

# The Psychology of Why Humans Play Games

Games are a universal part of human life – from children playing make-believe to adults engaging in video or board games. Modern psychology shows that playing games fulfills deep-seated psychological needs and desires. Games are not mere pastimes; they tap into what motivates us, how we feel, and even how we socialize. Below we explore **why humans play games**, what they enjoy (and dislike) about them, the emotions games evoke, and **what makes a great game** from a psychological perspective – with an eye towards insights useful in game design. While we focus on video and board games, these principles apply to **all forms of play**.

## Core Reasons Humans Play Games (Motivation)

**Intrinsic enjoyment and psychological needs:** One major reason we play is simply because games are fun and satisfying. Psychologists Ryan and Deci's **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)** explains that humans are driven by innate needs for **competence, autonomy, and relatedness**, and games excel at satisfying all three. When a game makes us feel skilled and effective (**competence**), grants us freedom and control (**autonomy**), and connects us with others (**relatedness**), it becomes deeply compelling. In games, competence comes from mastering challenges and experiencing the focused state of **flow** (being "in the zone" at the right difficulty). Autonomy is present because we **voluntarily choose to play** and often direct our own in-game decisions. Relatedness arises when games let us **interact or compete with others**, forming social bonds in a fantasy context distinct from real life.

**Achievement, social, and immersion motives:** Another framework, by researcher Nick Yee, identifies three main motivational components for gamers: **achievement, social, and immersion**. The **achievement** motive drives people to advance, conquer goals, and compete – enjoying points, levels, and victory over others. The **social** motive is the desire to form connections: many play games to **chat, cooperate, or be part of a team/community**. Finally, **immersion** motivates players to enter a make-believe world – crafting avatars, experiencing a story, and **escaping real-life stresses for a while**. For example, a player might relish *achievement* by mastering difficult levels and topping leaderboards, seek *social* fun by teaming up with friends in an online game, or enjoy *immersion* by role-playing in an epic RPG storyline.

**The fundamental need for play:** Underlying all these is a basic human inclination toward **play**. From an early age, play is how we learn, explore, and express creativity. Adults are no exception – games provide a **safe outlet for competition and imagination**, a "permission" to be playful that can relieve stress and boost happiness. In short, we play games to satisfy inner needs (feeling competent, in control, connected) and because play itself is rewarding.

## Different Types of Player Motivations

While humans share common needs, **not everyone enjoys games for the same reasons**. In game design, it's helpful to consider different player types. A classic example is **Richard Bartle's taxonomy** for multiplayer games, which identifies: **Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, and Killers**.

- **Achievers** are driven by goals, points, and status. They want to *win*, collect rewards, and show off accomplishments. (In Bartle's analogy, they're "diamonds" seeking treasure.) An Achiever in a board game might be the one intensely playing to maximize score or win as quickly as possible.
- **Explorers** are curious and love discovery. They enjoy exploring the game world or mechanics, finding secrets, and experimenting. (Bartle likens them to "spades" digging for information.) An Explorer in a video game will wander off the beaten path to find hidden areas or easter eggs rather than rush toward the end.
- **Socializers** play for the human element. They value interaction, teamwork, and friendship through games. (Bartle tags them as "hearts," empathetic and focused on others.) A Socializer might prefer cooperative board games or online games where they can chat, role-play, or form alliances, sometimes enjoying the socializing even more than the gameplay itself.
- **Killers** (a small subset of players) thrive on competition and impacting others *directly*. They enjoy wielding power in the game, defeating or dominating other players – essentially the PvP-focused folks ("clubs" that hit others, in Bartle's terms). A Killer-type enjoys fighting games or competitive shooters, and their fun comes from besting (and maybe trash-talking) opponents. Notably, **Killers are rare** compared to the other types – most players favor achieving, exploring, or socializing over pure domination.

Most people are a mix of these motivations, but understanding them helps designers make games that appeal to their target audience. For instance, a **great multiplayer game** often provides something for each type: *ranks and achievements* for Achievers, *rich worlds or mechanics* for Explorers, *chat and co-op modes* for Socializers, and *fair competitive modes* for the Killer-types. The key takeaway is that humans play for varied reasons – a great game can either **specialize** in one (e.g. a pure strategy game for Achievers) or **blend** several to broaden its appeal.

## What People Enjoy About Games

People love games because they deliver experiences and feelings that are **hard to get in everyday life**. Here are some of the most cherished aspects of games and **why they're psychologically appealing**, with examples:

- **Fun and positive emotions:** At a basic level, games are enjoyable. They produce **hedonic engagement** – the pleasure of being actively involved in something purely for enjoyment. This fun often comes with a sense of **liberation** – a temporary release from real-world obligations or stress while playing. For example, a lighthearted party game might make players laugh and forget their worries for an hour. Psychologically, this blends *immersion* (losing oneself in fun) and *freedom* (feeling unburdened), which is very rewarding. Many players turn to games to **relax or lift their mood**, and indeed a recent scientific study found that satisfying gameplay can modestly improve players' *affective well-being* (happiness). In short, games make us feel good.
- **Challenge, mastery, and flow:** Most great games involve *challenge*, and humans generally **enjoy a challenge** – as long as it's at the right level. A game that is too easy becomes boring, while one that is too hard becomes frustrating; the sweet spot in between creates a state of **flow**. *Flow* is the highly focused, absorbed state where we lose track of time because the task

difficulty perfectly matches our skill (not too easy, not too hard). In games, reaching flow is common – think of a chess player deep in concentration or a gamer so absorbed that hours fly by unnoticed. Designers strive to achieve this balance of **challenge vs. skill**, keeping players “in the zone” as shown in the diagram below :

*In the flow channel (bright yellow region), the game's challenge matches the player's skill – avoiding anxiety from overly hard tasks and boredom from overly easy ones. This balance produces deep enjoyment and engagement.*

When a player overcomes a tough challenge, the pleasure is immense. In fact, **triumph over adversity** gives rise to a specific emotion that game researchers call “**fiero**.” Fiero (Italian for “pride”) is that *intense exhilaration* we feel at moments of victory – “**we throw our arms over our head and yell**” in triumph. It's the feeling you get after finally beating a brutal boss in a video game or completing a long, difficult puzzle. Psychologist Jane McGonigal notes that *fiero* is one of the biggest reasons people play games – it's “**an intense emotion that many of us crave**”. Neurologically, *fiero* comes with one of the **strongest dopamine rushes** we can experience as reward for a hard-won success. Great games provide **clear goals and escalating challenges** to fuel this sense of accomplishment. They also make sure to *calibrate difficulty* so that victory feels earned but still attainable – if a game is so punishing that players give up, they'll never get to feel *fiero*, so tuning the game to let players *regularly experience moments of triumph* is a key design challenge. In summary, **people love games that challenge them** and allow them to **build mastery**, because beating a challenge yields pride, satisfaction, and often a compelling urge to seek the next challenge.

- **Progress and feedback (competence):** Related to mastery, games are built around **progression systems** (points, levels, scores, badges, new items) that constantly signal improvement. Humans enjoy seeing progress; it feeds our need for competence. Unlike real life, games give **clear, immediate feedback** for our actions – *points pop up, a quest is marked complete, a sound chimes for a correct move* – which **reinforces a sense of achievement** and effectiveness. This constant feedback is deeply satisfying psychologically, as it provides *tangible proof* of success or learning. Many games use **level-up systems** or skill trees to show players how far they've come, which boosts confidence and motivates further play. For example, in an RPG when your character gains a level and new abilities, *you feel more powerful* – a direct hit of competence fulfillment. **Dopamine**, the brain's reward chemical, is released when we accomplish tasks or get pleasant surprises, so these feedback loops literally create *little bursts of pleasure* that encourage us to keep playing. Designers also leverage the **anticipation** of rewards – e.g. a progress bar almost full or a mystery loot box waiting to be opened can be as motivating as the reward itself, because the suspense keeps us engaged. All these elements (points, rewards, immediate feedback) contribute to why players *like* games: they make us **feel competent and rewarded** at each step, in a way that is *clear and structured* compared to many real-world activities.
- **Social connection and competition:** Humans are social creatures, and games – especially board and multiplayer video games – are a *social playground*. Many people love games because they **bring people together** in ways other activities do not. Board games, for instance, involve sitting around a table talking, laughing, and strategizing face-to-face, which **fosters social bonds** and friendly interaction. Cooperative games let us experience *teamwork and unity* toward a common goal, building camaraderie. Competitive games, on the other hand, add the excitement of rivalry – pushing us to outsmart friends within a safe, “*friendly conflict*” context. Both cooperation and competition can be enjoyable, and **the best games often include a bit of both**, allowing players to team up or face off as they prefer (which also gives a sense of autonomy in how to play). Notably, “**fun is more fun when shared**” – research indicates people often find experiences more enjoyable when they do them with others. It's no surprise that a

majority of gamers prefer playing with others: for example, **66% of American gamers play video games socially (with others) most of the time**. Online video games tap into this by enabling global social play (guilds, chat, streaming), while board games provide an in-person social outlet. In either case, games satisfy our desire to **belong to a group, to communicate, and to feel the special bond that comes from shared play**. Even when playing alone, knowing others are playing the same game (competing on leaderboards, or discussing it in communities) can create a **sense of connection**. In short, people enjoy the **social dimension** of games – whether it's the cooperation in a game like *Pandemic* (a board game where players team up to beat the game) or the competition of *Mario Kart* with friends trash-talking on the couch, **games create memorable social experiences**.

- **Immersion and escapism:** Games transport us to **different worlds or roles**, appealing to our imagination. A captivating game can make hours feel like minutes because we're so immersed in its story or environment. This is enjoyable in two ways: first, it satisfies curiosity and the desire to **experience new things** (e.g. exploring a beautiful fantasy land in a video game, or imagining oneself a detective in a mystery board game); second, it provides **escapism**, a mental break from reality. As one psychologist put it, games create "*active involvement and immersion intended for pure enjoyment*", giving us pleasant sensations of being in a different reality. For example, narrative-heavy games like *The Witcher* or *Arkham Horror* (board game) pull players into rich stories, temporarily freeing them from everyday concerns. This sense of being elsewhere and "*letting loose*" is **liberating and restorative**. Many gamers cherish this opportunity to **temporarily step away from the real world** – to fly a starfighter, build a medieval city, or be a hero saving the world – *with no real consequences*. Psychologically, such **imaginative play** can reduce stress and satisfy our creative, exploratory impulses. Immersive games also often involve **art and aesthetics** (visuals, music, theme), which players appreciate for their own sake. In sum, players like games that offer a compelling alternate experience or story in which they can **lose themselves and feel free**.
- **Strategy, problem-solving and creativity:** A lot of games are essentially **puzzles or strategic challenges**, and humans generally enjoy solving problems. **Board games**, for example, often engage our brains with strategy and planning – whether it's chess or a complex Eurogame, there's pleasure in **devising a plan and seeing it succeed**. This *cognitive stimulation* scratches the itch for mental exercise, giving a satisfying sense of achievement when our strategy pays off. Games allow **safe risk-taking** too: players can try bold moves or experiments *within the game* (bluffing in poker, choosing a risky strategy) without real-life repercussions, which is both educational and thrilling. Video games similarly often challenge players with tactical or logistical problems (resource management, spatial puzzles, etc.). People who enjoy **learning and using new skills** find games rewarding because a well-designed game gradually teaches you skills and then tests you in interesting ways. In fact, the act of learning and mastering new mechanics in a game itself triggers dopamine release, contributing to the fun. Meanwhile, games that offer **creative outlets** (like sandbox or building games – e.g. *Minecraft* or a level editor in *Super Mario Maker*) appeal to our inventive side. They provide a playground for imagination and creativity, which many find deeply satisfying. Being creative or clever *within a game's rules* gives a sense of ownership and pride in one's personal approach to the game.
- **Tangible and nostalgic appeal (in board games):** While video games deliver many of the above pleasures digitally, **board games add a tactile, physical dimension** that people love. **Handling cards, tokens, or dice** engages our senses – there's something pleasing about shuffling cards or moving a piece on a board. The *physicality* makes the experience feel more concrete or "real" than virtual games. Many also carry **nostalgic** value: classic board games remind us of childhood or family time, invoking warm feelings. This nostalgia and the tradition of gathering around a

table contribute to why people continue to enjoy board games even in a digital age. It reconnects us with simpler times and face-to-face social play, which can be very emotionally rewarding.

All these aspects – challenge, mastery, social interaction, immersion, feedback, creativity, etc. – are the **“fun factors”** that make games attractive. Different games emphasize different factors (for instance, a party game emphasizes social laughter and low-skill fun, whereas a flight simulator emphasizes mastery and immersion). A key point for designers is that **fun isn’t one-dimensional**: as researcher Nicole Lazzaro found, games can offer *“Hard Fun”* (challenge and fiero), *“Easy Fun”* (curiosity and amusement), *“People Fun”* (social enjoyment), and even *“Serious Fun”* (meaning or learning). The more of these angles a game can fulfill **without diluting the experience**, the more engaging it can be to a wider audience.

## Emotions Games Evoke (and When)

Playing games can fire the whole gamut of human emotions – from joyous highs to anger and fear – often more intensely than other media because **interactive involvement** makes the feelings personal. Here are some common emotions in gaming, and **when/why they arise**:

- **Joy and Happiness:** Games frequently make players happy, both in moment-to-moment fun and as an overall mood boost. As discussed, beating challenges or receiving rewards triggers **dopamine-fueled pleasure**, leading to smiles and a sense of **well-being** during play. Many gamers play to unwind or cheer up; accordingly, research notes that *many players use games to relieve stress or regulate emotions* <sup>1</sup>. Lighthearted games (like a silly party game or a whimsical adventure) especially create joy through humor and playful surprise. **Co-op victories** or shared funny moments with friends also amplify joy – there’s a special giddy happiness in **celebrating a win together** or laughing over a game’s events.
- **Fiero (Pride/Triumph):** As described earlier, fiero is the *explosive excitement* and **pride in accomplishment** that comes at peak moments – the **“Yes! I did it!”** feeling. Players typically feel fiero **right after overcoming a significant obstacle**: defeating a tough boss, winning a close multiplayer match, solving a puzzle that had them stumped, etc. The harder the challenge, the bigger the fiero payoff on victory. This emotion is often visible – e.g., a player might literally jump off the couch with fists in the air after a clutch win. Fiero is **highly addictive in a positive way**; it’s what makes people persevere through hard games like *Dark Souls* or lengthy strategic campaigns, chasing that eventual triumphant high <sup>2</sup>. Good game design spaces out challenges to provide periodic fiero moments, which keep players hooked on the emotional ride.
- **Curiosity and Surprise:** Games often spark curiosity (what’s behind that door? how can I craft this item?) and deliver surprise (a plot twist, a hidden level, a random funny event). **Anticipation** is a powerful emotional driver – for example, the *suspense of a mystery box or the final move in a chess game* can create intense focus and excitement. Players feel a rush when a game surprises them in a delightful way or when they discover something unexpected. This ties into the *“Easy Fun”* – the pure enjoyment of exploring and uncovering new experiences. Puzzle games evoke the *“Eureka!”* feeling – a burst of joy and relief when figuring out the solution after being perplexed.
- **Flow (Focused Contentment):** When in a flow state, players experience a calm yet energized focus, sometimes described as **contentment or serenity in the moment**. It’s not an emotion with a name like joy or anger, but rather a *state* where emotions are balanced – the player feels

**in control and fully absorbed.** During flow, a player might feel **confident and engaged**, with a mild exhilaration at sustained success. After a flow session, players often feel *satisfied* or even surprised at how time flew. Achieving flow frequently produces a positive mood and is linked to overall happiness if experienced regularly. This is why a great game that induces flow can become a beloved hobby – it consistently puts the player in an enjoyable focused mindset.

- **Frustration and Anger:** On the flip side of challenge lies **frustration** – when a game’s difficulty or design crosses the line from motivating to disheartening. Players feel frustration when **progress is blocked** or they fail repeatedly without understanding why. For example, dying 20 times in a row at the same level, or losing to an opponent because of factors outside your control, breeds frustration. If not addressed, this can escalate to **anger or “rage-quitting”** – the impulse to quit (or even physically throw a controller) in fury. Crucially, research shows that this aggression stems not from violent content, but from **feelings of failure and lack of control** during the game. In psychological terms, the game is threatening the player’s sense of competence or fairness, and they respond with anger. Nearly every gamer has experienced this: for instance, a laggy online match or a “cheap” enemy attack that kills you can provoke immediate anger because it feels unfair or preventable. While a bit of frustration can motivate a player to try again, *too much* causes them to stop having fun. **Boredom** can similarly cause negative feelings – if the game is too easy or repetitive, a player might feel irritation or disappointment at the lack of engagement. In game design, **frustration and boredom are considered the archenemies of fun and flow.** A well-designed game tries to minimize these by smoothing out unfair spikes in difficulty, giving players tools to overcome challenges, and keeping the experience varied.
- **Fear and Anxiety:** Some games deliberately evoke fear – notably horror games (like *Resident Evil* or *Amnesia*) – by putting players in tense, threatening scenarios. The emotion of **fear** in a game can manifest as *heart-pounding anxiety*, jump-scare shock, or creeping dread. Interestingly, many people enjoy this in a game because it’s akin to a rollercoaster: **a controlled dose of fear** that ultimately is safe. The adrenaline rush from narrowly escaping a monster or surviving a scary encounter can actually be exhilarating. Even non-horror games can create short-term anxiety in high-pressure moments (say, a last-second penalty kick in *FIFA* or a do-or-die round in *Counter-Strike*). The key is that these feelings resolve – the fearful tension releases into relief (if you survive) or a burst of emotion (if you fail but then can try again). When designed well, these **tension-and-release cycles** produce excitement. However, if a game makes a player *too anxious without payoff*, it may stop being fun; as mentioned, sustained anxiety moves one out of the flow zone (see the diagram) into an unenjoyable state.
- **Sadness and Empathy:** Games can also make players feel **sad or moved**, particularly through storytelling and characters. Many modern games have deep narratives that can be as emotional as films or novels. Players might feel sadness if a beloved character dies, or regret at a morally difficult choice they had to make in a story-driven game. Because games are interactive, these emotions can hit even harder – *you* took the action that led to a tragic outcome, or *you* failed to save someone, which can create a strong empathetic response. For example, players of *The Last of Us* often report emotional moments of grief, and indie games like *That Dragon, Cancer* were explicitly designed to share an experience of loss and love, making many players cry. While not “fun” in the silly sense, these powerful emotions are part of why people value games as meaningful experiences. They provide a safe space to **experience and process emotions.** Moreover, the lows can make the highs more impactful – a bittersweet story can make victory more profound or messages more thought-provoking.

- **Social Emotions:** In multiplayer settings, games can trigger social emotions like **trust, loyalty, betrayal, or guilt**. A cooperative board game can lead to feelings of trust and **solidarity** (“we worked so well together!”). A hidden-traitor game (e.g. *Among Us* or *Battlestar Galactica* board game) might cause playful **suspicion or betrayal** feelings when one friend deceives the others – often followed by laughter and mock outrage when revealed. **Competition** can also evoke respect for an opponent, or envy, or triumph of outdoing a rival. Importantly, because games happen within a “*magic circle*” of agreed rules <sup>3</sup>, people often feel free to express emotions like aggression or mischief in-game without repercussions – e.g. trash-talking a friend during a game doesn’t (or shouldn’t) carry over outside the game. This *protected frame* of play allows us to experience these emotions intensely but safely. After the match, good sportsmanship and shared post-game analysis can even strengthen friendships due to the emotional journey shared.

In sum, games are a rich **emotional playground**. The *key for enjoyment* is that positive emotions (excitement, joy, pride, camaraderie) generally **outweigh the negatives** (frustration, anxiety) across the experience. When they do, players describe the game as engaging or fun. When negative emotions dominate – like a game that’s mostly stressful or anger-inducing – players will likely quit. This balance is why game designers talk about making a game **challenging but fair**, scary but not hopeless, sad but meaningful, etc. The right emotional mix, tuned to the intended audience, is central to a game’s success.

## What People Don’t Like About Games

Just as there are common pleasures in games, there are common pain points that turn players off. For game designers, these are pitfalls to avoid. **Players tend to dislike games (or moments in games) that produce:**

- **Excessive Frustration:** A bit of challenge is fun, but if a game crosses the line into *punishing the player too much*, it breeds frustration. As noted, when players feel stuck in a futile situation or that the game is “cheating” them, fun turns into rage. For example, if a game has clumsy controls or unclear rules, **failing because of the interface** (not your skill) is very frustrating. Unavoidable deaths, extreme difficulty spikes, or heavy penalties for mistakes can likewise make players angry. No one enjoys feeling incompetent or out of control. In fact, studies show that **when people feel they have no control over the outcome, it leads to aggression** and quitting – regardless of game genre. Thus, a poorly tuned game that often makes the player feel helpless or unfairly treated will quickly lose its audience. Players want *challenge*, but *fair challenge*. They dislike “cheap shots” or random failure that they couldn’t have prevented.
- **Boredom and Repetition:** On the opposite end, a game that’s too easy, slow, or repetitive will not hold attention. **Boredom** is a game-killer – players will simply drop a game that doesn’t stimulate them enough. This could be due to overly simplistic gameplay, lack of new content, or too much grinding (repeating the same task) without payoff. For instance, if a mobile game requires hours of doing the exact same action to progress, many will get bored and leave. As one industry analysis put it: “*The two most important reasons players quit are frustration and boredom – the archenemies of flow.*” Either extreme breaks engagement. Good games avoid monotony by introducing new challenges, mechanics, or story developments to keep things fresh. If a game fails to do so, players will feel it’s “*more of the same*” and lose interest. Essentially, gamers do not like feeling that their time is wasted or that nothing they do in the game is interesting after a while.

- **Lack of Meaningful Progress:** Tied to boredom is the sense of **grinding with no payoff**. If a game makes players slog without clear rewards or advancement, it starts to feel like **busywork** instead of fun. For example, imagine an RPG where you must defeat 100 trivial monsters to gain one level – players might tire of this grind if it's not fun in itself. **Games that feel like a chore** or “second job” are often abandoned. Psychologically, if the *intrinsic fun* dries up and only extrinsic rewards (points, etc.) remain, motivation plunges. As game design blogs often note, if a game starts feeling like work, players ask “*why am I even doing this?*” and quit. Thus, designers must be careful with repeating tasks and ensure players feel a sense of progress and **purpose**. Without that, players will dislike the experience.
- **Overemphasis on Extrinsic Rewards:** While points and badges are motivating, **too much focus on rewards (and not enough on fun gameplay)** can backfire. Psychology warns of the “overjustification” effect – if you flood someone with rewards for something they'd otherwise enjoy, they might lose intrinsic interest. In games, this means if the design is *only* about grinding for rewards (like incessant loot boxes, or pay-to-win monetization), players may feel manipulated or find the core gameplay hollow. **Modern players are savvy**; many dislike games that are obviously trying to nickel-and-dime them or hook them with slot-machine tactics. A well-known example is the backlash against games with aggressive microtransactions or gambling-like reward loops – players often complain these **undermine the fun** or make the game unfair. Good games strike a balance: they use rewards to enhance fun, not replace it, and avoid *too many dopamine “treats”* to the point that it **actually inhibits long-term enjoyment**.
- **Poor Social Experiences:** If playing a game with others, certain negatives can arise: **toxic behavior, cheating, or imbalance**. Many players quit competitive games because of toxic communities – constant harassment or unsportsmanlike conduct makes the experience unpleasant. Similarly, if a game allows cheating or has rampant unfair play (say, hackers in an online shooter, or one player always dominating a board game by exploiting a loophole), other players will not enjoy it. People play for fun and fairness; if the social environment is poisonous or the game design favors one type of player to the detriment of others (without recourse), the motivation to play evaporates. In short, **players dislike toxic or unfair atmospheres**. This is why game developers now invest in systems to curb toxicity and ensure *fair matchmaking* – a recognition that a game's social context must be managed for everyone to have fun.
- **Confusion and Cognitive Overload:** A more straightforward dislike is when a game is **too confusing or difficult to learn** initially. If the tutorial or rules are poorly explained, players might feel lost and frustrated quickly. An overly complex board game without a good rulebook, or a video game with a clunky user interface, can turn players off before they get to the good part. People generally dislike feeling stupid; a game should make the player feel smart and capable, not confused. Thus, a bad first-time user experience (FTUE) – such as a complicated setup or lack of guidance – is a common reason players walk away <sup>4</sup>. Smooth onboarding is crucial because **players won't like a game that doesn't respect their time in teaching them how to play**.

To summarize, **frustration and boredom are the big offenders** that drive players away. These often stem from deeper issues: unfair design, lack of challenge balance, absence of meaningful progress, or social toxicity. A great game mitigates these negatives by keeping the player appropriately challenged, rewarded, and respected. When players do complain about a game, it's usually because one of these psychological needs was violated – for example, *their need for competence was thwarted by unfair failures*, or *their need for autonomy was stifled by tedious, forced grind*, or *their need for relatedness was hurt by a nasty community*. Game designers must remember that **a game should ultimately be an enjoyable**,



**voluntary activity** – anything that consistently makes it feel like *suffering or obligation* will be something players “don’t like” and avoid.

## Psychological Keys to Great Game Design

Designing a great game means crafting an experience that consistently satisfies human psychological needs while minimizing the pitfalls we discussed. From a psychology standpoint, **great games** tend to do the following:

- **Balance challenge and skill (Flow):** Great games keep players in that magical *flow zone* as much as possible. They offer adjustable or scaling **difficulty** so that both newcomers and veterans can find the experience neither too easy (boredom) nor too hard (anxiety). This might mean having difficulty settings, adaptive AI, or a smooth learning curve that introduces complexity gradually. By “*asking you to do something just out of reach*” and then letting you achieve it, great games give players the thrill of growth **level after level**. A classic example is *Super Mario Bros.* World 1-1 design – it subtly teaches the player through easy obstacles and ramps up, a result of careful playtesting by Nintendo to hit that flow sweet spot. **Clear goals and immediate feedback** (hallmarks of flow) are always present – players always know what they’re trying to do and get response on how they’re doing, keeping them focused and motivated.
- **Frequently satisfy competence with fiero moments:** The best games **make the player feel powerful and accomplished** at regular intervals. This doesn’t mean they make everything easy, but they set up *victories that feel significant*. Whether it’s beating a boss, completing a quest, or simply improving a personal high score, great games ensure the player has **something to be proud of** after each session. They often do this via **short-term and long-term goals** structure <sup>5</sup>: there are big overarching goals (save the kingdom, finish the story, etc.) which give a sense of purpose, but also many short-term targets (beat the next level, find the next collectible) that keep yielding satisfaction and a sense of progress along the way <sup>5</sup>. This layered goal design means the player is never far from *the next accomplishment*, maintaining motivation. Great games also tend to **celebrate the player’s achievements** – with fanfare, unlocks, story payoffs, etc. – reinforcing that feeling of **competence and success**.
- **Provide autonomy and meaningful choices:** Psychologically, people enjoy games more when they feel *in control of their actions*. Thus, a great game gives players **agency** – meaningful choices that affect strategy, story, or outcomes. For example, an open-world video game might let you choose your quests or playstyle (catering to autonomy need), and a board game might allow multiple paths to victory. Even linear games can offer choices in how you solve a problem or customize your character. **Voluntary play** itself is a form of autonomy – the player should always feel “I want to do this,” not “I have to do this.” That’s why the elimination of unnecessary grind or the inclusion of optional content for extra challenge can improve a game’s reception. In short, great games respect player freedom, *never forcing prolonged activity that isn’t fun*. They also allow creativity: emergent gameplay, user strategies, or modding can all enhance the sense of ownership. Empowering the player to **play their way** (to an extent) is a psychological boon that increases enjoyment.
- **Foster relatedness and community:** From a design perspective, even single-player games benefit from acknowledging the social nature of play. Great games often include features that let players **share experiences** – high score tables, ghosts of other players, forums for fan content, etc., which create a community around the game. In multiplayer games, **tools to find friends or team up** (guild systems, matchmaking, chat) and systems to encourage positive interaction

(cooperative incentives, balanced competition) are key. The best multiplayer games **cultivate a culture of fair play and camaraderie**, because that keeps players invested long-term. Many successful games also organize events, challenges, or **content updates that unite the player base**, reinforcing the social bond (think of seasonal events in online games that bring everyone together for a goal). Essentially, great games recognize that **playing is often a social act**, and they reinforce the player's feeling of being connected to others who share the activity. Even around a physical table, a well-designed board game ensures everyone gets to participate and no one is left out – facilitating *fun for all*, which in turn makes the experience enjoyable for each individual.

- **Engage emotions with a positive tilt:** A hallmark of a great game is that it **makes you feel a lot**, and leaves you feeling good overall. This could mean a thrilling rollercoaster of tension and relief in a strategy game, a deeply moving narrative in a story game, or lighthearted goofy fun in a party game – what's appropriate depends on the genre. But the emotional design is intentional. Great games often use **psychological pacing**: periods of challenge (tension) followed by reward or rest (relief), bits of humor to diffuse stress, rising stakes in the story that lead to a cathartic climax, etc. They aim to create **emotional highs** (excitement, laughter, triumph) that outweigh the lows (frustration, defeat). Importantly, failures in a great game are framed as *learning experiences, not dead-ends*. For example, when you fail a level, the game might give a hint or simply encourage you to try a different strategy, rather than just punish you. This helps turn potential frustration into a motivation to improve (maintaining the player's self-efficacy). Additionally, many top games pay attention to **story and thematic resonance** – even simple games benefit from a bit of narrative or context that gives meaning to the player's actions, which can create an emotional connection. In summary, a great game is one that knows **which emotions it wants to evoke** in the player and carefully crafts the experience to hit those notes, leaving the player emotionally satisfied.
- **Continual novelty and learning:** Psychologically, humans love *novelty* – new stimuli grab our attention. Great games keep introducing **new elements or challenges** to maintain interest. This could be new enemy types, new power-ups, plot twists, or increasing complexity that keeps the player learning. A game that evolves over time prevents the stagnation of boredom. Importantly, great game design teaches the player *how to handle the new things* in an intuitive way, so the learning curve feels rewarding rather than overwhelming. As Raph Koster famously said, **“Fun is just another word for learning”** – players enjoy mastering new patterns. So, the best games are essentially *excellent teachers* that present novel problems and give players the tools to master them, yielding satisfaction. This constant learning also feeds into the **progress/competence loop**, as the player can look back and see how much more capable they are now compared to when they started.
- **Polish and usability:** Though not a pure psychology theory, it's worth noting that a frictionless user experience is crucial. Great games minimize **confusion and extraneous frustration** by having clear instructions, intuitive controls, and fairness in mechanics. This ensures players *stay in a positive mental state*. If a game's controls or rules “disappear” (i.e. the player doesn't have to fight the interface), the player can fully immerse and enjoy the psychological rewards we discussed. High-quality audio-visual feedback (satisfying sound effects, attractive graphics) also enhance enjoyment by making feedback more visceral and understandable (e.g. a triumphant music cue when you win, or a clear visual indicator of a low health state). All these polish elements contribute to the player's subconscious comfort and satisfaction with the game.
- **Ethical engagement, not exploitation:** Modern designers are increasingly aware that while certain psychological tricks (like variable reward schedules or fear of missing out) can increase

engagement, *overusing them can harm players' well-being or enjoyment*. A great game uses psychology **responsibly** – it tries to keep players hooked through enjoyment and mastery rather than through dark patterns or excessive compulsion loops. This means respecting the player's time (e.g. not locking fun behind 10 hours of grind), offering **optional** monetization that doesn't skew fairness, and ensuring that the game can be enjoyed in healthy sessions. Games that do this earn goodwill from players, who then feel *safe* indulging in the game. From a psychological standpoint, a player who trusts the game is not trying to manipulate or exploit them is more likely to fully engage and enter flow, rather than have a defensive posture. In contrast, if players sense a game is basically a Skinner box to extract money or a platform for ads, they'll not genuinely like it for long. Thus, fairness, transparency, and an emphasis on **intrinsic fun over extrinsic bait** are key to a game being great in the eyes of players.

Finally, a great game often **aligns with what makes play fun on a human level**. As one board game industry article concluded, the enduring appeal of games is that they “*appeal to our desires for connection, mastery, and fun*”, allowing us to **challenge our minds, connect with others, and enjoy the journey**. That is a beautiful summary of the psychology of play. If a game consistently delivers a sense of **challenge and mastery**, provides **social or narrative connection**, and most of all is **fun**, it will likely stand out as a great game. By understanding these psychological drivers – *why humans play and what we crave from games* – designers can create experiences that not only entertain, but also resonate deeply with players' motivations and emotions.

#### Sources:

- Research on player motivations and needs (Nick Yee's motivation components; Self-Determination Theory in gaming)
- Articles on game psychology and engagement (intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation, dopamine feedback loops, etc.)
- Game design blogs and industry insights on player retention, flow, and fun (avoiding frustration/boredom, fostering flow)
- Academic studies on gaming and well-being, aggression, and social aspects
- Insights on board game psychology and social play motivations

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