Art of the Pan-Opt-in-a-Con: FarmVille and the Gamification of the Digital Landscape

On September 28, 2020, social game company Zynga announced that it would be shutting down its most iconic product: the original, Facebook-and-Flash-based version of the game FarmVille ("Important Announcement"). While the ceasing of support for Flash games on Facebook is what ultimately led to Zynga "sunsetting" FarmVille, this explanation belies the deeper resonances of a game that, at its peak, had 32 million daily active users (Victor). I argue not only that FarmVille reset expectations for what digital experiences could be, but also that it inaugurated a new status quo for digital products that was enabled by a kairotic coalescence of beliefs and technological change. Understanding these preconditions, how FarmVille accessed them, and to what degree FarmVille affected them may be helpful for imagining a post-pandemic, post-FarmVille, and potentially even post-platform world.

[All roads lead to FarmVille]

Let's begin with a brief history of FarmVille. Launched in 2009, FarmVille became the first application to capitalize on Facebook's news feed feature. At the same time, FarmVille pioneered the use of big data, facilitating gameplay optimization and monetization in turn (@markpinc et al.; Victor). FarmVille was also able to grow very rapidly in terms of capacity by taking advantage of cloud services (Murphy), which have only become more accessible and ubiquitous since then. Boosted by its freemium business model and bucolic setting, FarmVille not only grew its user base astonishingly fast, it also did so by attracting an audience that had previously not been interested in online games. Ludic luddites were drawn to the game's simple graphics and casual point-and-click game environment, which was advertised to them on a platform where they were increasingly connecting with people they knew in real life. Most often,

it was through those very people that they were exposed to the game. This merger of the video game world with the real world at this scale was unprecedented.

In addition to extending what a video game audience could look like, FarmVille expanded the very concept of what a video game could be. Not only did FarmVille simulate in a very basic way the labor of farming, it also relied on players for their actual labor vis a vis their repeated engagement and attention. The reward system of the game required users to return daily to tend to depictions of crops and livestock while encouraging them to complete branded offers, pay for in-game benefits, and, of course, invite their friends to play the game, too. This combination of embedded affiliate advertising, microtransactions, and referral marketing, magnified by the ballooning scale of Facebook, made FarmVille a household name. And although its success was short-lived, FarmVille's model worked very well for long enough to prompt Zynga's public offering in 2011, and just this year Zynga's CEO was among the top 20 highest paid (Gelles). FarmVille's rise was also intimately tied to Facebook's: In fact, when Facebook filed its own IPO in 2012, it was revealed that 12% of the social network's 2011 earnings—$445 million—came from Zynga's products (Kain). The dominant social platform of today was launched in part with the help of a game that was effectively its parasite.

[The Double-Edged Sword of FarmVillification; or, the Hotel Cowifornia]

The way FarmVille enticed users to sign away their privacy rights in order to play this free-at-point-of-service game also made it a popular target of criticism. A 2015 paper on the ethics of FarmVille's use of big data describes a bait-and-switch dilemma: "When faced with whether to acquiesce to Zynga's Terms of Service including its privacy policy, users are given a stark choice—either they acquiesce in total and give away access to the requested information and any further information as to their in-game and across-platform activities or they don't play

the game; the game many of their friends may be playing" (Willson and Leaver 151). FarmVille, in other words, implemented and enforced a new set of normative behaviors that were lubricated by low-stakes but nonetheless exploitative socialization.

Still others criticised FarmVille on aesthetic grounds. FarmVille seemed to imagine a future for internet culture that was palatable only to the lowest common denominator, the villeins, if you will. Complicating this critique, however, is the problem of defining what FarmVille is. FarmVille epitomized the social game genre, despite the fact that it comprised very few elements that could be considered social or gamelike in any traditional sense. Paying for upgrades in FarmVille actually reduced the number of chore-like tasks a player needed to accomplish on a daily basis. The implicit goal of paying into the game was seemingly to play the game less, not more. Scholar and game designer Ian Bogost puts this contradiction succinctly: "Social games are games you don't have to play" ("Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession").

Bogost changed the conversation around FarmVille when he created his own satirical version of the game called Cow Clicker, which he referred to as a "theory-cum-parody game." Cow Clicker reduced the already limited visuals of FarmVille to pictures of cows that a player could click every six hours. This parody game also included simulacra of the marketing components that defined FarmVille (ibid.). The purpose of Bogost's game was to highlight the nearly naked pecuniary function of FarmVille by creating a completely stark version. Both games coerced players to pay money in order to temporarily relieve the low-level anxiety perpetuated by the sisyphean task of needing to click things at regular intervals. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, Cow Clicker developed a following to the tune of tens of thousands of users a short time after being released, prompting Bogost to continue to develop the game far beyond

what he expected and leading him to eventually opine that: “Just like playing one, running a game as a service is a prison one may never escape” (ibid.).

Games as services were not yet the norm in 2010 when Bogost wrote about his then-ongoing experiences with Cow Clicker, but today it seems quaint to consider a time when a developer could expect to ship a completed game, no matter how insignificant, and never have to update it again. To put this another way, services offer ongoing, never entirely completed means of extracting time, attention, and money from both customers and creators. Beyond games, “everything-as-a-service” has been a common buzz word in enterprise technology circles for years. “Platformization” explains this phenomenon, of companies creating their own marketplaces that also serve as walled gardens for their products. This essentially describes the motive behind anything that becomes a service, which is, increasingly, everything. In an article describing digital platforms as means of expanding rentier capitalism, scholar Jathan Sadowski describes platform capitalism in terms of data extraction, capital convergence, and digital enclosure. Using the example of farming equipment, Sadowski points out that “after spending $100,000 to buy a tractor, what you own is a big hunk of metal and rubber; you are only renting the software needed to actually operate the vehicle” (Sadowski 573). It turns out, farming is an ample metaphor for games as well as the broader contemporary economy of platformization.

As platforms have expanded, the term “social game” has moved even closer to meaninglessness. Games resembling FarmVille and Cow Clicker have largely moved off of social media platforms and onto mobile devices. Social media platforms and mobile game developers do retain a symbiotic relationship through the social platforms’ APIs, which provide authentication for user accounts and allow platforms to gather user data even when users are not directly “on” the platforms themselves. However, the main difference today compared to 2009 is

that social platforms and physical media have simply receded from view. Today, all games are social games just as all games are services. Of course, that doesn't mean the prison Bogost describes went away, it just got bigger, less visible, and less optional. In a platformed world, everything is a service, and that means today's games play you.

New technologies have arrived, disrupted (as Silicon Valley folks love to say), and displaced old technologies—and ways of life—since long before the internet age. A newspaper article from 1905 titled "Telephone Tyranny" weighing the "advantages and disadvantages of a much-used instrument" feels eerily familiar. "A man's house is no longer his castle if he has a telephone—it disturbs one's meals and demands an immediate answer" it reads (Sangster). And with technological destabilization comes artist's attempts to aestheticize it. In fact, the telephone received this treatment by the likes of László Moholy-Nagy and others, prefiguring contemporary new media art. Telephones, like games, required interaction. Bogost said himself that games are art: "If literature is the aesthetic form of language, then games are the aesthetic form of material constraints, of limitation" ("Play Anything"). Limits are indeed seductive. But today, as Bogost's own creation proved, games and their parodies are virtually indistinguishable. A game's constraints are themselves limited, reduced to the market logic of whichever platform it is beholden to. Parody games are easily played with a straight face.

As digital experiences in general become homogenized by platform-as-a-service logic, imagining other possibilities becomes challenging. As sociologist César Rendueles noted in his 2013 book *Sociophobia*, the traditional publishing industry's consolidation and integration with the "casino economy" provides an interesting case study. The effect of bowing to marketing concerns limits not only what is published, but also how long it remains on store shelves (or in virtual terms, in the gamified search results), and therefore what people consider to be literature

is altered (Rendueles 47). This is what happens to all digital products in a platformed context. In this regard, Cow Clicker and FarmVille are indistinguishable because they conform to the now-socially accepted logic of Facebook as a marketplace of attention.

[The Pan-Opt-in-a-Con: Variability is a Trap]

Bogost wasn't the first to create a satirical point-and-click game in order to call attention to the ways games are designed to inspire and profit from compulsive behavior. And examples of the pre-platform era show that the road to our platformed world was laid far in advance of its conquest. In the months before FarmVille launched and Facebook's dominance was not assured, game designer Edmund McMillen created a "joke" game-jam game called AVGM, which stands for "abusive video game manipulation," where a player would click a 2D image and new 2D images would appear subsequently, even after hundreds of clicks. McMillen—who was featured in the documentary *Indie Game: The Film*—made AVGM in response to what he saw at the time as "a tactic that's used in all MMORPGS [massively multiplayer online role playing games] . . . to get people hooked on your game and pay for it" (McMillen). In simple terms, the tactic was to trade digital goods for player's time and money, resulting in digital commodity fetishism.

In the 2014 how-to book *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, author Nir Eyal describes the tactic McMillen and Bogost are lampooning in terms of variable rewards. In Eyal's The Hook Model, "variable reward" is the third step in a four-step loop that consists of "trigger," "action," "variable reward," and "investment." In a chapter focused on how to implement variable rewards, Eyal puts video games in a category termed "rewards of the self," defined by the feeling of self-gratification they bestow. Curiously, this is also the category in which he places email (Eyal 112-13). FarmVille is specifically cited later on in the same chapter, in a section ominously titled "Beware of Finite Variability." By 2014, FarmVille's central conceit

was already played out, spread thin across numerous clone versions that Zynga had created in a mad dash to further cash in on a cash cow that people paid to not play. And then even when they did play FarmVille, as Eyal notes, it was "played mostly in solitude" (129). Echoing McMillen's 2009-era concerns, Eyal contrasts the finite variability of FarmVille with the example of MMORPG games like World of Warcraft, saying that they have "higher degrees of infinite variability" due to the fact that "players themselves alter the gameplay" (129). Putting aside the problem of explaining how there can be degrees of infinity, what Eyal is advocating is a world in which experiences are bottomless and rely on user creativity as a key ingredient of a service's success.

Eyal concludes his cautionary tale of FarmVille's finitude by reminding his acolytes that "an element of mystery is an important component of continued user interest" (127). This passing remark is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's more profound discussion of the ritually derived aura of pre-industrial-era artwork in his 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Specifically, Benjamin expected that the conditions of art's mechanical reproducibility would "neutralize a number of traditional concepts—such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery." Benjamin continues this thought by saying that these properties, including mystery, are often "used in an uncontrolled way" and that, not only is controlling them difficult, these properties "allow factual material to be manipulated in the interests of fascism" (2). Of course, the auratic, mysterious nature of art has persisted through to today, as has their weaponization. As Eyal's advice demonstrates, control over mystery in the form of variable rewards remains a goal of those who would seek personal gain by designing—euphemistically speaking—habit-forming products.

Theodor Adorno's concept of the culture industry picks up where Benjamin left off, anticipating the phenomenons of FarmVille and Silicon Valley with uncanny accuracy. In the 1975 essay "Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno describes the products of the culture industry as top-down, mass-produced amalgamations of high and low art that result in the worst qualities of both and uncritically pander to the status quo (12). Adorno chastens not only those who would see the culture industry in terms of an "ordering factor...[i]n a supposedly chaotic world," but he also calls out "[t]he two-faced irony in the relationship of servile intellectuals to the culture industry" as well as the complicity of consumers in their own self-deception (16). As far as the diminution of the aura, Adorno posits that the culture industry "preserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist" (15).

More recently, philosopher Bernard Stiegler echoed Benjamin in describing what he sees as as the result of a "second machinic turn of sensibility" that is "made possible by digital technologies":

> A work only works to the extent that one believes in it. More precisely, a work only works to the extent that it affects us, in the sense that, suddenly, it jumps out at us (*elle fait saillance*). Such a jumping out only affects us, and gets us hooked, to the extent that it directs us toward a mystery: it reveals next to existence—next to *its own* existence first and foremost, but also next to that of its author and of its spectator—*something other* than the plane of existence—if one believes in it. The experience of art is the experience of a work that opens up onto such a plane, and that appears in this way to reveal this other plane. Every work of art has the structure of a revelation. ("The Proletarianization of Sensibility" 9)

What is important to note here is that a pre-existing belief system is requisite for a work to have a hooking effect. At least in this respect, Adorno's prognosis of the culture industry's products agrees with Stiegler's view of artworks in the digital age: as reflecting whilst manufacturing a debased mentality en masse. Digital services increase the efficiency of manufacturing cultural beliefs by making it possible for individuals to participate in their systematic reproduction. The phenomenon of QAnon is one recent example of gamified belief, but Eyal ends his book with a more traditional example: an extremely popular Bible app. Not only does Eyal hold this up as an indication that his Hook Model is efficacious at reproducing a culturally accepted set of beliefs underpinned by mystery, it also represents the extent to which digital services need not reinvent but rather reproduce what we already buy into. Likewise, FarmVille was itself a clone of moderately successful farming-themed predecessors that failed to as efficiently commoditize a replaceable aesthetic (@markpinc et al.).

[The Tyranny of Completion: Games are Designed to Complete You.]

The amount of belief we have in the proprietary mysteries of black-box platforms is not universally faith-inducing, but it is enough to sustain them. At some point, all games managed to tap into undercurrents of platform culture, to the extent that games are functionally synonymous with the experience of everyday life. Media scholar McKenzie Wark described in her 2007 book *Gamer Theory* that: "Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time itself." And in a 2012 article, cultural critic Jonathan Beller builds on Wark's conception of the digitized world, saying that "we are forced to wager being itself in order to subsist amidst the practical-material deconstruction of life" (21). It follows that the predominant metagame of the digital era is perpetual kairotic appeals to a pre-existing sociopolitical worldview, undergirded by platforms, and in fact this is a key

component of what makes FarmVille a palatable, even tranquil, experience for some, while arousing suspicion and even ire in others.

Not only are we all implicated in a gamified existence, Wark argues that "[t]he game has colonized its rivals within the cultural realm, from the spectacle of cinema to the simulations of television" (7). In his recent book *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*, media scholar Patrick Jagoda argues in more concrete historical terms that "[n]eoliberalism borrows its key animating metaphors from games" (52) while explaining that gamification is a cultural development that "operates as a formal and cultural counterpart to neoliberalism" (9). Beyond the fact that games and neoliberal policies rose to significance concurrently in the 1970s, Jagoda says that video games inculcate the subjectivity necessary for neoliberalism to saturate everyday life (53). This of course echoes Benjamin's observation that the control of creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery enables the distortion or subjectivization of reality, as well as Adorno's assessment of cultural industry products as "a means of fettering consciousness" (18-19).

Jagoda describes how this plays out across different types of contemporary games, including the genres of simulation games and the successors to social games, mobile games. Mobile games, also often referred to as casual games, are for Jagoda a reflection of the precariousness of widespread casual labor: they provide "a resting spot, an outlet, a habit, a closed habitat, a temporary home for the energies of unemployment and underemployment" (247). In describing a parody of a casual mobile game called Little Inferno, Jagoda also illustrates that the spirit of FarmVille is alive and well in the mobile game era; like the earlier described parodies, the game "converts the pleasures [of gameplay] into anxiety or, more profoundly, in its parody reveals the anxiety that is always already inherent in the pleasures of

gamification" (ibid.). The tension between habit and habitat describes how games like FarmVille insidiously blur work, play, and inveigles players of a specific sense of existence.

In addition to being a casual game, FarmVille is also a simulation game. Simulation games often make no attempt to hide their conformity with neoliberal values. However, Jagoda chooses the independently developed farming game Stardew Valley to illustrate how even subtle, aesthetically rich, and explicitly non-social simulations imply a specific set of ideological, societal assumptions. Even though Stardew Valley begins with the player character escaping an office full of cubicles for the countryside, "everything in the [game] world promotes instrumental actions and tight self-management" (70). As evidenced by the mechanics of Stardew Valley, the neoliberal solution to the anxiety of spare time that is featured in casual mobile games is sold in terms of entrepreneurial self-management in simulation games. FarmVille, combining both of these genres, not to mention sharing a theme with Stardew Valley, figures as a faux pharmakon, a pastoral placebo mediated by a screen, that to see through is to see a reflection of yourself in the real and digital worlds simultaneously. And yet the result is neither here nor there; something is lost in this additive process that distorts rather than reifies lived experience.

References to metaphors of surveillance, simulation, and self-regulation abound in today's art and literature. But prior models only go so far in anticipating our current moment. As media and material culture theorist Petra Löffler observed in an interview with media theorist Geert Lovink in 2013, "Today, it is no more that the few see the many (panopticon) or the many see the few (popular stars)—today, because of the multiplication and connectivity of screens in public and private spaces, the many see the many." The global pandemic has only served to further decrease the difference between our personal and work lives. At the same time, it also revealed the costs of our obsessions with work and the precarity of our essential

interdependence. Platforms have become our life rafts; their owners seek to enclose and fulfill every niche of our existence, resulting in a distillation of the psyche to data points in a vast sea of networked server farms.

[Digital Platforms: Pharmakon or Farm-a-Con?]

Not only was 2009 the year FarmVille launched, it was also the year GeoCities bought the farm in the U.S. In ushering in the platform era, FarmVille suburbanized—homogenized and commodified—digital space. As artist and theorist Olia Lialina recently recounted in an essay titled "From My to Me": "Webmasters of the 1990s built homes, worlds and universes. But also, outside of intergalactic ambitions, they strongly pushed the concept of something being mine." Oliana argues for the universal need for our own space. To quote a pre-internet architectural hypertext work on this very issue, "People cannot be genuinely comfortable and healthy in a house which is not theirs" (Christopher, Ishikawa, and Silverstein 393). This is the fundamental problem of FarmVille and all platformed services: We are all tenant data farmers.

And herein lies the rub: The tessellation of platforms reduces us to pawns in their owners' gamesmanship. When a platform is put out to pasture, so are the users (a.k.a people) who invested not only money but valuable time building them up. Flash is a case in point: while it used to be simple enough to pirate Adobe products, user's software skills have always been held captive by Adobe's and other tech giants' support for Flash and its products—even before the advent of Creative Cloud. Outside of profitability, Flash had no future. While Stiegler expressed hopefulness circa 2010 that the digital, like writing, had the potential to be a pharmakon, by way of deprofessionalizing powerful tools and putting them in the hands of the many ("The Age of De-proletarianisation"), Oliana identifies a bleaker state of affairs today, seeing a need for quitting walled-garden platforms cold turkey. Boycotts of digital tools are

complicated by the network effect. At least for writers, the tools and skills are separable. But as long as the very digital homes and the tools we use to build them are rented, so are our digital lives. The dichotomy between Oliana and Stiegler represents a conflict over what it means to seek liberation in the digital age, presenting a choice between attempting to create our own fiefdoms within platforms—the way streamers, digital artists, content creators, and so-called indie game developers do—or abstaining from the platforms altogether.

Between these two extremes, though, there are countless other options that have been imagined. Stacktivism for the more technically minded is one route that has been recently advanced by Lovink ("Principles of Stacktivism"). The blockchain and non-fungible tokens comprise another recent hot topic promising digital artists redemption but which has so far only delivered more of the same in terms of environmental and economic problems. From another more FarmVille-adjacent, economic perspective, a kind of digital Georgism, i.e. creating a digital land use tax, has been imagined as a way to rein in monopolists (Smith). Along the same lines, a non-intrusive, decommodified, non-platformed version of FarmVille is a natural place to begin to think about a more equitable digital world. FarmVille ultimately did coax a broad swath of people into online gaming despite its other more deleterious impacts. Would a FarmVille similar to the GeoCities dream be possible now that the original FarmVille has ploughed ahead and gone to seed? Augmented reality technology has already been used to create at least one functional garden simulator (Okayama), so I would like to think so. Finding a way to extend education and care, including and perhaps especially by digital means, has been underscored as an urgent need in the Covid-19 era, and the global scale of this realization provides a glimmer of hope that we not only have the imaginations but also the mandate and the wherewithal to cultivate a more open digital landscape.

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