A Theory of Fun
The other day I played a typing game on popcap.com...
I got really far and did really well, and there came a point where I got bored.
Then I played Bookworm on the same site.
I quit when I saw that I was fighting the tide.
People are amazing pattern matching machines.
Look at the places we can find a face
In fact, we tend to see patterns where there aren’t any.
When we grasp a pattern, we usually get bored with it and iconify it
When we meet noise, and fail to make a pattern out of it, we get frustrated and quit.
Once we see a pattern, we delight in tracing it, and in seeing it recur
What's fun is exercising your brain
Games are puzzles
—they are about cognition,
and learning to analyze patterns
When you’re playing a game,
you’ll only play it
until you master the pattern
once you’ve mastered it
The game becomes boring.
Basically, all games are edutainment
Some games teach spatial relationships.
Some games teach you to explore.
Some games teach you how to aim precisely.
We’re very good at seeing past fiction. This is why gamers are dismissive of the ethical implications of games - They don’t see “get a {blank} from a hooker, then run her over.”
They see a power-up.
As critics of games, of course, we can see other patterns. 😊
Players seeking to advance in a game will always try to optimize what they are doing.
If they are clever and see an optimal path—an Alexandrine solution to a Gordian problem—they’ll do that instead of the “intended gameplay.”
They will try to make the gameplay as predictable as possible.

Which then means it becomes boring, and not fun.
In the real world, we call this “security” and “steady jobs” and “sensible shoes” and “routine.”

Call it a treadmill, if you want.
As gamemakers, we are fighting a losing battle against the human brain, which always fights to optimize, assembly-line, simplify, maximize ROI.
If I were Will Wright, I’d say that “Fun is the process of discovering areas in a possibility space.”
Most long-lasting games in the past have been competitive, because they lead to an endless supply of similar yet subtly varied puzzles.
Instanced spaces in massively multiplayer games are a designer’s attempt to maintain control over the puzzles that players are solving.
Larger minimum feature sets in online worlds are about increasing the permutations, the possibility space.
We talk so much about emergent gameplay, non-linear storytelling, or about player-entered content. They’re all ways of increasing the possibility space, making self-refreshing puzzles.

(insert cartoon here.)
We also often discuss the desire for games to be art—for them to be puzzles with more than one right answer, puzzles that lend themselves to interpretation.

To be, or not to be— that is the question.
That may be the best definition of when something ceases to be craft and when it turns into art.
— the point at which it becomes subject to interpretation.
We do happen to have various puzzles and conundra that are like this. Try writing a book.

It was a dark and stormy night.
Or composing music.
Or understanding your significant other.

(Did you notice all of these are about communication?)
Or designing games.
The point at which our game puzzles approach the complexity of those puzzles is the point at which our art form becomes mature.
The gap between those who want games to entertain and those who want games to be art does not exist.

To be or not to be...
Because both entail posing questions—tough ones even, ethical ones, even. And games will never be mature as long as the designers create them with complete answers to their own puzzles in mind.
Even then, there will a class of player who prefers the comfort of only tackling puzzles they know how to solve.
In the caveman days, the wolves got ‘em.
These days, we’re a bit more tolerant—the job market gets them instead.
So the challenge we all face is to solve our own puzzles that don’t have one right answer (PvP, instancing, player-entered content!)
Until then, all our games are destined to be like tic-tac-toe.
Child’s play because the patterns are too easily perceived.