

Can 'FarmVille 2' save struggling Zynga?

September 5 2012, by Barbara Ortutay

(AP)—Not long ago, online games company Zynga looked on pace to unseat much bigger, well-established rivals as it rode the popularity of "FarmVille," the clicking game of virtual cows and real money.

But the iPad came along, and more people bought smartphones. People weren't playing Zynga's games on Facebook and computers as much as they used to. Zynga's revenue growth slowed down, and its stock price fell sharply, even as it released dozens of new games.

Now, the out-of-luck [game](#) maker is turning to a "FarmVille" sequel for a revival.

A lot is riding on "FarmVille 2," which Zynga Inc. released on Wednesday.

It's a total makeover for the simplistic, addictive, but oft-derided online diversion. It now has lush 3-D graphics instead of the old two-dimensional figures.

The game itself has added another dimension, too. Players can now interact with cute cartoon animals instead of simply "harvesting" them with endless clicks to obtain coins, as in the original "FarmVille." There's more collaboration among farmers than competition, something Zynga said its players have asked for. Instead of getting players to complete chores, it tries to lull them into an old-timey comfort zone.

"You are trying to bring an old family farm back into glory," explains

Wright Bagwell, director of design at "FarmVille 2."

Rather than make it frantic and stressful like many of today's shooter video games, the creators are hoping to evoke relaxation and nostalgia. The soundtrack consists almost solely of nature sounds.

"FarmVille" became a household name when it launched in 2009 and helped propel Zynga to the forefront of Facebook [game makers](#). But investors are now questioning the company's long-term viability. Its stock is down some 70 percent since its December [initial public offering](#).

"People often refer to Zynga as the 'FarmVille company.' This will be a key test to them," Baird analyst Colin Sebastian said. "They need another breakout hit."

But a lot has changed since 2009. The first [iPad](#) didn't launch until 2010, and smartphones were not as ubiquitous as they are today. In 2011, the first year the Pew Internet & American Life Project started tracking such data, 35 percent of Americans owned a smartphone. That has gone up to 46 percent.

Zynga faces some of the same challenges in the mobile world as Facebook, where most people play Zynga's games.

Computers reigned when both companies were created, but people are now migrating to smartphones and tablet computers in droves. While Zynga has some popular mobile games, it makes most of its money through Facebook Inc.'s website. Zynga has yet to prove it can reap the same revenue from iPhone and Android games.

How quickly things can change is even more easily illustrated by the free-fall in Zynga's [stock price](#) since the spring, when it was trading above \$14. This week, it's hovering at about 25 cents above its all-time low of

\$2.66. Investors who own Zynga stock have sold it off in droves, spooked by declining user numbers and a worry that Facebook games were just a fad, with people moving on to playing on their iPhones and Android phones instead.

Soon after its launch, "FarmVille" became synonymous with online time-wasting. It spawned a generation of players—from teens to grandmothers—who zone out in front of their computers as they plant and harvest virtual crops and decorate fantasy farms with everything from gnomes to pink, sparkly fairy wing trees. The number of people who play "FarmVille" each month peaked in January with 34 million people, according to estimates from research firm AppData. As of this week, that number has dropped to about 18 million.

One person who's stuck around is Denise Lambert, executive director for a charity in Toronto. She has been playing for the better part of three years. She recently tried out "FarmVille 2" after getting early access to the game from Zynga.

"I loved it," she said. "I just think it's overdue. It is going to offer a gaming aspect that no other social game has right now. It's much smoother, everything is more vibrant."

She described the original as "so Neanderthal" compared with the sequel.

That might be what Zynga hopes, too—that "FarmVille 2" will represent the next generation of online social games. Many of the new game's features are based on user feedback. When the company noticed that players liked the animals in the game, designers drew cuter ones and made them more prominent characters on the farm. Take care of them, and they give you milk and eggs and fertilize your crops.

Then there are people like Kim Lindell, an avid "FarmVille" player until

December. She said she stopped playing because it wasn't enjoyable any more. She found herself playing just to keep from falling behind in the game—as a chore rather than an enjoyable pastime.

"I realized I never liked all the actual playing of the game itself anyway but mostly just enjoyed arranging the items (and) decorating," she said.

Today, she is playing another Zynga game, "CastleVille," though she says the game, like "FarmVille," is "full of glitches and myriad hoops to jump through" just to play.

She hadn't heard of "FarmVille 2 until Wednesday.

"I won't be checking it out," she said.

Zynga hopes it can lure players like Lindell back. The company invites some 200 people like each week to its San Francisco office to play its games and offer feedback. Some of the feedback is positive; some isn't. There are also paid focus groups, video and phone chats and live interviews that Zynga employees conduct with current and potential players. Sometimes it even visits people at their homes to watch them play.

"We want to talk to as many people as we can, people who play, stopped, never played," said Nick Giovanello, director of player insights at Zynga.

All of it is meticulously collected by Zynga to take into account when adding new features and ways to play to the games. For example, users might stumble when encountering a new feature in a game, discover software bugs or get bored. As with all its games Zynga uses the data it gathered on "FarmVille 2" trials to change the game. It will keep doing so after the game launches, treating it like a service rather than a finished product.

"One of the things Zynga has at its disposal is data and a big user base," Sebastian said. "They know who has played 'FarmVille in the past and who will play it again."

Of course, there's still that mobile challenge. "FarmVille 2" is available only on [Facebook](#) and on Zynga's website.

More information:

Facebook: apps.facebook.com/FarmVille2

Zynga's website: zynga.com

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Citation: Can 'FarmVille 2' save struggling Zynga? (2012, September 5) retrieved 3 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-farmville-struggling-zynga.html>

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