplistic interface</li> <li>• Calming effect</li> <li>• Keeping the mind sharp</li> <li>• “No casual game has ever failed by being too easy”</li> <li>• <b>Short bursts of gameplay</b></li> <li>• Lack of time (no time for deeper gaming experiences)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To mass audiences</b></li> <li>• Dominant genre of puzzle, word, arcade and card games</li> <li>• Generally non-violent</li> <li>• Possibility for experimental types of games</li> <li>• <b>Low commitment and involvement</b></li> <li>• Short schedules of producing processes</li> <li>• Low production and distribution costs</li> <li>• Small teams in the production</li> <li>• Primary distribution source: web</li> <li>• Retro-games</li> <li>• <b>Fast progress, quick rewards</b></li> <li>• Game instance and game session organisation</li> <li>• Low required investments (time, money, hardware)</li> <li>• Casual games can provide hardcore experiences</li> </ul>
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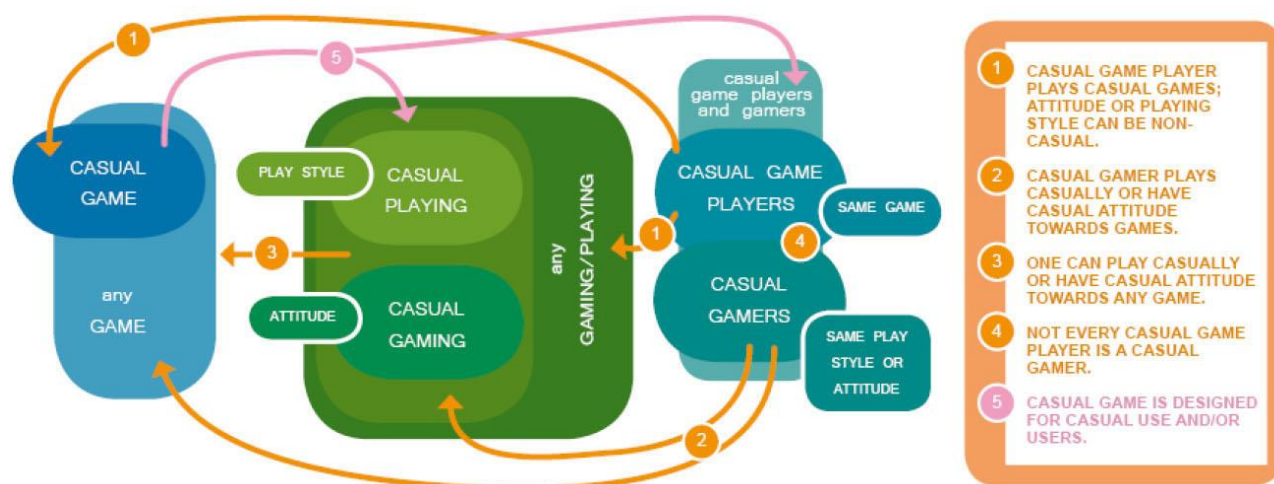
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Game as a snack or a break</li> <li>• Educational benefits for children</li> <li>• <b>High replay value</b></li> <li>• Lapsed gamers (no more time for other games)</li> <li>• Varying player groups and different devices</li> </ul>	<p>(hardcore-casual)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>No advanced gaming skills</b></li> <li>• Stress-relief</li> <li>• New gamer demographics: females, non-gamers, thirty-/forty-somethings and lapsed gamers (no more time for games)</li> </ul>
<p>Table 1: Casual game characteristics. The list drawn from the GameSpace project data, based on literature &amp; web survey &amp; expert interviews. University of Tampere, 2006-2008.</p>	

When clustered together in content analysis, there are certain key characteristics that emerge as something that people typically recognize as the features that identify “casual games” as we commonly understand them. These features include the game being easy to learn, inexpensive, supporting short bursts of gameplay, yet having a high replay value. In this sense a good casual game is much like a classic non-digital game; for example a board game like chess has relatively simple rules, yet it can maintain the interest of even masterful players after years of practice. It is not surprise therefore that many of the popular casual games are indeed digital versions of classic board games. The familiarity with the game rules and mechanics is also a benefit to classic games, and something that goes naturally hand-in-hand with the next key characteristic, game being targeted at mass audiences.

Also those game features that relate game being designed to support fast progress and quick rewards, and requiring no advanced gaming skills are central for making game casual, and targeted at large audiences. Yet, such features are also something that divides the potential player base. If the game is made deliberately very easy and quickly rewarding for a total beginner player, there is also a considerable chance that the game will alienate advanced and challenge-driven players. This is something that is often discussed under the topic of prioritizing hardcore versus casual gamers in game industry and in games related media. It is not automatically clear that the interests of active, skilful players as contrasted with those who do not have such play time or skill-sets available would be compatible; indeed, some online discussions feature clear antagonism between the two groups. The character of “casual player” will be discussed more below.

### The Quality of Being Casual

In analysis, it soon becomes clear that “casual” in relation to games is a complex concept, and something that is linked to certain features of games, but that closely connects also with certain styles of play, or even characteristics of particular game players. This is something to be expected, too, as game and player become so closely intertwined in gameplay that it is close to impossible to clearly separate the role of one from the other at the performance of play (cf. Mäyrä 2008, 17–20). Our team of GameSpace researchers published a summary of the analysis from casual games discussion, resulting in the following network of relations (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Relations of the meanings of ‘casual’ in games cultures (Kuittinen et al. 2007, 107).**

The central conclusions of this analysis focus on five distinctive relationships: (1) the people who play ‘casual games’ can adopt an attitude or playing style towards these games that is also casual, or not (e.g., it is possible to play casual games in committed, ‘hard-core’ manner, with substantial investments of time and energy). (2) It is possible to identify a group of players (here: ‘casual gamers’) who dominantly play games in ‘casual style’ – this relying on the notion (3) that it is possible to play even complex games with casual style, attitude or time-investments to a certain degree. Furthermore, (4) it is important to emphasise that casual games of today are popular among all kinds of people, and not all casual game players are ‘casual gamers’ in the sense introduced above. Also dedicated game enthusiasts often take casual games into their repertoire. And finally, (5) these relationships help to understand the characteristics of casual games as a feature set that aims to signal their primary intended role as games designed for casual use, by casual players and gamers. (Kuittinen et al. 2007.)

Such conceptual analysis is useful in rising awareness about the complexity of game–player relationships when a particular area of game cultures is taken into consideration. The meaning of ‘casual’ can lie in only one area of this networked phenomena, or in many of them simultaneously. It is typical to see the

characteristics of games, game players and their playing styles unproblematically interconnected and always harmoniously mirroring each other, but in a more analytical sense there are distinctive characteristics that can and should be separated from each other in this equation – like the not-so-hypothetical example of a ‘hard-core style casual gamer’ points out. Looking closer into this area, the game developer organisation IGDA in their whitepaper also highlights female players over forty, who play more than nine hours per week (IGDA 2006), and the casual game company King.com has published details about some of their active female casual game players who play as much as five to ten hours per day (Norton 2008).

In players’ experiences and performances, moving from complex digital games to the field of casual play, the shift from immersive to non-immersive play styles is most often the case. It should be noted that immersive, dedicated play styles have a long standing position as the standard of digital play; also our own previous work has focused on understanding the player experiences particularly through the different dimensions of immersive play (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005). Casual play is typically characterised by short sessions of playful interaction with games that are not particularly challenging, complex or extensive by character. The non-immersive character of casual play allows participants to divide their attention to other activities and issues beside that of gameplay, suggesting that such games would be particularly suitable for various social uses and purposes. As the popularity of casual digital games has been growing, we are also witnessing an expanding range of casual game experiences, as well as an enlarging range of social, entertaining and cultural uses which the contemporary online casual games have been adopted for. Taking a closer look, casual play appears to be an enabler in different personal and social processes, sometimes momentarily moving to the centre of attention, while mostly keeping in the periphery. While the vocal parts of game cultures have mostly articulated the pleasures of strongly immersive gameplay, the players of contemporary casual games have started to put forward an alternative view on what constitutes ‘good gameplay’, based on a slightly different aesthetics of play.

### **Understanding Casual Gamers**

In his book *A Casual Revolution*, Jesper Juul proposes an argument that links the playing styles to the design features of games, and what kind of time commitments they allow:

Games as well as players can be flexible or inflexible: whereas a casual game is flexible toward different types of players and uses, a hardcore game makes inflexible and unconditional demands on the skill and commitment of a player. Conversely, where a casual

player is inflexible toward doing what a game requires, a hardcore player is flexible toward making whatever commitment a game may demand. This explains the seeming paradox of the casual players making non-casual time commitments: a casual game is sufficiently flexible to be played with a hardcore time commitment, but a hardcore game is too inflexible to be played with a casual time commitment. (Juul 2010, 10.)

The argument is similar to the 'implied player' concept put forward by Espen Aarseth (2007, 132): the game prefigures its intended players through its design, or like Aarseth says it "the implied player [acts like] a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game". Considering the above Juul's argument, the structural features of casual games appear thus to provide more room for negotiation and more flexible boundaries for players to approach gaming.

In order to have a more comprehensive view on what are the dominant daily roles of players are to wider demographics, our team carried out a more thorough, three-year study to game playing and players in 2006–2008. Progressing in three stages, this work included an extensive survey into game playing in the context of various other leisure activities (with 805 valid responses), followed by smaller group selected for structured interviews (73 participants), and finally a series of 33 in-depth interviews and two focus group interviews. After quantitative and qualitative analyses, three dimensions were chosen as the key organising principles for the data: the intensity of gaming, sociability in gaming, and the (genre, or nature of) games played. The final outcome of the analysis was presented in the form of a heuristic model of gaming mentalities. These nine categories were created as a synthesis to suggest how to understand game playing in the roles it was commonly situated in the lives of our informants:

1. Social mentality profiles:
  - a. Gaming with kids
  - b. Gaming with mates
  - c. Gaming for company.
2. Casual mentality profiles:
  - a. Killing time
  - b. Filling gaps
  - c. Relaxing.
3. Committed mentality profiles:
  - a. Having fun
  - b. Entertaining
  - c. Immersing.

(Kallio et al. 2010, 9.)

This typology was not created to be an exact statistical representation of how game player mentalities are distributed in our data, but it reflects the derived, overall picture of “mainstream gaming”. The deeply committed, immersive play styles are in the minority, while the motivations with social and casual, time-spending related priorities are dominant. In our sample, those people who were interested in games for games’ sake, searching for specific games and looking at digital play as their primary form of entertainment, were in minority. One can of course claim that there is a qualitative difference in the amount of “gaming capital” (Consalvo 2007, 186) the dedicated game hobbyists have collected, in contrast to those people who access games principally for instrumental reasons, looking for company or just momentary respite from daily tasks. The cultural significance accumulated, appreciated and shared among the gaming hobbyists is certainly a valid and important area of study on its own, but there are several other areas of signification we should be aware of and researching, as well.

### **Cultures of Casual Play**

By their nature, the cultures of casual play are somewhat challenging to study. As a phenomenon becomes increasingly non-intensive, it also becomes more difficult to perceive, detect and analyse. While the dedicated fan of a long-standing series of strategy games, for example, might have thought about the virtues and downsides of her chosen game a lot, participated in various discussions focused on it, and there adopted a vocabulary to address its different dimensions, a casual gamer might not have done any such things at all. The game playing might be a recurring, everyday element of her day, yet something that remains at the periphery of attention and rationalization – precisely because it is casual by character. Even admitting to another person that she plays such games in the first place might be difficult. As a side note, this is actually a reason to suspect systematic distortion in gaming surveys, for example, where many casual gamers might not participate or report anything. When the cultural status and personal investment in such games is low enough, it will also have an effect on informant motivation. “I am not a gamer”, is a common first response in our interview situations, and it is only after more in-depth discussions that the full range of informants’ ludic activities starts to surface.

There are also reasons why the most commonplace elements in our lives are often the most difficult to break down analytically. Michel de Certeau has written about the everyday life in a manner that pays attention to how complex layers of meanings attach to the indeterminate areas, waste lands of our increasingly planned and regulated lives. Such “stratified places” are according to de Certeau “opaque and



stubborn”, and he goes on to describe “casual time” as the “diabolic adversary” of the system, and its planning projects (de Certeau 1984, 201–202). The casual phenomena are – paradoxically – deep in their superficiality. The non-planned moments of life, including casual game play, are rich in associative connections and non-verbalized personal meanings. Casual play is also often situated and contextualised in a manner that non-casual, immersive or dedicated game playing practices are not: in terms of Erving Goffman (1956), rather than being played out publicly in our “front-stage” (or alone as a conscious addition to our public self-image), casual play takes place in the “back-stages” of social and personal lives.

In addition to not being important enough to warrant attention and discussion, there remains also a deeper ambivalence that emerges from these interviews and reflections: casual play as something disgraceful and deniable. While game as a hobby is a viable option if your investment in time and effort is in harmony with the (sub)cultural frames that support the articulation of meaning in digital play, it appears that some casual game players have not adopted such values. Casual play emerges here as the unspoken “Other” of Rational Self – waste of time and effort in the era dominated by the ideology of efficiency and productivity. The topologies of casual and non-casual culture of play thereby differ: while it is possible to see gaming becoming one of the pinnacles for the organisation of identity, the position for casual appears more subdued. Casual play appears more subservient to identity work, providing unspoken spaces between the outspoken areas of productivity.

### **Online Casual Play in *FarmVille***

The above discussion has highlighted some of the numerous development trends and also tensions that run through the field of casual gaming. I will next illustrate the current state of casual online play with a few examples that display some typical features and developments. The first example is *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009), the archetypical “social game” that solidified a certain set of key features in casual Facebook games.



Figure 2: The user interface of *FarmVille* (April 2011).

The visual design of the game is as important as its rule-set or game mechanics (Figure 2). *FarmVille* takes its players back to the childhood days of toy animals and play gardening: with their clear contours, round shapes and big eyes, all game elements of *FarmVille* signal friendly, toy-like qualities. The theme is familiar and the processes related to farm-keeping (planting, harvesting, etc.) easily accessible to a wide range of different potential players; thus, *FarmVille* illustrates many of the typical design goals and values of casual games: acceptability, accessibility, simplicity, and flexibility (Kultima 2009).

*FarmVille* is a never-ending game of resource management and gradual progression towards having and maintaining an ever-bigger and better virtual farm. All available spots of land should be ploughed, planted with fresh seeds, then harvested and planted again, in a circle of manual labour and virtual production. Every single action requires mouse-clicks, and while an advanced casual gamer might have access to tractors, feeders or harvesting machines that speed up the process, *FarmVille* gameplay nevertheless means engaging in long sessions filled with clicking. It has been noted that it is symptomatic of *FarmVille* that some of the most coveted rewards from its gameplay are power tools that allow you to have less of *FarmVille* gameplay (Liszkievicz 2010). Since such farming tools can also be gained by investing real money,

part of *FarmVille*'s business model appears to rely on setting up artificial obstacles to players, so that they will pay for their removal.

In order to reach a sense of achievement, one needs to have some challenges and investments of time and energy that justify and give meaning to that achievement. The rewards of *FarmVille* are aesthetic as well as functional, but they also reward labour by displaying the ensuing progress. Through play, the farm expands, it will have more buildings, as well as more plants and decorations that reflect the taste and hard work of its player. Jason Begy and Mia Consalvo have noted how the player-preferred achievements of another casual online game, *Faunasphere* (Big Fish Games, 2009), focus on completing goals and levelling up, but can also be interpreted as “nurturing” activities within the game fiction (Begy and Consalvo 2011). There is both personal and social significance attached to gaming in a social network game like *FarmVille*; the new animals, buildings, decorations and tools hold play value inside the game, and also display value as extensions of their player's online persona within the social exchanges of Facebook. The theme of the game is important in contextualizing the playful activities within a certain kind of referential frame – one of caretaking, culturing and hard work in the case of *FarmVille*.

Two of the most interesting ambiguities running through *FarmVille* are related to the character of its casual play, and to the character of its sociability. The casual games of this kind are most often played by middle-aged people, women and men engaged in daily routines of the office and family chores (IGDA 2006). *FarmVille* can serve as a momentary relief from the stress of having obligations. Yet, it is precisely new kind of obligations that *FarmVille* creates to its players: planting the seeds of red currant, for example, means that I need to be back to do the harvesting in four hours, or my expensive plants start to wither. Scott Rettberg has written how massively multiplayer role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* serve the “corporate ideology” of our capitalistic society, by carefully modelling the workings of market economy. The laborious routine of such online games also make them paradoxically more acceptable: “When play feels like labor, and one toils to achieve objectives, play does not feel like a waste of time. Play that feels like frivolous entertainment would be intolerable for the good capitalist. Play that feels like *work*, on the other hand, must be *good*.” (Rettberg 2008, 32.) *FarmVille* adheres to the same cultural logic.

Another interesting ambiguity can be seen to operate within the role of sociability in *FarmVille*: the gift mechanism within the game is apparently enriching both the play experience and one's social ties by making it possible to send as gifts rare items, animals or building materials to players who belong to one's social network. However, the “gift” is also a part of the viral marketing mechanism of the game, and an important element among the devices that are intended to create a sense of social obligation to play more *FarmVille*. There is no built-in possibility for direct, simultaneous collaboration within the game, and the

presence of other players can be only indirectly perceived through the traces (gifts, farm upgrades, status feed items) left in the game and elsewhere in Facebook.

### **Location-Based Casual Play in Foursquare**

Location-based gaming is not a new invention – one can claim that any treasure hunt game is also location-based gaming, regardless whether digital positioning or only a paper map is being used. However, the scale of involvement in these play forms has greatly expanded, particularly as GPS has become a standard element in regular mobile phones. *Foursquare*, the service that I will feature as the next example of expanding casual play, reported at the time of this writing (March 2011) having seven million registered users. There are also several competing services with varying feature sets, including *Google Latitude*, *Gowalla*, and *Facebook Places*. Games and services that rely on mobile and ubiquitous technologies are part of a wider social, practical and ethical development where issues of power, control, identity and privacy, among others, are in the process of becoming interconnected in new ways (see, e.g., Greenfield 2006).

*Foursquare* is a playful, location-based social networking service, used with a smartphone client, which is focused on “checking-in” at various, real-world locations, and gaining virtual rewards and recognition from them. Typical rewards are badges, for example “Adventurer” badge is rewarded after the user has checked in at ten different venues, and “Local” badge from checking in at the same place three times in one week. The most active recent visitor in a venue wins the “Mayor” status into that place. *Foursquare* has also opened up their system to various establishments who provide special offers to their Mayors, or also to other *Foursquare* users checking in at their location (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Foursquare mobile application interface (iPhone app, Foursquare.com, 2011).**

When considered as a game, *Foursquare* is a borderline case. It features points, challenges and rewards organised in a playful manner, yet its “gameplay” is rather rudimentary. It is perhaps fair to call it a tool or service that can be used for casual play, but also for other purposes, like communicating about one’s travel locations to one’s social network (*Foursquare* allows status sharing via Twitter and Facebook). *Foursquare* also points towards a development where the borderlines between gameplay and social play start to vanish (cf. Montola et al. 2009). Rather than staying within the explicit rule-set created by *Foursquare*, the users of service can utilize the service to create playful exchanges of their own, checking in at funny places, or by framing their check-ins as joking comments to earlier check-ins by their friends or colleagues.

At its heart, the casual play in *Foursquare* carries its own ambiguities. With its links to other social networking services, *Foursquare* fits the busy lives of “urban nomads” who are constantly on the move, and want to advertise their lifestyle and location as an extension of their professional persona. On the other hand, the apparently trivial pursuit of gameplay tokens such as mayor statuses or badges sends out signals of free time and playful exploration. Taken together, these two dimensions of location-based casual play go partially against each other, allowing a dual gesture that mixes elements from one’s professional and private identity into a novel kind of “multi-layered culture of casual play”.

### **Conclusions: The Conflicting Culture of Online Casual Play**

The above discussions and examples have contributed to an argument where the currently evolving culture of online casual play is situated at the ambiguous borderlines between mundane, instrumental, and playful frames of reference. The defining feature of casual play, its non-committing character, operates as a dual gesture that identifies a casual gamer as someone who both enters the sphere of ludic playfulness, as well as keeps some distance from it. Thus, casual play can be seen as a technique of identity or self, with simultaneous push towards both engagement and non-engagement. As such, it fits very well within the conditions of late modern societies, with their often conflicting requirements on the lives of individuals.

The apparent simplicity combined with the complexity within the actual, underlying significance of casual online play makes it open for multiple routes of appropriation and sense-making. Under observation, casual online play can emerge simultaneously as something ritualistic and trivial (e.g., rote clicking), and something private and public. Involvement in a simplistic gameplay in a social networking context functions socially as something that both separates and shields the player from any immediate social interaction, yet also maintains at least a superficial contact with other people, and the associated mundane realities. This internal dissonance may also explain some of its popularity, and point towards better understanding of its specific cultural problematics.

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