



**Why Do We Play Video Games, And What In Terms Of
Design Influences Our Choices?**

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to research onto the reasons why we play video games, and how design can influence our choices.

Research will be carried out with surveys and focus groups, as well as background reading. From the survey I hope to find area to discuss in the focus groups, where hopefully we can define the areas of design that influence us most.

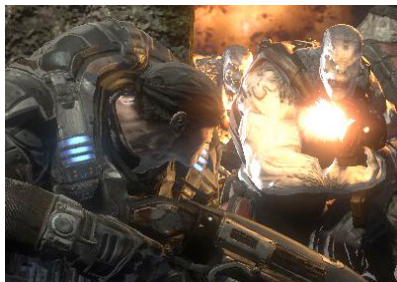
By the end of this research I hope to better understand what compels people to play video games and how the design of games can determine what games we choose to play.

Introduction

For as long as I can remember I have played video games. I grew up with the whirl and click of the ZX Spectrum, watching my mother's frustration at Dizzy Egg (Codemasters 1987), and taking turns at Alex Kidd (Sega (1), 1986) to get past that damned ghost with the flying cane. And when I wasn't at home playing console games I could be found in an arcade "wasting" my pocket money on Puzzle Bobble (Taito 1994) and Virtua Cop (Sega (2), 1994). Playing video games is as natural to me as watching T.V. so, if people ask me why do I play video games, it's simply because I always have. It wasn't long after I first completed Final Fantasy VII (Square 1997) on the Sony Play Station that I decided I wanted to pursue a career in video game design, and it wasn't long after I started working at GAME that I realised I had no idea what it was that other people looked for in a video game, so I decided to find out. I researched on forums, in magazines, books, an exit survey and focus groups to find out why we play video games, and how design can influence our choices, if at all?

Escapism

Although I tried to approach this research with an open mind and as few preconceptions as possible, I could almost have written this segment without ever questioning anyone. The main reason for playing video games, for the majority of the people I spoke to was, escapism. When talking about video games it is virtually impossible to avoid the ever ubiquitous term escapism, something that *The Escapist* (escapistmagazine.com) is very much aware of, but as a consequence the phrase seems to have lost some of its poignancy, and doesn't give us any clues as to how we can better design games, as by the very nature of sitting in front of a video game you are escaping the hum-drum and stresses of real life. So there must be other reasons, what is it that draws us to sit in front of a video game to escape?



Gears of War: honing in on the mentality that big angry men and guns are cool.



Guitar Hero plays on the idea that we are all closet rock stars waiting for our big moment.



Almost everyone has pretended to be a Jedi at some point, now the Wii controls bring those dreams closer to reality.

Perhaps one of the most obvious draws is the chance to do things that we are otherwise incapable of. The idea of life without the drowning, broadening our horizons from the comfort of our sofa. Video games can open doors to worlds and experiences out of our grasp, the most significant from my research being playing war with big guns; the majority of people interviewed rated Gears of War (Microsoft (1), 2006) as their favourite game. This is a result emphasised by the number of war games available, in fact almost a fifth of the games available on the XBOX 360 are first person shooters (FPSs). But more than just being able to travel to imaginary worlds or play with over sized rail guns now we can also be rock stars thanks to Guitar Hero (RedOctane, 2006), pop stars thanks to Sing Star (SCEE, 2004) and international golf champions thanks to Tiger Woods PGA Tour (EA Sports (1), 2007), all the comfort of our own homes. High definition graphics and surround sound coupled with strategic rumbles of the control pad complement our emersion, but not until the innovation brought in by the Wii were we able to immerse entirely, thanks to interactive game play we can get deeper into the game than ever before, our movements are what drive the game making it easier than ever before to believe that you are indeed a Lego Jedi knight (Lucas Arts, 2007).

Another reason for escaping into video games is the challenge/reward relationship. In all games there is a system of challenges leading to rewards and progression, the challenges will start simple and the rewards small, but as we progress the challenges are more complex and the rewards grander, and we enjoy the satisfaction of defeating the challenges and reaping the prizes. This idea of small gratification for completing tasks is a concept well known in game design, weather that prize is extra health, a pointy hat or a cinematic sequence we revel in them and it spurs us on to complete the next task in the hope of bigger and better gifts, completing Tekken's (Namco (1), 1994) story mode will reward you with a characters cinematic and will unlock a new playable character, complete all characters story modes to receive extra game modes such as Tekken Force (Namco (2), 1998); opening more hours of play and characters. In fact if the reward for our diligence doesn't reflect the effort put in by the player, one is put off, somewhat offended by the gesture, and will lack the motivation to continue. In Final Fantasy XII (Square-Enix (1), 2007) for example, one could quickly fill a characters licence board, once completed the character could develop no further yet you would still have to fight and collect wasted experience points, after this point there is little to motivate you to find the other secrets in the game such as the clan hunts.



The licence board in Final Fantasy XII, once all the items on the grid have been uncovered there is very little other incentive to continue fighting your way through the game, an issue that will hopefully be rectified with Final Fantasy XII: International Zodiac Job System (Square-Enix (2), TBA).

When we do succeed in a game, our satisfaction no longer has to remain within the confines of the game, thanks to gamerscore on the XBOX 360 and HOME on the Play Station 3 (PS3), games now come pre-packed with extra achievements for you to attain. These achievements add to your gamerscore on XBOX 360 or are displayed as trophies in your HOME hall of fame on PS3, and then there are on-line leader-boards. It's one thing to hold the high score against your friends, but now you can challenge everyone who's played that game to beat your score, and when you are the leader, even if only for a short while you hold the admiration and envy of your peers. It's acknowledged that high scores on video games, high gamerscore and packed out trophy rooms mean very little in the "real world", but in our escapism we can be kings of our castle and the idea of being the best at something is satisfying. Video games can be addictive, as Margaret Robertson states "the feeling is narcotic"⁽¹⁾, once we have tasted success, we develop a thirst for it and we will strive to get "good" in more games, hoping for the same fulfilment.

Taste in video games is the same as taste in music or film; it's just your preference, and like with music and films we gravitate to one over another for what we hope to get out of the experience by the end of it. For the most part we want to enjoy a video game. We turn to video games to break away from the mundane and the stressful, so the last thing we want in our diversion is a game that feels more like work than play. We want to enjoy our escape, if that's in immersing ourselves in an epic story line, getting a gold score on Geometry Wars (Sierra, 2007), five starring an expert track on Guitar Hero or even if the fun is sourced from the adrenaline rush of defeating Big Daddy (2k Games, 2007), or escaping Pyramid head (Konami (1), 2001), the experience is still enjoyable. So, when we chose video games as our escape how do we decide which game it is we want to escape with?

Story and Character

Something that came up in the focus groups was the importance of a good story and strong character development. Almost all video games today follow a story, mostly original but there are also film and book adaptations. How you advance through the story will depend on the game play, but it is agreed that a story needs to be compelling. As much as the challenge/reward system can keep us playing games for days on end, an immersive story can also act as the glue that binds to a game. And though strong character design is important it's not as essential as an attention-grabbing story line. Within story-based games we can define two groups; story based games where we act through the protagonist and story based games where we are the protagonists. With many FPSs it doesn't matter who we are, and our character is intentionally vague or clichéd to make it easier for the player to project their own personalities into the game, Half Life (Microsoft (2), 2002) and Halo (Sierra (2), 1998) could easily have had any lead character as our affinity is not with the person but the situation. The addition of customisation within games means you can literally put yourself into a game, in fact you're encouraged to have your own Mii to play in many Wii games, and you can even project a photograph of yourself onto a character in Tiger Woods 08 thanks to the use of web cameras on XBOX live. In cases where we are the hero, a good story is indispensable; especially with game play within genres is so similar.

Then there are the games where we are to assume the role of an already established character. The majority of role-play games (RPG) and action games have protagonists integral to the story; we play from their point of view. In these cases the character we play as can influence the way we play the game, given a strong, muscle head marine will encourage us to be head strong and confident, a more ordinary hero will promote more cautious play. So it's important that the character suits their environment and their role in the game, and it's crucial that we like, or learn to like the character. It's very easy for a personality to be overpowering and put the player off continuing with a game, and it's just as easy for a character to be underwhelming and not inspire a want to finish a game. It's a careful balance that's widely understood in the entertainment industry and when it's right that character will stay with us long after we've finished the game, Solid Snake is an example of this.

Metal Gear Solid (MGS) (Konami (2), 1999) is a plot heavy Play Station (PS1) game, which we traverse with the games protagonist Solid Snake. At a glance it could be bundled with every other war game with a generic and gruff anti-hero, but MGS and Solid Snake gave us much more than just a war game. The games thick plot line tackled more than just nuclear wars, and our hero was more than just a mercenary. As Snake we are betrayed, tortured, humiliated, revered, loved and needed. The game just about covers all emotions in a short and intense episode and we go from an indifference towards a genuinely un-likeable character to feeling a certain comradeship and respect for Snake, and when it's all over you miss having Snake around. The game was a critical and financial success, so it came as no surprise

when MGS 2 Sons of Liberty (MGS 2) (Konami (3), 2001) was announced; in fact we had been waiting for it. And it begins in a similar manner to its predecessor, we're treading familiar ground with old friends, but before we can get too comfortable Snake is snatched from us and replaced with rookie Raiden. It is difficult to like Raiden, mostly because we want to be Snake and the controversial exchange of character stained the game for many players. Yet we continue to play, mainly to finish the story, but also for the hope that we might go back to playing as Snake. And our lasting impression of the game is that it highlights how good MGS was.



Solid Snake (left) and his successor Raiden (right). The effeminate looks and long blond hair resulted in Raiden becoming the punch line in many MGS jokes. When compared to his predecessor, Raiden lacks all that we want to be whilst playing the game, cool, strong and dangerous.

The removal of the well established Snake for the new Raiden in MGS 2, resulted in it being cast off by many fans and it was surprising to see EDGE magazine rate the game as one of their 100 best video games. And it's not just MGS 2 that has suffered for replacing a well loved character, the inclusion of new hero Nero in Devil May Cry 4 (DMC4) (Capcom (1), 2008) was greeted with the same hostility as Raiden, we turned to DMC4 because we wanted to play as Dante. As much as a well-established character can draw us to play a game, it's not always true that the character will be able to carry a game if the story and game play fail to support them. It was once thought that Lara Croft could sell a game just by her inclusion alone, until Tomb Raider Angel of Darkness (Eidos, 2003), the poor game play and inconsistencies in the game alienated and infuriated the player resulting in the title being the weakest in the Tomb Raider franchise. So, good characterisation is essential in games but it needs to be supported with strong story lines and accessible game play.

Game Play



Alexey Pajitnov's Tetris has graced almost every single platform for video games, including watches. It's simple design has stood the test of time and it is frequently hailed as one of the greatest games created.

There are of course games that have little or no story behind them, and for the majority of these games there needs not be any story. Tetris (Nintendo, 1989) wouldn't be a better or more addictive game if there were a story behind it. With these games it's the game play that's key. Games focused on sports simulation, driving/flying simulation, rhythm action and puzzles depend on intuitive, innovative and fun game play to succeed. And here again we can define two classes; games that aspire to realism and games that don't. Project Gotham Racing 4 (PGR4) (Microsoft, 2007) is based around real cars and real motor bikes in real cities, so naturally the game is engineered to look and feel as true to real life driving as possible with incredible levels of detail both in the graphics and the sounds. The game succeeds because of this attention to detail and the player's love for driving really fast. Wipeout (Psygnosis, 1995) on the other hand uses hover vehicles on invented tracks set in the future, so naturally it is impossible to use real world rules in an invented future sport. What Wipeout did was take what we know of real world physics and apply it to an idea, with the same level of attention to detail and design, the result was a success because of it's application and the fact that players like to drive really fast. Sports simulations follow the same ideas, the groundwork is already out there, all the develops need do is make playing the simulation feel as natural and realistic as possible.

That's not to say that story based games don't require desirable game play. If we don't enjoy playing a game, if it's inaccessible or too difficult we won't continue to play. We'll discard the game and move on, regardless to whether or not the game had a well-written story and protagonist. Accessibility to a game is essential, without that we will never give the game a chance. It's widely acknowledged that Squaresoft's Final Fantasy VII is one of the greatest games to grace the PS1. As the first 3D RPG it's graphics we're like nothing we had seen before, with an immersive storyline, compelling characters and mini-games and side quests to keep the avid gamer busy for over 100 hours, it seems to have everything that we look for in games, however the game play is what puts many people off. Most of the games in the Final Fantasy series use a turn based battle system, the idea of having to stand defenceless and wait for your character to be attacked before it's your turn to strike back seems like a step backwards in comparison to the fast paced battle other games employ. Turned based fighting is an acquired taste, and possibly the only reason why the Final Fantasy franchise doesn't dominate the gaming world.

Graphics



Okami is quite possibly one of the most stunning games on the PS2, and it's not only the look of Okami that is beautiful, your objective is to make the world a more beautiful place to live.

Of course well-written stories, protagonists we can relate to and well-structured game play are all elements of a game we only discover once we have actually played the game. One thing that came up in the survey results was the importance of good graphics. This is something also mentioned in the focus groups, although not deemed quite as important as it was to those I surveyed. 'Good' graphics means different things in different situations. With games aiming for realism it's easy to judge if the game looks good or not because we can compare it to what's around us, and to other games also aiming for realism. When a game is stylized it becomes more difficult to affirm what makes the graphics good, as once again it depends on the player's taste. One title to succeed with stylized graphics is Okami (Capcom (2), 2007). Okami combines cell-shaded techniques with the sumi-e style to produce a truly beautiful game, met with critical acclaim. The painted outlines of the characters and environment, the paper texture filters and the celestial brush attack make it easy to believe that you are in fact playing through a painting and not a video game. Okami is a rare example of style and substance being one and the same. A good-looking game can lead us in but as with strong characterisation it needs to have more to it than just pretty pixels, without story and game play there's nothing to keep us playing, for every Okami out there which succeeds, there's a Ninja Bread Man (Data Design Interactive, 2005) which for all its charm lacks in level design and story.

World of Warcraft

After a sitting down with a group of self confessed hard-core gamers to talk about why they play games and what they look for in games, I start to see that, even though I play games for the sake of playing games, I too look for well written stories, defined personalities and beautiful stylization matched with accessible and intuitive game play. So I think to myself, if I look for these things also then perhaps it's true of all gamers on varying levels. And then I sit with another group of gamers and suddenly I'm not so sure. It's seems for every rule there is one exception out there which breaks it. Just when I think I've gamers pegged, I find my exception to prove the rule and that is World of Warcraft (Vivendi, 2005).

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massively multiplayer online role play game (MMORPG) with a staggering 10 million subscribers world wide, it's popularity however has very little in common with the elements we say we look for in other games. When talking to people who play WoW there is almost no talk about the story of WoW. It does indeed have a very rich history spanning across more games in the Warcraft franchise but the story is not what draws the majority of people to the game. The character you play in WoW is of your creation. There are a number of races that you may choose from and various customisations you can make on them but the idea essentially is that you create the character that you wish to play as. The game play is typical of MMORPGs and the graphics are simple to make the game accessible to as many people's different computers as possible. And yet it has 10 million users. So what is it that attracts people to play WoW? Seeing as the game goes against the grain in terms of what people have told me they look for in games, what is the secret to its resounding success.



It's easy to get sucked into the world of Warcraft, there's lots to do and many to help you do it.

For the most part people play WoW because their friends play. WoW is a massive online community and people play because of the social network, WoW for many of its players is now more of a social event rather than a game. People play WoW because 10 million other people play WoW. And that's true of most of the players, once one person starts playing they will invite other people to join them and their guild, Blizzard are no fool and pack each new copy of WoW with a free guest pass, get a friend to play and you will be rewarded. So that's why people start to play; word of mouth and mild peer pressure, but once they are in why do they stay? Obviously there is the socialising, but there are other avenues for this, what WoW also has is a very well structured and addictive challenge/reward frame. It's funny to hear people who no longer play refer to themselves as being "clean" and also be able to tell you for how many months they have been clean.

Conclusions

This revelation makes you think. All the people I've spoken to listed a fairly clear criteria for elements that they think make good games, things that they look for when they buy games, and yet many of these people I spoke to play WoW a game that almost completely contradicts this criteria. 19 of the people I surveyed claimed that they look for good graphics in a game, yet only 3 people said the reason they bought the game they purchased was for the graphics, in fact elements of design that the focus groups raised as important were not the factors that inspired the purchases in the exit survey I did at GAME. As I've said before, many of the choices we make about games are down to our taste, but I'm starting to think that it's more than just that. The people in the focus group were all asked to participate because they play games, a lot. The people who were surveyed in the exit survey at GAME were the general public. The results were similar but one thing raised in the survey and not the focus groups was the importance of a good review of the game they're buying. People who are into games tend to surround themselves with them, subscriptions to game related magazines, websites and blogs. We not only have our taste to influence our choices but we are also well informed, so when we make decisions about games we make them with a bank of knowledge to support them. Casual and social gamers won't necessarily have all the information as someone who actively pursues video games as a hobby, so it's natural that when purchasing a game they want some reassurance that their investment will be worth their while.

And then it hit me. Most of the people buying games are not hard-core gamers; in fact hard-core gamers are a niche market. The majority of gamers out there and in particular console gamers are casual/social gamers and as such their reasons for buying games have very little to do with a game's merits and a lot to do with a game's marketing. And this is a very upsetting find for someone who wants to be a game designer. And you just have to look at what games do sell to see how much of a sway marketing has. Dr Kawashima's Brain Training: How old is your Brain? (Nintendo (2), 2006) has not been outside the top 10 game sales on the DS and the top 40 game sales on all formats in the UK since its launch, and it's not even a game. Thanks to advertisements featuring Julie Walters, Patrick Stewart and Nicole Kidman, Brain Training has sold millions of copies, thanks to advertising campaigns featuring William Shatner and Mr T, WoW increased its number of subscribers by 2 million, and Halo 3 (Microsoft (3), 2007) features in the Guinness book of world records as the highest grossing game on launch (some \$170 million in the USA alone), helped by the massive marketing campaign "Believe". Video gamers are not cheap, they are a luxury item and gamers will tend to only buy a couple a month, so it's not surprising that we lean towards games that the media tells us are worth us buying. But this often means that some of the better games miss out. Only a very small percentage of games are actually advertised outside of specialist web sites and magazines, therefore a lot of games will go un-noticed in the shadow of their more powerfully advertised counterparts.

The failure for games to sell well in the initial months is more often than not the end of that games production. And this is where small budget, and slow burning games suffer. Unlike with movies there is no initial box office period for games. If a film is good, but fails to do well at the box office there is always time for word of mouth to spread for the DVD release, if a film is bad but does well at the box office, it will still get the DVD release because of all the money it made at the box office. And then of course there's the special edition DVD, the directors cut DVD, the how-ever-many-years re-release DVD and so on. Play Station games need to sell 600,000 copies in the first year before they will be re-released in the Platinum range. For the good games that are missed the best we can hope for is a spiritual sequel or for the elements of design that made that game stand out to be replicated in other games, a trait in games that the best sellers are subject to also. And it's perhaps the biggest trend in games, the sequel. A majority of people I surveyed at GAME brought their game because it was a sequel to a game they had played, if you look at the top 10 selling games from last year over half of them were sequels, with FIFA 08 (EA sport (2), 2007) coming in at the top. The fact that graphics was deemed so important to most of those surveyed is maybe the reason why classic games get left behind. Video games on consoles are reliant on the console; once it is superseded the game is slowly lost to the halls of gaming past. And as the technology moves forward, classic games age, and to new gamers there is little incentive to play them when there are so many better-looking games available. And when so many of these new games borrow so heavily from those that came before it, it's almost as though we don't need to. Whilst playing Eternal Sonata (Namco Bandai, 2007) I was reminded so heavily of elements, characters, places and themes in different Final Fantasy games that it was difficult to give the game credit for what originality it brought. All FPSs borrow from those that have come before with developments in the game play being so marginal between titles. Assassins Creed (Ubisoft (1), 2007) had elements reminiscent of the Prince of Persia (Ubisoft (2), 2003) titles, which themselves have evolutions of game play found in the Tomb Raider games. It's difficult to come up with a completely original game, there's so much out there covering so many aspects that any new game will in some way touch upon ground covered by another game, and perhaps this isn't such a bad thing. Seeing as the majority of us feel safer with a sequel than a new development, or will stick to games in a certain genre or by a particular developer, maybe a game has a better chance if there's something familiar. And there have been so many good games on older consoles, which would otherwise be forgotten altogether.

When I decided to undertake this project I thought I knew less about the gaming public than I actually do, and more about why I play games than I did. I had pre-conceptions and a lot of these turned out to be true, but I also discovered a great deal, which had I not undertaken this project I wouldn't have found out, or at least not now. I hoped that by undertaking this project I would come to learn more about what we see as good game design, and maybe even unlock some secrets to put to my own ideas. But the games market is driven by more than just good game design; it's dominated with big marketing campaigns. It's a shame to learn that we are more inclined to buy

a sequel or a poorly designed game just because we have been lead to believe that it is the “must have game”, and also a shame that the deserving games we misguidedly reject will struggle to receive the recognition they deserve. But then this research is not wholly conclusive. Within the time frame I have done as much research as I can, but the results are representative of a very particular demographic. This project would have benefited greatly from broader research. That said, more research would still only represent the thoughts of people right now, the video game industry is fast paced and our opinions on what it is that makes a game good will change with what’s around us at the time, I never thought I would say this but even the games industry isn’t without its fashion trends.

So why do we play video games? Simply put we want to distract ourselves from the every day with something fun and engaging. We will all get different things out of different games but if we’re not enjoying ourselves then we wont continue. Does design influence our choices? Yes, but not always in an obvious way. To those of us who keep themselves in the loop so to speak, we can make our own choices regardless to the media machine because we know what we want out of a game. Otherwise for those games which success is built by its merits, yes design influences our choices else the game would not have been brought to our attention. But there are still those games that we will buy regardless to its design. Is there an area of design more important than the others? No, good game design is a chain of elements, if any of these are weak the game will be frail and may even break, great games rely on all elements being as strong as each other. Has this research helped me? Well it’s not given me the golden formula for the perfect game, but then I never thought it would, but what it has done is help me recognise where games fail and hopefully, armed with this I will avoid these pit falls in my own designs. Before doing this I think my own game concepts where for games that I would play, but I sit in a niche market, if I want my games to reach more people there’s certainly things here I need to consider.