CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The Player's Mind Is Driven by the *Player's Motivation*

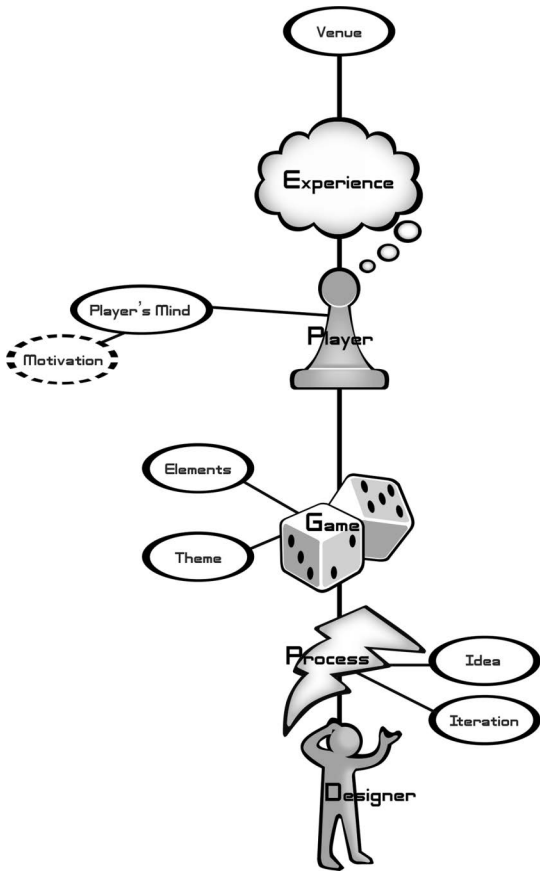


FIGURE
11.1

Let us begin this chapter by facing a painful truth.

Games are not important.

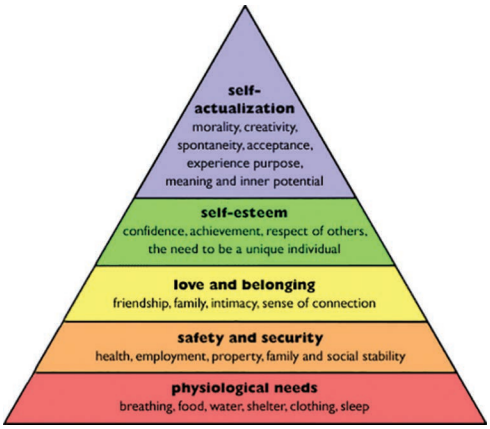
Sure, we like playing them. We get all excited about them and have wonderful, memorable experiences when playing them. But in the larger scheme of our lives, there is always something more important we could be doing. And, in fact, this is true for all entertainment. It is no exaggeration to say that the goal of all entertainment experiences is to take something unimportant (such as a ball going through a hoop, a story about imaginary animals, or whether this card is a king or an ace) and make it seem very important indeed. Is this deception? It is not. In the end, we are always aware that it is "just a game." But during play, something happens in us that makes it feel like it is so much more. Something drives us and compels us to care about these trivial experiences as if they were matters of life and death. This is the magic of motivation. The question of why we do what we do is as old as philosophy itself, but there can be no doubt that game designers seem to have special insights into human motivation.

The reality of what game designers actually understand is somewhat murkier, and it is this murkiness that makes game design so challenging. In truth, most designers create systems of motivation less through masterful understanding of the intricacies of psychology and more through gut instinct and experimentation, occasionally stumbling into success. However, any insights about motivation are potentially useful, and this is one of the rare areas where psychological research is well aligned with our design goals, so let's start there.

Needs…

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote a paper titled "A Theory of Human Motivation," which proposed a hierarchy of human needs. This is often presented as a pyramid:

FIGURE **11.2**



The idea here is that people are not motivated to pursue the higher-level needs on this list until the lower needs are satisfied. For example, if someone is starving to death, this is a priority over a feeling of safety. If someone doesn't feel safe, they aren't going to seriously pursue human relationships. If someone doesn't feel love and social belonging, they aren't going to pursue things that will boost their self-esteem. And if they don't have good self-esteem, they will not be able to pursue their talents (remember the major gift?) to do what they were "born to do."

If you think hard, you can come up with some possible exceptions to this model, but overall, it works well enough to be a very useful tool for discussing players' motivations in games. It is interesting to think about different game activities and where they fall on this hierarchy. Many game activities are about achievement and mastery, which places them at level four, self-esteem. But some are lower. Looking at the hierarchy, the reasons for the appeal and staying power of multiplayer games suddenly become clear—they fulfill more basic needs than single player gameplay, so it shouldn't be surprising that many players will feel more motivated to do them.

Can you think of gameplay activities that go even farther down on the hierarchy, to the second or first level? How about activities on the fifth level? It can be argued that the success of *Minecraft* comes from its complete coverage of the pyramid. It covers the bottom two levels with its fantasy context (you are trying to gather resources to build safe shelter), and it covers the top three levels by being a multiplayer game about mastery and creativity.

Any game that connects you with other people lets you feel a sense of accomplishment, and lets you build and create things that let you express yourself fulfills the needs on the third, fourth, and fifth levels. Viewed from this perspective, the popularity and staying power of games with both online communities and content creation tools makes a lot of sense. It is also interesting to consider how the different levels can feed into one another. But there are other ways to think about needs.

…And More Needs

As interesting as Maslow's point of view is, more modern psychologists have taken up new points of view on the question of needs. Particularly relevant to games is the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, who have done a great deal to develop what is called self-determination theory. Don't let that ugly name scare you. All they are saying is that just as humans have physical needs, we also have mental needs—not just wants or desires, but actual needs. When these needs are unmet, we become mentally unhealthy. Surprisingly, Ryan and Deci suggest that we have precisely three mental needs:

1. **Competence**: I need to feel good at something.
2. **Autonomy**: I need freedom to do things my own way.
3. **Relatedness**: I need to connect with other people.

These are somewhat startling in their simplicity, but a great body of evidence backs up their validity. And it is hard not to notice how well games tend to fulfill all three of these needs. Games are designed to make you feel mastery. Games give you freedom to play the way you want to play. In fact, they give more freedom than that: since they are only games, you can stop playing whenever you like. And, of course, most games are designed to be played with other people, to help form social connections and bonds. In future chapters, we will encounter lenses that individually address competence, autonomy, and relatedness. But to remember the importance of needs in general, take this lens.

#22 The Lens of Needs

To use this lens, stop thinking about your game, and start thinking about what basic human needs it fulfills.

Ask yourself these questions:

- On which levels of Maslow's hierarchy is my game operating?
- Does it fill the needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness?
- How can I make my game fill more basic needs than it already does?
- For the needs my game is already filling, how can it fill those needs even better?

It sounds strange to talk about a game fulfilling basic human needs, but everything that people do is an attempt to fulfill these needs in some way. And keep in mind, some games fulfill needs better than others—your game can't just promise the need, it must deliver fulfillment of the need. If a player imagines that playing your game is going to make them feel better about themselves, or get to know their friends better, and your game doesn't deliver on these needs, your player will move on to a game that does.

Illustration by Chuck Hoover

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Yet another way to think about motivation is by looking at where it comes from. This is particularly relevant for game designers, since games use so many different kinds of motivation to keep players interested. On the surface, it sounds simple: when I feel like doing something, we say I am intrinsically motivated, but when someone pays me to do something, we say I am extrinsically motivated. It may sound simple, but in the reality of games, things quickly become tangled. Do I play *Pac-Man* because I enjoy the visceral thrill of racing and chasing through the maze (intrinsic) or because the game gives me points (extrinsic)? What if I am truly motivated by the excitement of getting a high score? Is that intrinsic, or extrinsic, or both? Let's say that PepsiCo creates a game where you get points and prizes for drinking Mountain Dew. That's clearly a system of extrinsic motivation. But what if the game becomes a joke between my friends and I and we have an intrinsically fun social experience one-upping each other by winning more points and prizes? Some are quick to vilify extrinsic motivation as being "cheap" game design, but savvy designers know that one motivation can grow on another, like a vine growing on a trellis.

Some psychologists have tried to illustrate the complexity of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations by showing them as a continuum:

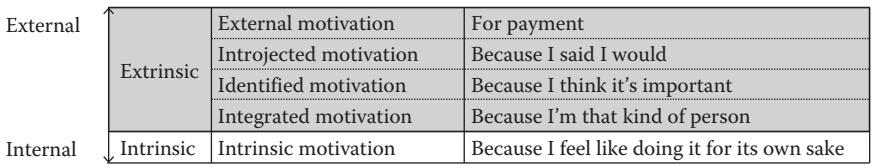


FIGURE 11.3

The key idea is that "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" are not binary, but a gradient where the more the motivation comes from "your true self," the more internal it is. As a game designer, it is important to have a sense of how internal or external the different motivations in your game really are, for all motivations are not created equal, and sometimes they can interact in unexpected ways. In one famous study, two groups of children were asked to draw pictures. The first group was paid for each picture they created; the second group was not. If you believe the idea that more motivation is better, then you might expect that the paid group would draw more pictures and better pictures. And you would be half right—they did draw more pictures, but the quality was lower—the pictures were not as interesting and thoughtful. But here's the surprising part: when drawing time was up, each group was asked to wait, while the researchers left the room. The unpaid children, with crayons and paper in front of them, naturally kept drawing. The paid children, however, did not. They put their crayons down and just waited. It would seem motivation is not purely additive; rather, the act of adding extrinsic motivation to

something that is already intrinsically motivating slides it along the continuum toward the external, draining away the intrinsic motivation! This has serious repercussions for those who believe that any activity can be easily "gamified" by adding simple points, badges, and rewards.

Wanna vs. Hafta

In Chapter 4: *Game*, we talked about how a change in attitude can turn work into play, and vice versa. This, without a doubt, is meaningfully connected to motivation. Think back to the example of the factory worker who made a game of trying to beat his manufacturing record each day and how it vastly increased his motivation and his engagement. What happened there, exactly? Certainly, one could argue that his motivation became more internal. He was less focused on the external reward for doing his job (getting paid) and became more focused on something more internal—beating his personal record, because he wanted to, and thus his motivation became more his own.

But there is something else at work here, too. It was something that I did not fully comprehend until I was reading a book about neuroscience that pointed out that pleasure seeking and pain avoiding are two different systems in the brain. They are not a simple continuum of pain to pleasure, but two different sets of motivational circuits. So often, though, we just group pleasure seeking and pain avoiding into one lump we call "motivation" and think no more about it. But when we think to separate them, interesting things come to light.

The relevance of this to games becomes clear when considering the following example. Let's say I start a new software company: Big Red Button Software. Our first product is a new kind of tax preparation software. We send you a big red button in the mail, you push it, and bam! Your taxes are instantly prepared, guaranteeing you the maximum refund allowable by law. I suspect you would agree that is a pretty amazing software product, and I'm glad you like it, because we are getting ready to release our second product: it's a game called Angry Birds. Again, we send you a big red button in the mail, and this time when you push it, bam! You instantly win!

But that's not such an amazing software product, is it? In fact, it might be the worst game ever. What is it that makes these two applications so radically different? Simply this: I "hafta" do my taxes, but I "wanna" play a game. Taxes are all about pain avoidance. I don't do them because I enjoy them, or because someone is paying me to do them, but because I'll suffer heavy fines and maybe go to jail if I don't do them. But playing a game is all about pleasure seeking. There is no penalty for not playing—I do it simply because I enjoy doing it. This has nothing to do with the activity and everything to do with our attitude toward it. A friend of mine loves preparing tax forms, and likewise, videogames bore him. For him, taxes are a "wanna" activity, and videogames are a "hafta."

So why do we care about this? Because while many gameplaying motivations are about pleasure seeking, not all of them are—many are centered on pain avoidance. When you are avoiding enemies and "trying not to die," you are in pain avoidance mode. When you are scooping up gold stars and scoring clever combos, you are in pleasure-seeking mode. They are both valid kinds of motivation and can actually work well in combination. However, sometimes the combination gets out of balance. "Free to play" games often begin entirely focused on pleasure seeking: big rewards, unexpected bonuses, and exciting animations. But over time, they build up obligations—come back by a certain time or lose points, invite more friends or miss out on prizes. Gradually, these games slide from pleasure-seeking motivations to pain avoidance motivations. They keep you coming back, but you don't always feel as good about it. For this reason, as designer Sheri Graner Ray puts it, "People don't just stop playing these games, they divorce them." Many *World of Warcraft* players have had similar experiences. They begin playing because there are so many fun things to do, one of which is to join a guild and enjoy the friendship and camaraderie of team play. But sometimes guild leaders, in a desire to succeed, pressure their members to play more than they want to. Players want to avoid the pain of shame from their guild, so they keep showing up, and gradually, playing starts to feel like something you "hafta" do.

For an interesting perspective on the motivations in your game, try putting each one on a matrix, where one axis is internal/external and the other is hafta/wanna. It is one more illustration of how richly complex and interesting human motivation can be.

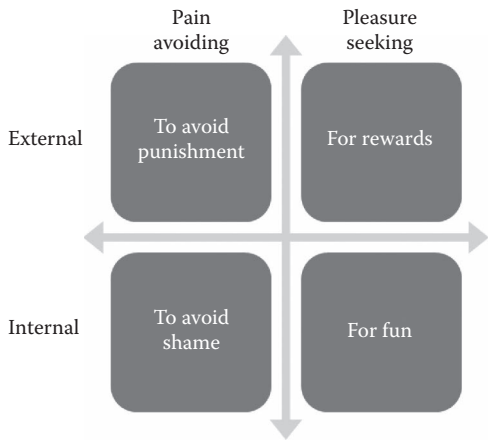


FIGURE 11.4

Be wary of those who tell you that human motivation is a simple thing, for you ignore its complexity at your peril. Take this lens to help you remember.

#23 The Lens of Motivation

Every game is a complex ecosystem of motivations. To examine them more closely, ask yourself these questions:

- What motivations do players have to play my game?
- Which motivations are most internal? Which are most external?
- Which are pleasure-seeking? Which are pain-avoiding?
- Which motivations support each other?
- Which motivations are in conflict?

Illustration by Dan Lin

Novelty

Unquestionably, the popular thing in this world is novelty.

—Mark Twain

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of novelty as motivation in the realm of game design. Human beings are natural explorers, and we are always interested in that which is new. If quality was our primary concern, our bookstores would be full of classics whose quality is time tested and true. Instead, classics get a dusty shelf in the back, while the majority of books for sale are brand new. And this is even truer for games. Conversation about games is dominated by what is new and what is coming next. Thirst for novelty is a tremendous part of what motivates players to purchase games. Games and systems that cost hundreds of dollars today will be sold for pennies on eBay tomorrow. Thirst for novelty is also big part of what keeps players playing—believing there is something new on the next level is a powerful incentive to finish this one.

One of the most powerful kinds of novelty in games is novelty that makes you think in a whole new way. Portal is a great example of this, with its bizarre mechanic of shooting connected "holes" into ceilings, walls, and floors. Its advertising slogan, "Now you're thinking with portals," is very appropriate, because the mechanics of

the game make you think about the world in a whole new way. Even though it's the same old world, you have a new way of interacting with it—one that probably never occurred to you because it didn't seem possible. But suddenly it is not only possible but urgent that you do so. Novel ways of thinking stretch our brains in a way that can feel incredibly rewarding.

Keep in mind, however, that there is such a thing as being too novel. Every successful game is a mix of the novel and the familiar. Many fascinating games have failed by being ahead of their time. An even greater danger is that your game may have novelty, but no other qualities to give it staying power. Be cautious not to fool yourself that novelty is enough. Novelty will get the word out and drive early sales, but if there is not a solid game underneath, your players will vanish as suddenly as they arrived.

It is easy to shake one's head at the sad state of a society that demands novelty over quality, but seeking and seizing novelty is the way the human race explores what is possible, ever questing for a better world. So do not despair at man's insatiable appetite for novelty—instead, embrace it, and give the people what they want: something they have never experienced before. Just be sure that when the novelty wears off, there is still something there to care about. Take this lens to be sure you remember.

#24 The Lens of Novelty

Different isn't always better, but better is always different.

—Scotty Meltzer

To ensure you harness the powerful motivation of novelty, ask yourself these questions:

- What is novel about my game?
- Does my game have novelties throughout or just at the beginning?
- Do I have the right mix of the novel and the familiar?
- When the novelty wears off, will players still enjoy my game?

Illustration by Zachary D. Coe

Judgment

The fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy, self-esteem, is the one most intimately connected to games. But why? One deep need common to everyone is the need to be judged. This might sound wrong—don't people hate being judged? They don't—they only hate being judged unfairly. We have a deep inner need to know how we stack up. And when we aren't happy with how we are judged, we work hard until we are judged favorably. The fact that games are excellent systems for objective judgment is one of their most appealing qualities.

This chapter has only scratched the surface of the nature of human motivation with regard to games. But don't worry—it isn't a topic we can abandon. Every aspect of creating great games ultimately relates back to human motivation. Consider this a starting point, a foundation on which you will build greater and greater understanding of why we do what we do. Let's take the next step by examining the mechanisms that make games work.

#25 The Lens of Judgment

To decide if your game is a good judge of the players, ask yourself these questions:

- What does your game judge about the players?
- How does it communicate this judgment?
- Do players feel the judgment is fair?
- Do they care about the judgment?
- Does the judgment make them want to improve?

Illustration by Joseph Grubb

Other Reading to Consider

***Glued to Games* by Scott Rigby and Richard M. Ryan**. An insightful guide to the relationship between self-determination theory and what makes games work.

***Punished by Rewards* by Alfie Kohn**. This book is an excellent overview of the vast body of research about the downsides of extrinsic rewards.

***Understanding Motivation and Emotion* by Johnmarshall Reeve**. If you are ready to get beyond primitive notions of how motivation and emotion work, this college-level text is a solid introduction to the world of psychological research on the subject.