

Depth in one Minute: A Conversation about Bejeweled Blitz

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The following is the result of an internet-based conversation between the authors about Bejeweled Blitz (PopCap Games 2008). Bejeweled Blitz (hereafter Blitz) is a 60-second version of the match-3 game Bejeweled (PopCap Games 2001). Played mostly on Facebook, Blitz features a high score table with the ranked scores of the player's friends. The high score table is reset every week.

Blitz is interesting because the match-3 game type that Bejeweled helped spawn has been held in low esteem by the traditional video-game playing audience as a non-challenging, second-rate "casual" video game (Juul 2007), yet Blitz uses the basic gameplay of Bejeweled to create a highly competitive and frantic playing experience.

At the time of writing, the Facebook version of Blitz has 11 million monthly players (Lowensohn 2010).

Getting into Blitz

Jesper: I think it is appropriate to discuss Bejeweled Blitz in a conversation because it is a game that is nominally single player, but for me has been completely determined by the existence of the updated friend's high score table on Facebook. When I first picked up Blitz, I think I saw it as just a quite shallow short-form version of Bejeweled. A few years ago, I spent some time writing a history of matching tile games, which in turn meant playing dozens or hundreds of different games. I enjoyed looking at the minute differences between them, but from reviews and player reactions to these games, it was also clear that matching tile games are generally looked down upon as simple and shallow (Juul 2007). At the same time, it seems intuitively true that a game played in a short time is necessarily less deep than a game played for a longer time, so it felt obvious that Blitz would not promote deep skills or strategies.

It was only when I saw the status updates from my high-scoring Facebook friends that I began to search seriously for deeper strategies in the game. There is competition with the other players, of course, but simply knowing that the game has depth fundamentally alters the way I play. I suppose this goes back to the high score table from early arcade games, but knowing the high scores of friends have certainly changed the way I see Blitz. That was my story. You, on the other hand, seemed to be getting very high scores early on. How did you get into Blitz?

Rasmus: I have an absolute love for puzzle action games. I think they occasionally outshine every other gaming genre with bursts of innovation and brilliance, crystallized into a standout game. And I think Blitz is such a game. When Blitz came out, I was instantly hooked, because this was something I was already looking for; it seemed like the perfect action-puzzle hybrid, something I had been thinking of ever since Collapse (Gamehouse 1998). I was always into match-3s, ever since Bejeweled came out, but the sequel did not really do anything for me. With Bejeweled 2 (PopCap Games 2004a), it seemed like the game would always snatch the action away from you when things were finally heating up; you would have created a few flame gems, possibly a hypercube, and the level would just end, bam.

Blitz, on the other hand, lets you build up meaty clusters of super gems and detonate them all in one phantasmagoric chain-explosion of fireworks. It invites creativity, experimentation, and quick thinking in a way that previous games in the genre have not, so in that way it is almost a sandbox experience. In addition, I quickly found that Blitz tickled my core gamer bone in a way that few other casual games have managed to do; it is somewhat of a crossover in that respect. For a casual game, it is pretty manic — you cannot just sit down with it, relax, and let your mind go blank. Therefore, Blitz challenges us to think about casual games in a new light.

Jesper: And see non-casual games in a new light, I might add. One of the things I find fascinating about casual games is how they are often described as a big “other”. As if we have “real”, “hardcore” video games played by “real” players over here, then at some distance there is a strange phenomenon called “casual games” that is assumed to work by entirely different principles. “Casual players” are obviously also assumed to be entirely different creatures than “real” players. At the same time, nobody really likes those terms, but we do not have any better terms to use instead, and we have to acknowledge that the ideas of “casual” and “hardcore” play an important role in game culture, game design, and the game industry (Juul 2009). Perhaps the best way to describe it is to say that match-3 games are strongly associated with the idea of casual games and casual players. Blitz is fascinating because it introduces extremely short play sessions — something we associate with “casual” games — but in the process of doing so it also creates a head-to-head competition that we associate with “hardcore” games.

Depth & Design

Rasmus: I am curious — Jesper, once you realized that there must be deeper strategies to the game, which ones did you come up with first? And in what order?

Jesper: It was really when Jewel Quest (iWin 2004) introduced the criteria you had to perform a match on every square in order to complete a level, that I started making long-term planning, thinking about matches several steps ahead. The second level of match-3 strategy came to me when I played Puzzle Quest (Infinite Interactive 2007), where preventing the opponent from getting a match becomes important. That made it necessary to think about the playing board in a negative sense: not just about maximizing opportunities in the following step, but about preventing opportunities from arising. All of that carried over to Blitz.

But to go back to the beginning, I think that the first thing a player will do is to memorize the three basic patterns that can be made into a match by moving a single piece: Since a match always involves placing similar pieces on a straight line, the player must move a piece that is either 1) along the length of the final match, 2) diagonal from pair of similar pieces or 3) in the middle between two similar pieces. These can then occur in mirrored and rotated forms.

Since Blitz awards us with special objects for longer matches, we then learn to search for larger matches. These patterns are the basic patterns of match-3, not just because they are the easiest to learn, but also because they are the fundamental actions available to you. Every single action performed in a match-3 is a variant or combination of these five basic patterns.

However, I think that because we see more short matches, we become more attuned to them. On a bad day, I will see the horizontal match possibility first and make a match-3, only to realize that I could have done the vertical match-4.

Returning to your question about strategies, I do not think of myself as strategic player in a fast game like Blitz. As a player, I am rather trying to balance my instinctual recognition of the patterns above with longer-term strategic thinking. How long time should I spend searching for a useful match-4 or 5 if there is a not-so-useful match-3 available?

On top of the patterns above, there are, of course a number of more complicated patterns: Making a match to move the next match into position; gradually chipping away at unrelated colors to get to a special object you want to activate; making matches at the bottom of the screen to shake things up. Some of these become instinctual — I may have a

feeling that there is something interesting going on with the gray objects on the right side of the playing field and I will try to bring them down to align with some gray objects in the center of the playing field. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith has proposed that all play can be seen as a negotiation between your reflective capacities (i.e. thinking) and your reflexes (Sutton-Smith 2008). I do think that this describes the experience of Blitz very well: I am training some basic pattern-recognition skills that I am not really controlling consciously, and at the same time, I am trying to manage which patterns to look for at a given moment.

The strange thing about playing games like this with shared high score lists but no access to the strategies of other players is that where you'd regularly simply copy whatever strategies you see people using, the dynamic in Blitz is that you see someone's high score and that makes you realize that there is some strategy or trick out there that you haven't been using, but you have to figure out for yourself what that strategy is.

For Blitz, I simply did not understand how people could get 200.000+ scores, so it was only when I understood that I could trigger multipliers by making large matches that I started getting anywhere. Your score in Blitz is strongly dependent on multipliers, which in turn are dependent on clearing a large part of the board in one go, which in turn is dependent on using the special objects that you get by making match-4s, or above. This means that I think the strongest strategy is to allow yourself time to look for large matches in the beginning of a game since the multiplier will last the rest of the level, but to be more open to making lots of small matches at the end of a level. How did your Blitz strategies evolve? Do you think very consciously about strategies?

Rasmus: While I've developed a number of strategies over time, I never try to play too consciously; I find it detracts from the fun, and also I feel I perform better when reacting on instinct, rather than going by some plan — you can't really anticipate what the game will throw at you. That being said, there is nothing wrong with internalizing a handful of rules to guide those reactions.

I would theorize that most players develop a surprisingly similar sequence of strategies, starting from the basic Bejeweled tricks, like prioritizing matches in the bottom rows to facilitate cascades and identifying match-4s and 5s, while gradually adding more Blitz-specific stuff, like making simultaneous moves, and prioritizing quick swaps, going top-down, in order to achieve Blazing Speed mode where swaps occur much

faster — for the rest of the game, in fact, if you can keep up a certain pace.

Eventually you learn that one of the single most important rules is never to miss an opportunity for creating a super gem — an L-match, T-match, or 5-match — so when you see one of these shapes, always match the outside gem in, to create a T-shape. Or an L-shape.

The resulting explosion will almost always cause a new multiplier to appear, so it is extremely important to get these right.

While I don't spend much time deliberately strategizing during play — there simply isn't time for that — I do evaluate after each play session and think about what I should try to do better next time around. You simply have to evolve your reaction patterns over time; it may seem ridiculous, but it actually really feels like you can keep growing with the game.

Indeed, your progress through your Blitz “career” can be thought of as a series of realizations about the game's non-obvious strategies. While this may be true of any game, I think it is particularly interesting in the case of Blitz, because it also seems to be key to driving its adoption. The realization that “there must be something I'm missing here” drives players back to the game, I think, to uncover new strategies that they might in turn incorporate in their arsenal and use to beat their friends.

And absolutely key to that is the 60-second time limit: “Hey, it's only one minute, why shouldn't I be able to do better than you?”

Jesper: Despite appearances, there is a lot of depth in this game. However, I am ambivalent about spending time developing strategies for a game with too much randomness, and I am ambivalent about score resets: I know I get the chance to make my mark again next week, but I worry more about losing the mark I made. That is part of what makes it work week after week on Facebook, but on some level, I feel that it should be possible to have an all-time high-score prominently displayed. Perhaps that makes me old-fashioned, and perhaps it reflects that I have a completion instinct: I want to be finished with a game, and at least theoretically, I prefer games that are predictable. I dislike randomness. However, I am sucked into a game like this anyway, so my tastes are probably out of tune with my theoretical alignment here.

I have been thinking lately that all games create a lack that you want to remedy. That is why you might fear picking up a game — because the world is complete before you pick up the game. This is what games do: they create lack and chaos, partially manageable chaos, out of order. Blitz is then meant to be played many, many times. The 1-minute game

sessions make it easy to get into the game, easy to leave the game, and easy to return to the game.

I was always philosophically opposed to games that feature large amounts of randomness. Achieving a high score in Blitz largely comes down to quickly collecting multipliers at the beginning of a level, which in turn depends on a good starting pattern of jewels. In the beginning I thought this was not fair. On the other hand, randomness had the positive effect that by playing often, I was guaranteed that there would occasionally be games in which I achieved a very high score. I felt that randomness was what kept me coming back to Blitz. Sure, I would improve my pattern recognition skills, I would be better at thinking several steps ahead, but I would get high scores in the games where I by sheer luck found several large matches in the beginning, leading to several multipliers, followed by several other large matches. It was in those games that I really felt an improvement. Even if your skills are not improving, randomness guarantees the occasional standout result. Randomness also means that I never feel quite finished with Blitz. Thinking about the game, there's always that glimmer of hope, that I will come back and experience an unprecedented setup of jewels that will allow me to reach an equally unprecedented high score. That hope is important if you dislike not having the highest score among your peers.

Do you think of yourself as a completionist or as something else? What do you feel about randomness? And what is the highest score you are aware of?

Rasmus: I did manage to score 670,300 in a single, mad game. That was a rush! Yet with 11 million people playing, you would think that there is probably someone out there who is doing considerably better. I guess we will not know until some kind of worldwide leader board is introduced — if ever. On the other hand, if such a leader board did exist, it might just scare people away from even competing. How would you feel if someone had a score of 2,000,000? I think PopCap probably made a wise decision, commercially, in keeping it between friends.

(Ironically, my next standout high score was 670,250 — achieved several weeks later.)

About randomness: actually, I think there is something quite beautiful about a game design which is so intrinsically dependent on randomness, yet still manages to produce a truly substantial play experience every time. I am endlessly fascinated by the depth on display within this incredibly small design. It is the purest expression of game rules; a system that serves fresh challenges for you each play.

Linear, level-based games have all these problems: while you get to rigidly control what the player experiences and when, it also inherently works against the replay value. You have level designers working for months on stuff that will ultimately be thrown away or glimpsed only briefly by players; you risk that some players will be frightened off by the steep learning curve, and others will be bored because they've already mastered similar challenges in other games. You cannot afford to iterate too many times over the game mechanics, because that will throw the level design to the wind. With large 3D games, there is simply no practical way to attempt this level of auto-generation. However, with something small, simple and very focused, like *Bejeweled*, it is possible. It allows the game designers to iterate a million times over the mechanics.

But having said that, I would contest the assertion that Blitz is truly random. Have you noticed how your chances of success improve more and more, the better moves you are able to pull off? And have you noticed that the end board is almost always much more bountiful ("springy") than the opening one? I think PopCap have found a way to tweak their gem-generating algorithm so that it favors you progressively, corresponding to how much havoc you're able to wreak. Mind you, this is not something I've been able to prove, statistically — yet — it's just a subjective suspicion, albeit supported by the experience of many thousand plays...)

(Throughout our discussion, I've been searching for a term that can communicate the degree of latent match opportunity in a given Blitz board. Not readily finding any, I've decided to coin it; from now on, I shall talk of a board's "springiness", meaning high in opportunity. So, a highly "springy" board is full of good matches just waiting to be made, whereas an "unspringy" board is not.)

Jesper: Unless you put all the numbers in a spreadsheet and analyze them, I think it is hard to judge whether a random generator is truly random. I know what you mean about the end board feeling more "springy", but can we rule out that it may be some kind of subjective distortion? I can appreciate randomness as something that gives you variation and gives everybody a chance at getting a high score, and I appreciate how this compares to family board and card games, wherein randomness adds to the social dimension of a game since winning will be more evenly distributed. However, some part of me feels that it is wrong when I restart the game after 10 seconds. This seems to me like a throwback to early video games where I would reset my computer and reload

the game sometimes. Isn't this a design flaw on some fundamental level? Can this really be good design?

Rasmus: To clarify, what you are talking about is the dreaded "No More Moves" scenario, which is unfortunately endemic to match-3s. The rules dictate that fresh gems appear at the top of the board as matches are cleared away below; if you continue to "trash the board", i.e. increase its entropy, you get into this situation where, potentially, no more matches can be made. Fortunately, PopCap have taken it upon themselves to mitigate this problem by rigging Blitz' random algorithm to ensure that at least one match can be made on the board at any time. Some other match-3s simply handle this scenario by displaying a large "NO MORE MOVES" sign and jumbling the entire board ... which feels, frankly, like a cop-out.

But the thing is: if you can accept that this is the way these games work, it becomes just another strategy to work into your arsenal. If you get into this chasing-the-automatch cycle, you have clearly messed things up for yourself, and you should have been paying more attention at an earlier point. If you are careful about the matches you make, and remember to shake up the lower part of the board regularly, there is no reason you should end in that scenario. Therefore, I can easily live with that design decision; it actually leans toward skill, which I think is ultimately what Blitz is all about.

Jesper: But doesn't it also lean toward time? I am sure we agree that games on some fundamental level should consistently reward skill. Randomness evens out over time, of course, but this in turn means that you have to invest large amounts of time, not to improve your skills, but in order to get lucky with the random generator. Most of all, what I really oppose is the "no more moves" situation as well as the workaround you discussed above. In such cases, I feel that game is wasting my time. I am a completionist, I want a game to be honest with me, and I want to be sure that if I perform poorly, it was my own fault.

On the other hand, it probably depends on how you frame the game. If you see it as a game you can complete on some level (by getting a high score that will stand for years perhaps), then it may feel more unfair than if you see the randomness as something that keeps generating new puzzles for you. Is Blitz a sublime and noble battle, mano-a-mano, or is it like a Solitaire variant that keeps creating new interesting problems that you can solve? Randomness has very different meanings in those two ways of framing it.

Rasmus: I can certainly see what you mean. As a gamer, or possibly more likely what we now would term an "ex-gamer", I feel where you are coming from. However, core games also waste your time, however honest you may think they are. When is the last time you had fun with corridors and crates? And yet every modern FPS is still chock full of that stuff. You wade around in some military base — or dilapidated undersea utopia — where every location looks almost exactly the same. What is the purpose of all this getting from A to B? Yet, as core gamers, we do this for hours on end! Core games are full of downtime. You will get into a heated firefight, and then spend 5 minutes roaming around, trying to find what amounts to the next key card. Blitz has no downtime. It is full-on action, all the time, demanding you make the best possible decision every half second or so. In that way, it is probably closer to Geometry Wars than to the original Bejeweled. So no, I do not really feel cheated out of my time, with Blitz. Not nearly as much as with most FPS games.

There is one other design mechanic about Blitz that I want to discuss, and that is time pressure, which I think is something quite particular to Blitz. It is certainly something which has had a controversial life in the casual genre. When I was pitching casual game concepts inside GameTrust, I would always target this intersection of matching and action — I would include time pressures and insist on speed and challenge, and heavy, over-the-top effects fireworks for payback. I felt I had it pretty much worked out. However, we always came up against this stigma, this fixed idea that casual games had to be, above all, relaxing and easy on the brain. That's what the market wanted. Time pressure was bad. Now, the easy and self-aggrandizing route would be to say, these people were clearly wrong, and all it took was Blitz to prove it. But the truth is never quite so simple.

Many match-3 games have included time pressure before Blitz; even the original Bejeweled had a timed mode. All those games included time pressure as a punishment mechanic — if you did not meet a set challenge within the time allotted, you would fail the level. And you'd just have to do it all over again. Blitz, on the other hand, offers you a simple contract: you play for one minute; it ends. You never fail. And the pressure is really all up to you. If you relax and just let things pass, it takes you 60 seconds. If you hurry and push yourself, it also takes 60 seconds. Same deal. That is relaxing in itself. Whatever pressure there may be, it all comes from you; it is your personal ambition to see how fast you can go. How fast you can work your mouse — or finger. How fast your brain can process those match patterns.

Jesper: I would argue that the discussion of time pressure really came in two phases: Before casual games became a well-understood concept, it was generally presupposed that time pressure was necessary. PopCap have explained how there initially was skepticism about the inclusion of an un-timed mode in *Bejeweled* (Juul 2007), but once casual games had been established as a genre or game form, the pendulum swung toward the idea that this audience didn't enjoy challenge or time pressure at all. It then took games like *Zuma* (PopCap Games 2004b) and *Diner Dash* (Gamelab 2003) to show that games in that distribution channel could be successful even though (or because) they had time pressure and quickly became very difficult.

The other side of the question is that *Blitz* does not have a single clearly defined win state —perhaps the failure state is failing to set a high score? If you thus fail, the time investment per game is so minimal, and you replay the game so often anyway, that restarting the game does not feel like punishment. Another way of putting it is that there are certain games that you can complete once and for all by beating every level of the game — like in many traditional single player games. In those games, failing a level means losing the time you have invested in playing that level, all because you are working toward the permanent goal of completing the game. *Blitz* may be more like Solitaire card games or even old arcade games in that the goal is transient: perhaps you are trying to get the high score, but someone else may beat you in turn, and the high score table is reset every week anyway. It also means that since you cannot complete the game, you have to come back. *Blitz* is not a game you can be ever really done with, so it may stay with you for a long period of time. Cheesily: You can check out any time you want, but you can never leave.

In the zone

Rasmus: Another very important design element is the way reward works in *Blitz*, and how it's engineered to gradually nudge you into that heightened state of cognition and dexterity commonly referred to as the "zone". Plenty of games have great reward mechanics, but *Bejeweled* is somewhat special because the work-vs.-reward ratio is 1:1. With a minimal input, just one swipe, you get a measured, but always worthwhile payoff. This makes you feel good about just about every move you make in the game, and extra good whenever you correctly identify a super gem opportunity, or trigger a cascade. Even a series of ordinary 3-swaps give you an increasingly juicier reward, with the climbing pitch

of the sound effect. This all builds the mood for speed perfectly, and it helps you get into the zone.

Blitz, as I see it, is a small synaesthetic masterpiece — an ingenious blend of interaction and visual + sound effects. Whenever I am forced to play with the sound off, I miss many audio cues that, for instance, would have let me know that a multiplier has entered the board, or that I am close to achieving speed bonus. I cannot say for certain, but I would theorize that it is nearly impossible to “work yourself into the zone” without the sound cues.

After a period of playing the game intensively, you begin to see things happen ahead of time — it’s really quite extraordinary — a couple of turns up ahead. Whereas to begin with, you might be consciously planning a move involving 2 swaps, when you get this much further into the game, your brain appears to actually process complex move patterns involving several sequential swaps, often with lightning-quick assessments of power-up prioritizations, and you find you can make surprisingly clever moves in what seems like “zero-time”. This happens on a not quite conscious, but also not entirely animal level; this is why I like to talk of “internalizing” these move patterns — I have no idea how the brain actually functions with this, but I think of it like caching an algorithm in a processor; once the program is in the cache, the CPU can then stream loads of data through, repeating the algorithm very quickly, much faster than when switching between individual algorithms that need to be loaded separately. I find this an endlessly fascinating facet of the game, and I continue to be amazed at how fast, and how far ahead I can begin to “guess”. It is clearly not an infallible function, however — I often find myself pulling a swap on instinct that just turns out to be the dumber of two possible moves with the same gem.

What really distinguishes Blitz, I think, from its long lineage of match-3 forebears, leading right back to the original Bejeweled, is its sense-heightening combination of instinctive pattern recognition, its exciting and satisfying payback (sound and fireworks), and making split-second decisions between multiple matching and scoring opportunities. It is this frenetic brain-bashing and hunting of shapes that makes the game so fun, challenging and rewarding — if the original Bejeweled was light exercise for the brain, Blitz is a full-on mental workout. This results in a heightened state of alertness, probably nurtured in mammals for the sake of survival; it excites you, makes you sharper — but is also, to some extent, associated with stress. The game, at the same time, lets you reward yourself with dopamine, the brain’s own joy drug. So while it is

incredibly exciting and rewarding, we also have the makings of a vicious circle — addiction, and stress. This is why Blitz is probably not a good idea for a soothing nightcap.

On the other hand, Blitz is really the perfect arcade game. It is deliberately short, endlessly addictive, and lends itself perfectly to high score competition because of its unforgiving leaning toward skill — physically, and mentally.

Jesper: We theorists like to refer to the concept of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) to describe the feeling of being “in the zone”. As I read Csikszentmihalyi though, he does not discuss the issue of juiciness or sounds and visual feedback; he just talks about “clear feedback”. I think you are right that there is something very specific about sound that influences us in a subconscious way.

Burnout

Jesper: I will get really into a game like Blitz, and then one day, the wonder will be gone. I cease to care. I will still believe (perhaps erroneously) that I might get a high score if I put the hours in it, but the game just doesn't give me the kind of “quick hit” positive experience that I am looking for — and I go back to my regular work. Interestingly, I have spent the last few years making my writing process closer to game playing: I make sure to break down my writing into dozens of little tasks that I can then tick off from the to-do list. Fix the language in the first sentence; deal with the flow between section 2 and 3; find backup for the argument in the final section and so on. This means that if I want that quick hit of accomplishment, I can be surer of experiencing it if I work than if I play a small procrastination-oriented game like Blitz. I will sometimes play a game of Blitz to procrastinate, only to be disappointed and go back to my actual work where I can be sure to feel good about myself. You might say that I managed to turn my actual work into a satisfying game.

Returning to randomness, it has a large bearing on the question of burning out and coming back. After playing Blitz for a while, the randomness made me feel burned out even though I kept coming back. I ceased to feel any responsibility for what happened; I was simply waiting for the appearance of a fortuitous pattern on the game board. If nothing great had happened within the first 10 seconds, I would restart the game. Randomness also became an excuse for me: if I for several seconds could not identify any match on the board, this obviously, I would reason, was due to bad luck. The idea of randomness became my way of avoiding further reconsideration of how I was playing. In his article The

Art of Failure (Gladwell 2000), Malcolm Gladwell recounts the story of how Jana Novotna squandered a sizeable lead over Steffi Graf at the 1993 Wimbledon finale. The problem, says Gladwell, was not that Novotna panicked, but that she choked: she started to think consciously about the basic actions in tennis — serving, returning the ball. Choking is when you start becoming conscious of the task that you can actually do intuitively, and therefore end up performing much worse than you are actually capable of. I had a period like this with Blitz: I could identify the valuable patterns in the game, but when things were going too well, I started to think about it. I failed to cash in on the opportunities presented to me. I choked.

I still desperately wanted to be on top of the list, but I had lost faith. I would play the game hurriedly, distracted, while listening to podcasts about science.

And then one day, it all changes. I come back to Blitz and see new things, I do well, I enjoy it, I am in the zone, it is once again a beautiful game.

How do you feel about inevitably burning out on Blitz, assuming that you will burn out on it? Can you see it coming?

Rasmus: Oh, sure. It is kind of happening already; the highs get fewer and farther between, and the mountain to climb keeps getting higher for each score reset. Weirdly, I find that I am having more trouble than ever before reaching those high scores, and experiencing those wild highs. Kind of like any addiction, really. What is interesting about that is that it seems that it is exactly when you stop frantically inventing new strategies and just sort of try to fall back on a tried and tested play style, that you start performing poorly.

Then, suddenly, you get another one of those one-in-a-thousand games where everything just explodes, the points rack up, and you are in the zone. And the hunt is back on. Incredibly, I find I just keep returning to Blitz repeatedly and again — “Just another go!” I guess it’s because it’s just so damn easy; just fire up your browser and bam, you can be into the game in a matter of seconds. Or, on the road, on the iPhone. It’s always right at hand. You do not have to worry about making it to a save-point or the end of the level within the lunch break; it is just so accessible, it is truly one of the few games that fit into a busy lifestyle. It is a lot like an arcade experience, actually. It has that immediacy.

On the flip side of that, I have found that this has caused me to more carefully weigh for and against when I make decisions to play other games. I have only relatively short intervals of free time to invest in

playing games — ironic, I suppose, with a job like this — sometimes, not much more than thirty minutes. So I regularly find myself thinking, “can I really hope to make it to the end of this level before I have to turn the console off? Do I really want to wait for this massive game to load anyway?” When you have such short periods of time to play, it naturally works against “core” game experiences, and otherwise relatively insignificant wait times take on disproportionately daunting durations. Quite a few expensive console games are languishing on my shelf because of this.

Of course, PopCap also keeps adding new twists to the formula, which helps keep the game interesting. Perhaps the biggest change, not to the gameplay as such, but to your overall rhythm of playing of the game, is the Boosts feature where you gradually amass coins that you can use to buy “boosts”, powerups. I’ll always want to maximize the effect of the boosts I use, and so I will unfailingly pick 3 really effective — and thus really expensive — ones, and play as focused as I can for the 3 rounds they last, to really make them count. This of course then has the flip-side effect of demanding lots of additional pedestrian “pick-up” play, simply to re-accrue the coins spent. Which, in turn, means that you start to consciously plan when to spend your coins — at which point during the day am I most likely to be focused and sharp? And perhaps, more worryingly, when will I be tired and just going through the motions? I think this may end up hurting the game, as those less-important games become tedious “work” to be undertaken merely so that you can have fun “later”. It promotes a cynical mindset that I think is fundamentally out of tune with the intuitive, adaptive strategies that drive Blitz. It also kind of reeks of monetization — 100 bucks says PopCap will introduce micro transactions one of these days, so players can skip the “boring games” and plunk down, say \$1 for 50,000 Blitz coins. This might actually be timed to coincide with Facebook’s introduction of its Credits currency. (It was, during this discussion — in spring 2010).

I have always found the idea of introducing paid power-ups to be a somewhat problematic monetization strategy. The notion that you can pay to get ahead of your friends is a tricky one, and in the case of Blitz is only tempered by the fact that you will still have to be sharp as hell, and lucky to boot — there is no guarantee that the boosts you buy will get you a record score. Still, I think it might fundamentally undermine the sportsmanship that characterizes friendly competition. What will you think about someone at the top of your scoreboard who bought his or

her way past 1 million points?

Jesper: That they have too much money on their hands? To me, micro-transactions and virtual item trades say something fundamental about users that we tend to forget: people's lives change over time. Blitz may be successful due to both its short game sessions and due to the predictability of the length of a game session. In "serious" console games, it is often unclear how long a game session you are committing yourself to. Blitz is more like Guitar Hero in that you know the time commitment ahead of time, which makes it much easier put in some game playing in a crowded schedule. You could generalize that young people tend to have little money but lots of time, while older people with jobs and kids have more money but less time. Thus, microtransactions may be a way for the older generation to achieve parity?

Rasmus: I suppose so. Now that micropayment has actually been added to Blitz, I cannot truthfully say that I do not feel tempted. Damn those kids.

Jesper: Damn them.

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