Tricks of the Trade

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Near misses and short-term rewards that lead to promises of a bigger win are some of the tricks app and game developers have taken from electronic slot machine designers to keep players playing. In an article in The Economist writer Ian Leslie explains:

"The machines are programmed to create near misses: winning symbols appear just above or below the 'pay line' far more often than chance alone would dictate. The player's losses are thus reframed as potential wins, motivating her to try again. Mathematicians design payout schedules to ensure that people keep playing while they steadily lose money."

Leslie goes on to talk about another trick designers use:

"A player who is feeling frustrated and considering quitting for the day might receive a tap on the shoulder from a 'luck ambassador,' dispensing tickets to shows or gambling coupons. What the player doesn't know is that data from his game-playing has been fed into an algorithm that calculates how much that player can lose and still feel satisfied, and how close he is to the 'pain point.' The offer of a free meal at the steakhouse converts his pain into pleasure, refreshing his motivation to carry on."

Apps and games also use the "pain point." But, instead of free dinners, players are offered incentives like a sale on coins or an in-game reward to keep the player playing. In reality, it only appears random. The game developers have analysed data on the player so they know when they are about to quit (i.e. their pain point), which is when they step in with a pick me up (free dinner or in-game rewards) and sure enough, gamblers will stay longer.

MIT professor and cultural anthropologist, Natasha Schüll, explains these manipulations in her book "Addiction by Design". She explores how the casino industry went from a social activity around a craps table or roulette wheel to a solitary experience of individuals zoned out in front of machines. Soon after her book was released in 2013, Schüll said she began receiving invitations to speak at tech companies and conferences attended by marketers, developers, and entrepreneurs.

So over half term, I thought it might be helpful for us to talk about some of the casino tricks and how they relate to the games and social media we all use on our devices.

1. What app or game do the boys find hooks them in the most?
2. Are the boys aware of how the game or app hooks them in, with rewards like streaks on Snapchat?
3. Do the boys think companies have a responsibility to monitor and limit their habit-forming games and apps, or do they think it is okay that the companies hook us in?