

The dangling carrots of Might and Management

*Analysis of addictive elements in “Heroes of Might and Magic III”
and “Championship Manager 00/01”*

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“The game draws you in, then pounces and before you know it, you cannot stop playing the infernal thing.”

User review¹ of Championship Manager 00/01

“A warning to all, this game is very, very, very, addictive.”

User review¹ of Heroes of Might and Magic III

“If you ever have the urge to play a game that you won't be able to switch off then this is the one for you.”

User review¹ of Championship Manager 00/01

One of the trademarks of successful computer games is that they present a sort of a carrot dangling in front of the player, constantly luring him to play a few more minutes – for hours and hours. This is the “just a few minutes more” syndrome, which describes the urge the player feels to play just that little bit longer, achieve just a little bit more, just to see if...

This paper will compare two seemingly very different games that have had the above described effect on the author; “Heroes of Might and Magic III” (3DO, 2000) and “Championship Manager 00/01” (Sports Interactive, 2000). Their similarities will be discussed and attempts made to categorize the common elements of addiction found in these two games.

The games are very different, and at first appear to have almost nothing in common, although both can broadly be described as “turn-based strategy”. Using typical genre definitions the similarities end here, with one striving to be a realistic sports/management simulation and the other taking place in a totally fictional world with elements of role playing, exploration and war simulation.

In order to find mutual elements of addiction one must look at the player experience and the gameplay itself, not only the technicalities of the games.

Personal attachment

Both games employ a god-like view (visual in HMM and textual in CM). Neither game has a typical first person avatar, but in CM “you” are the manager (with your own chosen name), in HMM “you” are either one of the heroes or an invisible king (the only real difference being to whom the in-game pop-up texts refer to). Still the player feels a certain personal attachment to “his favourites” that he builds up and nurtures, be it one or more heroes in HMM or a few favourite football players in CM:

“The amazing thing is how emotionally attached you can get to the [football] players in the game who are basically a list of numbers. You'll realise what I mean when you can't bring yourself to drop your young Swedish striker who you plucked from obscurity.”

User review¹ of Championship Manager 00/01

Combat with boots and swords

In both games you only have limited control over when “combat” occurs. In CM the matches come regularly regardless of whether your “heroes” are match fit or not, and in HMM an enemy hero might attack anywhere within reach (or you might attack an opponent that turns out to be more powerful than you had expected).

Both games give you a similar overview of the battlefield at the beginning of “combat” where you start with some default strategical positioning of your military troops or football players. You then have the option in both games to modify this positioning in light of the combat ahead (provided you have better tactics skills than your opponent in HMM).

The progress of the “combat” in CM is comparable to the auto combat in HMM; you are an observer, but can at (almost) any time stop the match/combat. In CM you can then change tactics or substitute football players, and in HMM you can take over the full control of your troops if you want to.

Various levels of depth

In both games you can choose how much “micro-management” you like. In HMM you can choose either to use auto combat or to control every movement of your troops and the spellcasting of your hero when fighting. In CM you can use a default play system or give the team detailed instructions, influence the training of the football players, manage the reserve team, etc.

This appears to be one of the key elements of addictive games; it is easy for a beginner to learn the basics, more experienced players can then “micro-manage” elements of their own choice and thereby add more depth to the game play.

Elements of time (and of carrot)

Both games have long term goals to be decided in several hours of gameplay; objectives for a football season or the winning objectives for a scenario. In-between there is always some challenging objective “just around the corner” that can be reached in a matter of minutes; the next football match, a town to be captured, an unknown area to be explored...

At any time there also are several development goals a bit further into the future; a football player returning from injury, the upcoming purchase of a player, new tactics that the team is getting used to, a town upgrade a few rounds away, the gathering of troops for an upcoming battle, etc.

The balance between these objectives seems to play a major role in the carrot effect mentioned before (“just a few minutes more”), and might very well be the most important.

To summarize

The key addictive elements both games appear to have in common are that they involve some build-up process; in HMM you nurture your heroes and build up your towns, in CM you construct a team and develop a strategy that applies to your squad (this includes nurturing young and promising players). Both games have a mixture of long term goals and various smaller objectives, apparently within reach at every turn. (This is probably the key addictive element in both games.) They also allow beginners to play the game at a basic level and experienced players to go into more detail if they choose to, that way avoiding a too high barrier of entry and at the same time providing experienced players with additional challenges.

What questions remain?

Such a brief text only allows limited discussion. Some of the questions this paper hasn't answered:

- What comparable quest elements are there in the two games (if any)? Can the long term goals and smaller challenges be considered as quests?
- What role does immersion play in these games? Do you have to be interested in football to fall for CM? Is the immersion/addiction stronger if you control your favourite team? Do you play differently as a human hero than as a demon?
- Both games have multiplayer options, does this add to the addictability? In what ways?
- How do the addictability elements of these two games differ from multiplayer action games like Counter Strike?

- What papers have been written about the elements of addictability in computer games?
- Can the addictability elements of a game be considered as positive (at least from a developer's point of view) but “game addiction” as negative (from a social point of view)?
- Is it possible to use the analysis of these two games to produce a general recipe for addictability?

¹ User comments are from the web community www.dooyoo.co.uk