

POV: What makes fun?

Gears of War 3 VS Portal 2

Critical analysis by Yuval Gelbard

What can make a fully grown adult spend \$60, fake a note from the doctor, send the kids to the mall, sit in the dark, stay up late and fuse with the couch while staring at the TV?

That's called **FUN** (which probably involves a newly released console title...)

What is this "fun" that makes us want to keep playing? How do different games provide this intriguing feeling?

In *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*¹, Raph Koster demonstrates that fun and learning are greatly connected - you enjoy better when you learn new things or patterns, such as new words in Scrabble. Koster also implies that fulfilling one's fantasies, such as those of power or of control, enhances the fun and allows some sort of escapism, just as in being a GTA gangsta.

Let's test that theory in practice over the well known recent titles - *Gears of War 3* and *Portal 2*.

By checking the ratings of those titles in major game review websites such as Gamespot, IGN, Gamespy, GameInformer and others, one may see an average score of more than 9/10, so both titles can be considered successful and qualify as "fun providers" for our analysis, although their gameplay is fundamentally different.

Arguably one of the best titles of 2011, *Gears 3* campaign mode is completely linear and does not innovate much in gameplay and features - 3rd person shooter style is familiar and cover taking has become a standard feature, so learning is probably not the source of fun, but *Gears* does give you the feeling of being an action movie star!

Being a hero is no mere fantasy - we're all heroes at heart. *Gears 3* gives us the opportunity to be heroes over and over again by both allowing us to **participate** in the action and bestowing the illusion of **free will** when doing so. During the entire game, the

player is the center of the events which, to the player, seems tailored to his or her heroic measurements and decisions.

As usually happens in good action movies - the hero never dies, and so I survived too along many epic battles and dire situations, due to my heroic gunslinger skills and well timed cut-scenes.

On the opposite corner we have *Portal 2* split screen mode - two players at the same room, controlling funny looking robots that are being bullied around by the main computer in solving test lab's mazes and riddles, using their worm-hole guns.

In *Portal 2*, the player has to master the unique worm-hole gun, familiarize him or her self with common physics laws such as speed and acceleration and play cooperatively with the other player for solving the puzzles. In this game, the player does not shoot anything, fights no enemies, isn't under time constraints and no upgrades, pickups or decision making are needed. All the player has to do is **think!**

Although cooperative mode has no interesting plot and levels are related to each other only by a physic law's theme, *Portal 2* teaches one to use common knowledge in uncommon ways, which is quite sophisticated.

Could I equally enjoy playing such different games? The answer is yes - endorphins ("fun") are released through our bodies when something important to our development occurs, such as learning something new in *Portal 2* or fulfilling a fantasy in *Gears 3*. This quality is what drives us further in life and why games are such a valuable tool in education, if designed to treasure some valuable lessons in a package of fun.

It seems that today's games, digital or not, are planned to answer some primitive needs we have whether they improve born reflexes and instincts such as aim, speed and gathering resources, teach us something new, fulfill fantasies or provide escapism in the form of role playing another character which we would want to be in real life.

Perhaps future games will answer other development needs that we have but might not be able to recognize today.

¹ Koster, Raph. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Scottsdale, Arizona: Paraglyph Press, 2004. Print.