

Gaming and ADHD – Harley Brown-Cirkovic

Ever since I was young I've loved games. They helped expand my imagination, helped me with reading, and gave me an escape at the times I needed them. I was always a bit of a nervous kid when it came to how I played – I didn't like to fail. If I did sometimes that would scare me away from a game. I just liked to have fun, collect, feel a little safe.

For the most part I grew up on platformers like Banjo Kazooie and Spyro, colourful and vibrant worlds one could get lost in for hours. As I got older, my focus became more drawn towards games that compelled me, and that was usually horror games. Low reward for my brain, but stories and atmosphere compelling enough to grip me and keep me invested for a little while. Said stories have remained with me.

As I matured I thought my relationship had changed with games over the years, or maybe the way our generation had changed in regards to how we consume media. I used to wonder if it was part of being an adult, being busier and having less time to sit down and really invest time into something, but the more I learned about myself the more I realised it's always been there and the patterns ring true in the types of games I gravitated towards.

I was diagnosed with ADHD over a year ago, and that's when my behaviour all started to make sense for me.

Overall I preferred a shorter experience over a long one, things to collect and find within reason (so long as they weren't permanently missable!), and however long I played depended on how long something held my attention. My two favourite games growing up were Pokemon Puzzle League and Pokemon Stadium 2, both with plenty of challenges and features to keep a young kid busy. I liked the collectability of Pokemon and the strategy, the reward for training well and the secrets that could be found. However, these games back in my day were actually fairly simple in design and never overstepped, never felt overwhelming to me.

I liked challenges, *sometimes*. In my teen years I always preferred the challenges a good fighting game would give, and as I got older a nice and tricky Layton puzzle, because anything too hard would scare me away from a game sometimes for months. I couldn't handle the failure unless I felt the reward was worth it – and even then it could be a frustrating endeavour. Anything I enjoyed immensely I would be able to play for hours – for the most part this was colourful platformers, fighting games or rhythm games – with some puzzles on the side. I became extremely fond of detective games and point and click adventures. Somehow, my focus was able to remain. Good setting, themes, characters and gameplay and I would have no problem investing myself, and more often than not it became *overinvesting*.

The rest of what I would play was short and sweet, either broken down into rounds (Tekken, Mortal Kombat, Soul Calibur), songs and minigames (Rhythm Heaven, WarioWare) or missions/chapters (Devil May Cry, Resident Evil 4). Fighting games used to be very rewarding as one had to unlock artwork, features and characters – with the more major rewards becoming obsolete with the addition of DLC in newer games as well as a push for online tournaments. Aside from that, gaming felt bite-sized for me, something I could put down whenever I wanted and return to at any time.

Games were never as big back then as they are now. I never understood why I was so stubborn to try open world games for the longest time – there was simply too much to do once I finally got around to them. You're presented with a path, and suddenly sidequests, real time events, distractions that lead you off said path and suddenly I'm halfway across the map – it *disorients* me. When I was young you were lucky to have two or three sidequests happening at once, now there's new

people to meet, mini events, small happenings everywhere. I preferred linear games and never understood the criticism of them; as much as I liked to explore the environment of an open world, the risk of missing something important eats away at me and with too much choice I just don't know where to begin. With too much to do, I also don't remember where I left off too well if I put the game down for a while.

Adventuring is hard and it almost feels like being on holiday in a completely unknown place – and that isn't always a magical experience. I could be set on following the story and suddenly a stranger interrupts my train of thought and needs me to desperately help them find their cat and I lose track as the minutes pass (bonus points if the cat is cute!). Over the past few years I've tried to organise things better, stay on a sidequest and not get distracted, but sometimes the temptation is too real. It's nearby on the map or there's a better reward so I let myself be distracted. Ten sidequests later and I can't remember the main story, big thanks to games that summarise chapters because I'd be lost without them. Not everything about modern games is a downside.

I have so many open world games I want to start but I feel burdened by the sheer size of them, the logical part of my brain can only translate that as hundreds of hours of dedication, the same kind of mentality that holds me back on starting a long-running television show or a book series. There's just *too much*. Instead it has become easier to accept games like Overwatch and Dead by Daylight into my world; they're brief, rewarding when I help my team, and there's enough lore to keep me invested. Some days a few games are all I can manage, but I never feel like I've forgotten something with them.

Another factor that is a setback is my *misophonia* – my strong, uncontrollable reactions to certain sounds. A genre I learned to love as I grew older was horror, but with my misophonia combined with low rewards, it's a difficult genre for me to explore. The stories always intrigue me, but when progress means a bigger threat up ahead, it's hard to enjoy the experience for someone low on dopamine.

Overall, being diagnosed has helped me understand my habits a little better. It's helped me realise it was never a lack of skill, but a lack of motivation and focus at times – others a little too much excitement. To anyone who is reading this who feels a similar way, please know that you aren't alone, and at the end of the day you can play at your own pace, in your own style.