

The Pleasure of Turtling: Having Fun the Wrong Way

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Introduction

Turtling, along with its essential counterpart, the rush, is, perhaps, one of the most recognizable strategies in all of gaming. It exists across multiple genres of games both digital and analog, and, while its exact definition may vary from genre to genre and even from game to game, its core remains the same – it is a slow, cautious, deliberate playstyle characterized by a heavy focus on defense and unwillingness to go into offense. However, it has come to be seen as undesirable and even problematic by many players and game designers alike. One Magic: The Gathering (Garfield 1993) player complains that a match against an overly defensive blue deck left them “feeling almost completely powerless” and “was almost enough to make [them] quit the game altogether” (RPG.net 2014). Books and articles on game design abound with advice on how to discourage players from turtling, describing it as one of the “obstacles to enjoyment” (Pulsipher 2011). In competitive videogames (i.e. StarCraft series, Blizzard Entertainment 2010), developers implement mechanics that force players to abandon defensive positions, pushing for gameplay that is faster, more aggressive, and, in theory, more spectator-friendly. Turtles can even suffer social stigma, as they are often blamed for ruining the fun of the game (Burgun 2015) and met with disdain from both spectators and their fellow players (Sirlin 2007, Hrabec 2017).

However, if this behavior is so damaging to the dynamic flow and fun of games, why do players engage in it at all? This is the question that this paper tries to answer by examining turtling in digital and tabletop strategy games like StarCraft II (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) and Twilight Imperium III (Petersen 2004), as well as a few examples from MOBAs, collectible card and incremental games.¹The full version of the paper was presented at PCG 2018 in Copenhagen; this is a short rundown of its main points.

Existing Research

Turtling is a little-researched topic, and works that mention it tend to fall into one of two broad categories: esports-oriented and game design-oriented.

¹ While heavily defensive playstyles are also evident in sports, and certain parallels can be drawn between them and turtling, this topic would call for a whole separate level of analysis - thus, this paper will not venture into that territory.

Studies of the esports-oriented kind treat turtling as one of several distinct playstyles in competitive gaming (Sirlin 2007, Hrabec 2017). They describe turtling as a slow and cautious style, which heavily favors defense over offense. Players that turtle avoid risks and position themselves to outlast the opposition and win in the later stages of the match. Both Hrabec (2017: 71) and Sirlin (2007) also provide insight into the negativity that often surrounds turtling. Sirlin's account of the dismay with which turtling is met by the spectators, "who always hate a turtle", is especially telling.

However, the second, design-oriented kind of work goes even further, conceptualizing turtling as a problematic player behavior that arises from bad game design (Burgun 2015, Jolly 2014, Pulsipher 2011). Such studies focus on the way it influences the game itself, opining that it leads to undesirably long matches, sub-optimal game flow and reduced player interaction. Ultimately, this approach sees turtling as a problem to be solved by implementing specific rules and mechanics that make turtling outright impossible, or at least actively discourage it by turning it into a non-viable strategy. While this designer perspective provides invaluable insight into the interaction between game mechanics and turtling as a playstyle, it inevitably suffers from a certain prescriptiveness. It is perfectly understandable: after all, it is this willing effort to separate good design practices from unsound ones that makes these works useful for their intended audience of game developers. Nevertheless, it leads the accounts of turtling to be somewhat one-sided and limits their usefulness in regards to better understanding turtling, the players that turtle and their motivations.

Building on the foundation of these two types of work, this paper posits that turtling is a meta-strategy that players employ in order to minimize discomfort and stress related to risk and challenge in games – or, in other words, to manage game flow. However, it also argues that in some genres of games turtling enables players to achieve a second set of goals, related more so to the mimetic side of play rather than its competitive side. It allows to maximize specific types of pleasure derived from acquisition and accumulation, from creating and managing, and from the mimetic and aesthetic desirability of virtual objects.

Turtling as a Flow and Stress Management Technique

The first and most evident purpose of turtling in competitive play is, simply put, playing to one's strengths. Sirlin (2007) points to this, stating that most turtles "are simply trying their best to win given the particular situation and their own knowledge and skills". However, it stands to reason that increasing the chances of winning are not the only goal of turtling – another one might be to make the challenge and demands of competitive gaming more bearable and the process itself more enjoyable.

By playing defensively, a player essentially chooses to focus their attention on their side of the map or their part of the play area only, thus reducing the amount of space they have to control both mentally and physically, the amount of information they have to process and the number of tasks they have to perform simultaneously.

Deciding from the beginning of the match that you are not going to attack also means that the player has to make fewer decisions under stressful conditions and take fewer risks. It decreases

the amount of interaction that happens between players and thus reduces the exposure of the turtle to the most unpredictable and hard to control aspect of competitive play – the opponent. All of this greatly reduces the strain and discomfort a player experiences during play.

In other words, turtling can be seen as a technique that is employed, either deliberately or unwittingly, to manage all the major stress factors in competitive gaming and adjust them to fit one's personal flow channel between anxiety and boredom.

However, managing stress and flow is not the only motivation for turtling. The next section is going to focus on a few very specific, core types of playful pleasure that turtling empowers and supports in digital and analogue strategy games. While the general logic employed in the following analysis can undoubtedly be extended and used to examine other genres of games as well, this task will remain out of the scope of this paper.

The Pleasure of Turtling in Strategy Games

There is a distinct pleasure to be had in possessing a mighty battlecruiser armed with enormous lasers and devastating torpedoes – a pleasure that gets more intense the bigger the spaceship and the deadlier its armaments. On one hand, this is the sheer pleasure of having (thus, more spaceships also leads to more pleasure). On the other, this pleasure is aesthetic and mimetic in nature, since it depends both on the aesthetic value of the virtual item (how shiny the battlecruiser looks on screen) and its “mimetic value” - the desirability of a hypothetical real-life twin of it (how powerful and fascinating such a battlecruiser would be in real life).

The same principles are at work in incremental games such as *Cow Clicker* (Bogost 2010) or *Cookie Clicker* (Julien Thiennot 2013). Let us engage in a mental experiment: imagine a program in which the user endlessly clicks a grey “OK” button to increase a number on some nameless counter. I would argue that practically no one would choose to call this program a game and agree to spend a couple of hours trying to have fun with it.

However, if we beautify the “OK” button by turning it into a lovely, if a bit simplistic, picture of a cow, and enhance the counter so that it tells the player they are collecting something valuable, we suddenly get an extremely popular game. So popular, in fact, that its success took its author, Ian Bogost, who initially developed it as a critique on social games, by complete surprise. The importance of the visual aesthetic in *Cow Clicker*'s success becomes even more evident in light of the fact that when Bogost decided to end the experiment and “kill” the game, he simply removed the “eye candy” - the pretty cow pictures - from it.

The same pleasure principles (“eye candy” – or, better yet, “mind candy”) are at work in many strategy games. This paper argues that there are 3 main sources of non-competitive pleasure in strategy games that turtling allows to maximize: hoarding resources, creating and managing virtual objects, and mimetic as well as aesthetic desirability of said virtual objects.

Essentially, amassing resources in an RTS like *StarCraft II* or a tabletop strategy like *Twilight Imperium* is a type of advanced clicker game. The player performs a series of trivial repetitive tasks and, in reward, they get to see numbers grow and feel like they are accruing a valuable

commodity. In case of *StarCraft II* it is virtually an in-built mini-game version of *Cookie Clicker*: the player clicks on a timered button to produce workers, which automatically collect resources for them. Since the workers are autonomous, after the player has assembled a certain number of them, even the trivial task of clicking the button becomes unnecessary, and they can sit back and just watch numbers grow on a screen. Since turtling leads to longer games², it naturally increases the amount of resources gathered per game, as well as the army size, the number of bases built and technologies researched etc.

The pleasure doesn't stop at acquisition and accumulation, though. Given that a huge part of "mindcandy" in both *StarCraft II* and *Twilight Imperium* comes from constructing buildings and increasing population, these games might best be likened to militarily-oriented versions of *SimCity* (Wright 1989). This comparison is so self-evident that many players and casters of *StarCraft II* refer to a base with beautifully or effectively arranged buildings as a "simcity". Turtling enables this because playing defensively allows a player to pay less attention to interacting with the other player through attacks and counter-attacks and more attention to constructing their base, planning the layout of buildings, setting up defenses and building up to the perfect army composition. This activity can be essentially boiled down to creating and manipulating virtual objects, and in its purest form it exists in construction toys. But while there certainly is fun to be had manipulating abstract cubes and blocks, it is no coincidence that most construction toys also allow players to recreate real-life objects and situations that they for some reason find fascinating (such as hospitals, airports, railways, castles etc.). This leads us to the third pleasure source – mimetically and aesthetically desirable objects.

Turtling prolongs the match and thus empowers the implicitly roleplaying, paidia-like pleasure that is derived from the mimetic desirability of virtual objects, which, understandably, goes against the competitive virtues of ludus that define modern esports. In longer matches, more of the game's powerful late-game units and advanced technology can be employed. There is an implicit "cool-factor progression" built into most, if not all, strategy games: a player begins with cheaper, simpler, less destructive units and eventually gets access to more advanced and deadly units as the game goes on. It is these late-game units and technologies that appeal the most to the "battlecruiser power fantasy" described in the beginning of this section. This means that if the player wants to "play with the big guns" and derive the most aesthetic and mimetic pleasure from the military sci-fi aspect of *StarCraft II* or *Twilight Imperium*, they have a lot of incentive to turtle. It allows the player to up the scale of the action – armies become larger, and battles more epic in proportions. All of this leads to an experience that is rewarding and fulfilling in a much different way than a series of quick, lean competitive matches.

Conclusion

This paper examined the practice of turtling – playing in a slow, heavily defensive manner – in order to find out why players engage in it. It posited that there can be two types of motivation for turtling, one applicable to all genres where turtling is at all possible, and the other for some of them.

² This is as good a point as any to point out that not all efforts to stall or prolong the game are necessarily examples of turtling. For example, an aggressive player may wish to stall a match to win time and prepare a risky, but powerful attack.

The first, genre-agnostic motivation for turtling is to manage the challenge and flow of the game. Turtling as a meta-strategy allows to minimize risk and multi-tasking, thus reducing the stress and discomfort that those factors can evoke in some players. It also shifts the balance of power from tactical decision-making to strategic thinking and planning.

The second, genre-specific, is to maximize certain types of non-competitive, mimetic pleasure of play. In strategy games, which were at the center of this analysis, such pleasures can have 3 sources:

- 1) acquiring and accumulating valuable virtual resources and objects,
- 2) creating and managing virtual objects,
- 3) desirability of certain virtual objects – be it for mimetic, aesthetic, psychological or other reasons.

Of course, these sources of pleasure can coexist in different mixed, intertwined forms, such as creating a large number of mimetically desirable objects (building a mighty fleet of spaceships), managing and arranging valuable objects in an aesthetically or otherwise pleasing way (constructing an orderly and effective base) etc. However, they do not necessarily have to be mixed, and it is important to separate them because they evoke different colors of feeling and produce different kinds of pull and satisfaction. Turtling enables the player to engage with all these sources of pleasure more than other playstyles because it prolongs matches, increases the amounts of resources gathered, puts a higher emphasis on building infrastructure and allows the match to enter a late-game stage, where more of the game's desirable objects are often concentrated.

To conclude, there is much need in further research of “unorthodox” and often negatively connoted play practices, such as rushing, grinding, farming, camping and the like. One of the motivations for such research could be that by analyzing them, we can gain insight into the diverse pleasures that games can bring us - sometimes even against the wishes of their designers.

Games

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