Why do people play?

Author: Daniel Schosser

People from all classes and ethics even male and female play games caused by different reasons. Since the beginning of time humans and games are constant companions. This paper will list and discuss the main points, why people play games.

1 Introduction

Games are an exciting phenomen. All over the world people play, either board games, video games, multiplayer or singleplayer games. All these games have some facts in common, which made them as successfull as they are today. In case to develope a successfull game or to produce products and mask them as a game, it is essential to know why games are as popular as they are and why people play them.

In the second Chapter, games will be discussed as an alternative world in contrast to the day-to-day tasks. In the third Chapter, games are a way to forget about time and get a mental distance to "real life". In the fourth Chapter, we will handle the social component of games. In the fifth Chapter, games show us another way to learn. In the sixth Chapter, we talk about games as the perfect task to match human needs. In the last Chapter, we deal with the different ways people think about risks and organizing their lifes in reality and games.

2 Alternative universe

Most people are not as happy with their lifes as they like to be. School is stressfull, they are forced to learn or they will fail the exams. Parents decide for their children what to do and what they should not do. At work people again are told by their supervisors what they should do and how they should do it. If they don't do what they are told, they will fail exams, lose their job, or in worst case even can die. In almost every situation there is at least one person telling the other one what they have to do.

In games there is no one to define what to do, or not to do. Everyone can make his own decisions. If they want to complete a quest now, they can do so, if they don't like to, they can do it anytime later. Another very important fact is that games are not restricted to someones

workingplace or school. These are places where most people don't feel very comfortable. Everyone can play wherever he likes to and so most people play from the safety of their living rooms. The living room, or commonly the own appartment is a really safe place. This is the place where everybody creates the rules by himself, where he can relax and do whatever he wants. The player don't has to watch over his shoulder to avoid getting caught by his boss, doing something forbidden.

Games offer an alternative world with virtual characters, buildings and rules. People have to use their imagination to accept this artificial universe and forget about the normal rules they know. They accept the rules made by the game for the period of time they play. In games anyone can become the hero he or she would love to be in reality. After leaving the game, they are back in the real world. Games create a virtual world around the player known as the magic circle. This term was first used by Johan Huizinga in his book "Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture" [3] and later applied to digital media by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their Book "Rules of play: Game Design Fundamentals". They write "[...] the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga's list of 'play-grounds,' the term is used ... [by him] as short-hand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game." [4].

3 Time matters

Everyone remembers, if a lesson in school was boring. It felt like hours until it ends and on the other hand if someone is interested in something time flies by.

These are the two categories someone can sort in games and work. Work will be interesting or exciting in the first days, but after a while it will become routine and mostly boring. Games instead are not routine. There are so many games on the market, that every single one interested in games can find at least one he likes to play. Even if someone plays the same game multiple times, it will not become routine.

For most people, gaming is the balance to their work or school. While working in a job people often don't have fun, they count the minutes and seconds until they can go home. In games they can forget about time, very easy. People get sucked inside the magic circle while concentrating on the virtual world and time flies by. [2]

4 The social factor

If someone plays games, one is never alone. In multiplayer games one has friends or teammates around. They talk about next steps, how to support one another or they are planning tactics, how to beat the opponents. In real life perhaps they are just one small wheel in a big machine, but in games they can be the one who leads the way.

In singleplayer games, players don't have any other real persons playing directly with. In this case, they are alone inside the game, but they are not the only one playing this game. In huge communities people are discussing about every different game and everyone can become a part of it. If a gamer plays the same games as his friends do, they meet and talk about the last hours inside the game.

Over the last years games changed and made the social factor more relevant. Cloud computing allows game publishers to gather the users data and create rankings out of it. Every single step a player does can affect these rankings and tells other players how successful one

is in a certain game. Competition is one of the biggest factors why people play games. Before video games become popular, it was all about who wins a game. Sports like soccer, basketball, hockey, football, ... they are all designed to have a competition about who is the winner at the end of the game. In games like chess, monopoly, connect four, or even playing tag, it is the same.

Massively multiplayer online games brought the social factor to a new level. Every player is part of a big alternative universe. The difference to other game genres is that if the user turns the computer off, the world inside the game continues. This leads to a very profitable effect for the publishers. The User tries to stick to the game as much as he can, to make sure not to miss any important events.

5 Learning by choice

Games generally are played, because every single one does it by choice. Everyone can choose time and place to play. Professor Ahn at Carnegie Mellon University made a study about the gaming behavior of people born after 1970. One of his results is: A person born after 1970 has played an average of 10.000 hours when he becomes twenty-one and more then 200 million hours are spent each day playing computer games in the United States. [5]

As a consequence two questions are worth to be asked. Why do people play so much and how can this be used for real life problems? The second one results out of the first question. People play so much because they want to learn.

If we remember the first part of chapter 3: Pupils are often bored in school. If someone would ask hundreds of students if they like learning, the majority would answer with "No". But thats wrong indeed. It depends just on the way people learn. If someone is forced to learn, the result will be bad. If a person learns by choice or does not even recognize that he is currently learning, the result will be a lot better.

The human brain is built to recognize patterns and built synapses in the brain to memorize these patterns. The more patterns the gamer finds, the more synapses are built. In school or most jobs, the teacher or supervisor explains the pattern to the people and their brains will take notice of it. It works different in games, because the player is not told what the pattern is or even if there is a pattern. The players task is to find these patterns on his own. As a consequence the player is actively searching for the solution and not passively accepting what others tell him. If the player finds a pattern that works, he gains access to a new level or unlocks a new feature which rewards him for his good work. This reward again, is also noticed by the brain which will answer with a small dose of dopamine. Dopamine is a chemical structure which is responsable for the good feeling someone has, after getting a reward. As a consequence the player tries to find as many patterns as possible to get more of the dopamine-driven feelings.

6 Stay in the flow

Games use a perfect mix of challenges and skills to complete all tasks. At the beginning the player needs to solve some simple tasks, i.e. tutorials. Tutorials are a good way to give an overview what people can expect from the game. Which kind of quests and levels are we playing? How can I move my avatar? How can I interact with other characters in the game? After this first overview the player gets more and more liberty to explore the game on his

own. As shown in figure 1 the game tries to keep the player inside the "Flow Channel". At the beginning of a game the challenges are easy and the gamer does not need any special skills to solve them. But towards the end, the challenges become more and more difficult and the player needs to improve his skills to solve them. While the course of events keeps the player inside this channel, the game is never boring or too complicate. The player stays interested and accepts the challenge to move on.
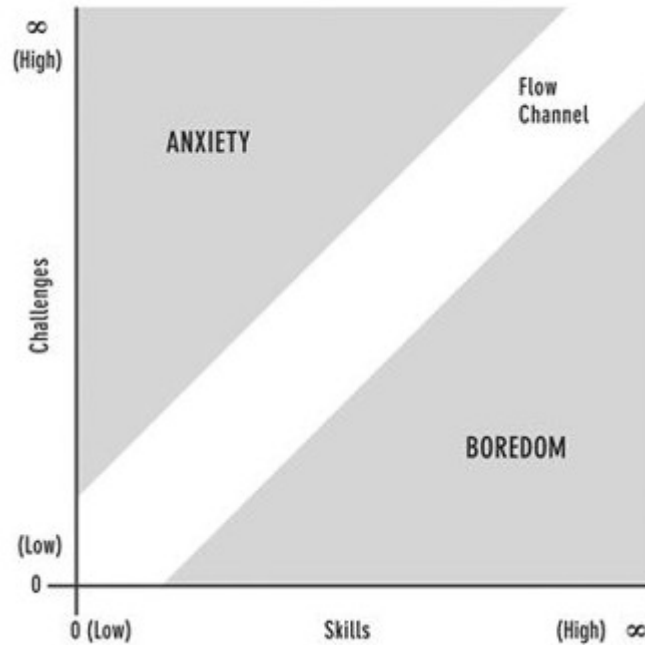

Figure 1: Flow Channel is the perfect mix of challenge difficulty and the players skills ([2] page 7)

In addition games use reward-systems as we have seen in the last chapter. Within the first levels of a game the player gets a short overview which kind of rewards he can earn. This can be a very easy pattern the player will memorize in combination to this game. The player uses this pattern as a hint to play through the rest of the game searching for more rewards. There are two kinds of getting a reward. The first one is to like a reward. This works in the early phase during a game, where the player gets rewards very easily, i.e. by completing a mission, passing a special point inside the level and so on. Later in the game the rewards become more rarely and harder to earn. The player changes from "liking" to "wanting" which enables the active part of human interaction. The gamer is hunting for rewards, which turns the focus away from the simple task the player should solve on to a goal the player sets himself.

According to this fact, Aaron Dignan writes about a study in his book "Game Frame: Using Games as a Strategy for Success". In this case there were three groups of preschoolers. Each of these groups had pens and paper to draw on. The first group has been told to earn a ribbon if they use the pens for drawing. The second group was promised a surprise ribbon only after deciding to draw, and the last group received no mention of rewards.

The researchers studied the behavior of these kids the days after the test and recognized, that the children with the surprise ribbon drew the most. The children of the other two

groups drew about comparable amounts. [2]

Games use a lot of classical conditioning like demonstrated in this study, especially for reward-systems. Another example would be the pattern-system we discussed in chapter 5.

7 One life

In a survey on a construction site, the workers have been asked, what motivates them the most. Their supervisors mentioned things like: money, interesting projects, ... The workers answer was: To see progress. [2]

Humans stay interested in one thing, if they recognize that they are making progress. Working on the same task for a longer period of time without any progress, makes people certainly bored and creates the wish to do something else. If they see their progress they will keep on working for a longer time, because they want to complete this task. The same applies to nearly all kind of games. A player will stay in the game if he can see the progress he is making, i.e. new quests, rewards for solved tasks, new levels, ... he will keep on playing.

Sometimes it is necessary to do something risky. Humans tend to avoid risks when possible. If they fail jumping from one rooftop to another, they will probably get injured. If there is a chance to get the same task done without risk, humans will in most cases choose this way. Humans learn by trial and error. But if we never try we will never learn. According to this, the handling of risk in games is different. What happens if you fail the jump from one rooftop to another in a game? In most cases you reload the game and try it again. If a player completes the jump, he saved himself the time to climb down the house and climb up again on the other one. He made a bigger progress in a short time.

The decisions a human being made in his life will stay forever. The decisions can't be undone later, whether someone chooses to move to another country or to change his job. Every one has only one life to manage. Games can be played multiple times and every time it will be slightly different. A player can remember his last decisions and reconsider if they were good or not. Which one will be the best decision in this run? There are even some games with different endings. The "good" and the "bad" player can play the same game with different quests.

8 Related Work

Anyone interested in the features which make games successful and how they interact with humans, should read Aaron Dignan's book "Game Frame: Using Games as a Strategy for Success" [2]. In addition to the covered topics in this paper, he writes about the future of games and how games can - and will - change everyones day-to-day life.

Other very interesting works about this topic are "Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals" by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman and "Designing games with a purpose" by Luis Von Ahn and Laura Dabbish.

9 Conclusion

Summarized we can say: People play, because games combine the human needs for social contacts, rewards and learning. They offer a world to the player where he is his own supervisor

and games animate people to learn without letting them know about it. Games initiate players to set their own goals and achieve them.

References

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