Exploring the Shift in Player Enthusiasm Towards Games

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Video games, providing a constant source of excitement have been an integral part of the lives of many enthusiasts, helping shape childhoods and providing a source of entertainment and social interaction between friends and strangers. From the joy of unboxing the Wii with siblings back in the day, all the way to playing multiplayer battle royales and among us with our friends over the pandemic, the gaming platform has been an ever changing and dynamic experience. However, with time, a noticeable split emerged among peers who once shared the same joy of running home and putting on the headset. Some continued to embrace their passion for gaming, leading to an even deeper connection to the gaming landscape, while others found that the enthusiasm that they once had towards gaming, was faltering. This paper will delve into the complexities of this phenomenon, by exploring the diverse factors that contribute to the level of gaming enthusiasm in individuals.

As we continue to explore the realms of personal experiences, game design, and societal shifts, it becomes clear that the shift in player enthusiasm towards games is caused by a complex interplay of all of these various factors. During this exploration, we will draw from academic research and use the insights of Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics (MDA), as a base, explore narrative design, and the consider the contexts of Literacy, Criticism, and Science, and explore the questions of how these shape and plate into the dynamics of player enthusiasm. Drawing from this academic research as a starting point, and coupling it with personal experiences, case studies, and society as a whole right now, this paper will try to unravel and provide insight and
clarity into the fork down the road that splits up individuals who once shared the same passion and love for gaming.

To gain a better understanding of the seismic shifts the gaming industry has undergone in the past few decades, we have to delve into the academic context of video games. From arcade games all the way to household and portable consoles, VR machines, and more, the gaming industry has undergone a revolution in terms of change, and understanding game design will help us build a foundation on topics needed to continue this exploration.

To better grasp and understand game design, we can examine Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics, a framework to analyze games. The introduction of the MDA framework was a pivotal milestone when it came to understanding game design, and allowed us to break games down, and dissect the small changes that game designers make to express themselves and convey their points using games. Mechanics relate to the rules and the system that the designer has chosen to govern the gameplay of the game. By looking at the mechanics, we can get a feel for what kind of game we are about to play, as games in the same category usually share the same mechanics. Dynamics are the experiences that result from interacting with the mechanics of the game. For example, some games have a challenge dynamic, which can be the result of mechanics such as a time limit. Finally, aesthetics refer to how the game resonates with the players on an emotional level, and focuses on those emotional responses and experiences resulting from the game (Morgan, 2020). By using the MDA framework, we are able to use a structured approach to analyze games, appreciate the detailed thoughts and intricacies that go into creating games, and this will allow us to have a foundation to continue exploring the shift in gaming enthusiasm.

Continuing, the concepts of narrative architecture and the frameworks of Literacy, Criticism, and Science when related to games have become a necessary lens needed to
understand video games. Narrative architecture refers to the conscious choices that the game designer makes regarding the story structure, world-building, and the character development, contributing to the overall narrative and story that the designer wants to tell with his game. There are so many choices that the game designer can make, each one resulting in a slightly different emotional response from the player. The narrative architecture of one game can make or break a player’s enthusiasm for not only the game, but also games in general, depending on the amount of emotional response that the game evokes out of the player. On the flip side, Literacy, Criticism, and Science offer a different perspective, a more broad perspective that highlights the cultural and academic context of video games. Literacy refers to interpreting the language of games, and the ability to critically think about the content and delivery of the game after consuming it. Criticism refers to the endless means of interpretation when it comes to video games, or media in general (Morgan, 2020). Going back to aesthetics in video games, a game will impact and resonate with people on different levels. Everyone will come out of playing the game with a different interpretation of that specific piece of work, and this can play a huge role in our study. The science of video games explores psychological, technological, and sociological dimensions in this landscape. Some examples of science when related to video games are shown in a Ted Talk given by Daphne Bavelier, she reveals that the average age of a game is 33 years old, contrary to popular belief that video games are mainly consumed by children and teenagers. Continuing on, she reveals that individuals who play action video games actually have better vision than those who don’t, and they are able to discern between different shades of gray better than those who don’t. Daphne Bavelier is a brain scientist, and she conducts experiments in a lab, and some of these experiments have led to the discovery that video games can be used therapeutically to solve certain reflex issues, and could actually be prescribed to patients in the
future (Bavelier). By using the information we have about these fundamental concepts regarding video games, we can now explore these factors coupled with personal experiences, cultural and societal circumstances, and more to try to answer the question of the divergence of gaming enthusiasm.

Using the structured approach of MDA and the academic research of Literacy, Criticism, and the Science of video games as a background, we can also dive into personal anecdotes and experiences that can act as supplementary evidence in this study. In my own personal life, I believe my original love and passion for video games was largely shaped by two factors: other people, and my own aspiration of self-improvement. Looking back, I can say that the only two types of video games I was really drawn towards were multiplayer games, and solo games that focused on the dynamics of progress, challenge, and improvement. This relates to my personality, so it makes sense that these are the games I was drawn towards. It really wasn’t even the game itself, it was more so the community around it. For example, I vividly remember the day that the New Super Mario Brothers game came out for the Wii. My brothers and I woke up early and lined up at the gamestop, with games we had ready to trade in, all to get our hands on the glorious new game, complete with a limited edition red casing. Once we secured the purchase, we immediately called over all of our friends, and once they finished begging their parents to let them come over, we all gathered around the TV and played the game for hours. It wasn’t even about the game for me, it was about the community and how this game could bring us all together like that. The narrative architecture of that specific game really played into teamwork, as we all worked together, playing different characters, towards the same goal. There was literally a huge age gap as well between my friends and I, and my older brother and his friends, yet this game made that meaningless as we all played together. This really started my
love for these multiplayer games with my friends. As I grew older, my friends and I still played a lot of these multiplayer games, such as battle royales, but I could already sense the split starting. Some of my friends were deep into other solo-player games, and you could see their passion for video games as a whole blossoming. At this time, I still loved video games, but really only kept to multiplayer games, and the occasional single player game on my phone such as Clash of Clans. Thinking about it more, I can see why I was drawn to games similar to Clash of Clans, but not other single player games. As we examine the MDA and the narrative architecture of Clash of Clans, it heavily pertains to progress over time, self-improvement, and patience, all dynamics and aesthetics that resonated heavily with my personality, compared to games like Call of Duty or League of Legends. I never realized it before but the reason I was heavily invested in games like that was a direct reflection of my personality outside of games, and my drive for self-improvement in my own life (Hjelte). Really examining games under the lenses of narrative architecture, and their MDA, can give you valuable insight into some reasons why people are drawn to them, or not drawn to them. From another angle, one of my closest friends loves roles-playing-games. When I asked him about it, the first thing that he mentioned was the immersive experience in these narrative driven games that he was drawn to. Every carefully crafted story arc that evoked different emotions in him, the backstories of the characters, and the free-flowing story that allowed him to explore captivated him in a different way than it would to me. Different types of games speak to different individuals in different ways, and that is super important when analyzing why some individuals draw away from video games eventually. I think if you are really experiencing a game where the narrative architecture, and the MDA speaks to you personally, you will continue to be immersed by video games. Having said this, it’s not that simple. Other factors such as the cultural context, and personal life will also play a role
in this. My love for games started dying down around the end of high school, but that’s also when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The pandemic actually spurred my love of games again because companionship, something that was extremely important to me, was taken away during the pandemic due to all of the restrictions. Gaming and online calls filled this void in me, and I was playing multiplayer battle royales, and other multiplayer games every night with my friends. On the flip side however, when the restrictions were lifted, and I was able to see my friends again in person, my love and “need” for gaming started to die down again. This is solely because of my personality, and how games resonated with me.

Another physiological aspect that can possibly be related to individuals losing interest, or significantly gaining more interest in video games is code switching. Code-switching is usually referred to when talking about switching languages mid sentence, or depending on who you are talking to. The main element to dissect here is that the individual who is code-switching is adapting to the situation and being influenced by the person that they are talking to. In the same way, the friends and people you eventually start to hang out with, can have a big impact on player enthusiasm towards gaming. In my case, my “gaming group” consisted of my childhood friends, however, when everyone split off and went to college, we couldn’t see each other as much. Being around my college friends who game less, definitely played a role into why I stopped gaming as much, especially when you factor in that multiplayer games are what I resonate with most, and I wouldn’t want to play by myself. On the flipside, one of my friends joined the officer team at a gaming club in his school, and that caused him to gain a new group of friends to game with, which led to him developing an even greater passion for gaming. We both went down different paths due to the people we spent our time with, and this is an example of code switching.
I think that the reason for the split down the road that causes some individuals to slowly stop gaming, and some to become even more invested, is a complex combination of all of the factors we talked about above. Everyone’s different personality is another layer on top of how games resonate and speak to them personally. While there were games that spoke to me personally, picking at that self-improvement aspect that I loved, my extroverted personality combined with my limited time due to balancing school, work, and friends put me on the side of the fork where gaming became a smaller part of my life, even though I started off loving it. Comparing it to the other side, my friend who was immersed by RPG games found joy in playing those games throughout the pandemic, and not only stuck with them, but expanded his taste and continued playing games with his friends till this day. He too is extremely busy with school and his personal life, but gaming fulfills that joy in his life because of how the games speak to him. In my life, even though I still find joy from playing the multiplayer games with friends every once in a while, I find that companionship factor satisfied by hanging out with my friends in person doing other things, and my life doesn’t permit me to really have time to do both, so it’s a decision I just have to make. I believe that the love for gaming starts when a game's narrative architecture resonates with an individual deeply. That is the first step that can lead to the passion for gaming, and every individual will have different games that resonate with them the most, because everyone is different, and every game designer carefully crafts a story to evoke different emotions out of people. However, once you find a game that resonates with you, that doesn’t automatically mean you’re going to love gaming forever. This is where everyone's personal life, personality, and the cultural and societal status of the world plays as another factor. In my case, I did find games I resonate with for different reasons, but as I grew up, I found myself having to choose between games and interacting with my friends in different ways due to time conflicts
and my schedule. On the other hand, my friends found different games that resonated with them, and were able to fit gaming into their schedules, and their love and passion for gaming blossomed. Through this study starting with the structural approach of MDA, to the narrative architecture, and the literacy, criticism, and science of games, combined with personality, and personal experiences, I think that I can conclude that the shift of gaming enthusiasm is a complicated phenomenon that is a mix of these elements, and each mix is different for every individual, just like how every game designer creates a different, unique story that target different emotions and audiences.
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