Casual Games, Time Management, and the Work of Affect

Aubrey Anable

Casual games are stupid and they are taking over our lives. This is what a recent *New York Times Magazine* article concluded. Sam Anderson, the article's author, writes, "*Tetris* and its offspring (*Angry Birds*, *Bejeweled*, *Fruit Ninja*, etc.) have colonized our pockets and our brains and shifted the entire economic model of the video-game industry. Today we are living, for better and worse, in a world of stupid games." [1] The industry classification of "casual games" encompasses several genres—digital puzzle, word, and card games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, *Words with Friends*, or *Solitaire*, and also time management and social games such as *Diner Dash* and *Farmville*. These very different games share some basic similarities: they have simple graphics and mechanics, they are usually browser or app-based, and they are free or cost very little to play. Most importantly though, casual games are designed to be played in short bursts of five to ten minutes and then set aside. As such, what makes a game "casual" is that it functions in the ambiguous time and space between the myriad tasks we do on digital devices; between work and domestic obligations; between solitary play and social gaming; and between attention and distraction. Anderson continues,

> *Stupid games…are rarely occasions in themselves. They are designed to push their way through the cracks of other occasions. We play them incidentally, ambivalently, compulsively, almost accidentally. They're less an activity in our day than a blank space in our day; less a pursuit than a distraction from other pursuits. You glance down to check your calendar and suddenly it's 40 minutes later and there's only one level left before you jump to the next stage, so you might as well just launch another bird.* [2]

Anderson's representation of casual games as all-consuming but also as blank spaces neatly summarizes the way critics seem unable (or unwilling) to attach meaning to casual games beyond their popularity and impact on the video game industry. Similarly, Anderson is unable to come to any conclusion about how and why we play them. According to him, our play is both incidental *and* taking over our lives. Casual games seem too banal *and* too significant to analyze. With some notable exceptions, casual games are often figured like this in both popular and academic accounts.[3] Despite their popularity and importance to the industry, these types of games are widely dismissed as culturally insignificant. Even the term "casual game" itself performs this

distinction: designating, implicitly and by contrast, an aesthetic, narrative, and procedural formalism to other types of video games.

This dismissive attitude partly comes from the kinds of feelings—shame, guilt, disgust, stress, boredom, etc.—that circulate around these types of games and their association with work and procrastination; but casual games are also dismissed as culturally insignificant because they are so strongly associated with women players. In North America, for example, casual games are the only type of video game where women over the age of thirty-five have constituted the majority of the market for many years.[4] Yet, some industry observers reject this fact as an oversimplification because it neglects the changing demographics of casual games now that small downloadable games appeal to a wider range of players.[5] While it is true that not all casual games are explicitly gendered and that player demographics across all game categories are shifting; it is also true that the cultural meanings generated through and around casual games cannot be completely divorced from the genre's past and continued associations with women. The extent to which casual games are perceived as in need of being rescued from feminized mass culture or preserved as a site where woman are actually playing video games is less important than the fact that game studies tends to dismiss the entire category because these seemingly simple games do not fit neatly into an emerging field that privileges procedural complexity, expensive hardware, and graphic realism. A feminist engagement with video games, then, must be in part an engagement with how the field of game studies shapes inquiry according to the implicit gender binaries of hardcore/casual, mechanics/narrative, and computation/representation.

This article proposes that the ambiguous status of casual games—in relation to what exactly they are, when they are played, and who plays them—is not a sign of disagreement over an essential definition, but rather precisely where their cultural meaning resides—in the spaces between. Rather than being blank spaces in our day, casual games are affective systems that mediate relations between players and devices, workers and machines, and images and code (and our feelings about those relations). As such, casual games constitute a contemporary "structure of feeling," in Raymond Williams' term, that gives shape and expression to emergent ways of being in the world as well as emergent ways of understanding what being in the world means.[6] I am interested in casual games as affective processes on two levels. One, all video games work on us in various ways that cannot be completely described through representation, hardware, or code. What it feels like to play a game cannot be broken down into semiotic, phenomenological, psychological, or algorithmic units. Our

experience of video games is a more complicated give and take between these systems of meaning-making and affect is one way to begin to describe this experience.[7] Second, regarding video games as affective systems can tell us something about contemporary culture—as 'a whole way of life'—that is distinct from how other media express this.

In this essay I consider a sub-category of casual games—time management games, specifically the game *Diner Dash* *(http://www.playfirst.com/games/viewGame/70)* (GameLab/Play First, 2003) and its many spin-offs—as a case study to illustrate two points. First, all casual games are bound up with work, and time management games, in particular, are affective systems that operate on various levels as mediations of "women's work." Second, when we open a time management game on our phone, tablet, or desktop, we open up an affective system that involves the player, the game's representations, code, and hardware. Through the concept of affect, I am trying to expand how we imagine action and how video games "work"—work in the sense of the work of bodies, of machines, and digital processes, but also how games work culturally, ideologically and how they *work on us* and *work us over* in terms of impinging on our feelings, our identities, and our everyday lives. Affect is often described in terms of action—as the capacity to act and to be acted upon. As such, it evokes a cybernetic system of inputs and outputs. Video games compel us to act (and to be acted upon) through the procedures of their algorithmic structure, but video game action is also filtered through representational practices. In a very basic sense, we make choices and push buttons in games because of how games structure our feelings about those choices and actions. I am especially interested in notions of affect as something that flows between people and alights on cultural objects, such as that explored in the work of Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant, among others.[8] This approach has important lessons for expanding the homologies and slippages between the actions of a player's body, the actions of a game's mechanics, and the actions of ideological signification; and for getting at how video games as particular cultural formations are affectively charged. Using *Diner Dash* and the many similar games it inspired, I analyze the way these games put the player into an affectively charged relationship to both the working woman represented on the screen and the working body of the player, the work of hardware, and the procedural actions of code. Regarding these games this way allows us to see the relationship between their more visible representational practices and their less visible digital procedures and how "affect" is not a neutral or non-ideological term, but rather always culturally situated in relation to the gendering of the bodies and objects of mass media culture.

Casual Games and Work

Ian Bogost offers a brief but useful discussion about casual games that illustrates the gendered dimensions of taste and distinction in game studies. Asking if there is such a thing as "kitsch" in the video game world, Bogost concludes that casual games fit this description.[9] Using **Thomas Kinkade** (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Kinkade) 's paintings as an example, Bogost defines kitsch as "an art urging overt sentimentality, focused on the overt application of convention, without particular originality."[10] For Bogost, kitsch functions in the relationship between the aesthetics of sentimentalism and their display as markers of class location and aspirations of class mobility. It is the problem of display that troubles Bogost. While aesthetics similar to Kinkade's can be found in games, we don't display video games like we do paintings on our living room walls. Bogost resolves this difference through a consideration of the casual game *Diner Dash*. In *Diner Dash*, players lead the protagonist, Flo, through a series of levels as she works her way up as a restaurant owner. First released in 2003, it is one of the top-selling downloadable games of all time, spawning numerous sequels, and inspiring countless imitators. *Diner Dash* is kitsch, according to Bogost, not because it deploys the "naturalistic sentimentalism" of a Kinkade painting, but rather because it deploys "occupational sentimentalism" in its depiction of the virtue of hard work.[11] He sees *Diner Dash* as the equivalent of the motivational poster hung in an office cubicle that validates the protestant work ethic. You cannot hang a video game on a wall, Bogost notes, but casual games are displayed all over the virtual walls of online social networks publically marking the players' aspirations, progress, and rewards. Bogost writes, "by surrounding ourselves with posters, or [casual] games, that espouse ideals of control, the timeworn hope of pure will breeds the wistfulness that makes kitsch appealing."[12] Rather than stopping at "kitsch" we might take Bogost's analysis further. By comparing casual games to motivational posters and aligning the form with "occupational sentimentalism," Bogost points to precisely what is significant about them: casual games are bound up with feelings about work, many are explicitly aimed at the working woman, and they tap into a perceived shared longing for a better working life.

Casual games are about work in a number of ways. As a form, they connote the bored office worker sitting in front of her computer with a game always in progress in the background of her desktop, behind the windows of "real" work for which she is being paid. After all, casual games are designed to be played in the context of work.[13] Their short levels and simple gameplay are forgiving to interruptions by phone calls, meetings, or a boss peering over our shoulder. Casual games also often represent work

and, especially, working women, in their settings and narratives. The "occupational sentimentalism" of Bogost's example, *Diner Dash*, can also be found in scores of other casual games. The *Dash* series and spin-offs include titles such as: *Hotel Dash, Garden Dash, Cooking Dash, Wedding Dash, Dairy Dash, Diaper Dash, Pet Shop Hop, Dress Shop Hop, Teddy Factory, Betty's Beer Bar, Nanny Mania, Dr. Daisy Pet Vet, Magic Farm, Airport Mania, Sally's Spa, Ranch Rush, Hospital Hustle, Wendy's Wellness,* and even *Grave Mania* (where you play as a zombie undertaker). As the titles indicate, the *Dash* games tend to focus on careers, activities, and interests that are usually coded as feminine. More often than not these occupations are portrayed through white female protagonists. The narratives and graphics also tend to frame these occupations as "dream" jobs that the protagonists have come to after escaping a less fulfilling job elsewhere. Perhaps more than anything, though, the titles of the Dash games speak to their time management structures. These games are organized around a mad rush, dash, hustle, or hop to complete repetitive tasks in a limited amount of time. However, as the titles also indicate, playing at these "dream" occupations is not entirely a sentimental endeavor, but also a mania.

The most common stereotype about casual games is that they are played during stolen moments, as a break or distraction from work that the player should otherwise be doing. Some of the earliest games for personal computers, for example, came with a "boss key" that, when activated, masked the current game on the screen behind fake spreadsheets designed to give the impression that work, rather then play, was being done on the computer. Michel de Certeau's example of *la perruque* offers us a way to think about casual games as a tactical response to our conditions of labor.[14] Literally meaning "wig", *la perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. De Certeau writes, "*La perruque* may be as simple as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room."[15] De Certeau's problematically gendered distinction between the simple and complex still understands both practices as antagonistic to capitalism's uses of the worker and as a tactic for workers to preserve a portion of their labor value for themselves.

It is tempting to see casual games as separate from the work we do for an employer. Yet casual games are entirely embedded in work culture. Recently, with the gamification of education, work, public health, and other areas of everyday life once hostile to video games, the stereotype of casual games as an activity that distracts from productivity has receded. Whether played surreptitiously at work, as part of official job training, or on

one's "own time" (e.g. on the commute between work and home), casual games are intrinsically about the organization, rhythm, habits, and management of time devoted to labor. Furthermore, shifts from manufacturing to service-based economies and "flexible" just-in-time production chains have altered the type of work many workers now do and have explicitly extended the time and space of labor into leisure in ways that Horkheimer and Adorno could not have imagined.[16] Yet, we cannot completely collapse casual games into immaterial labor. The pleasure casual games provide cannot be entirely expressed through institutions of labor or leisure. What is missing from the immaterial labor critique of video games then is the crucial understanding of how from their very beginning video games were a platform for the reconceptualization of work —and our affective relation to work—emerging just as the context of labor in North America was shifting from manufacturing to service and information industries.[17] It is the idea of video games as platforms for mobilizing affect that I wish to add to our understanding of the cultural function of casual games and the discourse surrounding them. Perhaps, then, it is more useful to consider *la perruque* of casual games as the work of affect disguised from ourselves. Time management games, in particular, stage the affective work of being a woman worker (what it feels like) as well as the work of being a subject who longs to feel differently in relation to work during a time when affective and immaterial labor has become the model for most work regardless of gender.

Diner Dash

To develop this analysis I examine Bogost's example of *Diner Dash* in more detail. While the game may set itself up as a sentimental escape from the lived realities of work, it is also very much a supplement to and critique of work at the same time. *Diner Dash*'s introductory manga-style sequence begins with the text "Somewhere in a dreary office." We see Flo sitting at her desk quietly simmering as faceless co-workers shove more and more paperwork onto her desk. Erupting with frustration, Flo runs screaming past cubicles and out onto the street. Exhausted, panting, and leaning against a building, Flo exclaims, "Man! There's GOT to be something better than THIS!!" At this point she notices a run down restaurant that is for sale and decides to quit her stressful office job and open her own restaurant.

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Anable_figure1.png)

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Anable_figure2.jpeg)
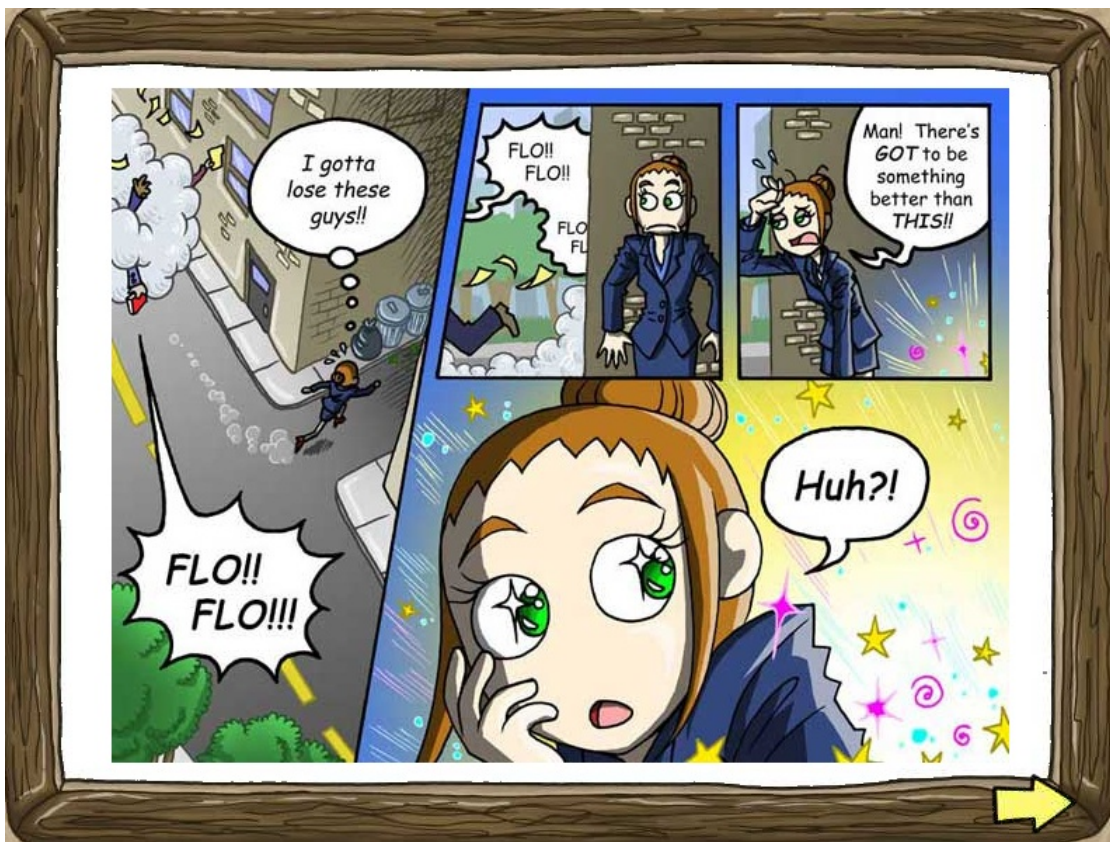
Through this opening sequence we can see how the narrative and tone of *Diner Dash* both represent the working woman and represent dissatisfaction with the "dreary office." Owning a restaurant is figured as a literal escape from the grim cubicle and piles of paperwork. In the opening illustration, the restaurant, though boarded up and shabby, is rendered in bright primary colors; while panels depicting Flo's office job are colored in drab grays and browns. Flo's escape from the office mirrors the player's own presumed escape from a similar type of dreary work and into the game. On a software level the game reinforces this effect. When the game loads, it automatically takes over the entire screen, completely obscuring any non-game digital processes for which the device might be used. The entire screen becomes occupied by play.

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Anable_figure3.jpeg)

The introduction's theme of escape from work is brief, however. After clicking "let's play", the game leads the player through a tutorial level where, as Flo, she learns the ropes of being a restaurant owner that in the perverse logic of the game means learning to be a waitress. The tutorial level also serves as an introduction to the mechanics of the game: the clicking or tapping, dragging, and clicking again to achieve the stated goals of quick, efficient, and friendly service.

On the levels of representation and mechanics, games like those in the *Dash* series can seem like fantasy workspaces. These games portray women as entrepreneurs who are successful because they love the work that they do. Their tasks are clearly defined and always rewarded. Their work environments are safe, colorful, and full of zany characters. But the experience of actual labor in the games bears more resemblance to grim Taylorization than to occupational sentimentalism. In these games, the more work that we do and the more efficiently we do it, the more complicated, sped up, and vast our tasks become.

In Shira Chess's smart analysis of the *Diner Dash* series she discusses the importance of time management mechanics for the meaning of work in the games. Time management games structure play through a series of simple actions that must be quickly completed over timed intervals. The pacing of the game and the difficulty of the tasks increase as the player progresses. Thus, Chess argues, "While the game is intended for play/leisure time, thematically it involves work spaces that bear a great deal of similarity to work in the non-game world."[18] Even the name of the game's protagonist, Flo, speaks to the perceived goals of time management games and to the flow of efficient labor that she is meant to embody. Chess understands this conflation of work and play as part of the appeal of time management games for women. Citing the work of Arlie Russell Hochschild on working women and time management, Chess points out that games like *Diner Dash* might appeal to women who already feel the pressures of juggling multiple shifts at work and at home. Time management games, according to Chess, do not save time for the busy working woman; rather they convert leisure time into time management training for their already overextended lives.[19]

There is a disjuncture between Bogost's and Chess's description of the *Diner Dash* games. Bogost, who is concerned with how they look, sees them as kitschy and sentimental. Chess, who is focused on their mechanics, finds social realism. The occupational sentimentalism that Bogost finds fails to address the ways the game's cheerful cultural layer is repeatedly undone by its time management mechanics, and Chess's analysis of the game mechanics does not get at the odd interplay between the images and the actions. Of course, at the level of image and narrative there is nothing realistic about these games. Beyond the uniform whiteness of their protagonists, the games condense the complexity of running a business down to one or two actions. Except for the brief appearance of the chef in the background, we never see Flo's staff. From seating guests to bussing tables, the heroic Flo appears to do it all herself. Knowing this, we can hazard a guess that players are not attracted to these games

because they offer realistic representations of their working lives nor do they provide simple, sentimental escape. Instead we might think about how the disjuncture between the images and the mechanics is precisely where meaning and pleasure in that meaning is produced. Time management games do not simply offer a representation of work, they also offer digital procedures that impinge on, skew, or intensify feelings about work. Through the interplay between their digital procedures, representational practices, and gameplay actions these games offer a rhythm that addresses a desire for flow in a digital landscape that is defined more by distraction and interruption.

In time management games, where work is both the subject and presumed context of play, our physical relationship to the machines of our labor is momentarily transformed through these games' expressive proceduralism. Time management games are also sometimes referred to as "click management" games, connecting the player's manipulation of the interface (clicking a mouse or tapping a touchscreen) with the goals of the game. The player clicks or taps on various tasks to complete them, always juggling multiple tasks and making decisions about order and rhythm in order to complete the tasks effectively. Video game genres are often classified by mechanics (i.e. first person shooters, platform games, racing, fighting, etc.). As Jesper Juul puts it, game genres are named "after what you *do* as a player, rather than after the fiction."[20] This fact is often used to shore up claims in game studies that game mechanics are more significant to the player's experience than any of the more obvious signifying units. What casual games make clear, however, are both that game mechanics are intimately tied to the representational practices of games and that *game mechanics are themselves kinds of fictions.*

What we do in a game—the actions—and how we feel about them, are shaped by the game's representational fictions, and the player's actions are themselves signifying practices that create meaning. Indeed, we experience video games as digital procedures, but our very access to their procedural expression is necessarily couched in and framed by the visual, aural, and narrative dimensions of the game. The opposite is also true. Our experience of a game's representations is always informed by the invisible digital procedures the game asks our bodies to make visible.

The actual experience of labor in these games is absurdly easy. The act of harvesting a crop or working an eight-hour shift on your feet is reduced to a series of clicks of the mouse or taps of the touchscreen. What can seem like a discontinuity between the banal activity of tapping our digital device and the representation of increasingly

difficult and endless work is actually a transformation of our relationship to the digital device on which we perform so much labor. The physical acts of touching a touchscreen or maneuvering a mouse are detached from their usual search and selection functions and replaced with the abstract though quite material repetitive labor of click management. The supposed labor saving digital device, and the way we *feel it* and *feel about it*, is momentarily transformed through play. The maniacal and rapid tapping and clicking of the player to complete a timed task is a highly visible form of work on a smooth machine that is designed to conceal our labor and to conceal the digital processes that structure our lives. In this way, our actions in the game make the time and work of digital devices visible in ways that reflect on how these same aspects of our everyday digital experiences are often submerged beneath the rhetoric of ease, efficiency, and flow.

Time management games (and all casual games to some degree) function as rhythmic interludes that mediate the gaps, pauses, and glitches that are part of everyday digital rhythms. The timing and rhythm of the games interrupts our workflow in precisely the way that interruptability, fragmentation, and piecework have come to be the common conditions of labor in the digital age. The digital worker is constantly asked to move from one task to another and to juggle multiple and varied tasks simultaneously. On our computers we move from one window to another, negotiating the different languages, rules, and logics of the different software programs that we are using. The digital landscape is not only about the easy flow of the hyperlink or seamless touch navigation, but it is also about constant procedural and ergonomic shifts between windows, programs, devices, interfaces, and lexicons. The everyday experience of digital media is equally, if not more so, an experience of pauses, breakdowns, interruptions, eruptions, and glitches as it is an experience of flow.

In light of the gendered discourse around these games and their relationship to work, casual games can be productively linked to other types of mass media geared towards women. In Tania Modleski's 1970s study of soap operas and women viewers, for example, she argues that the conditions of reception for soap operas correlate with the rhythms of women's work in the home.[21] For Modleski, the soap opera's highly fragmented, repetitive, and drawn out narrative structure as well as the commercial interruptions and the flow between soaps and other daytime programming units, "reinforces the very principle of interruptability crucial to the proper functioning of women in the home."[22] Similarly, we might think of casual games as punctuating and providing a rhythm and timing to work wherever and whenever it is done—mediating

shifts between different tasks, different emotional tones, and attention and inattention. Since Modleski conducted her study, television soap operas have all but disappeared in the U.S. and video games have become a dominant form of mass media. Perhaps casual games are filling in for and significantly revising at least one of the cultural functions once performed by the soap. The interruptability of casual games, their relative simplicity and short levels, offer the player a type of pleasure, a structure of feeling, that speaks to the way her work is already structured.

At the level of narrative, time management games often reflect on their own endless work procedural rhetoric. Again, consider *Diner Dash*. At the end of the original game, after Flo has completed all the tasks of becoming the head of a restaurant empire, she is transported above the clouds where a Hindu Goddess challenges her to ten waitressing trials. To complete the trials, the goddess endows Flo with four arms allowing her to carry twice the amount she could before. After Flo has worked her way up and has built a restaurant empire, her reward is extra appendages with which to more efficiently serve.

This tongue-in-cheek ending speaks to the procedural and narrative mania of the entire genre that we can link to Sianne Ngai's exploration of "zaniness" as an aesthetic category with particular significance for late-capitalism.[23] From Lucille Ball to postmodern literature and *Frogger*, zaniness is an aesthetic category that emphasizes the labor of the performer. Ngai writes, "Like a round of Frogger, Kaboom! or Pressure Cooker, early Atari 2600 video games in which avatars have to dodge oncoming cars, catch falling bombs, and meet incoming hamburger orders at increasing speeds […] zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by—and endangered by—too many things coming at her at once." [24] Beginning in the post-war period, Ngai argues, zaniness becomes a particularly loaded aesthetic category in relation to shifting labor and gender contexts. Zaniness "calls up the character of a worker whose particularity lies paradoxically in the increasingly dedifferentiated nature of his or her labor."[25] Citing the work of Nikolas Rose on neoliberal conditions of labor, Ngai continues,

> *Post-Fordist zaniness in particular suggests that simply being a "productive" worker under prevailing conditions—the concomitant casualization and intensification of labor, the creeping extension of the working day, the steady decline in real wages—is to put oneself into an exhausting and precarious situation. This can be all the more so in postmodern workplaces where productivity, efficiency, and contentment are increasingly measured less in terms of "objective exigencies and characteristics of the labor process (levels of light,*

hours of work, and so forth)" than as a factor of "subjective attitudes" about work on the part of the worker.[26]

Just as the ending of *Diner Dash* clearly acknowledges the perversity of the conflict between its cheerful visual fantasy and its grim mechanics; so we might acknowledge the possibility that the pleasure found in casual games is not based on any simple notion of escape, distraction, or, on the other hand, social realism. The rhythm and aesthetic of time management games—their zaniness—is a quality that is represented by and that also exceeds their narrative and mechanical processes. It is felt, not as an emotion tied to subjects or digital objects; but rather as something more fugitive, as affect passing between them.

The Work of Affect

In Chess's analysis of the *Dash* games she links their time management structure to the management of emotions as affective labor. In *Diner Dash*, for example, customers are pictured with a series of red hearts over their heads to indicate their mood based on the service they are receiving from Flo. We can see affective labor at work in most time management games, from their predominant focus on service-based occupations to how the player's progress is measured and visualized through feeling-based icons. In Marxist theory, affective labor is the labor under capitalism that produces and manages feelings—service with a smile, caring for the sick, or the products of the entertainment industry. Feminist analyses of affective labor have connected this to undervalued "women's work" in the family and in service industries—such as caring for children and spouses or working as a flight attendant. In both Marxist and feminist analyses, affective labor functions on the level of the subject as the producer and manager of feelings that smooth over the otherwise brutal and alienating conditions of capitalist labor. Citing Hochschild again, Chess links these representations in the game to the ways women are called upon to do emotional labor in the workplace and at home. [27] Chess writes, "if the *Dash* games construct a complicated relationship between work and play—then the games, too, have the potential to become a form of emotional labor.… [E]motional play becomes retuned into a kind of emotional labor. And just as emotional labor takes a toll on many women, so might emotional play."[28]

By focusing on affect, however, I am interested in how the representation of emotional labor in casual games is only a trace of the affective processes that get called up into representation. For Brian Massumi, affect names the relational forces and intensities that circulate through culture and between subjects, but are not yet tied to or named by

subjects. Once tied to subjects and named as love, fear, happiness, boredom, etc. affect becomes *representable* and observable as emotion.[29] About the difference between affect and emotion, Steven Shaviro writes, "Emotion is representable and representative; but it also points beyond itself to an affect that works transpersonally and transversally…and that is irreducible to any sort of representation."[30] By shifting attention slightly away from emotions and onto affect, I want to pry open a space for the ways these games, as affective systems, cannot be completely pinned to any subject or representational practice; but rather function as mediations between subjects of labor, the devices of labor, and representations of labor.

While affect works in the spaces between representation and computation, between the representation of work and the experience of labor in the games, and between the player and the device; it is clearly not an entirely fugitive process. Affect lands—as image, as algorithm, as interface—and becomes present and readable to us as feeling, mood, and emotion. If time management games are zany according to Ngai's formulation, they are also sentimental in that they speak to a longing for a different, less fraught, relationship to labor. We can view time management games as contemporary sites of what Lauren Berlant calls "the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture." Looking at mass mediated women's culture mostly in the form of mid-twentieth century film and literature, Berlant identifies the female complaint genre as media that, "foreground witnessing and explaining women's disappointment in the tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy."[31] Berlant writes,

> *Over more than a century and a half of publication and circulation, the motivating engine of this scene has been the aesthetically expressed desire to be* somebody *in a world where the default is being nobody, or worse, being presumptively* all wrong*: the intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates* situations *where those qualities can appear as luminous.*[32]

The time management games in the Dash series can be productively added to the female complaint genre, yet here the complaint is not only about women's disappointment over lived intimacy, but also a complaint that expresses a whole range of disappointments. Not the least of which is the ways work culture and labor conditions in the 21st century seem to exacerbate gender inequality while at the same time universalizing women's precarious status as workers to massive segments of the population, regardless of gender. Time management games create affective situations

that call into question the myths and failures of the digital workplace, the constantly increasing bleed of work into our private lives, and the role of emotional labor.

Conclusion

Theories of games that focus on the actions of code, algorithms, and hardware before narrative and representation are important and compelling developments in game studies. But they are also shaped by a rather narrow concept of what counts as a video game. They seem like overkill when applied to games that require no devoted gaming system, no honed gaming skills, and, as procedural objects, can appear quite repetitive and obvious. The divide between representation and computation in game studies mirrors other gendered binaries like nature/culture, emotion/logic, passive/active, humanities/hard sciences, etc. and makes it difficult to ask of casual games questions that seek to understand how computation and representation may actually work together to convey cultural meaning. Like the field of game studies, casual games are meaningfully gendered.

Conceptualizing casual games as affective processes stresses the relationship between games as cybernetic systems and their role in larger inter-relational systems of representation, labor, identity, play, etc. This is an approach to culture that recognizes how much of the sense we make of the world and our actions in it are not entirely caught up in or articulated by clear-cut ideologies or institutions, nor by overt resistance. Affect speaks to the spaces, forces, and moments that fall outside of the discursive boundary lines of work, home, or our social lives—say, the moment of the commute between work and home, on public transportation, daydreaming, tapping at our mobile phone screens playing a game to pass the time. These spaces and moments and what they constitute are hard to articulate or theorize and yet they form the closest thing we know to be "everyday life" and a vernacular digital culture. Berlant writes, "The object [of women's mass media] is an opportunity for the reanimation of a critical and transformative longing in registers that include power without elevating its normative conventions of transformative fantasy over other ones."[33] This is not to say that casual games are inherently radical or even progressive media forms, but it is to say that they animate a different structure of feeling— than other types of video games, other media forms, and other digital processes with which we engage. The casual game as affective system holds potential for this reanimation of longing and complaint precisely because it is a process that always seems to escape the boundaries of any single ideological discourse or institutional practice.

Notes

[1] Sam Anderson, "Just One More Game … Angry Birds, Farmville and Other Hyperaddictive 'Stupid Games,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 2012.

[2] Anderson, *New York Times Magazine*

[3] Some notable exceptions are Mia Consalvo, "Using Your Friends 2.0: Social Mechanics in Social Games," *FDG 2011 Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games*, ACM, p. 188-195; Shira Chess, "Going with the Flo: *Diner Dash* and Feminism," Feminist Media Studies, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2012; Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010); Erica Kubik, "Masters of Technology: Defining and Theorizing the Hardcore/Casual Dichotomy in Video Game Culture," in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, edited by Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh (Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).

[4] Casual Games Association, **"Casual Games Market Report 2007," "Social Network Games: Casual Games Sector Report 2012," and "Mobile Gaming: Casual Games Sector Report 2012."** (http://www.casualgamesassociation.org/news.php)

[5] Though 98% of the respondents to Juul's survey of players for *A Casual Revolution* identified as female, Juul and the game developers he interviews repeatedly emphasize that the association of casual games with women is a misleading one, p. 9-10. 175-218.

[6] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131-135; *Politics and Letters: Interviews with* New Left Review (London: New Left Books, 1979), 168.

[7] For other work linking affect theory to video games see Eugénie Shinkle, "Feel It, Don't Think: the Significance of Affect in the Study of Digital Games" *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*, 2005, p. 1-7; Shinkle, "Video Games, Emotions, and the Six Senses," *Media, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 30(6), 2008, p. 907-915.

[8] See for example, Sianne Ngai, Ugly Feelings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) and *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012);

Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[9] Ian Bogost, *How to do Things With Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) 83-88.

[10] Bogost 83.

[11] Bogost 86.

[12] Bogost 87. This view of casual games can be understood as continuing the long tradition of dismissing cultural forms that are coded as feminine as insignificant. Andreas Huyssen analyzes this history well in, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Post-Modernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) 44-64. See also the now classic study by Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[13] This relationship between casual games and work is widely acknowledged by the industry. PopCap September 2007 press release, **"Survey: One-in-Four White-Collar Gamers Play at Work – Senior Executives Have Most Fun,"** (http://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/survey-one-in-four-white-collar-gamers-play-at-work---senior-executives-have-most-fun-155569585.html) .

[14] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Randall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

[15] de Certeau 25.

[16] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007 [1944]); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[17] Stewart Brand, "Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, December 7, 1972; Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Paul Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996).

[18] Chess 90.

[19] Chess 91-92. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2001).

[20] Juul 37.

[21] Tania Modleski, "Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work" in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (University Publications of America, 1983) 67-75.

[22] Modleski 72.

[23] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Thanks to Radhika Gajjala for pointing out this link.

[24] Ngai 183.

[25] Ngai 9.

[26] Ngai 10. Citing Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Free Association Books, 1999) 70-71.

[27] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), cited by Chess.

[28] Chess 96.

[29] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 27-28.

[30] Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2010) 4.

[31] Berlant 1-2.

[32] Berlant 3.

[33] Berlant 270.

—CITATION—

Anable, A. (2013) Causal Games and the Work of Affect. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, No.2.* **doi:10.7264/N3ZW1HVD** (http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3ZW1HVD)

This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review** (https://adareview.adanewmedia.org/?page_id=118) .

◀ **PEER REVIEWED**

Aubrey Anable (https://adanewmedia.org/author/aubreyanable)
Aubrey Anable received her PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester. Professor Anable's research examines the links between early digital media and urban reform in North America beginning in the 1960s. She is also working on a book about video games and affect. Her research interests include: digital visual culture, video games, net.art, vernacular digital culture, film and media theory, urban studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies.

6 THOUGHTS ON "CASUAL GAMES, TIME MANAGEMENT, AND THE WORK OF AFFECT"

Pingback: **gender and minecraft: console-ing passions 2014 | Feminist Games**

Pingback: **Class Syllabus | Playing World 2014**

Pingback: **Recent Works in Fan Studies That You Should Be Reading | Nicolle Lamerichs**

Pingback: **Teaching Anthropology of/through Games, Part 1 | Teaching Culture**

Pingback: **SmoothSketch, or Navigating Haptic Space in the Video Game Composition | Analog Game Studies**

Pingback: **Papers, Please: "Casual Game" – VG boundaries 2**