



The Musings of 'Evil Bastards': Perspectives from Social Casino Game Professionals

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Abstract: Technology has blurred the lines between gambling and gaming. While the convergence can be witnessed on many different levels, social casino games on social networking sites and mobile apps illustrate just one example. Much of what we currently know about social casino games focuses on player behaviour, with little understanding about this genre from the perspective of social game professionals. This paper aims to fill the gap in our understanding of social casino games through interviews with the professionals who design them.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 professionals from the social casino games industry. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings illustrate that tensions exist between the two fields of gambling and gaming; however, both are trying to separate themselves from the stigmatized 'dirty secret' that is gambling. Further, as a result of social casino games residing, for the most part, in an unregulated 'grey area,' findings illustrate the ethical struggle felt by social casino game professionals. This convergence has significant consequences, not only for players, but for game developers, designers, and researchers, and highlights the importance of game designer education.

Keywords: gambling, game design, social casino games, free-to-play, stigma

Introduction

While gambling has been a part of the human experience for centuries, new technologies offer a huge potential for expansion. Social casino gaming is a concomitant convergence of traditional gambling (real money casinos), online gambling (real money online casinos), and social gaming (virtual games played primarily on social networking sites (SNS) and mobile apps). For the most part, these games are largely unregulated and generate revenue from a free-to-play (F2P) business model, where the product (game) is free to access but players are encouraged to use real money to purchase premium features such as upgrades, bonuses, virtual goods/currency, or speeding up actions (Nettleton & Chong, 2013; Paavilainen et al., 2013). Thus, the social casino gaming industry challenges our conventional understanding of gambling, gaming, and regulation. In this article, I present the perspectives of social casino game professionals, whose voices have received little attention to date.

The growing body of literature about social casino games focuses on the player, with relatively little

research to foster an understanding of how these games are designed and of their potential impact on player behaviour. Natasha Dow Schüll's seminal work, *Addiction by Design* (2012), illustrates the importance of understanding how commercial gambling activities, business models, and environments create, and actually encourage, the behaviours of individual players and influence gambling-related harms. Before Schüll, very little discussion of gambling addiction took into consideration the role of slot machines, particularly slot machine technology and the underlying industry practices.

Previous research informs us that professionals have worrying concerns over the F2P model, feeling that the revenue model is exploitive and unethical (Alha et al., 2014). Reynolds (2019) highlights the ethical and risk concerns about game mechanics and the use of big data to personalize players' gameplay to optimize engagement and monetization. Finally, Paavilainen (2016) illustrates that F2P game developers emphasize key F2P design principles, such as: fair play, player equality, scalable game design, the constant drive for new content (especially for players who

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spend a lot of money in the game; i.e., whales), the ability for players to achieve within the game (at least in theory), and the preference for a loose economy rather than a tight one.

When we examine the literature on player behaviour, there is a growing body of research about the associations between social casino gaming and gambling that warrant attention. In 2018, a survey reported that 12% of Canadian adolescents in three provinces played social casino poker in the preceding 3 months (Veselka et al., 2018). A study of young gamblers (12–24 years) reported 20–35% play casino-style gambling games on SNS (Stark et al., 2016). Factors associated with social casino gaming among youth indicate that being male, parental gambling, having friends that gamble, and increased screen time are associated with gameplay (Veselka et al., 2018).

Of concern is the potential transition of players from casino-style games found on SNS, to real-money gambling (Derevensky et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015; King et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2012). Previous research found that youths aged 11–15 years who play free-to-play gambling games show a greater propensity to engage in real-money gambling, suggesting that ‘children may get the same buzz from playing free games as gambling for money’ (Ipsos MORI, 2011, pp. 3–4). Evidence demonstrates that social casino gaming influences the migration of play over to monetary gambling (Gupta et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015).

Moreover, regression models confirm that ‘exposure to or past involvement in simulated gambling activities was a significant predictor of pathological gambling risk’ (King et al., 2014, p. 310), while engagement in micro-transactions was also found to be a unique predictor to transitioning over to real-money gambling (Kim et al., 2015). Finally, and most importantly, claims that social casino gaming sites ‘teach young people to gamble’ (Lewis et al., 2012, p. 6) are beginning to be substantiated (Kim et al., 2015; Reynolds, 2016). This is of particular concern for youth who might not otherwise have gambled at such a young age. The proliferation of gambling opportunities is now embedded in the daily lives of young people, offering youth more opportunities to gamble and foster migration of their gameplay over to

real-money gambling sites once they develop a level of experience and skilled play (Kim et al., 2015). Given the absence of monetary reward, these games might not legally be considered gambling, but many youths perceive social casino gameplay as a form of lower-stakes gambling (Reynolds, 2016). Finally, in a recent guest editorial, Kim & King (2020) highlight the struggle of research to keep up with the pace of technology, call for future research to focus more globally, and consider how the convergence of gambling and gaming operates and affects gambling participation across various cultural and sociocultural contexts.

Methodology

Located within a constructivist paradigm, this study focuses on how professionals in the social games industry perceive casino-style games and explores the larger ethical issues surrounding them. In total, 14 game professionals were interviewed following a semi-structured interview format. In-depth interviews were conducted in person, lasting from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Professionals did not receive an honorarium for their participation in the study.

A professional was broadly defined as an individual engaged in an occupation that is tied to social casino games in some manner. Specifically, game professionals identified specializing across a variety of industry roles and in-game areas, such as monetization, user experience, data analytics, and live operations, from three different social casino game companies located in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The game companies are currently leaders in the social casino games industry, and are similar in size, business operations/goals, and scope of the games they develop. Therefore, it can be assumed that professionals were similar with respect to their professional behaviour. Professionals were recruited through a purposeful sampling strategy, selecting participants because of their characteristics and knowledge of social casino games. At the end of each interview, I encouraged professionals to share my contact information with their colleagues. See Table 1 for the breakdown of all game professionals.

Table 1
Description of Participants

Number of Participants	Professional Area of Expertise	Location	Gender	
			Male	Female
2	Operators/producers	Montreal	2	0
8	Game designers (monetization, UX)	Montreal	4	4
2	Analysts	Montreal	2	0
2	Live-op managers	Montreal	2	0

In-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of my findings during the analytic process, I followed Braun & Clarke's 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis, which consists of criteria to examine during all stages of the process (i.e., transcription, coding, analysis, write up). Despite the diversity of game professional roles, overall thematic saturation was obtained. Ethics protocol was approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Review Committee, Concordia University, 2017.

Analysis

Convergence of Play

Despite jurisdictional regulatory differences, all professionals agreed that social casino games represent a blurring of lines between gambling and gaming, a perfect illustration of the convergence that is happening between the two fields. 'The mechanics are exactly the same. If you win, you're going to accrue chips, bet them again, in the hopes to keep winning.' The difference is that players cannot directly take money out of the game; this slight difference is why these games do not fall under the gambling laws in many jurisdictions, as it is not gambling per se. As one game designer articulates, 'this makes the games similar, but also different because we [game designers] can do things that would be morally unacceptable.'

Social casino games fall in a grey area that is mostly shielded from regulations, which gives operators an opportunity to exist and profit in the absence of independent oversight. As one professional states:

It's an interesting problem for regulation because things don't operate like a dichotomy, or binary between games and gambling. It operates more as a spectrum of things. You can clearly say that putting money in a slot machine is gambling ... as you move further along the spectrum, you have people putting in money in loot boxes. You're putting in your real money because you want a hat or a fancy yellow gun so that you can show to other people.

Several game designers claimed that loot boxes are essentially 'the equivalent of a slot machine into a normal game.'

There are some implications to the convergence and lack of clarity around how social casino games are conceptualized. Previous research shows how young people consider social casino games as a form of 'gambling lite' (Reynolds, 2016). Similarly, most game professionals interviewed often referred to social casino games as 'gambling-ish.' This convergence adds to the confusion surrounding the casino-style games sector and, according to social casino game designers, results in stigmatization.

Stigma

These findings illustrate that stigmatization can be witnessed on multiple levels. First, interviews support previous findings that tensions exist between the two industries of gambling and gaming (Abarbanel, 2018). It seems that both industries are trying to separate themselves from the stigmatized 'dirty secret' that is gambling. There is a distinct feeling that while gambling falls under the larger umbrella of games (Juul, 2003), framing gambling games as gaming is deceiving and 'a lot of people who are in gaming, as opposed to gambling, really look down on gambling.'

Gambling has always been a very loaded term: for some, it continues to be associated with the illegal gambling operations run by organized crime in the twentieth century; others observe how gambling losses transformed Las Vegas from a desert outpost into one of the world's top tourist destinations (Schwartz, 2006). It has only been over the past couple of decades that gambling has begun to be seen as a socially acceptable leisure activity, largely because of the powerful, deliberate, and misleading reconstruction of gambling as gaming by the gambling industry (Derevensky, 2012).

When people say 'gaming,' it's like one of those 'What do you mean?' moments. 'Oh, you're talking about gambling. Yeah, that's like a different thing.' ... I would say it's [gambling] sort of like the dirty secret. In the games industry, no one wants to talk about gambling.

It's [stigma] really is just an extension of the moral approbation of the rest of society. It's more like someone you're related to, right? You're like 'Pfft, that's really bad, please don't associate me with my brother ... because he is the bad sibling, and I am the okay sibling. I'm trying to work my way towards respectability.' Gaming, as opposed to gambling, is really obsessed with respectability ... Being associated with gambling is really bad for that. It's like having the cousin who reveals that you come from a non-classy background, while gaming is trying to be 'No, no, we're not like that. We're a totally different type of person.'

Social casino game designers also reveal a second level of stigma that is occurring. Specifically, that there is significant stigma for game designers of casual and 'free-to-play' games, associated with the underlying business model of many casual and free-to-play games that 'exude a priority of profit over a truly fun game experience.' This result reflects previous findings from game professionals (Alha et al., 2014). As one game designer says:

there is a lot of stigma in the field ... you will find a ridiculous amount of articles talking about whether or not they [social games] are games. To

this day, when I tell people I work in social games, I'm always like [whispering] 'I'm in social games, and it's in gambling. But I can do REAL design, I swear I can.'

As this quote indicates, oftentimes the stigma can lead to an internal struggle. For many social casino designers, there is a struggle that resides with their 'desire to make good games.' As a couple of game designers explain:

Triple A companies look down to people in casual games. And for some game designers, we felt it was a punishment to be assigned on a casual game project. There is really a stigma, still today. People want to make good games; they want to work on the games they want to play.

I have to provide for my family. In a way, I accepted doing a free-to-play game, it's become a job. It's a job I think I'm good at, but it's not my true calling. The [game] market has evolved like this. At one point, you have to adapt or find another craft ... In the end, you try not to think about it because at one point, it's like, what are you going to do? Risk losing your job?

'Dark Design': Designer Ethics and Being 'An Evil Bastard'

Across the board, game designers understand that what they do can significantly impact people. A topic candidly discussed in almost all the interviews was the notion of 'dark design.' Dark design is about the tweaks, notifications, cues, and pushes that designers specifically incorporate into the game. As one designer articulates, 'dark design is a rabbit hole you [designers] can go down. It comes originally from slot machine design, not from game design. It's basically design patterns that abuse what we know about human psychology.' The 'dark design' of social casino games weighs heavily on almost all designers and highlights an area that is rarely discussed—designer ethics and corporate social responsibility. It encompasses everything from the types of data that social casino game developers are collecting, to the ways that the data are used to 'profile, nudge, whatever.' A powerful discourse within the game design community focused on the self-identification of the social casino designer as an 'evil bastard.'

Social casino game designers acknowledge that the games they are producing reside in an unregulated 'grey area' and, consequently, feel an ethical struggle. Two game designers explain:

Ethically speaking, you're always a bit tough on yourself. It's actually so close to a real gambling that the company basically hired psychologists to work with them full time to understand the psyche of their players ... It can impact people

drastically because you play on the psychological effect. Some people are susceptible to fall into it [gambling] more than others. Many studies are there to illustrate it. So, in the end, you turn into a kind of evil bastard.

I see people get highly addicted and will play forever until they are literally bankrupt. Which, as a game designer, I do not want on my conscience. I don't think any game designer does.

As game designers, they want to be 'proud of their work.' But all acknowledge that 'very few games make good money without resorting to poor impulse control.' As one designer indicates, 'when designers start making a game that they are not proud of, they are really sad.' Another designer confirms this when he says, 'some days there is a lot of self-loathing.' At which point, the reality of being a free-to-play game designer sinks in: 'we need to constantly negotiate our values.'

Almost all of the game designers I interviewed spoke about being good at their job. This adds an additional level of internal conflict. One social casino game designer said it best: 'my job is to best figure out how we can get a little bit more sneaky [with respect to monetization].' He goes on to say,

The problem for me personally, is that I got very good at it [monetization]. At work I would say 'oh yeah, we should do this,' and then we do it. And then the player will pay this here and there. But then I would go to events with friends about gaming or whatever, and then they would talk about bad monetization practices and all that, and I am like, 'oh shit, that's me they're talking about' ... I feel dirty, but I am very good at it.

One designer sums up the current monetization practices of free-to-play games like this:

Game designers are the bad guys in all of this. Companies specifically hire people to inject microtransactions into their games, but we [designers] know what we are doing, we are good at it. It's evil. It's like we are mercenaries. We are going to do all the dirty work.

This quote hints at the important role that companies have in using dark design patterns in their games. All designers were in agreement that one of the most challenging aspects of their jobs is dealing with companies' 'higher-ups' and the struggle they have when discussing 'problematic design choices' as a way for the company to 'make a shit-ton of money on a game.' Having worked on a number of social games over many years, two designers explain it like this:

When social games, Facebook games, mobile games become really big, they get bought out by a whole different type of businesspeople. A whole different type of management-level people who have no interest in games and are only there because of the quick gains. And they don't treat games as a form of entertainment, and only want to design them to make money. They treat it as any other business. So, whatever brings them the most money the fastest is what they go for and it doesn't matter if it burns out in three years and they burn through their player base. They don't care. They just take the money and leave when they are done. Fire everyone and they start a new business ... they like whatever is hot at that moment.

The most challenging part is fighting with the higher-ups on wanting to just do whatever in the most abusive approach to making money. I try to convince them of good design that will long term, will bring them more money. Which I proved to them, and they didn't care ... They don't think long term, we only look at something for the first two weeks and they start to panic.

Multiple Currencies

In many countries, social casino games are not considered to be gambling because of the legal coordinates of consideration, chance, and prize (Campbell et al., 2005; Owens, 2010). The latter part of this assumes that prizes must be synonymous with money and that in-game currencies and chips do not hold value outside of the game. Perhaps the key to solving this legal puzzle is to address the real value of virtual currencies.

Findings from my interviews support the need to augment our definition of value with respect to in-game currencies (Castronova, 2005). In particular, currencies and chips *do* have value inside and outside of the game. Games, including social casino games are currently being designed in ways that expand our understanding of currencies. However, from a gambling regulatory perspective, this is often not being acknowledged. For example, one game designer asks if 'in-game XPs (experience points) are a form of currency?' For a player to have to 'grind' their way to a desired level or achievement, they are spending significant amounts of time playing the game. She goes on to explain:

the principle of games is that sometimes you have to grind, so designers try to make the grind interesting so people will do it themselves because it's fun ... But sometimes players pay people to grind for them. Unfortunately, it is a well-known practice when players want to play against others at a higher level and don't have the time or inclination to grind their way to that desired level.

In this instance, buying XPs is a form of currency. It also elucidates an additional important currency: time. Players' time is of value. Two game designers sum it up when they say:

It is important how the players perceive that [paying people to grind] and by not perceiving it is gambling when they lose time. They are at risk of losing too much time. Time then creates this barrier of gambling and gaming, and gambling is perceived as worse. This is really the barrier where games want you to take out your credit card and pay for something [time]. It's like a protective factor to gambling. If players perceive using money as a way to grind through XPs, it becomes a double-edged sword. Players can too easily lose the time, but it helps them to protect against losing money.

Your XP usually gets to level ups. What happens on level up? ... Rewards. It can be anything, hard currency if you have them. This is where we [developers] can be generous with our players. Why? Because you want them to level up. If they level up, it means they are playing and chances are increasing that they will spend. You just want them [players] to come by habit to the game and get their daily adrenaline stimulation. What in the end are we selling? ... Time! With time, you [designers] can basically predict everything that happening in the game. I get them [players] to a tilting point where I can sell them time.

Discussion

'How can they expect people to gamble responsibly when they build machines that make them [players] behave irresponsibly?'

Interviewee (Schüll, 2012, p. 274)

The emergence of casino-style games on game platforms, mobile apps, and social media, such as FB and Steam, challenges our current understanding of gambling and raises considerable concerns, particularly with respect to how these games are designed and their ethical implications. This study presents the unguarded views of social casino games professionals, an absent voice in our current understanding of this genre of games.

To date, the studies of gambling and gaming have had very little to do with each other, despite the fact that they are both areas of study that fall under the larger rubric of game research. Although the two fields are converging as a result of the evolution of technology, casino-style social games, have for the most part, only been examined through a gambling lens. This study allowed me the opportunity to immerse myself within the field of gaming, which is quite

different from gambling with respect to its underlying disciplines and related knowledge.

There is a growing consensus about the need to view gambling from a public health perspective (Bowden-Jones et al., 2019; Hancock & Smith, 2017; Korn & Shaffer, 1999; Livingstone & Rintoul, 2020; Skinner, 1999). Essentially, the key difference between the public health framework and the various other approaches hinges on the role of the individual. The public health approach offers a broad viewpoint on society, moving beyond individual behaviour to the importance of examining the games and the environment in which gambling games occur and the games themselves (Korn & Shaffer, 1999). Despite this interest in framing gambling within a public health perspective, a disproportionate amount of research still focuses solely on the individual and their behaviours. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given that a disproportionate amount of gambling research originates in the discipline of psychology (Reynolds et al., 2020; Cassidy et al., 2013).

Moving forward, examining this genre of social games from a broader lens and adopting a multiple disciplinary perspective will offer unique opportunities to critically understand, not only players' behaviour, but also the effect of the environment and underlying business models.

The prevailing regulatory knowledge promotes the dualism between social casino games and gambling based on the traditional, and mainly uncontested, legal coordinates—consideration, chance, and prize (Campbell et al., 2005; Owens, 2010). Tensions exist between the two industries; however, both are trying to separate themselves from the stigmatized 'dirty secret' that is gambling. Confusion exists about how to frame social casino games. This confusion illustrates the significant power that industries have in shaping the public discourse and discussion around these games.

The literature in both fields have attempted to define gaming and gambling, and highlight the difficulties in coming to an agreement about these terms. The process is difficult and not unbiased, as it is accompanied by questions of power (Arjoranta, 2014). To date, dialogues about the definition of social casino games have been significantly driven by industry and related key stakeholders, who have set the terms and boundaries for how the discussion is carried out: 'In the liminal spaces between definitions live things that resemble the ones you are trying to fence inside your boundaries, but are faulty in some small way' (Arjoranta, 2014). Traditionally, gambling has been considered a boundary case under the larger rubric of gaming (Juil, 2003). Social casino games have become an example of a similar boundary case, located between gaming and gambling, and challenging the gambling field to ask: 'What kind of purpose the definition is trying to fulfill, what kind of phenomena it is leaving out, and why?' (Arjoranta, 2014).

Examining the regulation of social casino games was beyond the scope of this study, but the industry will be significantly impacted if we begin to define these activities as gambling under the traditional legal definition; specifically, if winning a prize, other than money, holds value. The biggest risk to the industry would be a challenge to their assertion that in-game currency holds no value outside of the game—as soon as value is attributed to it, these games will be defined as gambling, and with that comes regulation. As the game professionals articulated, social game developers maintain a level of freedom that allows them to push the boundaries of game design, usually at an ethical cost to the designer. Despite the dark-design patterns and the related ethical struggle that many game professionals experience, social casino game developers/operators continue to construct these games as just another form of free-to-play entertainment and keep alive the harmlessness discourse (Reynolds, 2019).

Findings illustrate how the concerns of social casino professionals are disregarded in lieu of generating fast money at all costs. Schüll's (2012) work on machine gambling also takes the commercial interests of the game design company into consideration; particularly how players find themselves disconnected and in the 'zone' as a result of game design. As Schüll (2012) articulates,

An understanding of flow is relevant to the design of leisure products and services, he [Csikszentimihalyi] neither elaborated on the profit motives behind the design of user flow nor reflects on how these motives might lead to products and services whose configuration risks drawing users' escape motivations in a 'backwards' direction, such that they lose themselves without self-actualizing gain. (p. 167)

My findings support previous research arguing that there is a need to broaden our understand of currency beyond the monetary value as defined by the real financial economy (Castronova, 2005; Goggin, 2012; Jacobs, 2012; Lehdonvirta et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2016; Schüll, 2012; Zelizer, 1997). What was clear from my interviewees was the notion of multiple currencies; specifically, the importance of time and the design mechanics in place to ensure that players 'lost track of time.' Time playing the game holds incredible value to game companies. In *Addiction by Design*, Schüll (2012) builds on the work of Livingstone (2005) when she writes about players' use of money to 'suspend clock time' rather than represent financial value. As Livingstone (2005) writes, 'Time is liquidated to become an essential currency of the problem gambler ... it may well be the most important and significant currency' (p. 527).

When we begin to examine social casino games, incorporating what we know about the players, the

environment, and the underlying business practices of social casino operators, the concerns about these games are warranted. As history informs us, public health advocates once voiced concerns that packs of candy cigarettes were ‘so real looking it’s startling,’ and that tobacco companies were ‘trying to lure youngsters into the smoking habit’ (Minnesota Tobacco Document Depository, as cited in Klein & St Clair, 2000, p. 363). At that time, public health researchers could not argue that candy cigarettes *cause* experimental tobacco smoking behaviour in children. However, results of studies could support the claim that ‘candy cigarettes provide opportunities for children to engage in smoking-related play’ (Klein et al., 1992, p. 30) and companies are ‘selling the social acceptability of smoking’ (p. 27). This history is particularly interesting because it illustrates the significant power the public health community had on candy cigarettes. Conversely, social casino games are intentionally presented as something entirely different—a harmless form of gaming, distinctly separate from regulated gambling—similar to what the candy cigarette manufacturers did until research began to indicate the need to protect young people from products that promote the social acceptability of smoking and the need for more targeted primary prevention efforts (Klein et al., 2007).

This study’s limitations need to be addressed. First, technological innovation significantly outpaces research in this field. This study also offers only a snapshot of some professional perspectives—future research should seek to build on these important findings. Given the global nature of social casino games, it may be expected that some historical and cultural differences were also not captured in the data. Additionally, my research is grounded in a constructivist approach, seeking to provide a contextualized understanding of social casino professionals’ perspectives. There is some caution required in extrapolating the findings to other digital games and other professionals.

Future studies should work toward an understanding of the environmental context surrounding these games, particularly with respect to the protection and prevention of gambling-related harms to youth. We need to understand how broader social, industrial, and technological forces combine to shape individual behaviours and perceptions. Finally, future research needs to examine if/how game design education addresses the convergence of gambling and gaming.

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