Why We Play Games, And Why We Grumble About Them

Sometimes, one gamer's flaw is another's feature. Even the highest-rated games aren't always perfect – but what determines the flaws we'll tolerate versus the ones we can't forgive? It all depends on *why* you play games.

Some of our best-loved gaming experiences, from *God Hand* to *Psychonauts*, earn adoration for the strength of their ideas even when the execution isn't exactly pitch-perfect. Even this year, when Grasshopper Manufacture rolled out *No More Heroes 2* with an extra coat of polish and a streamlined design, many fans opined they preferred the "character" of the first game, flaws and all.

Yet other times, gamers are ready to grab the pitchforks and torches just for a couple frame rate drops, for cutscenes that are a few minutes too long, or over minor problems with controls. What gives? What determines the flaws we'll tolerate and those we won't?

Surely, to some it's just personal taste. For example, if you like J-Pop remixes, you'll like *Bayonetta*'s soundtrack; if you don't, you won't. Some people care if a game has a bad story, others couldn't care less. But when it comes to whether or not a flaw is a dealbreaker – or, game-breaker, if you prefer – it helps to look at *why* people play a particular game and whether or not a flaw interferes with the player's motive.

A player's motivation is more complex than "to have fun." Think on it closely and you'll agree – everyone plays to scratch a particular itch, and some games serve some itches better than others. While plenty of the details are complex and subjective, it's possible to divide play motivations into four different groups.

To Feel Powerful
Games like: *Crackdown, God Of War, Call of Duty, Devil May Cry*
You're stepping into the shoes of someone much bigger and stronger than you, commanding a massive arsenal of weapons, or enjoying a stable of incredible vehicles. Games like these put players at the helm of a power fantasy, where the enjoyment of the game comes from being able to impact its world (or the faces of the enemies that live in it).

If you get your fun out of feeling powerful, the flaws that get in the way will be those that distance the player from the action. Of course, the controls need to be immediately responsive and the physics need to work correctly – how powerful can you feel when your character doesn't react correctly, or an object he throws bounces like a piece of plastic when it ought to break? Music and sound stand out, too: crescendos create emotional peaks, and combat sound effects create a sense of impact. In this motivation group, artistic elements may be less important: You can have fun even with rough-edged polygons, ugly characters or a boring story, as long as there's a satisfying *crunch* when your fist connects.

To Have Control
Games like: *Harvest Moon, Civilization, The Sims, Pokemon, FarmVille, Wii Fit*
Game worlds can sometimes behave in complicated ways. That's why it can be so much fun to get them neatly-managed. Whether that's building a well-defended city in a real-time strategy game, building a finely-furnished dream mansion in a life simulator, or raising the perfect Pokemon, with every stat the

best it can possibly be, having control is immensely satisfying.

For players to get that sense of control, the game must behave in an understandable way, where actions produce predictable results. Bugs that interfere with completion percentages are *not* okay (but bugs that let players accidentally max out funds or resources are, of course!). And because control games often depend on using the same interface over and over, that interface must be clean, streamlined and easy to access and navigate.

In games like these, the flaws most likely to ruin a player's experience are those related to the stability of the game world and the way it behaves. Since it's so tough for the control-motivated player to get the right balance of challenge and satisfaction, if you give them a very good gameplay system, there are often quite a few other flaws, from bad music to bad translation, that they'll be willing to tolerate.

To Break Rules

Games Like: *BioShock, Grand Theft Auto, Saints Row, Prototype*

There's one type of player who, as soon as they get control of their character, starts swinging weapons, jumping or climbing just to find out what the game world will and won't let them do. Does this glass break? Can these crates be smashed or stood upon? This player loves the simulated environments that game worlds can provide, and they play to test – and break – its rules.

The primary draw for a player motivated by rule-bending and breaking is the joy of experimentation. Therefore, they're most likely to be bugged by a game world that doesn't give them a lot to do. Doors that don't open, or too many objects that are simply non-reactive chipset, feel like flaws. For this player, too, the world must behave in a responsive, believable way, since they need to be able to see the impact of the choices they make. Bad AI's a major experience-killer here – what's the fun of breaking the law if the cops, or the guards on duty, don't notice all the havoc you're sowing, only to chase you full-force for a much smaller misstep? Story may be important to this player, too, as it gives life to the game world.

Smaller bugs tend to be forgivable, though, especially when they cause funny behavior. A rule-breaking kind of player tends to mind less if the controls are less than perfect – chaos is what they love, and they can work around minor impediments.

To Explore A Story

Games like: *Final Fantasy, Heavy Rain, Silent Hill*

The story-driven player loves a game that makes them feel immersed in a new world, that lets them fill the role of a fantasy character on a journey. To them, the most important part of a gaming experience is a sense of place and character – they play to see what happens in the big picture, and to resolve a narrative.

It's not surprising, then, that elements like graphics, music and voice acting need to be spot-on – players find it hard to believe in character models that look bizarre, behave stiffly or sound stilted. Because players motivated by story exploration need to feel grounded in the game world, it needs to look rich and real, even when it's a fantasy. Of course, the story needs to be good. Empty stretches where "nothing happens," or a plot that leaves gaping holes, make the game feel broken.

This player will tolerate things like cut scenes or quick-time events more than other players will; they're more willing to be patient with technical problems like long loading screens or flawed combat as long as the emotional payoff is good.

Of course, these are just some loosely-structured theories of play motivation, but it does help illustrate how whether a flaw is a deal-breaker or not depends on the type of game and why its intended audience enjoys it. And there's some overlap, too – plenty of people play *BioShock* to feel plasmid-ripped and powerful, for example, while others play it to get lost in the world of Rapture and the story of its mad citizenry. Some will play a *Final Fantasy* game for its fantasy narrative and beautiful characters, while others are drawn to the stat management and journey of power it takes to get an RPG party ready for the final boss. Still others want to complete every side quest and collect every weapon for that spot-on sense of control over the game.

That one game can attract different kinds of players for different reasons might often explain why sometimes reviews are so mixed, or why a game can attract a strong constituency of fans even when it's critically-panned or disfavored by popular opinion.

Which motivation type most closely resembles you? What flaws will you forgive in a game and which will ruin your experience?

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