

That (Casual or Hardcore?) Game Company

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Introduction

As I step through the dark, flooded corridors of Bioshock, my heart races and I twitch at every noise that might signal a crazed attacker in the shadows. In The Prince of Persia: Sands of Time, I experience vertigo as I creep along five story high rafters. When I first received the Goron Mask in The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, I spent ten minutes just rolling around the fields enjoying my new speed. Each of these games draws the player into its world, providing a sense of immersion that strengthens the player's experience. But playing Bejeweled, there is no world to be immersed in. The jewels, though aesthetically pleasing, don't invite the player into a fiction. Diner Dash may simulate the stress and multi-tasking of running a real diner, but it's unlikely that the player feels like they are actually in a real diner. While not all "hardcore" games feature immersive experiences, it is extremely rare among casual games. And yet, immersion was the defining feature of Flower (2009), whose simplicity and short length seems to label it a casual game. Over the course of three games, Cloud (2005), Flow (2007), and Flower, thatgamecompany (TGC) has been on a trajectory of small, simple games that could appeal to the casual audience while still creating immersive and emotional experiences. In this paper, I will be examining these three games using two rubrics for distinguishing casual and hardcore games or gamers.

thatgamecompany

Before diving into the casual/hardcore divide, I will give a brief overview of TGC and each of the three games in question. TGC was founded in 2006 by two graduates of the University of Southern California's Interactive Media program: Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago. The five-person company eventually expanded to its current group of seven, with three engineers, and art director, a designer, Chen as creative director, and Santiago as President. On TGC's home page is a message that states "At TGC (thatgamecompany) our goal is to make commercial video games that communicate different emotional experiences the current video game market is not offering. We encourage innovation and experimentation and believe that our creative games will appeal to new, yet untapped, audiences."¹ Now compare that to the mission statement of PopCap Games, one of the leading developers of casual games: "Here at PopCap our goal is to create fun games that literally everyone can enjoy. Our games are easy to learn, tough to master... and utterly addictive!"² Although TGC emphasizes their games' innovation and emotion, both companies share the desire to have their games appeal to new audiences (the key to casual games' success). Steve Meretzky even defined a casual game as "A game for which the intended audience are people for whom gaming is not a primary area of interest."³

Cloud was developed as a student project at USC prior to the founding of thatgamecompany . While not technically a product of TGC, it had the same pair of

¹ <http://thatgamecompany.com/>

² <http://www.popcap.com/aboutus.php>

³ Meretzky. *What is a Casual Game?*

leaders (Chen and Santiago) and is a clear predecessor to their following work. Cloud was released in Fall 2005 as a free download on the web, where it quickly gained renown and was written up in many game publications. The game opens with a brief cutscene that begins with text on a black screen: “Could you really forget that feeling of flying headlong through the clouds.... I did.” The cutscene continues and through gorgeous painted still images tells the story of a boy stuck in a hospital who imagines himself flying. Gameplay consists of four levels where the player takes control of the boy as he flies through the sky over an archipelago. The primary mechanic is dragging purified clouds into non-purified clouds, creating larger clumps of cloud. The first level only requires the player to purify all the clouds. The second adds an outline of a lollipop in the sky that the boy must use clouds to fill in. The last two levels introduce dark polluted clouds that must be pushed away from an untouched island or combined with pure clouds to create rain that purifies islands.

TGC’s first game together was Flow, although it actually began life as a free flash game in 2006 that was developed as part of Jenova Chen’s thesis. His thesis was a discussion of how games can use dynamic difficulty adjustment in order to maintain a player’s “flow.” The concept of flow was introduced by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and is explained as a desirable state of being “in the zone,” where the player’s growing skill matches the increasing difficulty of a game. “If the challenge is higher than the ability, the activity becomes overwhelming and generates anxiety. If the challenge is lower than the ability, it provokes boredom.”⁴ In Flow (the game) the player

⁴ Jenova Chen. Flow in Games. <http://www.jenovachen.com/flowingames/thesis.htm>

controls an abstract snakelike micro-organism that grows and evolves as it consumes other micro-organisms. In order to maintain a state of flow, Chen allows players to move between the levels at will (the red amoeba advances the player, the blue moves to the previous level). This allows the player to choose how quickly they move to more difficult areas, giving the player control of their state of flow. After graduating and founding GDC, Chen remade Flow for downloadable release on the Playstation 3 with upgraded graphics and improved gameplay. Four additional controllable micro-organisms were included, each with different abilities and their own set of levels.

Drawing upon elements of both Cloud and Flow, 2009's Flower took the player back into the peaceful skies of Cloud while further streamlining Flow's gameplay. Flower was also a downloadable release for the Playstation 3 and took full advantage of the PS3's graphical processing power. The player guides a gust of wind carrying increasing numbers of flower petals through lush grassy fields, canyons, and an urban center. With no time limits or enemies, the player is free to enjoy the sensation of flight in the 3D environment. By collecting enough flower petals, or completing another local goal, the world is made increasingly colorful. Just as in Flow, the low challenge, simple time-independent objectives, and hypnotic visuals are designed so as to create a state of flow. Although there is no narration or dialogue anywhere in Flower, brief moving images before each level along with the progression of environments tell an open-to-interpretation tale about the conflict between nature and the man-made.

Casual or Hardcore

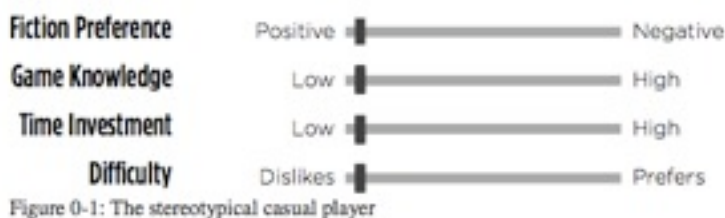
In theory, distinguishing casual and hardcore games would benefit both designers and marketers. If there two distinct categories of gamers then games could be designed with each category's needs in mind. Marketers would then be able to better target the audience. Hardcore games are generally thought of as the high-budget mainstream titles that are very complex with increasingly realistic graphics and targeted towards players for whom gaming is a central part of their life. Casual games can be epitomized by small, cheap games that allow for short play-sessions and cater to an audience who is just looking for a brief diversion during the day. With regards to classifying gamers, Scott Kim wrote that "people play different types of games for different reasons. Expert gamers play for the longer term rewards of competition and rankings, whereas casual gamers play for the shorter term rewards of beauty and distraction."⁵ We need a more thorough system than Kim's limited classification.

There is no clear line between hardcore and casual, whether to describe for games or for gamers. There are gamers that play a "casual" game like Bejeweled for many hours a week perfecting their strategy, and there are those who play a "hardcore" game like Halo just in short matches with friends. A game like Super Smash Brothers has a cartoon aesthetic and simplified controls (compared to other fighting games) that seem to fit the conception of a casual game. It also has action-packed twitch gameplay and an emphasis on competition that might better fit a hardcore game. A better way to

⁵ Scott Kim, "Games for the Rest of Us: Puzzles, Board Games, Game Shows." <http://www.scottkim.com/thinkinggames/cgdc98.html>

distinguish casual from hardcore would be through multiple traits each of which can be rated on a scale.

Jesper Juul lays out two rubrics, one for game design and one for player type, that can be used for a more nuanced analysis. I will use the five “Elements of Casual Game Design” and four traits of gamers to see how that game company’s products vary, and how well these rubrics describe the games. The game design elements are as follows: fiction, usability, interruptibility, difficulty, and juiciness. The four stereotypical traits of gamers are: fiction preference, game knowledge, time investment, and attitude towards difficulty. Two convenient images from found below demonstrate how the traits of gamers could be visualized.⁶



Fiction (Player/Game)

First let’s take a look at each game’s fiction. The game design element “fiction” and player trait “fiction preference” cover the same ground. Fiction is often responsible

⁶ Jesper Juul, A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players. 2009

for the initial impression of a game. The fiction of a game, in this context, refers to the tone of both the narrative and the aesthetics. Juul writes “The stereotypical casual player has a preference for positive and pleasant fiction.”⁷ A brightly colored scene with smiling cartoon characters would convey a positive fiction visually. Stories for a stereotypical casual player would be light-hearted and relatively without nuance. In contrast, a stereotypically hardcore game would have dark, gritty, and realistic aesthetics with a morally grey, likely violent, story. Cloud has a soft, dreamlike visual style and soothing music. Though the brief narrative has the tragic subtext of a child confined to a hospital, the overall tone is positive. Flow lacks a discernible narrative beyond the abstract micro-organisms eating and evolving. Its neon abstract visuals with bright flashes of color downplay realism in terms of animals consuming each other. The tone is closer to neutral than Cloud, but still positive. Flower has a much more nuanced fiction than the previous two games. You play as flower petals carried by the wind, and the first few levels are bright and colorful. The serene initial environments are replaced by encroaching industry and the game grows darker before the player is able to restore the colorful natural environment at the end. The subtlety and conflicting emotions found in Flower display the limits of rating fiction on a one-dimensional scale. Using the existing scale, I would place Flower between Cloud and Flow, though its opening is the most positive of the three while the dark climax is significantly more negative than the others. The depth of Flower might in fact appeal more to the hardcore audience even though the fiction has a positive valence.

⁷ Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. 2009

Game Knowledge (Player)

The player preference “game knowledge” refers to familiarity with the conventions of gaming. A player with extensive experience playing first person shooters can sit down at a new one and immediately figure out if it uses a standard control scheme while an inexperienced player would be challenged right from the start. Game knowledge has similarities with the game design element “usability,” although usability is regardless of experience. Cloud requires fairly little game knowledge as the only convention it relies upon is steering a figure with the mouse. The tutorial is very thorough and walks the player through each new mechanic. Flow and Flower each benefit from slightly more game knowledge, although the level remains low. Flow asks the player to recognize that they should collect the scattered food and that the glowing spots on enemies is their weak point. Flower similarly expects the player to realize that they need to collect all the flower petals to advance.

Usability (Game)

Regarding usability, Juul wrote that “following Beaudouin-Lafon an interface can be evaluated on its degree of compatibility: this is the measure of the similarity between the physical action of the user and the action performed on the domain objects.” The usability for Flow and Flower is very high relying solely on the tilt of the PS3 controller and a single button for either a special ability in Flow or a burst of speed in Flower. The tilt is a very physical indication of direction by the player. On the other hand, Cloud is probably the least usable of the three games given the need to coordinate multiple

buttons on the keyboard while the mouse awkwardly controls both the players movement and the camera angle.

Time Investment (Player)

Casual players stereotypically don't see games a central part of their lives. As a result they prefer games that do not require large time investments. Games typically viewed as casual include repeatable brief puzzles, such as Solitaire or Minesweeper. It's not that the game as a whole is short, but that a complete stand-alone experience does not take significant time. A hardcore game typically requires a larger investment of time, such as with a 50 hour role-playing game. Each of Clouds levels take less than 10 minutes and are essentially stand-alone. The entire story mode is only four levels, with the rest of the levels being user-created. Cloud requires very low time investment. Flow takes slightly longer with each micro-organism having its own set of levels and less distinct end-states. Flower has the longest time commitment with each level requiring at least 15 minutes and a continuous story. Although I would still place Flower in the low time investment category. Time investment is a trait that does not neatly match casual or hardcore games. A player may invest large amounts of time weekly in perfecting their Bejeweled play, or play through an 8-hour intense action game a single time.

Interruptibility (Game)

Interruptibility is a game design element that better distinguishes how the structure of a game determines if it fits a casual or hardcore audience. This element is not only about when a game can be interrupted, but that effective games give cues to the time

commitment. Cloud is very interruptible. Each brief level exists independently from all others. The player can select which level to play without having to replay previous levels. After the first level, it becomes clear what the scope of each successive level will be. Flow is interruptible with minimal loss of progress, but does not give clear cues about when it can be interrupted. Flower is the least interruptible with relatively long levels and little indication about how much of the level remains. Luckily Flower, as well as Flow, automatically saves progress so exiting the game won't result in much loss.

Difficulty (Player/Game)

Casual and hardcore gamers tend to have different opinions about difficulty. Like fiction, difficulty is a trait used to describe gamers as well as game design. While a hardcore gamer might see repeated defeat and punishment as an exciting obstacle, a casual gamer could easily become discouraged. Similar to with time investment, a casual is more interested in a short pleasant diversion than in a brutally challenging test of skill. None of these three games are particularly difficult. Cloud has the most dramatic punishment with requiring the player to restart a level. In later levels, Cloud has a lose scenario that is not explicitly explained to the player and may cause confusion. Flow has some challenging levels, but the punishment is merely being sent upwards a level from which the player can just go back down. The player can even skip a level that seems too difficult as the level-change microbes are always present and active. This involves what Jenova Chen referred to as Player Oriented Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment. The player has control of their own progression so as to maintain a flow state. Flower takes the low punishments of Flow even farther. In Flower the player has freedom to spend as

much or as little time getting every single petal in an area, but there is never a lose condition to worry about. Certain reviews from hardcore sites in particular criticized both games for their lack of difficulty. A review in *The Escapist* said “Flower's puzzles largely solve themselves. If you treat this game as a challenge, you're liable to be disappointed. But if you treat it as something else - an interactive, visual poem? software-as-thought-experiment? - then Flower will probably have something to offer you.” Rather than seeing the low difficulty as a negative, it could be seen as a new form of gameplay.⁸

Juiciness (Game)

The final element of casual game design what is known as “juiciness.” Kyle Gabler describes how “A juicy game feels alive and responds to everything you do - tons of cascading action and response for minimal user input. It makes the player feel powerful and in control of the world, and it coaches them through the rules of the game by constantly letting them know on a per-interaction basis how they are doing.”⁹ The prime example of juiciness is *Peggle*, where a single click sends a ball bouncing between pegs accompanied by flashing lights, sound effects, particle effects, and large point values. This is a problematic element for me as I would argue that an appropriate amount of juiciness is good game design, regardless of casual or hardcore. Juiciness is possibly more central to the casual game experience given the limited scope of many casual games. A hardcore game may err on the side of low juiciness if it has complex mechanics that don't benefit from distraction. *Cloud* has a moderate-to-low level of

⁸ Jordan Deam. “Review: Flower.” *The Escapist*. <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/editorials/reviews/5751-Review-Flower>

⁹ Kyle Gabler. “How to Prototype a Game in Under 7 Days.” *Gamasutra*. http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20051026/gabler_01.shtml.

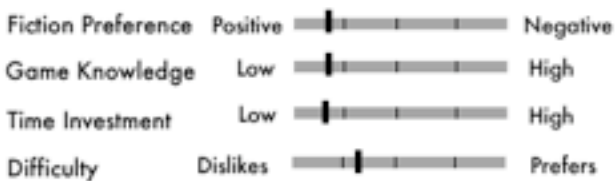
juiciness. The camera angle moves cinematically with the avatar and the clouds are animated elaborately, but there is little clear feedback aside from the clouds themselves. Flow amps up the juiciness with the glowing neon micro-organisms, pulsing lights, and pleasing particle effects. Flower takes the juiciness even farther with a responsive environment and generative music. Collecting petals yields soft tones that blend with the music. The music itself changes depending on how the player moves between areas. Rather than having a single petal for an avatar, the player controls a swirling stream of petals such that the player can see what they have collected.

Results and Conclusions

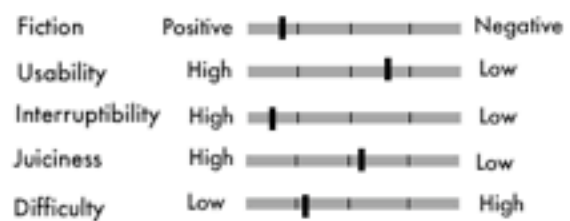
Based on my experiences playing each game to completion and the above analysis, I have constructed graphs of Casual/Hardcore elements and traits for each of the games.

Cloud

Stereotypical Player Preferences

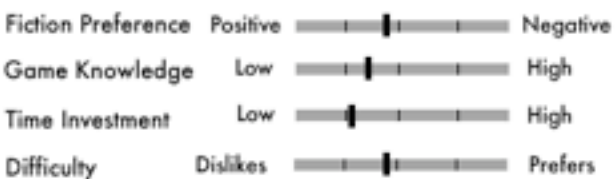


Elements of Casual Game Design

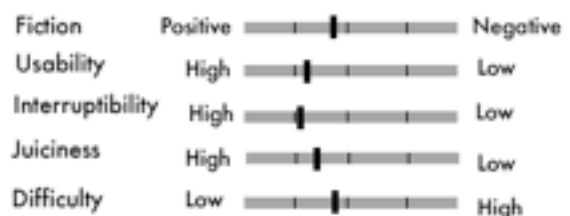


Flow

Stereotypical Player Preferences

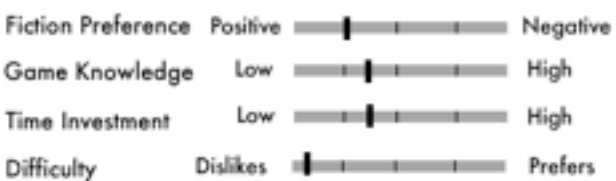


Elements of Casual Game Design

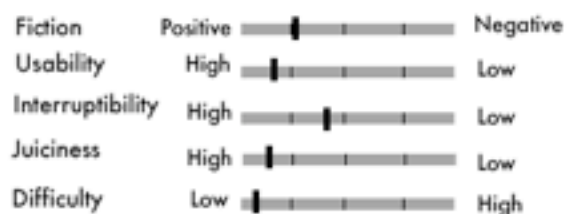


Flower

Stereotypical Player Preferences



Elements of Casual Game Design



Looking over the results, certain trends become apparent. All three games are predominantly on the casual side of the spectra. The design of Cloud is distinct in having the two least-casual ratings in usability and juiciness. Usability was clearly improved over subsequent games as thatgamecompany streamlined their designs.

Juiciness also showed a consistently increasing trend. The developers clearly learned what was appealing in their style of games. It's interesting to compare game knowledge with usability. Cloud has ratings very far apart for these two elements that typically are correlated. The game's unique and simple interactions along with a thorough tutorial require mean that experience with other games is not particularly valuable. The control scheme is not particularly usable regardless of the player's gaming literacy.

There is also an interesting discrepancy between what appeals to the player and how the game designed. With the exception of interruptibility, the designs show a trajectory towards being more casual. Yet in terms of player preference, the earliest game should appeal to the stereotypically casual player. It would be interesting to obtain extensive sales data about these games to investigate what sort of audience purchases each game. The games might be better designed for a casual player even if it does not seem to appeal to their usual preferences. Especially given the overlap between these two rubrics, a more differentiated rubric could be useful. Stereotypical preference refers to what a player is looking for. Instead we could have a rubric about the manner in which casual and hardcore players interact with the games. This would more fully differentiate the analysis of the game from the analysis of the player.

As a further alteration to the existing rubrics, I propose the addition of a new category to both the stereotypical player traits and to the game design elements. Bateman and Boon discuss the difference between "gameplay" and "toyplay." Gameplay is described as "performance-oriented stimulation" with discrete goals while toyplay is

“unorganized stimulation” with “freeform, non-goal-oriented play activities.”¹⁰ These categories don’t fit cleanly into the casual/hardcore divide but would give insight into the players interact with the game. Fiction is likely to be less significant of a factor in toyplay where the player can act out their own stories. Toyplay would probably result in larger expected time investment, but also higher interruptibility. With the increasing popularity of toyplay games, that category could use its own set of standards for what is casual or hardcore.

As far as the three games discussed in this paper, they lean more towards toyplay with each successive game. A Gamestop review states that “Flow has more in common with something like a lava lamp than an actual game. It's something to be watched. You'll find yourself infinitely more intrigued by the shapes and colors that evolve throughout its experience than its relatively scarce gameplay mechanics.”¹¹ One of the most entertaining elements of Flower is to swoop around the levels enjoying the sensation of flight and the beautiful scenery, rather than trying to progress towards the goal. The games of thatgamecompany, culminating in Flower, occupy a unique space between casual and hardcore gaming where the experience is deep enough to appeal to hardcore gamers while remaining short and accessible enough to draw in casual gamers.

¹⁰ Bateman & Boon. Ch.2, 21st Century Game Design.

¹¹ Alex Navarro, “Flow Review.” Gamestop. <http://www.gamespot.com/ps3/puzzle/flow/review.html>

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