

#AltDevBlogADay » Playing with my kids helps me make better games

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A funny thing happened to me smack in the middle of my transition from the brokerage industry to the games industry. People tell you how everything changes when you become a parent. Friends of mine tried to explain the feeling, their eyes taking on a bit of a faraway look as if they were describing an unnatural love of unicorns or some sort of mythical being while I smiled and said “Oh yeah. Oh yeah.” I often joked that agents would slip into parent’s houses at night and pump them full of endorphins while they slept because it was the only way to describe the wonder I saw in those faces at the arrival of those little, pooping, screaming, sleep deprivation units. “Everything changes,” they’d tell me and I’d nod without a shred of comprehension. Then after years of difficulties it finally happened to my wife and I and I got it. I understood why so many I knew couldn’t really put the experience into words aside from the fact that everything changes and that it’s wonderful. I don’t even bother to describe the experience to people without children now, other than to

offer a genuine smile and say “Hopefully, you’ll understand one day.”

I was never around children from the time I left home until nearly 20 years later when I had kids of my own. When I was faced with other people’s children, I often found the experience awkward and a bit uncomfortable. I had no idea how to relate to kids of any age or how to interact with them. Now with children of my own I can hardly remember a time where I didn’t know how to play with children, and in return my kids have opened my eyes to why we find certain things “fun”. I hope I can describe this idea in a way that could prove useful to aspiring developers.

Playing video games in my twenties and thirties I think I lost some of the understanding of why I found games fun to play when I was a kid. Video games to me were about roleplaying or they were about competition and if you had asked me why video games were fun even three years ago, I probably would have described some combination of those two factors but over the years I’d forgotten something. Perhaps not forgotten so much as overlooked. While roleplay and competition can be factors in why games are appealing long term I think what makes video games fun is much more fundamental to the way we learn. Watching my children grow and play has helped me remember what drew me to video games as a child and what still keeps me coming back now. It has to do with learning and the feeling of accomplishment when you finally master a challenging game.

From a very early age, babies love patterns. Nothing quite locks an infant’s gaze like faces and patterns. As they get older it doesn’t stop. We find patterns all around us all the time even when confronted with something that doesn’t seemingly have a pattern. We see shapes in clouds and we instantly look for some sort of familiar arrangement in a jumble of letters or numbers. I watched my son stare at a wooden puzzle, then progress to dumping the pieces and creating chaos only to then restore order. He would continue to play in this manner until eventually it’s no longer challenging to solve that particular puzzle and suddenly that toy is forgotten for good (or until his little sister picks up a piece). He moves onto the next challenge and that’s his day with the exception of naps and meal time.

To me, right there I see two fundamental pieces of what keeps us coming back to a good video game. One factor is some sort of pattern recognition mechanic and the other is a challenge. When I started looking at the video games I enjoyed as a kid and that I enjoyed now they all have, at their core, some sort of pattern recognition element and they all had increasing levels of difficulty. I’d play until I either mastered the game and it became too easy or until the difficulty became such that I grew frustrated and no longer found the experience entertaining. I see the same behaviours in the way my toddler plays. It’s fun unless the task is too difficult, and it’s fun until the task becomes too easy.





Playing games with a two and a half year old also helped me rethink control schemes as well. My son loves to pick up a controller and ask “Sack-boy, Daddy?” but a Playstation 3 controller and LittleBigPlanet is a bit beyond him currently. However, I sat him down with Angry Birds – Star Wars and within seconds he was flinging birds at piggies and loving it. The same goes playing “Digit Chase” on the Playstation Vita, a quick demo that has users tap numbers on the screen in sequence. There’s something undeniably intuitive about touch screen input as illustrated by how quickly children take to them, but often mobile developers try to shoehorn controller type controls into their mobile games. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with modern game controllers, but controls needs to be intuitive. That doesn’t mean they have to be toddler approved simple, I just think the basic controls should be straightforward. This was a lesson we learned developing our first game and reaffirmed by watching my son play. Just because you have variety of ways to control your game doesn’t mean you should just throw everything in because you can. It’s tempting to do. I know because I did it.

I can thank the time I spend playing with my little guy for bringing me back to the basics and helping understand why we find games fun. It’s not about simplifying the games themselves, but it’s recognizing that under everything we’re always searching for patterns and looking to challenge ourselves, because that’s how we learn. It’s not about making controls dead simple, but it couldn’t hurt to imagine a scenario where your game is being played by a gamer who’s never gamed before. Will your controls confuse or will they help the player become comfortable before becoming challenging? It’s easy to lose focus on basic game-play mechanics underneath everything else that makes up modern gaming, especially for experienced gamers. Watching children play and learn helped me realize this and I look forward to gaming with both my kids for years to come, and I look forward to what they have to teach me.