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Immersive Anticipation: Navigating the Boundaries of Experience and Obsession

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I stepped into the arcade and was struck by the glow of the rainbow neon lights reflecting off the polished arcade floors and glass ceilings. This feeling of being overwhelmed, through the chaotic mix of overlapping machine soundtracks, occasional outbursts of excitement, and joystick squeaks reinstated the same joy I felt a decade ago. A floral jasmine scent lingers throughout the arcade which was oddly refreshing despite all the chaos. I took a deep breath, letting it all sink in before I was rudely interrupted by the sound of a mini siren.

Rows of claw machines stand like glass fortresses, each containing prizes ranging from plush toys, keychains, to sweets. As I turned towards the sounds of the siren, I saw a couple carefully manoeuvring the joystick, eyes locked in on the purple stuffed bunny before descending the claw to grip the prize. I saw their faces turn from excitement to disappointment as the bunny slipped through at the final second. A groan of frustration accompanied the loss, but the tap of the arcade card had already been registered for another play. That adrenaline rush and excitement of near success and the belief that “I’ll get lucky on the next attempt” is undeniable.

Farther in, I could feel the crowd tighten around two adjacent machines that promised joy and rare collectible cards. The light on each machine flashed frantically, luring players to tap their arcade cards over and over again. Hands moved with practised familiarity over the greasy and worn-down buttons, ignoring the occasional jammed button that required repeated force. A variety of reactions painted the scene as impatient arcade users were eager to play the machine, yet the frustrated players who received common cards tapped their arcade credits away for another wishful attempt, to no avail once again.

The arcade thrives on these moments of risk and reward where each attempt feeds the player with a surge of adrenaline, keeping them locked in a cycle of anticipation, will and determination. I was struck by the way excitement consistently outweighs caution. It is almost

as if you could understand the human tendencies towards their own risk, reward, and emotional investment. Even small victories would be sufficient to justify the next tap with a promise of a better outcome, and near-wins only fuel the players to keep playing, convincing themselves that the right time will come, yet frustration envelopes their senses and grows immensely inside of them because winning and getting a prized gift seems to be elusive. This leads me to a question: What sustains our attraction towards uncertain rewards despite the vicious cycle of loss?

Natasha Dow Schüll (2014) explains this sustained attraction as an interplay of carefully engineered environmental and psychological manipulation. Her research reveals how gambling machines strategically exploit cognitive biases and vulnerabilities by employing tactics such as unpredictable rewards and near misses. Players are psychologically immersed, entering a state defined by Schüll (2014) as “machine zone,” a dissociative state where players lose touch with reality, believing strongly that their next attempt might be a reward. Schüll (2014) quotes a gambler describing their mindset during a play: “You aren’t really there—you’re with the machine and that’s all you’re with” (p. 2). Such strategies are not confined to casinos as I saw similar mechanisms in an arcade environment where near success continuously prompted players to invest more yet consistently led them to disappointments.

Schüll (2014) provided a compelling exploration on how the environment and psychological manipulation sustain an individual’s attraction towards uncertain rewards in gambling. Her detailed examination of machine design creates a structure for unpredictable rewards, near-misses and an immersive sensory experience. By documenting on “machine zone”, she reveals that the main attraction is not the desire to win itself but the dissociative state of continuous play. This powerfully addresses my research question and demonstrates the engineered experience that compels players to persist despite their evident losses. However, while Schüll (2014) captures the design and psychological absorption, her study can be extended to discuss the individual differences in susceptibility to these tactics

Dr. Carolyn Hawley (2022) emphasizes a neurological dimension where she incorporates real-world examples through her counselling practices, demonstrating how gamblers became captivated by dopamine-induced excitement just for uncertain rewards. Her analysis further shows how neurological mechanisms sustain attraction towards gambling despite obvious negative results, explaining how gamblers persist even after a series of losses. Hawley (2022) underscores this phenomenon concisely - “just the anticipation of a reward produces a high” which is often more rewarding than the reward itself. Her neurological perspective is proven by observing the behaviours of frequent casino-goers repeatedly spending

their money, seemingly addicted to the thrill and anticipation of potential rewards rather than the rewards themselves.

Hawley (2022) draws on real-world clinical examples to prove how the “high” from anticipation can be more reinforcing than the reward itself, effectively proving why gamblers continue to persist even after repeated losses. The behaviours of regular casino goers supported this conclusion making her argument not only persuasive but also alarming. However, while her argument on the neurological mechanism is robust, it may risk oversimplifying gambling behaviour by not addressing the social contexts, the personality of players, and cognitive biases that contribute to addictive gambling.

Insights from Schüll (2014) and Hawley (2022) led me to a deeper understanding on how our attraction towards uncertain rewards is sustained not only through psychological or neurological factors but also through a process I call “anticipatory immersion.” This concept complements Schüll’s “machine zone” immersion with Hawley’s dopamine-driven anticipation. I contend that our attraction is reinforced by deeply immersive experience of anticipation rather than the gameplay or reward outcomes. In other words, players can be immersed deeply because the act of anticipating an uncertain reward is so psychologically and neurologically engaging that it outweighs one’s rational awareness of continuous losses.

Anticipatory immersion explains why players in the arcade persist despite dwindling balances and the full emotional and neurological experience of the cycle of hope, excitement, disappointment, and renewed anticipation. Each attempt at uncertain rewards intensifies the immersive anticipation, becoming an end rather than a means to achieve certain victories. So, by recognizing immersive anticipation, it holds for broader discussion beyond the arcades and casinos, potentially applying to other facets of human behaviour influenced by uncertainty, such as social media interactions or speculative investments including betting or lottery. Understanding the power of immersive anticipation might help us better control its addictive potential and develop healthier environments or engage in other more meaningful activities that recognize human weaknesses while fostering informed decision-making and psychological well-being.

Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that our attraction towards uncertain rewards, despite the vicious cycle of losses, reveals something deeply human. Initially I thought that the arcade was a place for people to relive their carefree childhood days, or simply for people of all ages and from all walks of life to have fun. However, witnessing and experiencing the relentless attempts at the claw machines and collectible card dispensers allowed me to unravel a deeper

story. Our persistent attempts, despite repeated disappointments, are not purely about winning but also about how deeply we become immersed in the sensation of anticipation itself.

I saw myself again in the arcade. My heart racing before a card drops, the excitement magnifying before revealing the rarity of the card and this feeling of being captivated is often more thrilling than winning a prize from the machine. Yet realising this led me to question the ethics behind such manipulative designs. If casinos and arcades purposefully exploit our human nature of psychological and neurological tendencies, should we reconsider how these environments are regulated or structured? I believe that acknowledging anticipatory immersion could empower us, not to remove these experiences entirely but to be strongly aware of the design factor and manipulative intent that trap players in those destructive loops of disappointment and losses.

I have become more mindful of my own emotional responses to uncertain rewards. By recognising how deeply immerse I can be in the act of anticipation as I perform a game in a claw machine, I will learn to enjoy these experiences responsibly and with caution. This is because, every time I enter an arcade, my self-awareness becomes a control mechanism or a stick to poke me when it is time to surrender and leave. Perhaps, if we collectively become more aware of our susceptibility to the vicious cycle of loss, we could better navigate the fine line between harmless entertainment and obsessive habits. Ultimately, the goal is not to demonise these enjoyable moments or deny people from the thrill of excitement, uncertainty, and adrenaline rush. Instead, it is to understand why we are attracted to risk, learning how to engage thoughtfully, and ensuring that excitement enriches rather than diminishes our lives.

Bionote

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