

# Not so corny: Facebook game lets users play farmer

January 25 2010, By JIM SUHR , AP Business Writer

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(AP) -- Even while calling Chicago home, Laura Hawkins Grimes is a country bumpkin. Her scenic rural spread has three dairy farms, two ponds and a log cabin, all skirted by a white picket fence as scarecrows stand sentry over her blackberries.

And the best part is the 40-year-old sex therapist never has to leave her computer to tend to it all.

She's one of tens of millions of occupants of FarmVille, a near-utopian, wildly popular online fantasy game where folks rush to another neighbor's aid, ribbons readily come as rewards, plants don't get diseased and there's never a calamitous frost, flood or drought.

Since its launch last summer, the cartoonish simulation game seeming to meld "Leave it to Beaver" and "Green Acres" has become a [Facebook](#) phenomenon, luring in everyone from urbanites like Grimes to actual farmers while gently nudging people to think more about where their food comes from.

"It's kind of what you don't see every day," Grimes said of FarmVille by Zynga, a San Francisco-based developer of games widely played at online hangouts such as Facebook. "I have to say, living in Chicago, what appeals to me about FarmVille is it's not urban."

FarmVille - with more than 72 million monthly users worldwide, the most talked-about application in Facebook status updates - heads a

growing stable of simulated agriculture that also includes SlashKey's Farm Town on Facebook and PlayMesh's recently launched iFarm for the [iPhone](#).

Purposely simplistic, FarmVille lets players build and trick out their farms, starting with a tiny parcel they till and seed with a range of crops including berries, eggplant, wheat, soybeans, artichokes and pumpkins. Players can add pigs, cows and chickens and accouterments such as barns, chicken coops, windmills and greenhouses.

As is the case on real farmland, attentiveness in FarmVille is vital. Players who diligently tend to their crops see their farms flourish and their bank balances balloon. Those late with their harvests may see their crops - and their investment - shrivel and die.

Neighbors get rewarded with points and gold for scaring away pests, fertilizing or feeding chickens on another player's spread.

"One thing we feel we got right is it has extremely broad appeal," said Bill Mooney, Zynga's vice president and general manager. "Everybody likes farming, whether you're a gardener, whether you grew up on a farm or your grandparents did. It's literally something everyone can relate with."

And with FarmVille, "there's an appeal that's just cute, with the amazing ways people take the farms and develop them out as their own."

In the end, he hopes, "people will see this as a fun little escape."

Grimes sure has. The transplanted Oklahoman who detests video games and has no farm background razzed her FarmVille-loving friends before her sister successfully prodded her to join.

Now, she admits, "I'm a total FarmVille freak."

A mother of a 3-year-old daughter and the wife of a paramedic, Grimes squeezes in simulated farming between appointments and parenting. She devotes less than an hour each day "in little bitty spurts" to eventually max out her FarmVille spread to resemble a whimsical menagerie - black sheep, pink calves, penguins, reindeer with flashing Christmas lights in their antlers.

"It was completely mindless and just mine," she said. "I could decide where everything went, I could decide when it happened. I got to move things around. I got to make it look nice."

She loves getting rewards at every turn, often for helping a neighbor. And she credits FarmVille with hastening her reconnection with old friends, including a fourth-grade schoolmate who's now living next door to her in this online agricultural experience.

"I don't know anything about her life except she's a really nice neighbor - she leaves me little posts, she sends me nice gifts, harvests my crops. And it makes me feel better about people in my life," Grimes said. "What's so nice about this is it's really about camaraderie, like you depend on people to do things for you."

"I really would have never thought this would have been something I do," she said.

Even actual farmers are digging it. In his central Illinois farmhouse near Windsor, 31-year-old bachelor Darin Doehring started playing months ago with the game he credits with helping him wait out soggy weather that hampered harvesting of his 2,000 acres of real corn and soybeans.

"There were more times this past fall I was doing my crops more on

there (FarmVille), than I was in the field because of the rain and mud outside. I enjoy it," Doehring said, noting that he wished the fantasy game posed more challenges mimicking real-life ones farmers face, including weather events.

Mooney of Zynga says that isn't likely: "We don't want it to be a punishing experience. We want this to be a positive."

To John Reifsteck, a corn-and-soybean grower in Champaign County, Ill., there are parallels between virtual and actual farming. "Success at FarmVille requires foresight, persistence and a willingness to help others - just like farming in the real world," he wrote in an online column last month.

And while he doesn't play FarmVille - "I work in the fields for a living" - he understands those who do and welcomes FarmVille's popularity.

"It's a healthy sign for agriculture - but only if players don't come to think that running a farm is as easy as FarmVille makes it seem," he wrote. "If FarmVille was as difficult and complicated as actual farming, probably no one would play it."

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On the Net:

FarmVille, <http://www.farmville.com>

Zynga, <http://www.zynga.com>

SlashKey, <http://www.slashkey.com>

PlayMesh, <http://playmesh.com>

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