

Pinball and Social Games

Internet companies are booming again. Does that mean it is time to buy or to sell?

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I once thought of social games as being very similar to slot machines, but I now think a better analogy is pinball. The art of great pinball is not the skill (which tends to put off more people than it attracts) but rather the rewards. While social games are clearly very different from pinball in many ways, the two share some surprising similarities.

Pinball Wizards

Great pinball

navigates the middle ground between agency and luck by giving the player fast-paced activity (repeatedly hitting balls with bats and hoping for the best) that is rewarded with prizes, color and sound. The game has no overarching strategic elements beyond achieving sets of bonuses, and so it is very much a game of the moment. In the engagement hierarchy, pinball is an amusement for most players.

The main game dynamic is the warding off of gravity to achieve scores. Shooting the ball creates a variable loop with many possible reactions, some pleasing, some not. There are bonuses and multipliers to achieve, but there is also failure: Most pinball games have side chutes into which the ball can fall, which the player cannot prevent. Also, the space between the bats in the center is usually just a tiny bit wider than the diameter of the ball, also a source of unpreventable failure.

This means that pinball is a self-limiting activity for most players. When they insert their coins and shoot their balls, it is implicit that the activity will only last a few minutes before more coins are required. But the reward in those few minutes will be (if done well) exciting and engaging.

Social Sorcerers

Social games are sort of similar. They lack the need for physical skill, but what they have in common is the deliberate use of timed play, coupled with an easy but bright reward structure.

Successful social games serve activities, such as objects to collect, things to build, friends to visit, etc. All are delivered in what feels like a basic game, but the objective of the game design is not formal victories and big wins. Instead it is focused on small wins, things to do, little rewards to earn, and happy bonuses. The joy of these games is the endless colorful achievements, payoffs and unlocking more of the same.

Where social games differ from more traditional sim or role-playing games is a lack of overarching goals. There is creative appeal, but very little by way of interdependencies and complex effects to understand. Long term objectives and deep

game-play are toned down on purpose, as with pinball, to create simple task/completion scenarios.

The result is that players visit little and often, performing a few tasks, collecting a few rewards, achieving some small goals and occasionally being awarded a level or a lucky item drop. A social game permits the player a certain quantity of energy or activity (which savvy players learn how to maximize) which means that the game is self-limiting. Somewhat like pinball really.

Why Pinball Is A Better Analogy

Playing a game on Facebook is like standing in an amusement arcade. Pinball is primarily available at arcades, and each pinball machine has to fight for its right to be seen and heard by being louder, more visual and more immediately fun than its competitors. Other people and games are constantly in your peripheral vision, and the sounds and distractions that they create drain your attention.

Just as there is no room for an absorbing game like The Legend of Zelda at the arcades, the environment of social games restricts their ability to be deep. What social game makers have realized is that Facebook is so loaded with distraction that deep gameplay is almost impossible to achieve. So the game you are playing has to keep things light, fast and fun because the rest of the player's social graph is only a Notification Request away.

More serious games are better at achieving depth simply because they exist in full

screen rather than browser windows. If I'm playing Starcraft 2, all I can see on my monitor is that game. It blanks out the rest of my desktop and browser, and so I am completely enclosed in the Starcraft universe. On the other hand, if I'm playing CityVille I might also have FarmVille, Twitter, Google Reader, Facebook and BBC iPlayer open on different tabs.

Distraction rules the Web, so about the best that social game makers can hope to

achieve is the delivery of great amusement. Like pinball, the secret to social game design is thus to be quick and simple, obvious and unconcerned about grander ideals. Keeping things simple (to the point of lame) is a good fit for the Facebook platform because



the rest of the world really is only a click away, and as humans we are notoriously bad at paying attention unless all distractions are removed.

Environment Matters

It's important for any game designer to realize what environment he is working in, in order to avoid fooling himself. Like a pinball designer, you have to understand not only what the game that you are making is, but the environment in which it will sit.

There's no point trying to build quest elements into family sports games on Kinect, for example, because the environment is fast-paced as the family members jostle to take their turns. By the same token, there's little

value in introducing artificial mini-games into single-player explorations that are intended to be played for 100 hours. They feel oddly out of place.

What pinball knows, and social games have learned, is that environment plays far more of a factor in how engaging a game can really be than we sometimes realize.



[Editor's note: Game veteran and industry thinker Tadhg Kelly shares his ruminations on the nature of social gaming mechanics, and similarities they have to that arcade classic, pinball.]

An Irish lead designer and producer living in London, Tadhg Kelly is the author of a challenging book about, as he describes it, "Reclaiming games as an art, craft and industry on its own terms" titled What Games Are. The blog for the book is whatgamesare.com. You can also follow his tweets on Twitter (@tiedtiger).