



Randomness, Serendipity and Gamification

Description

Recently I have been trying to write a few games, just for fun, with my daughter. There are a couple of card games and I am trying to make a single player board game.

Making a game with a 7 year old is an interesting experience. I got asked to go into her room as she had a new game she wanted to play. She had made a game board with LEGO. You had to get from one end to the other, with certain bricks having modifier effects on the game (move faster, move slower etc). She said I could go first, so I asked “how do we decide how many spaces to move?”. I expected a dice or something, but no. Her answer was “just pick a number between one and ten”!

I was baffled, but did as I was told. I chose the biggest ten, assuming she would do the same, as this was the quickest way to win. However, she chose seven – she genuinely randomly chose a number in her head!

It was at this point I began to realise just how important randomness is to enjoying games. I couldn't just choose random numbers, it made no sense to me as I could win by just choosing the biggest or the “right number”. Of course, I let her win, but still! If you have my sort of brain, where you like logic, you analyse the situation and work out the best solution – i.e. how to get to the win state fastest. Now, if there had been a dice added, that would change the dynamic. Rather than being able to choose the best route, you would have to work out based on the random number you had been assigned by the dice.

This got me thinking about randomness in general and how it is or could be applied to normally predictable things. So I built a [random story builder](#). It has about 15 books in it from Project Gutenberg and randomly chooses paragraphs from the books and puts them on the screen. Of course most of the outcome is rubbish, but every now and then you get a great combination of a Grimm fairy tale, Dantes Divine Comedy and Frankenstein that makes you chuckle. It has no practical use (except as a more interesting version of Lorem Ipsum), but it is a bit of random fun.

Another example of this sort of fun is [Rory's Story Cubes](#). These are a series of dice with icons on them. You role the dice and have to build a story using the icons to inspire you. I play this with my

daughter all the time. I also use them to try and inspire new ideas when my mind is drawing a blank. The random nature of the dice means that you have to remove all of your pre programmed ideas of structure and go with the flow.



[Steve Jobs](#), it turns out, was a great believer in serendipity. This is the idea that random happenings can lead to great and unexpected outcomes. He built the offices at Pixar studios with central toilets, ensuring that people from all over the company would randomly run into each other. Marissa Mayer famously banned working from home, citing (among other things) that incidental meetings around the office lead to new insights that would not happen otherwise. On the site, I have a link called “[Page Roulette](#)” which will just take you to a random page. You may like it, you may not – but it is fun to find out just because it is a journey into the unknown. I love the “[random article](#)” button on Wikipedia for this exact reason!

In gamification, we are no strangers to randomness, I have spoken about [random reward schedules](#) (and their [potential dangers](#)) in the past. But this is generally relegated to just surprises than changing something that is usually totally predictable into something that isn't.

When planning your user journey, think of ways to take people out of the predictable linear from time to time. Give Free Spirit Explorers something to look forward to! When building your systems, think how you can create moments of serendipity, where ideas and people may randomly collide to create wonderful new innovations.

Category

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Tags

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