

In Focus

In Focus directs your gaze towards some special interest areas of psychology. In this issue, Mark Griffiths looks at the reasons behind our fascination for playing games.



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GAMES

Games for one player are childish and simple and not worth learning. When a man is reduced to such a pass as playing cards by himself, he had better give up.

'Captain Crawley',
The Card Players Manual, 1876

(The card game) patience is the mental equivalent of jogging — its purpose is to tone the brain up and get rid of unsociable mental flabbiness.

David Parlett,
The Penguin Book of Card Games, 1979

Exercise

From the text extract the following:

- Functions of games
- Types of games
- Reasons why games may be addictive

Most of us love to play games — especially if we win! I like nothing better than an afternoon at the scrabble board — but even if I lose, I have usually had a good time along the way. So what is the fascination with games? Why do we play them? How are games categorised? What makes some games so successful and others not? What makes some of them so addictive? In this short article I will briefly look at the psychology of game playing.

Why do we play games?

Game playing is a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement bounded by precise limits of time and space, as well as being what the sociologist Goffman (1967) called 'a world building activity'. Freud was one of the first people to concentrate on the functions of playing games. He speculated that game playing provided a temporary leave of absence

from reality which reduced individual conflict and brought about a change from the passive to the active. Modern thinking is that people play games to concentrate on a limited stimulus field, in which they can use skills to meet clear demands, thereby forgetting their own problems and separate identity.

Games provide the opportunity to prove one's superiority, the desire to challenge and overcome an obstacle and a



Just a game? Competitors play with real money as they fight it out to represent Britain in the World Monopoly Championships.

medium by which to test one's skill, endurance and ingenuity. Games, unlike some activities (including life itself!), tell us whether we have won or lost. Sociologists have argued that in the context of a competitive and materialistic culture, that has become increasingly regimented and standardised with little room for individual creativity and personal achievement, games offer the illusion of control over destiny and circumstance.

Categorising games

Perhaps the best categorisation of game types was formulated by the anthropologist Callois (1958) who listed four classifications

- **agon** (competition), **alea** (chance), **mimicry** (simulation) and **ilinx** (vertigo). In the context of games like chess, poker, scrabble and monopoly, alea

and agon are crucial in that they offer a combination of skill, chance and luck. Most people desire opportunities to test their strength and skill against an adversary, and those games that offer a component of skill or talent, combined with luck and chance, provide the most favourable conditions. This is particularly prevalent in males who are deemed 'masculine' if during the socialisation process they show (socially) important traits such as courage, independence and bravery. Another interesting observation is that in games involving winners and losers the real prize is often status as opposed to positive material gain. Thus, by taking risks, reputations are built and winners gain social rewards.

What makes a successful game?

Nearly all 'successful' games share fundamental similarities. These factors which

determine whether games become firmly established or simply fade away include the capacity for skill development, a large bibliography, competitions and tournaments, and corporate sponsorship. Let's look at these briefly in turn. All good games are relatively easy to play but can take a lifetime to become truly adept at. I would therefore argue that the capacity for continued skill development is important for an activity's continued popularity and future existence. Secondly, for games of any complexity there must be a bibliography that people can refer to and consult. Without books and magazines to instruct and provide information there will be no development and the activity will die. The sheer number of monthly game magazines on the market again demonstrates how healthy the game industry is! Thirdly, there is a need for



Box 1 Amazing game records

The highest score in a competitive game of Scrabble is 1049, scored by Phil Appleby in June 1989. His score included 374 for the word OXIDISERS. The highest competitive single score with one word was by Dr Saladin Karl Khoshnaw who scored 392 with the word CAZIQUES (which means native chiefs of West Indian aborigines!).

The American Larry Kahn won the tiddlywinks singles titles a world-record 12 times between 1983 and 1991.

Charles Walker played a record 229 games of draughts simultaneously, winning 227, drawing 1 and losing 1, at the International Checkers Hall of Fame, Petal, Mississippi, USA on 25 January 1992.

The most consecutive games of chess played without a break was 663 by Vlasitmil Hort of Czechoslovakia in a period just under 33 hours. He played between 60 to 120 opponents at a time winning on average four out of every five games.

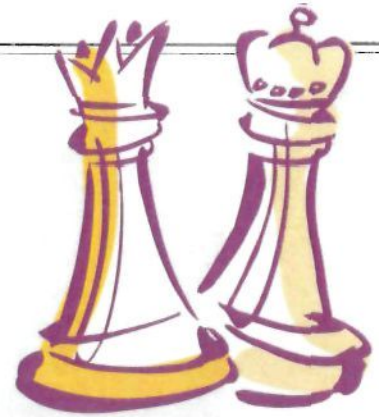
In 1989, the Brazilians Marcel Branco and Gabriel Chagas played 752 (out of 784) hands of contract bridge.

The shortest time ever for a game of solitaire is 10.0 seconds by Stephen Twigge at Scisset Baths, West Yorkshire on 2 August 1991.

The world's biggest board game was a version of the game 'Goose', and was organised by 'Jong Nederland'. It stretched for 638 m and was played by 1631 participants at Someren, Netherlands on 16 September 1989.

On 12 June 1979, Kevin St Onge threw a single standard playing card 56.41 m in Michigan, USA.

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extinction — in short to more 'addiction'. Instant reinforcement is also satisfying. A lot of games (such as video games) rely on multiple reinforcements (the 'kitchen sink' approach) in that different features might be differently rewarding to different people. Success comes in a variety of routes and the reinforcement might be **intrinsic** (e.g. improving your Scrabble high-score, beating your friend's high-score, mastering the game) or **extrinsic** (e.g. peer admiration). Just to whet your game-playing appetite, look in Box 1 for some amazing feats to keep in mind when you're next playing a game! ■

References and further reading

- Callois, R. (1958) *Man, Play and Games*, Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1967) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*, Doubleday Anchor.
- Wanner, E. (1982) 'The electronic bogeyman', *Psychology Today*, Vol. 16, No. 10, pp. 8–11.

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competitions and tournaments. Without somewhere to play and like-minded people to play with there will be little development within the field over long periods of time. This is very much linked to the capacity for skill development as the best players in any activity will want competitive arenas in which they can demonstrate their dexterity, prowess, physical and mental reaction time, problem-solving ability and overall game-play. Finally — and very much a sign of the times — no leisure activity can succeed today without corporate sponsorship of some kind.

Why are games addictive?

Many games flourish for brief periods of time and reach unprecedented heights of popularity. For instance, the Rubik's Cube was enormously popular in the late 1970s and there were even reports of Rubik Cube addiction! Excessive game playing partly comes about by what is called the **partial reinforcement effect** (PRE) (Wanner 1982). This is a critical psychological ingredient of toys such as video games whereby the reinforcement (the reward) is intermittent. Basically, people keep playing in the absence of a reward hoping that another reward is just around the corner. Knowledge about the PRE gives the game designer an edge in designing appealing games. The magnitude of reinforcement is also important. Large rewards lead to fast responding and greater resistance to