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Cows, clicks, ciphers, and satire

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Abstract

The social network game *Farmville*, which allows players to grow crops, raise animals, and produce a variety of goods, proved enormously successful within a year of its launch in 2009, attracting 110 million Facebook users. However, the game has been criticised for its mindless mechanics, which require little more than repeated clicking on its colourful icons. By way of parody, Ian Bogost's *Cow Clicker* permits its players to simply click on a picture of a cow once every six hours. In this essay I extend Bogost's critique and suggest that *Cow Clicker* highlights not just the soulless inanity of *Farmville* gameplay but also the paucity of that game's portrayal of the painful reality of a dairy cow's punishing daily existence and untimely end.

Keywords: absent referent, animals, Carol J. Adams, cipher, cow, Cow Clicker, factory farm, Farmville, Ian Bogost, new media, satire, social game, video game

Farmville, launched in 2009, is a social game developed by Zynga that can be played on Facebook. As its name suggests, the game is a farming simulation which allows players to grow crops, raise animals, and produce a variety of goods. Gameplay involves clicking on land tiles in order to plough, plant, and then harvest maize, carrots, cabbages or any of a huge variety of crops, both real and fantastic, as well as clicking on cows, sheep, chickens and the like to generate milk, wool, eggs and other products, all of which generates virtual income. *Farmville* is free to play, but players can purchase 'Farm Cash' with real-world money, which can then be spent on speeding up the various activities and gaining access to many more crops, animals, trees, buildings, decorations, and other benefits. Players are encouraged to link to friends' farms, making them 'neighbours', which allows them to send each other gifts, help out on one another's farms, pursue

collaborative tasks, and gain rewards. The formula has proven enormously popular: by March 2010, less than a year after its release, 110 million people had signed up for the game, 31 million of whom played it daily.[1] That month, *Farmville* won the inaugural 'Best New Social/Online Game' award at the Game Developers Choice Awards, which are held at the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC), the game industry's largest professional gathering. While acknowledging the game's huge success and fast growth, Bill Mooney, Vice President of Zynga, spoke in his acceptance speech of the creative freedom that game designers enjoyed at the company, suggesting that Facebook and the social games space were 'the last big realm' for independent game developers; he took the opportunity to invite 'you indie folks' in the audience to 'come join us'.[2]

Mooney's speech was not well received by many of those 'indie folks', who perceived it as condescending and insulting to those who had been pursuing innovative, experimental game design since long before Zynga's recent success.[3] Indeed, many considered *Farmville* not only derivative but the very antithesis of imaginative or creative design. Employing an illuminating mix of animal imagery, Ian Bogost, an independent game designer and theorist, suggested that the kind of experiences that such games create

> are more like [Skinner] boxes, like behaviorist experiments with rats. They're relying on creating these compulsions so people will want to come back and click on the bar.[4]

'Games like FarmVille', he said, 'are cow clickers. You click on a cow, and that's all you do.'[5] To illustrate his point, in three days Bogost created a Facebook game of his own. In *Cow Clicker* you get a picture of a cow which you can click once every six hours. Doing so earns you a point or 'click'. You can spend in-game currency, called 'mooney', to click more often or to buy 'premium' cows with different appearances. You can invite friends to join your 'pasture', thereby gaining your friends' clicks. You can post announcements to your Facebook news feed about your cow-clicking activities. And that is it.

Bogost's game seeks to satirise the shallow, meaningless, even sinister mechanics of *Farmville* and related games. Specifically, *Cow Clicker* draws attention to what he describes in an article titled 'Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession' as four disturbing, dangerous aspects of games, which are magnified out of all proportion in social games like *Farmville*:[6]

Enframing: In his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', the philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that the very essence of the modern, technological era is that everything is construed simply as a resource to be

optimised.[7] This way of 'enframing' (*Gestell*) the world as a 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*) that can be put to use has come to pervade human thought and practice. Bogost argues that there is something particularly insidious about enframing in games. Even outside the context of work, social interaction is stripped of enjoyment and imbued instead with the spirit of potential use. In so-called social games, 'friends aren't really friends; they are mere resources' to draw on,[8] becoming a stockpile of points or clicks you can add to your own.

Compulsion: Many games, digital and otherwise, from slot machines to massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), involve an element of compulsion. But most games are more than this; they are not *just* 'brain hacks that exploit human psychology in order to make money'.[9] However, it often seems that social games exist solely for this purpose, Bogost argues. Stripped to their basics, as *Cow Clicker* seeks to do, we uncover games that provide little more than incentives simply to click, click, and click again, ultimately to the financial benefit of those selling virtual currencies like mooney for real dollars. This is a logic, Bogost points out, that dovetails with Zynga CEO Mark Pincus' infamous declaration when reflecting on his own entrepreneurial practice, that 'I did every horrible thing in the book to just get revenues right away.'[10]

Optionalism: Most games require some degree of effort in order to play them, indeed providing an element of challenge. Meaningful interactivity arises as a result of the player's choices, selected from within 'a complex system of many interlocking and contingent outcomes'.[11] Even the simplest and most accessible games, such as Solitaire or *Bejeweled*, can produce earnest and even profound experiences, Bogost suggests. The gameplay of social games, by contrast, is undemanding to the point that it actually becomes optional. These games often require no more than mere actuations of operations on expired timers; there is nothing for you to do but wait for the six hours to expire, and then click on your cow. Often you can pay to skip even these rote tasks – 'social games are games you don't have to play'.[12]

Destroyed Time: Finally, Bogost argues that although many games require huge amounts of time to complete, much of it spent on gameplay that feels quite empty, social games destroy time in a more comprehensive and objectionable way; they impinge on our lives and activities, with their pointless demands and requirements, even when we are not playing them. Once they have matured, the crops that you plant in *Farmville* must be harvested within a particular window of time lest they wither and become useless. Social games manage to 'abuse us while we are away from them, through obligation, worry, and dread over missed opportunities'.[13]

Bogost's *Cow Clicker* parody embodied, by means of a working game that could actually be played, the ways and extent to which social games are 'troubling specimens of human tragedy'.[14] In short, *Cow Clicker* 'distilled social games to their essence, offering players incentive to instrumentalize their friendships, obsess over arbitrary timed events, buy their way out of challenge and effort, and incrementally blight their offline lives through worry and dread'.[15]

Beyond the opportunity for a series of groan-inducing bovine puns, Bogost chose cows as the object of players' clicks in order to satirise *Farm-ville*. However, insofar as *Cow Clicker* functions as a critique of the mechanics and monetisation of a whole genre of social games, it is not at all relevant or necessary that it is *cows* that you click – pretty much anything would have worked just as well in their stead. When all is said and done, there is nothing essentially cow-like or cow-ish about the gameplay (such as it is) in *Cow Clicker*. There is a long tradition of employing animals as ciphers in this way, as creatures who are insignificant in themselves but utilised to make a point. From Aesop's allegorical animals, enlisted to convey a variety of moral lessons, to the many beasts employed throughout the history of philosophy to demonstrate fine points of logic or metaphysical speculation, diverse creatures have taken on the role of the educative cipher. The term *cipher* derives originally from the Sanskrit *śūnya*, which literally means 'empty' and came later to designate the arithmetic symbol for 'zero' or 'nought'. As such, the cipher had no value in itself; rather, its importance derived from the place it took in notations and calculations. Most often, it matters not whether the creature who is duped in Aesop's tale is a crow or a hedgehog, or whether it be a pig or an ass who features in rarefied reflections on lexical novelty or the nature of free will. Ciphers are empty, transposable placeholders who fulfil a vital function but have no significance in their own right. Rather, the cipher takes their meaning and value from the part they are made to play, whether in a moral fable, a philosophical argument, or a social satire.[16]

The deployment of animals as ciphers can be understood as an example of their becoming 'absent referents', a process described by Carol J. Adams in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.[17] Adams argues that, through a series of related cultural practices, the particularity, the experience, the very existence of individual animals is denied. Through the act of butchering, animals are quite literally rendered absent in order for them to be transformed into food. They are made further absent linguistically by the use of terms such as 'meat' or 'veal' to refer to the dead bodies that are thereby produced. Finally, animals are made absent figuratively when peo-

Fig 1: Cow Clicker (Bogost, 2010).

ple use particular metaphors to describe their experiences, as when some-one suggests that 'I felt like a piece of meat'. As a result, '[t]he absent referent functions to cloak the violence inherent to meat eating, to protect the conscience of the meat eater and render the idea of individual animals as immaterial to anyone's selfish desires.'[18] The effect of these processes of making animals absent is that they permit us to

> forget about the animal as an independent entity. ... The absent referent is both there and not there. ... We fail to accord this absent referent its own existence.[19]

Although the cipherous animals of Aesop and philosophy and *Cow Clicker* are there, they are not there *as animals* – that is, as particular creatures in their own rights. They serve a purpose, they make a point, but ultimately they are blank, entirely interchangeable placeholders whose arbitrary employment permits us to forget that, beyond and before the fable or philosophy or satire, crows and hedgehogs and pigs and asses and cows are independent individuals, each with their own unique existence and experiences.

Nonetheless, despite the cipherous nature of the cows in *Cow Clicker*, or perhaps even as a consequence of their vacant placeholding, it is possible to understand the game's satire as addressing the impoverished, prejudicial representation of animals that we encounter in *Farmville* and its ilk. 'What I am after', Bogost said of *Cow Clicker*, 'is a certain kind of novelty that might actually be really uncomfortable and disappointing, to show you something that you didn't see.'[20] This something, to which the game's interminable clicking draws attention, is, in the first instance, the mindless mechanics of a particular variety of social games. As a distillation, indeed as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the core elements of these games, *Cow Clicker* highlights the soulless inanity of our experience when playing them: the instrumental enframing, the exploitative compulsion, the undemanding optionalism, and the destroyed time. However, we might argue that there is more to the game's *reductio* (or perhaps better, that there is *less* to it). Consider the iconic cow of *Cow Clicker*. Though you start the game with a standard white cow, you can buy or earn all manner of alternatives: purple cow, rainbow cow, paisley cow, bling cow, Magritte cow, Mao cow, et al. In each case, however, all that actually changes is the cow's colouration, and your selection makes not the slightest difference to gameplay; these interchangeable individuals are functionally identical, all mere objects of your clicks. Or consider the 'pasture' on which the cows appear. It is nothing more than a plain, two-tone background, with no feature or ornament of any kind to interrupt its uniform green blankness. In just the same way that game mechanics have been reduced to their painfully limited essentials, the very paucity of the representations here, the failure to depict anything more than the rudiments of a ruminant and her environment, draw our attention to what is missing from the game.

In effect, the iconography of *Cow Clicker* satirises the stereotyped, sanitised vision of life on a farm in *Farmville*. The cow who finds herself subject to the practices of contemporary intensive dairy farming is likely to spend precious little time standing quietly in a grassy pasture as she does in *Cow Clicker*, and the process of inducing and extracting milk from her is by no means as simple or benign as the unintrusive clicks that *Farmville* requires

once per day. Conditions vary between farms and are regulated by different national laws, but a modern dairy cow will, in all probability, spend a significant proportion and sometimes all of her time indoors, most often standing on hard, concrete flooring; her housing, in fact, frequently consists of a tie-stall in which she is tethered by the neck, with limited or no opportunity for exercise or social contact with other cows; she may have her tail docked, typically without anaesthetic; she is subject to a repeated cycle of impregnation and birth, and will have her calves taken from her immediately, often within a day of giving birth; she may be injected with bovine growth hormone to increase milk yield; she will be milked twice a day or more; she is liable to suffer from mastitis, swollen and ulcerated hocks, and accutely painful lameness caused by claw horn disruption, digital dermatitis, or sole haemorrhage. Despite a natural life span of more than 20 years she will be considered spent after just five years or less and be sent for slaughter.[21] The uncomfortable and disappointing something that *Cow Clicker* highlights is the failure to portray the painful reality of a dairy cow's punishing daily existence and untimely end in *Farmville*.

The danger of satire is that it not be appreciated as such. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that irony is never simply a matter of an author's intention or of the formal properties of a text or cultural event.[22] Rather, irony's cutting edge, its critical evaluation of its object, must (also) be recognised or inferred or attributed by its audience – or not. By October 2010, 56,000 people had played *Cow Clicker*, a fraction of the number who had *Farmville* accounts to be sure but nonetheless a considerable quantity of players by anyone's reckoning, many of whom seemed quite unaware of any satirical dimension to the game.[23] Plenty of *Cow Clicker* players simply enjoyed clicking on cows. Bogost elected to expand both the game and its targets. In a parody of the gamification trend, which uses game mechanics to solicit or influence behaviour in diverse real-world contexts – a practice Bogost prefers to call 'exploitationware'[24] – he launched 'Cowclickification', which allowed developers to add clickable cows to their websites and applications. Together with developer Jason Kapalka he produced 'Cow Clicker Blitz', a spoof of the Facebook iteration of Kapalka's own enormously successful and lucrative casual game series *Bejeweled*. He launched the 'Moogle' search engine, which enhanced Internet searches with the ability to click a cow. He developed 'Cow Clicker Moobile', an iPhone app that enabled players to keep clicking their cows even during those potentially wasted moments when they were away from their computers. 'My First Cow Clicker', an app 'cleverly disguised as an entertaining

videogame',[25] helped train children too young for Facebook how to click on a cow, with the added benefit to parents of outsourcing their clicks to their kids. Bogost launched a 'Cow Clicktivism' campaign which permitted players to turn their online activity into activism: by clicking on an emaciated cow they could donate to Oxfam.[26]

Finally, in a parody of those 'alternate reality games' that integrate riddles and tasks into the real world, came 'Cow ClickARG', in which Bogost invited players to deploy 'cowllective intelligence' to solve a set of crypic clues hidden around the world. The puzzle was eventually solved: every click was hastening the imminent, mysterious Cowpocalypse, which could be staved off temporarily only by appeasing the bovine gods with Facebook credits.[27] On 7 September 2011 the countdown clock expired, however, and the cows all disappeared. It was announced that they had been 'raptured'. Yet the game went on, employing the ultimate cipher in the service of satire: players could and can still click on the empty space where their absent cow used to be. The multi-faceted satire of *Cow Clicker* endures – players can continue vainly, compulsively, to click until the cows come home.

1   Acknowledgments

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23. Tanz 2011; Bogost 2010b.
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