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The Neurobiology of Happy Salmon The Most Ridiculous Game in the World!

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My name's Nick Bentley and I'm the smartest person on Earth. That may not actually be true, but 3 years ago something happened that made me feel for one precious moment it could be: I had a real, honest-to-goodness insight, and it played a tiny role in helping create a hit game.

I'm not the game's designer (these two [guys are](#)), nor am I responsible for its development, production, distribution, or marketing (that would be [this guy](#) and a bunch of other folks). So my role was tiny INDEED, but that hasn't kept me from overweening pride or constant gloating. Let's get on with it:

The year is 2015. The scene is the North Star Games booth at New York Toy Fair. I'm new to the game industry, I've no idea what I'm doing, and accordingly I'm standing around like a moron contributing nothing to our company's success. I realize this, so I cast about for a way to look busy.

One reason we have a booth is so game designers can pitch us their games and we can evaluate them. I eventually realize this is the activity for me. I'm a game designer and I'm also judgey and self-important, so critiquing other people's games with gimlet-eyed prejudice comes naturally. So I do. I sit in the middle of the booth gleefully cutting down game ideas like a farmer at harvest.

After this has gone on for a while, a young guy shows up at the booth. Everybody knows him already. He has a bunch of professional pitch sheets with him. I crack my knuckles and prepare to eat him alive.

The first thing he does: he tells me to stick out my hand like I'm going to shake his. Then he does the same, except he moves his hand past my hand, to my forearm, and starts slapping it furiously like it fainted and needs waking up. He tells me to slap his forearm in the same way, so I do and now we're both slapping each other's forearms with unusual vigor.



This is new. This is different. It's funny and makes me feel...happy. Whatever this is, it's the first thing I've seen to which I have no critical response. My gimlet eye has blinked.

His name is Ken Gruhl. He tells me what we're doing is called the Happy Salmon, and it's one of four actions you take in a speed game he invented with his partner Quentin. The other actions are a high-five, a fist-bump, and a thing called Switcharoo where you switch places with another person. All the players try desperately to get through all the actions in their personal deck of actions first, by taking those actions with other players who are striving for the same goal.

We try the game. The whole thing, a nuclear bomb of silliness, takes about 60 seconds.

But I don't need near that long to render my verdict. 5 seconds in, I know from the deepest place in my heart Happy Salmon will be a hit. As soon as we're done, I yell out something to the effect of "THIS IS THE ONE!!!!!" like I'd just seen Neo stop bullets, and I start telling everyone around me we MUST publish it.

That was three years ago. My certainty hasn't wavered for a moment since.

We did publish it, and it did become a hit, and now it's a nominee for a Toy of the Year Award (The TOTY's are considered the Oscars of the toy industry), and I'll keep bragging about that until the day I die.



If you've played Happy Salmon, you're probably going "Well duh. Of course it's a hit. It's awesome. Anyone can see that. Put anyone else in your shoes and the outcome would have been the same."

But at the time, it wasn't obvious. Ken and Quentin had pitched it to several other companies, all of whom had rejected it. Maybe it seemed too ridiculous. When you show it to people, you hear a lot of stuff like:

"That was so stupid!!!!"

"Was that even a game!?!"

(they're always laughing when they say it, but still...)

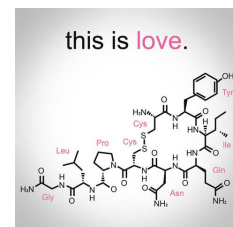
And if I try to describe it to you, I'll utterly fail to convey why it's good. You'll think it's the dumbest idea you've ever heard. I'm sure Ken and Quentin owe some of their rejections to publishers who didn't play it.

I suspect Happy Salmon's seeming idiocy made it feel ever-so-slightly disreputable, at least on a subconscious level. Maybe that was why it was rejected. I've heard many people say it has zero educational value.

But Happy Salmon is far from idiotic. On the contrary, it does something powerful and unique among games, and it's actually a serious and important thing. That's what I saw in that moment in 2015, and that's why I wanted to publish it so badly. I've never discussed this outside our company, but I think it's valuable, so here goes:

I used to be a Neurobiologist, so I'm always thinking about the effect games have on our brains. I view games through the lenses of neurotransmitters, visual perception, cognitive biases, etc.

I learned in grad school that positive human touch has a profound effect on the brain and body. A hug, a high-five, a caress: they all prompt a release of "happy chemicals" in us. Like oxytocin, known as "the love hormone". Those happy chemicals do great things: they ease us out of fight-or-flight mode, make us feel close to and trusting of others, help calm our immune systems, and more.



But touch is a tricky thing. I can't just go around hugging people willy-nilly because it would be an invasion of personal space. If I touch someone who's not open to and ready for it, I'll just make them angry or scared. Touch requires permission.

Now you can understand what I saw in Happy Salmon. Games are opt-in systems. When I saw the players high-fiving and fist-bumping and happy-salmoning as vigorously as it is possible for a human being to do those things, my first thought was "My GOD, this thing is a F^%\$#@* oxytocin MACHINE".

I'd never seen anything like it. Its closest relative is Twister, but Twister is too intimate. I don't ever want to have to stick my crotch in grandma's face but that's what Twister asks of me. Happy Salmon creates a level of touch close enough to release a flood of happy chemicals, but not so close it's awkward. The players can feel it, and it makes them feel good, and that makes the touching even more enthusiastic and effective, in a viciously happy circle. The game achieves this in 60 seconds with just a deck of cards - i.e. cheaply and portably. It could not be more perfect. I've never told anyone this, but later that night I had a moment alone in my hotel room and I teared up. I'd been witness to a perfect thing.

The neurobiology of touch is, I'm certain, the core gameplay reason Happy Salmon is a hit. I'm extremely proud we publish it, because there are a lot of stressed-out people in the world who don't trust each other. The miracle of Happy Salmon is that it's a real antidote, disguised as a ridiculous little card game.

Play Happy Salmon with North Star Games, Booth 6629, at the The American International Toy Fair in New York City, February 17-20, 2018