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# Making Games as Collaborative Social Experiences: Exploring An Online Gaming Community

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## Abstract

In addition to playing games together, making games together has offered new opportunities for social interaction

and community building in online spaces. This paper presents an empirical study of how making indie games become interactive and collaborative social experiences in an Asian female-dominated online gaming community. It contributes to the CSCW community by providing a better understanding of the social side of game making in addition to game playing, and points to the importance of social engagement in game making communities.

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Collaborative game making; online gaming communities; interactive crafting; indie games.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.2 User/Machine Systems: Human factors.

## Introduction

In the history of CSCW, online games have been understood as cultural phenomena, applications of collaborative technology [1], and social worlds that are different from other types of new media [3]. While a body of CSCW literature has investigated social dynamics in gameplay [e.g., 1, 3, 6], the social side of game making is an often-overlooked topic in research on collaborative systems. Social computing has fundamentally changed the Web “from a comprehensive information repository to a set of collective projects, a worldwide community of communities” [2, p.642]. Combined with the booming indie (i.e., independent) game culture (see side bar) and sociability in online communities [8], making games together has offered new opportunities for social interaction and community building in online social spaces, which raises a number of interesting research questions for CSCW.

**What are indie games?**

A common understanding of indie games is that they are non-commercial, not-for profit, and activist games [7] made by amateurs (e.g., *Minecraft*). Making indie games combines a form of personal expression with employment as a career alternative to working at large mainstream gaming studios [4, 10].

**What does “indie” (i.e., independence) mean?**

There are three dimensions to understand independence in indie game development:

**Independence as provenance of the game** [9]. It involves both an independent social identity for a group or groups of game developers and autonomic conditions under which they make and distribute games.

**Independence as a cultural and ideological discourse.** [10] highlights the democratization of making indie games. It makes digital games a form of personal expression rather than commercial products.

**Independence as a new business model.** It has made both the technical, artistic, and business skills related to digital game production as widely available as possible, which offers a new business model in context of game entrepreneurship.

This research explores how making indie games can become interactive and collaborative social experiences, and how online gaming communities afford and support such experiences. Specifically, this paper focuses on an online community comprised of young Chinese females who use a popular free game engine (i.e., *Orange Adventure Game Maker* [OAM], Chinese version only) to make 2D Web/mobile games.

**Research Site: The OAM Online Community**

The OAM community (Figure 1) is one of the biggest and most popular online social spaces for game makers in China to play and discuss 2D Web/mobile indie games (Figure 4). Most games there are free-to-play and episode-structured, allowing game makers to revise the storyline based on player feedback over time, and to charge a small amount of money if their games become popular. Major themes of games include drama, historical fiction, romance, time travelling, entertainment business, reality (i.e., using games to reflect on social issues in the real world), and health care. All games are made using *Orange AVG Maker* (OAM), a free-to-use, drag-and-drop game engine (Figure 2). OAM does not require programming skills and includes various free packages of authorized content such as images, music, and UI templates. Though a Chinese male developed the game engine and the gaming community, most (more than 90%) game makers and players within this community are young females who are located all over China and have never met with one another in the real world.

**Methodology**

The OAM community has an active online public forum (<http://bbs.66rpg.com/forum.php>), which was established in 2008. As of October 19, 2015, it had 1441,209

posts and 1453,659 members. Considering members' high level of participation in this forum, posts of self-reported personal experiences of game making were collected. As of this writing, 103 posts (Chinese character count: 17,098) submitted to the forum from July 2013 to October 2015 by 89 unique online users (Female: 80; Male: 3; Gender unknown: 6) have been collected. An in-depth qualitative analysis was used to code and interpret the data. Focusing on first-person, subjective, and narrative accounts of the OAM community members' game making experiences, this method would become the main medium for transmitting meaning of the language use and the objects of experience [5]. The data analysis followed the following steps: 1) closely read through players' narratives to acquire a sense of the whole picture regarding game makers' social experiences; 2) identified a set of themes emerging in the narratives; and 3) synthesized themes to summarize the fundamental aspects of game makers' social experiences.

**Preliminary Findings**

This section presents three themes of sociability emerging in OAM community members' game making experiences, using quotes from their own accounts (all original in Chinese and translated by the author).

**A motivation to share values and develop friendship.** For many users, making games is an important way to visualize and express their ideas and ideologies to others. #78 (F, age unknown) wrote,

*I make games because I want to show my love for my mom. I also want to encourage more people to think of how great moms are: They can do everything for us without asking for anything back. My mom cried when*



Figure 1. Homepage of the OAM Community website (<http://www.66rpg.com/>)



Figure 2. The interface of OAM



Figure 3: Using a poll to collect player feedback to develop the storyline (source: <http://www.66rpg.com>)

*she played my games. And many people commented that they were so moved when playing my games.*

As games reflect the game makers' values and voices, members started to develop friendships with others who had similar thoughts and interests while making games together, which became an essential part of their social experiences:

*I started to make games when I was 11. One of my friends recommended the OAM community to me. We are best friends now and we are a team! We discuss what type of games we want to make, what can be a good story to tell, what type of UI would fit the theme, and so forth. I just like making games with her. (#15, F, 13)*

*Making games is long journey. Perhaps one day we will lose each other's contact information; we won't make games any more; and we will no longer follow or comment on each other's games. But what's the matter? We have spent great time together. We feel like a family. We will wish each other best of luck, no matter where we will be in the future. (#29, F, age 18)*

**A process of interactive crafting and collaborative learning.** [10] considers indie game development as craft. When developing a game, the game maker is usually the sole creator, "allowing for authorship of the game development process, and playable outcome" [10, p. 82]. However, game making within the OAM community is often a process of interactive crafting: Both game makers and players engaged in developing the storyline. Many game makers even attributed the success of their games to the useful dialogs between them and players. For example:

*I love interacting with players, either on the forum, through the comments, or in online chat groups. We had so many inspiring discussions about how to develop the story and how to make the endings more logic. Without them my games wouldn't be so good. (#67, F, age 18)*

Other members also mentioned how making games became collaborative learning experiences, through which they gained community support and useful knowledge from peers:

*When I just joined the community, I knew nothing about games. I just made friends on the forum. We chatted, watched tutorials together [online], cheered when players commented on our games and supported us. I don't know how to define "warmth," but I feel warm in this community. (#35, F, age 17)*

*I'm always very interested in historical fictions. I formed an online chat group with other people. We read many books about Chinese history and discussed what we learnt. We worked together to figure out some interesting historical stories or mysteries that could become games. Yes we are competitors but we also help one another. (#23, F, age 18)*

**A blurred boundary between game makers and game players.** Another theme that contributes to the unique social experiences of members is the blurred boundary between "author" and "audience" in this community:

*I enjoy being both a game maker and a game player. In fact that's the biggest fun in this community. It's so interesting that I am a fan of someone's game and*

### What does the OAM online community offer?

It offers all necessary resources for indie game makers, including tutorials for OAM, instructions to compose engaging storylines, free web platform to publish and play games, official guideline or evaluating game quality. It also provides multiple channels for social interaction, including forums, comments for each published game, polls for each published game (Figure 3), and a variety of online activities (e.g., a competition of best UI design).



Figure 4 (a). Starting a historical fiction game regarding Song dynasty in China (source: <http://www.66rpg.com>)



Figure 4 (b). Making choices in gameplay (source: <http://www.66rpg.com>)

he/she is a fan of my game. I suggested how to update his/her games and he/she did the same for me. I think this role change is very helpful: I make my own games but I also know how to interact with players because I'm one of them. (#46, M, age unknown)

### Preliminary Conclusions and Future Work

This research sheds light on how making indie games allows for collaborative social experiences. It contributes to the CSCW community by providing a better understanding of the social side of game making in addition to game playing, and points to the importance of social engagement in game making communities. In addition, since this paper focuses on an online gaming community especially preferred by young Chinese females, it has potential to provide a more inclusive understanding of the social context of gaming with regards to gender and culture.

This study is part of a larger comparative study of Chinese and American female game makers' collaborative social experiences. Future work will include two interview studies of game makers in the OAM community and young adult female game developers in the U.S., which would be conducted from November 2015 to early 2016.

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