

China's Happy Farm and the Impact of Social Gaming

By Wang Huang



Removing a dead plant in Happy Farm by Five Minutes.

Social network games (SNG or social games), the online games played through social network sites (SNS) or mobile devices, began to grow in 2008, after SNS such as Facebook opened up for developers to make video games in 2007. SNG distinguish themselves from other types of online games in that they are embedded in SNS, where people usually connect to real-life friends and family members with real-life identities. SNG are often casual, easy-to-pick-up, multiplayer experiences that allow interactions between players even when they are not online at the same time. Some game tasks cannot be accomplished by the player without interacting with one's "neighbors" (in-game friends who are from one's SNS network); and the more "neighbors" one has, the more likely for one's success in the game. Players extensively add or invite friends from their SNS network into the game play, enabling the game to spread fast and creating active communication (framed in game play) between SNS contacts. The explosive growth of SNG accompanied the development of several extremely popular game genres, such as farm simulation. Since the first farm SNG hit, Happy Farm (2008), developed by Shanghai-based company Five Minutes, farm SNG have developed into a global cult phenomenon, played by over 100 million people worldwide.

Farm simulation dates back to early video games such as Harvest Moon (1996) and simFarm (1993). In farm SNG, players usually grow crops and plants, raise animals, sell farm products to make money, expand and decorate their farms, and interact with their farm neighbors. Some farm SNG have an agricultural-industrial theme (eg, growing crops to feed cows to produce milk and cheese for sale) or an agricultural-commercial theme (such as the Qzone-produced trilogy of QQ Farm, QQ Ranch, and QQ Restaurant).

Five Minutes' CEO Gao Shaofei attributes the success of the farming genre to the universality of farming itself: "In order to achieve a success like Happy Farm, you'll need a very suitable marketing opportunity and a very good theme. You can create stories and make stories enticing, but you cannot create the theme itself. The theme of farming is not created by anyone, but is already there in human societies."¹ In fact, Happy Farm can serve as a good example for us to take a glimpse into global SNG cultures.

Happy Farm: From China to the World

The earliest farm SNG rage occurred in the People's Republic of China in November 2008 with Happy Farm, which immediately swept the nation. In March 2009, the Chinese farming SNG craze spread to Russia. On Facebook, though the earliest farm simulation game myFarm appeared in November 2008, a farm SNG rage didn't break out until 2009 with the release of two new titles: Farm Town and FarmVille. In the meantime, China-originated clones of Happy Farm penetrated world SNS networks throughout 2009, bringing SNG hits into other countries. Today, farming SNG still have millions of players, and new innovations of the genre continue to appear. The virtual farming phenomenon, eye-catching in the global new media cultures, implies multiple interactive processes across boundaries of language, culture, geographical region, and technology. Chinese farm SNG have played a very active role in the popularization of the genre and transcultural interactions in the global gaming culture.

Happy Farm is a free-to-play farm simulation game in which the players can grow and sell crops and fruits, expand and decorate their farms, help water crops, kill bugs, pull weeds for their neighbors' farms, and also



Killing bugs for a neighbor in Happy Harvest by ELEX.

Some companies had to formulate written regulations to forbid employees from playing the game during work hours.

steal their neighbors' farm products. To guard one's own farm, a player can buy a dog that will bite the thief and cause the latter to lose money, which will go to the farm owner's account. The game had immediate success and quickly attracted over one million players on Chinese SNS Xiaonei by the end of 2008. Tencent's acquisition and release of the game on Qzone in April 2009 (later renamed QQ Farm) furthered the nationwide farm SNG craze. By October 2009, there were twenty-three million people playing the game every day in China.² Clones of the Happy Farm model appeared and were exported to a number of countries, where they dominated SNS. These clones attracted millions of players in Russia, Brazil, Taiwan, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Holland, India, Japan, and Viet Nam.³ Examples of Happy Farm clones used in other countries include Happy Harvest, Happy Farmer, Sunshine Ranch, and Ibibio Farms.⁴



Playing Happy Farm in the office in China. Photo: Wang Huang

The various farm SNG played worldwide have shown similarities, differences, and mutual influences in their developments. The players' past and present gaming and other experiences can shape their gaming needs and preferences, which will in turn influence further developments of the games. Dynamic cultural interactions can be observed in these processes.

Game Time and Space: Virtual and Real-Life Convergence

In Happy Farm, plants take a long time to mature (ten to sixty hours). The shortest maturity times are ten, thirteen, and fourteen hours, compared to often much shorter maturity times in English farm SNG (eg, two, four, and six hours as the shortest in FarmVille; one minute, two minutes, and five minutes in Farm Story; and one minute, two minutes, and one hour in FarmVille 2). The long maturity time in Happy Farm reduces the duration of time that a player can spend tending one's own farm and potentially encourages the player to interact with neighbors, eg, pulling weeds for others to earn experience points (XP). Experience points are earned points for advancement in the game. Stealing neighbors' products will also facilitate the earning of XP in the long term. For many players, money earned from stolen products outnumbers money from one's own products. The game runs in real time with a one:one ratio between the game time and real-life time, uses real calendar dates, and celebrates real holidays with special sales and events. These settings help simulate a long-term merger of the game world and the reality world, making the game intrusive to real life. To harvest one's own or others' products before anybody took them, some players got out of bed late at night or early in the morning or harvested crops during work hours. It is common for parents to tend their children's farms while the kids are at school. Software automatically tending a player's farm was sold, and part-time farm tenderers were available for hire. Some companies had to formulate written regulations to forbid employees from playing the game during work hours.

The virtual farm also affects employee perceptions of the actual workplace. An office employee described how the game livened up his workplace: "[The game] accompanied us in the repeated tedious days, giving me some hope and something to care about. I even began to enjoy coming to the office, and came very early, just to steal vegetables."⁵ As illustrated in



Selling stolen fruits in Happy Harvest by ELEX.

A player said she started her farm just so that her addicted friends would have a place to steal.

for another, and can also steal from another). In China, the stealing feature is often highlighted as a defining feature; the game is, in fact, nicknamed “stealing vegetables” or “vegesteal.” Multiple factors influence how individual players interpret in-game competitive interactions and resolve in-game relations in real life.

Some players at times felt angry for being “betrayed” by their real-life acquaintances. A player of QQ Farm furiously deleted a real-life colleague from her QQ friend list after the colleague stole her expensive products. An employee was fired by his boss after stealing the boss’s vegetables. In other cases, the players stole from each other and still remained friends. A player said she started her farm

some comics and pictures, virtual farms occupied the employees’ computer screens and literally integrated into the three-dimensional space of the office. In Gansu Province, confusing the game space and reality, a female player accidentally stole vegetables in real life.

Player-to-player interactions in SNG are often classified into competitive interactions and collaborative interactions. Although competitive interactions can be found in Western SNG such as Mafia Wars, these farm SNG usually feature collaborative interactions (trading items, restoring withered plants, offering neighbors machinery components or real-time labor). However, in Happy Farm, both competitive and collaborative interactions are enabled (a player can kill bugs, water plants, and pull weeds

just so that her addicted friends would have a place to steal. Player-to-player interactions can also be intertwined by player-to-system interactions. For example, in some versions of Happy Harvest, the system sometimes gives the player a task of “stealing from 10 neighbors.” In that case, the players can be open-minded about their neighbors’ stealing because it’s a compulsory part of the game. In QQ Farm, which provides functions of putting harmful bugs and weeds into neighbors’ farms, some players would meet online at an agreed time and put bugs and weeds into each others’ farms so the farm owner could kill bugs and weeds to earn XP. In this case, the players are actually using the seemingly “competitive interactions” to collaborate with each other.

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Stealing a neighbor's bomb tree fruit in Happy Harvest by ELEX.

While stealing provides Happy Farm a very strong social function as an SNG, it also raised moral controversies in China.

The Issue of "Stealing"

While stealing provides Happy Farm a very strong social function as an SNG, it also raised moral controversies in China. For many players, the simulation of human relations in the game is perceived with a sense of social satire and parody. In some player-created one-line phrases, as part of the game's fan culture, the gamers satirize the unethical game world as parodying the unethical reality world: "In the face of self-interests, family love and righteousness are meaningless; anybody can be stealing behind your back." "Those who are pulling your weeds and being friendly to you come to you probably not to help but to see if you have anything they want." "Those who have money make money fastest."⁶

This satire is rooted in some of China's social problems. Although enormously successful in many ways, economic liberalization in China has also created significant problems, such as growing income inequality, systemic corruption, and lack of trust in social relations. In a sense, legal "stealing" is one manifestation of reality. For example, land and housing monopolies make housing prices sky-high in some cases (an apartment often costs twenty to forty years' full salary of an office worker) and "steal" from people. Corrupt government officials and some of the privileged rich are rightly or wrongly construed as stealing from the powerless poor. Family relations are complicated; many young adults borrow money from their parents or relatives to buy a home or live with their parents. Due to deficient social security compared to developed countries, many seniors have no income and are provided for by their children. Intense competition in education and in some sectors of the economy, as well as unsettling population migrations, sometimes also result in apathetic or even hostile interpersonal relations. It is in these social contexts that a satirical theme of "everybody stealing from everybody" becomes attractive to many people. By simulating social satire and flexible relations with others in one's gameplay, one can symbolically deal with these real-life anxieties.

The government had attempted to intervene to make the game providers change the game's "inappropriate" moral tone, but because Internet censorship had become a touchy issue in China, the government did not bother to further irritate the netizens with an issue that wouldn't directly threaten authoritative power.

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However, when the game is marketed in other countries where the social contexts are different, the idea of stealing may not appeal to all players. When ReKoo, one of China's largest social gaming companies, put Sunshine Ranch into the Japanese market, CEO Liu Yong decided to change the function of stealing to putting bugs and weeds into neighbors' farms because of a perception that stealing would be unpopular in Japan. Many Japanese players turned out to like the "cute" bugs, so the game added more varieties of beautiful beetles and insects. In Happy Harvest's overseas versions, the stealing feature usually remains, but different players use it differently. Many players do not play the whole game as a game of stealing from each other but instead understand the game is one where occasionally there can be thieves, and one can invest in a dog to guard one's own farm. As described in the game's English description, Happy Harvest makes it open to an individual player's choice: The players determine whether to rob or help others.

Eco-ethical and Environmentalist Issues

Representations of animal and nature in farm SNG can be ethically ambiguous. Although in some games the animals have different degrees of freedom (eg, walking around in Happy Farm and FarmVille 2), more often the confinement and exploitation of animals are represented as "natural" and taken for granted. Sometimes, animals and machines are juxtaposed explicitly as an instrument and component for industrial production (such as a pigpen and ham machine in Hay Day). Just as the eco-ethical and environmentalist issues are indeed global issues, related crises remain present in global farm SNG.

As indicated earlier in this essay, the Chinese farm SNG have apparently been affected by world Internet cultures. In a situation of globalization and new media, different cultures are not isolated but often inevitably encounter each other and participate as active agencies in global cultural symbiosis and coevolution, being at the same time local and global. As the example of Chinese SNG illustrates, different cultures, while entangled in their own particular social contexts, can relate to one another and be mutually influential, which often involves cultural translation and bridging.

Conclusion: Chinese Farm SNG in Global Gaming Culture

As shown by the example of Happy Farm and Chinese farm SNG, players' gameplay involves complex social and political negotiations and self-expressions. Through creative and symbolic play at levels of player-to-player, player-to-game, and player-to-society interactions, the individuals produce meanings for interpersonal relations, social communications, and selfhood. Individuals negotiate with authoritative power and social anxieties and also define their own senses of friendship, social relation, and self-territory, symbolized by the very symbol of "farm," their own place, life, and world. This sense of place, life, and world can certainly find connection and understanding across social and cultural boundaries. People embedded in different sociocultural and political conditions can identify at a level with a similar situation of being in the world; and often, their different (gaming) reactions, behaviors, and choices are interwoven into the overall strategies they take in coping with their own realities. For example, a Japanese culture of "cuteness" and quasi-American-Western ideas of "niceness," "friendliness," and "helping each other" are both part of their own larger beliefs and strategies in dealing with personal problems and anxieties. Moreover, social gaming offers the individuals at once a path toward symbolically addressing and negotiating with their reality and a path away from reality toward a place of escape and "play." These complexities set foundations for global cultural communication.

Therefore, the popularity and reactions to Chinese farm SNG in global networks as an example enables an up-to-date and intriguing view of global gaming, new media, and globalization in general, which invites more communication and understanding between multiple peoples and cultures. ■

NOTES

1. Yan Liu, "How to Surpass *Happy Farm*: The Nature of Social Games (如何超越《開心農場》: 社交遊戲的本質)," *Entrepreneur*, last modified June 7, 2011, <http://tiny.cc/mgfyw>.
2. Elliott Ng, "China's Growing Addiction: Online Farming Games," *VentureBeat*, last modified October 29, 2009, <http://tiny.cc/6ywoyw>.
3. Sebastian Sujka, "AppStats: Farming Games Dominate the VZ Networks," *Social Games Observer*, June 7, 2010, <http://tiny.cc/5hfqyw>; "Social Networks in Focus: VZ Networks," January 19, 2012, <http://tiny.cc/hc1vyw>; "AppStats Orkut: New Elex Entry with Happy Harvest 3," last modified December 9, 2010, <http://tiny.cc/ma1vyw>; "AppStats Poland: Plinga Games Dominate Nasza Klasa," last modified July 27, 2010, <http://tiny.cc/djfyw>.
4. Readers who are interested in learning more about *Happy Farm* clones in other countries should consult the following sources: Elena Rytsareva, "Russian Social Network Games a Booming Business," *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, last modified November 1, 2010, <http://tiny.cc/kkfyw>; "China Social Games Firms Make a Success in Japan," *Mobility Tech Zone*, last modified June 23, 2010, <http://tiny.cc/rwwoyw>; Serkan Toto, "Sunshine Ranch: Mixi's Top Social Game Goes Smartphone," *Japan Mobile And Social Games Consulting*, last modified March 31, 2011, <http://tiny.cc/sxwoyw>.
5. SNG player, interview, February 2011.
6. Ibid.

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