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What You Don't See: The Impact of Hidden Game Mechanics on Players

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Since the rise of technology in the early nineteen sixties the art of gaming became an increasingly popular form of entertainment for many people throughout the years. As time progressed so did the advancements in technology which allowed for video games to become more immersive, captivating, and complex. Due to these advancements in tech, it generated a wide variety of ways for developers to increase game complexities. However, as the complexity of video games has increased, so too has the number of hidden game mechanics. These game mechanics are seen as the underlying systems and rules that govern how the game operates and how players interact with it. While these mechanics may not be immediately apparent to players, they can have quite a profound impact on how a player may experience their game. Throughout this essay, I will explore the ways in which the world of hidden game mechanics can have a large impact on its players, from Easter Eggs to in-game purchases, enticements, leaderboards and more.

**Easter Eggs:**

Easter eggs in early gaming are often referred to as a secret passage, hidden messages or even player advantages. These features are embedded within a game and are intentionally designed and hidden by the games developer as a form of surprise/ intrigue. The term "Easter egg" is believed by many enthusiasts to have originated from a hidden message in the 1979 game Adventure for the Atari. Within the game the developers decided to hide the creator's name in a
secret room accessible only by performing a specific sequence of actions. Easter eggs were prevalent in early video games due to technical limitations of the time. This often made it challenging for developers to include features that they wanted to but could not. This further led to a culture of hidden messages and surprises being incorporated into games, which players enjoyed discovering and sharing with others. In modern gaming Easter eggs continue to be a popular feature for video games, with some games even including entire secret levels or multiple unlockable characters. It's because of this that Easter eggs have been a truly cherished aspect of gaming since their inception. Many speculate its popularity due to the fact; it offers players a sense of delight and discovery. From hidden messages to secret rooms, these intentional surprises that originated from technical limitations have since evolved into a cultural phenomenon. It really enriches the gaming experience and fosters a community of enthusiasts who are enticed by the thrill of uncovering those hidden gems encased in modern games. Due to the increase in popularity, dynamics such as these lead to the birth/creation of cheat codes.

Cheat codes:

As gaming progressed and technology advanced, easter eggs became less necessary due to the integration of cheat codes. Cheating through codes may have originally begun as hidden Easter eggs that players could discover to unlock special abilities or progress through difficult parts of a game. However, as gaming became more popular and mainstream, cheat codes became more widely known and developers began to include them as intentional features in their games. These specifically designed codes became a way for players to personalize their gaming experience, allowing them to experiment with new ways to play the game, unlock hidden items, or make the game easier/more challenging. Essentially meaning, you could determine how you
wanted to manipulate the game as a way to play to your liking. Today, cheat codes have become a staple of gaming culture and continue to evolve with the times, from classic button combinations to more complex console commands and mods. The most commonly known game for this is “Grand Theft Auto”. The concept of cheat codes became particularly popular in the “Grand Theft Auto” series due to its open-world nature and the freedom its map provides the player. This is why cheat codes were so successful. With the use of cheat codes players would be allowed to unlock various advantages such as unlimited ammunition, spawn vehicles, increase health and ect... the possibilities become somewhat endless based on your desired style of gameplay. Due to this, people are drawn to games with these codes as it allows for the player to experiment and push boundaries of the game without spending the necessary time to attain it conventionally. For myself it's truly a way to relax and unlock a world with limitless possibilities and multiple chances to live a variety of lives. Unfortunately nothing is truly limitless and that's why developers introduced monetization.

**Monetization:**

Gaming monetization has become a highly debated topic in recent years, especially with the rise of microtransactions. While some argue that microtransactions can have the ability to enhance gameplay and support ongoing development, others contend that they create an unfair advantage for paying players and promote addictive behavioral tendencies. According to a report by The Guardian, microtransactions have in recent years become quite a significant source of revenue for game developers, which has led to much of the rise in popularity for free to play games that often do rely heavily on microtransactions to keep the game afloat/company. Things such as this tend to spark controversy in the gaming community over loot boxes and other
randomized rewards not being as necessary when you have money to gain the goods necessary to level up. Imagine playing a game for years while someone else has the monetary value to get to the same level in seconds. It's as simple as that.

Upon researching this I found that a game designer by the name of: Raph Koster had explained in an interview with “The Verge”, that the economics of the “free to play” market tend to be optimized around a particular set of player behaviors. They believe that this has resulted in a focus on maximizing engagement and retaining players for as long as possible. Ideas such as those can lead to the incorporation of an addictive style of mechanics as well as the disregard of a player's well being. In his writing, Koster states; "It's about maximizing engagement and keeping players playing for as long as possible." However, some developers have argued that monetization can be implemented in a responsible and player-friendly way. Things such as enticements compared to transaction based upgrades are a prime example of this.

**Enticements:**

The use of enticements and rewards in early gaming was a fundamental strategy created by many game developers as a means to engage and motivate their players. These so-called enticements and rewards were designed to create a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, further driving players to continue playing and progressing in the game. In early gaming, rewards were often tangible in-game benefits such as points, levels, or virtual items (armor, powerups, ect.), which provided a clear sense of progress and achievement. Rewards such as these would have acted as powerful incentives, stimulating a players' desire for advancement and encouraging them to invest more time and effort into the game so that they may gain more in their collection. By offering enticements and rewards, game developers aimed to enhance the overall gaming
experience and create a positive feedback loop, generating a form of player engagement and retention. I believe approaches such as this laid the foundation for modern game design, where the use of enticements and rewards remains a crucial element in motivating players as well as shaping their in-game behavior.

**Leaderboards:**

To many gamers, leaderboards play a pivotal role in making the game more competitive by simply creating a sense of rivalry and driving players to strive for excellence. By showcasing the rankings and scores of players, leaderboards provide a clear and measurable benchmark for players to compare their performance against others. This creates a competitive environment where players constantly seek to try & outperform their peers and climb higher on the leaderboard. As a result, players are motivated to invest more time and effort into the game, honing their skills and developing strategies to improve their rankings. Leaderboards introduce a competitive element that adds an extra layer of excitement and challenge to the gaming experience, pushing players to push their limits and reach new heights.

To myself, the presence of a leaderboard serves as a constant reminder of the ongoing competition and the desire to achieve higher rankings. I find it taps into the human instinct for a sense of competition due to the nature of its pursuit to success, this aspect compels players to continuously strive for improvement, further making them want to consistently play. The visibility of other players' achievements fuels a competitive spirit in many, further motivating other players to invest more time and effort into the game to surpass their peers and establish themselves as top players on the leaderboard. The presence of these leaderboards not only
elevates the competitive nature of games but also creates a sense of community as players can also engage in a form of friendly competition as well as compare their progress and celebrate their accomplishments.

**Social pressures:**

Leaderboards in gaming contribute to social pressure by creating a visible and competitive environment where players' performance is ranked and compared. The presence of leaderboards creates a sense of competition and the desire to outperform others, this leads to increased social pressure to achieve higher rankings and maintain a positive reputation within the gaming community. Players may feel compelled to invest more time and effort into the game, conform to certain playstyles or metagame strategies, and even experience stress or anxiety in their pursuit of higher leaderboard positions, driven by the social pressures associated with their in-game standing.

The history of social pressures in gaming can be traced back to the emergence of multiplayer gaming and the creation of online communities. With the rise of online gaming platforms and the ability to connect with other players globally, many of the social dynamics made within gaming began to evolve. In the early days, social pressures primarily revolved around skill and performance, as players sought recognition and respect from their peers. Things like holding the top spot in “Pac Man”, or “Pong”. Just being skilled and achieving high scores or rankings became a measure of status within the gaming community, leading to competitive atmospheres and a drive for improvement. As multiplayer gaming continued to evolve, social pressures began to expand to take on aspects such as conformity for certain playstyles, adherence to community norms, and the need to fit in with specific in-game groups or guilds. It wasn't until the rise of social media where the dynamics started to make a shift. The growth of social media
and streaming platforms further amplified social pressures in gaming. The rise of esports and professional gaming introduced a variety of new levels of competition and heightened expectations for players. With modern gaming having had a significant impact on the younger generation, shaping their attitudes, behaviors, and social interactions, it's exciting to see what new mechanics will soon be developed.

Overall the impact of game mechanics on players is profound, encompassing various aspects such as the allure of hidden surprises like Easter eggs and the ability to personalize gaming experiences through cheat codes. These mechanics have the power to evoke surprise, intrigue, and a sense of discovery among players. On the other hand, monetization practices and enticing features shape player behavior and engagement, while leaderboards introduce competitive elements and social pressures. As artists and developers in the gaming industry, it is imperative that we recognize and comprehend the influence of these hidden mechanics. They provide valuable insights into the gaming experience and their effects on players' well-being. Understanding the delicate balance between enjoyment, monetization, and fair gameplay is crucial as the industry continues to evolve.

As the gaming industry progresses, developers and players all alike must navigate the complexities surrounding game mechanics. The integration of surprise elements and personalization options can enhance the gaming experience, but it is equally important to critically examine the monetization strategies employed. Finding a harmonious balance between player enjoyment and fair business practices is crucial to ensure the long-term sustainability and ethicality of the industry. By acknowledging the influence of hidden mechanics and their impact on players, developers can strive to create engaging and immersive experiences while
safeguarding the well-being of their audience. Ultimately, the responsible utilization of game mechanics is key to promoting a healthy and enjoyable gaming environment for everyone involved.

**Sources:**


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