

An Essay: What is a puzzle? A discussion on dexterity puzzles/sports.

A puzzle can be described as an activity that requires ingenuity and often persistence in solving or assembling. One way to classify puzzles could be :

- Take – apart
- Put – Together
- Interlocking
- Disentanglement
- Puzzle Vessels
- Sequential Movement
- Dexterity
- Folding
- Vanish
- Impossible Objects

Traditional puzzles have inherently been single-player activities that rank low on replayability. Dexterity puzzles, unlike most, walk the thin line between skill and chance. In my opinion, a strong reliance on skill is when dexterity puzzles can be called sports. From the viewpoint of a game designer, the marriage between dexterity puzzles and sport happens when a substantial element of competition is involved.

Before anything, a multi-player puzzle with competition can be defined as an activity that mandates ingenuity and persistence to result in either victory or defeat. Such a binary result requires participants to utilize their skills as best they can to reach the desired state. The introduction of skill into the equation definitely helps solving the lack of replayability with most puzzles. However, skill levels pose as a double edged sword. Their variance levels affect how well a puzzle/sport would play out. On one hand, a ‘clean sweep’ is when the inferior skill level of one player is no match for the opponent. As a result, both participants are left unsatisfied where the sport was not as ideally engaging. On the other hand, when two individuals with similar skill sets compete, the experience turns into a more absorbing one. This can be extended to team sports as well. A sport, like a puzzle can be as engrossing if not more, when the attainable challenge is

conquered by expending reasonable physical skill or via the skillful effort of exercising the human brain to judge and decide.

Chris Crawford distinguishes play activities into stories, toys, puzzles and games respectively. He indicates how each category is a sum of an element of its predecessor and an additional consequence. Using this construct for puzzle classification, sports and dexterity puzzles can be said to border the demarcation between games and puzzles at their respective ends and merging into one ever so often. As an example, consider the game of squash. It warrants the dual-description being discussed in this essay. In terms of skill, the game demands endurance, apparatus control and the magnanimity of the mind. The chance factor being dealt with depending on who your opponent is and how your approach to the game would react to his and vice-versa. Thus, outcome of this unique combination of differing skill sets leads to the resolution of the puzzle in interesting ways each and every time.

The 'puzzle' nature of squash lies in the timely identification of the opponent's weakness as well as the unexpected course of events a single deliberate choice can make. On the other hand, the "game" nature of this sport manifests in the competitive struggle that evolves to win the game. Conflict presents itself by internal and external challenges – both mental and physical. Internal challenges being those that limit the self, and the external ones being posed by the opponent. To support the claims made in this essay: A case in point is my own experience with the sport. I have played on numerous occasions with unassuming adversaries, yet succumbed to defeat inspite of obvious skill advantage. Much like the feeling elicited when one fails to solve a puzzle, but knows they are that close to getting it right - reiterating the dual existence of dexterity puzzles and sports.

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