

Peer-pressure? A motivation-focused taxonomy of social mechanics in microtransaction-based mobile games.

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INTRODUCTION

Social mechanics can be a core aspect of the player experience in free-to-play games. Alha et al. (2018) found that social interaction – like playing with friends – was a motivator for selecting a free-to-play game.

However, such mechanics are also consistently linked with microtransaction-based models. King et al. (2020) found that in the game *Fortnite*, the frequency of spending by the participants' closest friend in the game was one of the biggest predictors of spending by the participant and Hamari (2017) discovered 'social interaction' to be an in-game purchase motivation. Nicklin et al. (2021) also identified 'social factors' to be one of the motivations players had underlying loot box purchasing. Generally, both social features and monetisation features are linked in the literature to more frequent gaming and higher scores on measures of gaming disorder (Rehbein et al. 2021).

Yet there exists no comprehensive taxonomy of social mechanics which are connected to purchase elements in mobile games. The aim of the current study was therefore to create such a taxonomy of social elements which motivate players to spend. The work builds on similar research such as by Shibuya et al. (2015), who studied in-game purchase categories in mobile social games in Japan. Its contribution is the combination of its location, focus on mobile games as a whole (rather than social games), and incorporation of player motivation to purchase specifically because of social elements.

METHODOLOGY

The study was two-part, combining a formal analysis with a player-centric perspective. The first part was an analysis of the 25 top-grossing mobile games from the Apple App store and the Google Play store by the researcher. Mobile games were used because they most frequently implement free-to-play models (Paul, 2020). The definition of social mechanics used for guidance in this analysis is 'all opportunities the game offers to players in order to interact with one another', taken from Consalvo (2011). Data was collected through "light play", where a player spends enough time playing a game to gauge the experience and make 'meaningful progress in the game' but does not complete it (Aarseth, 2003).

The second part was a large-scale qualitative survey, aimed at the players of these games. The players were recruited from the subReddits of the relevant games, e.g., to account for *Candy Crush*, recruitment was done on www.reddit.com/r/candycrush/, and so on. The survey asked 109 players about whether they have encountered the social elements from part 1 in the games of interest, whether they influenced them to spend on microtransactions in the games in a way in which they may not have otherwise, and

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why. Respondents were also given the opportunity to mention social elements which had not been derived from the social analysis, as not all elements may have been captured by one-person play starting from an early level. Importantly, there was a distinction drawn between players specifically feeling *pressured to spend* because of the game design, rather than spending because of mutual enjoyment with a friend, for example. This data allows the link of specific social elements to player motivations to spend, as well as the inclusion of mechanics which may have been missed through the formal analysis.

The final output will be a taxonomy of social mechanics in microtransaction-based mobile games which have been identified by players as influencing their motivation to spend in the game. The data collection is complete at point of presentation, and the analysis is ongoing. Some results will be presented at the conference.

RESULTS

In total, 15 social mechanics were present across the 31 games. They are mapped visually in Figure 1 and fall into four distinct categories.

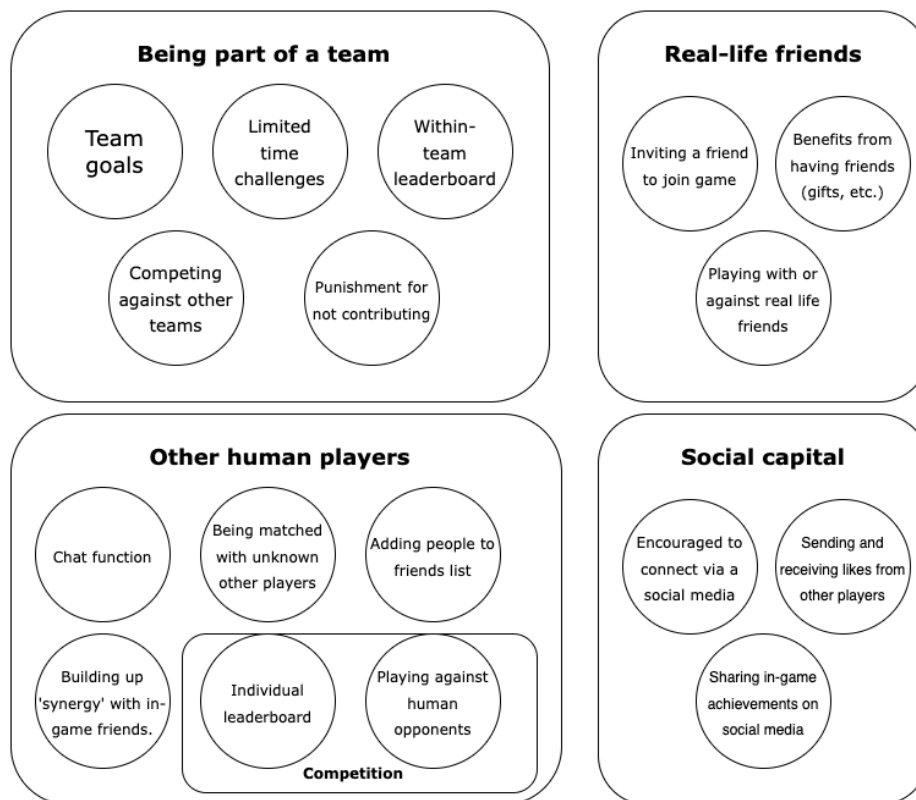


Figure 1. A mapping of social mechanics in mobile games.

Early results suggest the social mechanics which most influence player decisions to spend all relate to being part of a team. The most frequently cited mechanic was *team goals* (N=54), followed by *competing against other teams* (N=48), followed by *limited time challenges* (N=44). Respondents described direct pressure from teammates, comparison within teams, and helping others who become their friends via teams as motivations in their spending.

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