How to

APPEAL TO THOSE THAT DON'T WANT TO PLAY!

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My mother has never enjoyed games, virtual games to be precise. She likes the cute nature of the characters within them, the whimsical soundtracks and noises but never wanted to be a part. As someone that enjoy games themself, this always struck me as odd. Just like there's a movie, a song or a book for everyone, there's also a game for everyone. There just has to be. Right?

Because I'm a game designer myself, I made it my personal mission to find something she would enjoy. The rules? Showing her a game that she will come back to play herself - that's a win. Here's my journey on finding a game for a non-gamer.

Just like with my profession, the first thing that I generally prioritize is to get an understanding of what kind of person my player could be.

A good friend of mine plays multiplayer games with me every day, although he is below average at them. Sometime he'd tune out and not be too focused on the game either. To him, games are a means for social interaction. He loves to progress ahead of the group, to brag with his achievements. Above all, he cares about having an experience together that encourages conversation. Trying to categorize my mother like this wasn't so easy. But there's one thing I knew for sure; she loves adventure - and she's always up to discovering something new.

There is always a reason why we play. Even though we could simplify it as „just a fun way to pass time", there's usually a deeper reasoning. Understanding player motives is core to developing engrossing gamification concepts. Sometimes you want to appeal to a large group of personality types and sometimes it is more important to focus on a niche. Creating personas allows you to empathize with the players that you design for. What drives them in real life will high likely also drive them within a game.

FIRST ATTEMPT. I started off by introducing my mother to games that I enjoyed myself.

I've quickly understood that the ability to interact with virtual worlds heavily differs from person to person. Moving and looking around within a game is like breathing to me, I can do it seamlessly without spending a thought on it. My mother however is struggling to grasp the controls. Turning the camera is difficult and the idea of both moving and looking around at the same time appears to be borderline impossible. It frustrated her beyond belief. I found handing her a controller to be a poor idea.

For me this was also a prime example why usability is so important to have a solidified foundation for any sort of game. Any amount of interface struggles are a distraction. If the user can't understand an app or software, let alone interact or control it, the chances of making up for it with a great gamification concept are rather low. It's like trying to play soccer without knowing how to kick the ball. Why would you care how the game is played out if you can't even access it?

SECOND ATTEMPT. So I've decided to show her games that make do with minimal input.

A point & click adventure requires you to do nothing more than - who would've thought - point and click. For every bit of input you give, the game gives you back a lot. Your character moves on their own, picks up objects and unlocks doors - all with the click of a button. She liked it.

It comes to show that just like with a lot of modern interaction design, minimalism is key. The most hyped up mobile games of the past decade mastered this. In „Angry Birds" you were always just one finger drag away from the action and the one-tap-input from „Flappy Bird" had you playing for weeks. „Doodle Jump" at its core only needed you to tilt your phone. There's a certain magic to this simplicity.

An additional benefit of the kind of adventure game that I showed to my mother is also that it is somewhat closely attached to the logic of reality. The majority of big modern games rely on abstract „game logic", a language that one needs to slowly learn. Concepts like „yellow colored areas generally signify places of interest" (e.g. Uncharted & Tomb Raider) come naturally to people that have been playing games for a while, but really don't make a lot of sense to complete newcomers.

So whenever I design gamification, I also expect to design for people that have never engaged with games before. In fact, most people that are targeted with gamified solutions are primarily ones that haven't had much contact with games. Gamification can be intrusive and intense if you want it to be - but most of the time it is silently pulling strings from behind the scenes. In that sense, I attempt to ensure that my concepts speak a clear language that anyone can understand.

After having solved my mothers struggles of communication between her and the medium, I introduced her to my **THIRD ATTEMPT**. A cute, easy to understand, and beautifully crafted puzzle-adventure, set in a fantasy garden filled with lively colorful flowers. It captured her attention for about an hour (a new record). I had the feeling that I was finally slowly progressing. I was so close to winning my own challenge.

Fast forward a couple of weeks and I'm surprised to hear from my mother that she's been crazy about this one game - but not my game. „It's a mix of Tetris and Sudoku." I couldn't believe it. A twist on an old-fashioned classic? A puzzle game that asks you of nothing more than to beat your own high-score?

I had to think about it for a while, but I realized I wasn't far off. The game featured one simple inputs (drag & drop) and made use of base level of game knowledge (concepts like Tetris and Sudoku aren't too daunting to grasp). She also turned out to be a surprisingly ambitious player, trying to perfect her skills (core human desires: mastery) and beat high-scores of her friends (core human desires: relatedness). A serious drive for competition that I genuinely hadn't seen in her before.

Although it might've not been me that found the game that would keep her playing, I've discovered a new character trait in my mother that I hadn't seen before. I suppose I did sort of beat my own challenge - and learned something on top of it.