Psychology of Gaming: Crash Course Games #16

Crash Course: Games
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Hi, I'm Andre Meadows, this is CrashCourse: Games. In this episode, we're gonna explore the psychology behind games and see what leading experts have to say about why we play them and what they teach us about ourselves and others. Now, this is an episode on psychology, which, well, is one of the squishier sciences, but there are some legitimate studies in the field, and some of those even happen to be about games, so sit back, relax, and let's talk about your mother... brain.

(Intro)

Games are incredibly effective at satisfying many of our intellectual needs. You may have heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You know the enemy of John Green and Hazel Grace Lancaster? It's a common topic in Psych 101 classes, and it ranks human needs, suggesting that lower priority needs must be met in order for us to reach self-fulfillment. Now, I should note that there are some criticisms of this model's oversimplification of the human psyche, but it's kind of useful for our purposes as it relates to games.

The model suggests that you're not going to care about writing that term paper when you're hungry, and if you don't have a roof over your head, trying to beat the Turbo Tunnel from *Battletoads* probably isn't a top priority. I don't know, some people I think it still is. But once you meet those basic needs and have a good social support system, you find yourself wanting more fulfillment, and this is where games come in.

The beauty of a game system is just that - it's a system. Games produce perceptible results, so once a player completes a game, they are given feedback telling them how well they've done. This can be done at the end of a game level, on a phone, in a deck of cards, or even on a kitchen table. Modern video games have extensive achievement systems in which players can compare their achievements to others. These constructs allow players to see how far they've come and how far they need to go, basically outlining a direct path to fulfillment.

But competition isn't the only social drive for playing games. Academic Jane McGonigal explains that cooperative game play is also psychologically driven, and it has been shown to lift players' moods longer than competitive play. It also helps build stronger relationships. So we've talked about why we like games, but not all players play the same types of games. Why do some people prefer football and others poker?

Well, first let's talk about the satisfaction we get from games. Roger Caillois classified games in his landmark *Man Play and Games*, based on the different experiences games create. Competition experiences are found in games like basketball and Go. In these games, the enjoyment lies in overcoming the challenge of the opponent. Chance experiences are found in games like slot machines or dice rolls. In these games, the joy lies in the excitement of not knowing and trying to guess an unpredictable outcome. Vertigo experiences can be found in games that require intense concentration, in which the user gets in the zone. We'll talk more about that in a bit. And make-believe experiences allow players to assume characteristics and abilities they don't posses in real life. For example, *League of Legends* allows players to act as an all-powerful summoner, working for the greater good, not something we get to do in real life.

So games are composed of any combination of these gaming experiences, and they define why we play games. But how do we decide which games we would like to play? Well, to better understand, we're going to have to look at the psychology of players. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Richard Bartle, a founding father of the MMORPG gaming genre spent much of his life trying to describe character identities of players. In 1996, he published a paper that would describe the Bartle test. Now, the Bartle test was based around immersive world games, and Bartle himself states that, "It is incomplete for different game types, but is still useful for understanding gamer preferences." Bartle claims that all players can be described by their scores across four main character types: achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers.

Achievers find fulfillment in success. They are completionists that find satisfaction in gaining points, completing quests, or leveling up. Most MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* are designed for this character type. Explorers find fulfillment in discovery. They often feel restricted by tightly controlled games and enjoy learning about hidden places, finding Easter Eggs, or revealing glitches within a game. A game like *Myst* is designed for this character type. Socializers gain enjoyment through interaction with other players or even AI. This character type tends to play games that rely heavily on relationships and communities within the game, like *Animal Crossing*. And lastly, Killers enjoy competing with other players in the game. This character type seeks to dominate the game itself and other players through their actions in games like *Call of Duty*.

A player's gaming preference is a combination of how strongly they identify with each of these character types, and they find the most satisfaction in games that align with these preferences. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Now we should talk about flow, or the zone. This is a theory on mental states defined by Hungarian psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. People find themselves in the zone when the outside world slips away and they are fully engaged with a task at hand. Ever play a game and someone's talking to you or something's happening around you and you don't even notice it? You're in the zone. Csikszentmihalyi described it as, "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved and you're using your skills to the utmost."

Baseball players, musicians, gamers, and many others have all reported this state of being, and Csikszentmihalyi claims that he knows the factors necessary to reach this state of mind. First, players must be engaged in something that can be actually done. It can't be a simple activity like sitting, but it also needs to be something that requires some skill. Players must also be fully engaged with no distractions in a task with clear goals and constant feedback. This is where games excel. And the players need to be able to have some control that requires significant concentration, almost like meditation. When the zone is finally achieved, players will become fully integrated into the activity and will experience altered time, and what takes hours may feel like only minutes, and if you're playing *Bayonetta*, you're experiencing altered time and witch time.

In a 2008 study by Lennart Nacke and Craig Lindley, it was found that First Person Shooter games fit Csikszentmihalyi's zone perfectly. Games like *Doom* and *Call of Duty* help players achieve the zone by allowing them to become fully immersed in the first-person mechanic while at the same time creating a mix of challenge and tension through shooting mechanics.

So we've seen how games affect our brains while we're playing the games, but do these games affect our behavior in real life?
Video games, and especially violent video games, have often come under fire for their realistic and sometimes unrealistic portrayals of war, murder, and other terrible stuff, and media outlets have had a rich history of trying to tie violent video games to real life violent behavior. For example, in 1999, much was made of the fact that the

perpetrators of the Columbine High School mass shooting were avid *Doom* players. But it isn't just the media that thought so. In 2015, the American Psychological Association released a report tying violence in video games to real life aggression. The report found a consistent relation between violent video game use and increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions, and aggressive affect, and decreases in pro-social behavior, empathy, and sensitivity to aggression. But wait, before you put your all-caps rebuttal in the comment section, just know that not everyone agrees. The APA's report and others like that have been met with criticism, and not just from the gaming industry.

Critics argue that the APA's studies were flawed and failed to take into account other factors that can lead to violent behavior, including socioeconomic status and violence in the home. Critics also point out that crime statistics don't show an increase in violent crime, despite the massive growth in the video game industry. In fact, violent crime has been steadily dropping for decades, and a 2011 study by Christopher Ferguson of Stetson University even found that playing violent video games led to a decrease in frustration and aggression. The debate over violent video games is far from settled, but evidence is mounting all the time that the vast majority of people who play video games have a strong ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Most players don't engage in violent behavior after shooting up their friends in *Call of Duty*, just like I don't go around stomping on turtles after playing *Super Mario Brothers*.

So whether it's through studies, discussions, debates, or personal experience, we learn that games are capable of stimulating amazing things in our brains, and we play games because they help us feel fulfilled. Games vary by experiences, but they all have a component of satisfaction, but all players are different, and our differences dictate the games we choose and the ones that get made, and if we choose the right one, even time itself can seem to stand still.

Thanks for watching, see you next time, and you made it to the end of the episode, achievement unlocked!

Stan: CrashCourse: Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our Patrons in general, and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge, Morgan Lizop, and her Vice Principal Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.