

EPISODE 171

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.7] JM: Welcome to Live Happy Now, the podcast to inspire you to live a happier life and give you the tools to make it happen. This week's episode is brought to you by Momentous Institute, powered by the Salesmanship Club of Dallas and dedicated to building and repairing social emotional health for kids since 1920.

This is Live Happy Science Editor, Paula Felps, and today on episode 171 of Live Happy Now, we're talking about playing games and how they can make you happy, especially if you play them at work. We're talking to Scott Crabtree, founder of the company Happy Brain Science. Scott is an entrepreneur who combined his love of game design with his passion for positive psychology and blazed an entirely new trail when he created the game Choose Happiness at work. Today, he's talking to us about how we can all gamify our lives to create greater happiness at work and bring it home with us.

Well, Scott, first of all, I want to welcome you to the show and thank you for being a guest on Live Happy Now.

[0:00:57.9] SC: Such a pleasure to be with you again, Paula. Thank you.

[0:01:01.0] PF: People don't know that you and I actually met at the International Positive Psychology Association World Congress in Canada, and the reason that I was so interested in what you are doing is that you're combining two elements that people don't usually think about together, and that's work and games. So can you tell us a little bit about how you decided to merge those two things?

[0:01:24.7] SC: Yeah. Well, I come from a video game design and development background. So I spent most of my career leading the design and development of mostly kids and family educational games, but also some exercise games and console games, even an iPhone game along the way. The career ultimately led me to Intel, and while I was at Intel doing outreach to the video game industry from Intel, I discovered there was a real solid science of happiness.

I finished my first book on the science of happiness, Sonja Lyubomirsky's *The How of Happiness*, and felt like I discovered this amazing goldmine, this amazing treasure, right? As you know, because I know you sure the passion, that there's solid science that can guide us to making choices that lead to more happiness in our lives, and if we make those choices, we lead better lives. Our brains work better, we're healthier, we live longer, etc.

So I thought I really wanted to learn all these science of happiness stuff and I felt, "What's the best way to learn something?" It's to teach it. So I started volunteering to give talks titled The Science of Happiness and Video game Development, for example, to conferences. Conferences said, "Great! We'll take it."

So I started learning as much as I could about the science of happiness. That essentially went viral and led to me founding Happy Brain Science resigning from Intel and starting Happy Brain Science in early 2012. So I was for several years focused on being a speaker and a coach helping people apply the science of happiness at work. Then I thought, "I miss games. I miss playing games, and making games, and speakers like me are supposed to write books, but everybody's got a book and almost nobody has a game. So I want to make a game about the science of happiness at work." So I made a card game called Choose Happiness at Work that teaches the science of happiness at work by getting people playing with problems and solutions together.

[0:03:31.1] PF: What made you decide to do it as a card game instead of a video game or an app?

[0:03:36.9] SC: Good question. The original plan was I'm going to make this as a card game so that I can be there playing it with people and see their feedback and get their feedback and we're going to iterate and iterate until people love it, and then we'll ship it is a card game and then we'll convert it into an app. Well, we did all that stuff with the card game and we made a card game and then I've been really, really busy, so I want to make of video game version of it, but I have not yet.

[0:04:06.1] PF: Well, and didn't your timing turned out very fortuitous, because board games and card games are kind of having a renaissance right now, aren't they?

[0:04:14.0] SC: Yes. There's another reason that I started with card game first, and that is, as you know and maybe some of your listeners know, the science of happiness is quite clear for most of us most of the time. The number one factor in our well-being or happiness is the quality of our relationships with other people.

So I love technology. I love video games. I'm not anti-technology at all, but I do think that technology, these amazing cell phones and more that we have, they pull us apart. I asked my phone for directions. Therefore, I don't need to ask you, or I don't need to call you up and get together to play a board game, because I've got my phone to entertain me.

So I fear that technology is leading to us spending less face time with each other, and therefore maybe not having as high quality relationships with each other as we should have or could have if we wanted to really be happy and thrive in life. So I wanted the first version of the game to be one that physically brought people together, because it's part of what's [inaudible 0:05:16.5].

[0:05:17.3] PF: And yours does.

[0:05:18.9] SC: Thank you.

[0:05:20.6] PF: We've played it at IPA. I've seen what it does in a crowd of people, where people really get together and they interact, and engage, and they laugh, and they solve problems together. So can you tell us how that works? Can you, I guess first of all, explain exactly what the game requires of the player?

[0:05:40.0] SC: Absolutely. So essentially Choose Happiness at Work is a card game, and it is somewhat like apples to apples or dare I bring up Cards Against Humanity?

[0:05:51.5] PF: It's a really nice version of card against humanity.

[0:05:55.0] SC: I have a friend who says my game should actually be called Cards For Humanity, which I didn't do for copyright reasons.

[0:06:00.3] PF: I love that.

[0:06:00.9] SC: But it kind of is cards for humanity. So it's like those games in that there are two decks of cards and you're trying to match cards to get winners essentially. So a couple of differences, in Choose Happiness at Work there is a deck of problem-based cards. We call them scenario cards. These are real-world scenarios that we face in the workplace. So just randomly picking a couple off the top here, I'm afraid of changes that might be coming at work. I am constantly checking my email. I am asked to do more than is possible. So various typically morale and motivation problems that tend to show up at work.

Then the other deck, which has over 100 cards in it are all science-based solutions. So positive psychology and other science that suggest choices we can make to boost our happiness and well-being, in particular, at work.

[0:06:53.7] PF: What kind of results do you see? Because one thing that has struck me about the game is it not only gives you good interaction with your peers, but it teaches you these great positive psychology principles. So it's kind like two for one type of situation. What do you see when people play it? What kind of reactions and responses do you get to it?

[0:07:13.9] SC: First of all, there's a lot of laughter. I do this a lot in workshops. So I do a lot of workshop facilitation, and often I will have 50 or a hundred people playing at tables of six or eight or something like that, and there's just a lot of laughter going around, which is just music to my ears. There's not enough laughter in our workplaces I dare suggest based on what I experience and what my clients tell me.

So it's just fun. It's supposed to be fun. Now it's a serious game, as game designers like me call it. Meaning there's a point in addition to fun. A regular game is just supposed to be fun, right? A serious game is supposed to be fun and educational, or fun and make a difference somehow. So that's certainly part of what people tell me as they learn science from the game. They find cards go by in their hand that they're like, "Hey, I should do this, and I will," or they have a card come by and they're like, "Oh. Who needs this I did at least idea? Is Karen. I'm going to tell her about this."

[0:08:16.2] PF: Do they ever like steal the cards and subtly slide it on to someone's desk?

[0:08:20.5] SC: Well, that's one of the variations. You said two in one. I like to think that there are dozens of ways of using these cards, and one of them is called "this is for you", where you simply look through a handful of solutions and you pick one for somebody else at the table knowing what you know about your colleagues.

There's also ways of using the cards to facilitate discussion. So what people have told me, which has been a pleasant surprise, is that there's a meta take away from playing Choose Happiness at Work, and the meta take away is any problem has multiple solutions that can work, and tapping your colleagues is a great way to find more solutions.

So I was specifically after teaching the science of happiness at work when I designed the game, but people report out afterwards, they're like, "You know what? It was great. Is we all just opened our minds to real problems we have day-to-day, that there's not just one solution we're looking for. There're often a handful of solutions that will solve a problem, and sometimes your colleagues have those ideas in your head, and if you're not reaching out to them, you're missing out on good solution.

[0:09:22.9] PF: It seems like then maybe game design can be used actually outside of game, like the theories of game design are something that you can apply to problems in the workspace.

[0:09:32.6] SC: Yes, and I'm so glad you're asking this, because it's been an area that I've been very excited about lately. Basically, gamification is the word that people use when we're applying game design concepts to things that are not games. If you've been in any loyalty program or you've earned any badge in an app or a website, you've experienced gamification whether you knew it was gamification or not.

So what makes game so compelling? What makes people like me play it every day or almost every day? What makes us spend a lot of time in a game and spend a lot of money in a game? Science has given us the answers. What was so surprising and wonderful for me was the answers of what engage people in a video game were exactly what I had been reading for the past several years on how to engage employees at work.

So basically what the science says is if you go deep, if you go past the surface and you go past the points and the levels and the badges and the quests, what you find are core human intrinsic motivators, psychological needs we have, specifically autonomy, relatedness, and mastery. We need autonomy, relatedness of mastery, and the best video games satisfy our needs for those things, and therefore they're very engaging.

So not every game solves every one of those needs, but autonomy. Games give you tons of choices. So video games are great at delivering autonomy. They are sometimes great at delivering relatedness. Not every video game does of course, but Words With Friends was a smash hit, even though there were lots of word games before that. I think it's the with friends parts that helped it be a smash hit.

Then mastery, simply making progress, feeling confident, getting better at things. Games are masterful, like giving you lots of progress indicators and feedback and showing it how you're mastering what you're doing.

So autonomy, relatedness, mastery, and then surprise it is this element that's going to hook you and bring you back. So that, according to science, is what makes game so compelling. A bunch of that is how you engage employees as well. You give them autonomy. You relate to them as human beings and give them opportunities to relate to other people. You help them master new skills of progress, and you've got an engaged employee. So I was really excited to discover how the things that engage us in playing games are the same things that can engage us in making work more rewarding, more engaging, more playful, more fun.

[0:12:10.6] PF: There are some people who think that games aren't – Work is not the place for games. Let's put it that way.

[0:12:16.8] SC: Yup.

[0:12:17.1] PF: We still do in some places, they have that mindset still that like work is serious and this is what we're supposed to be doing. Yes, we want our people to be happy, but not at the cost of productivity. So they might not see games or something, that's the gamification of the work experience is important, because it might take away from an employee's productivity. Can

you speak to what that would actually do for an employee if they're given the chance to either have a gamified competition at work or actually play games?

[0:12:48.7] SC: Absolutely. So I run into this skepticism frequently to be candid with you, and I understand it, right? I mean, we're at work to get things done. We're not at work to play games and mess around, right? but there's a great, great quote from John Cleese. The quote is, "Just because it's fun doesn't mean it isn't serious." That is, and I might've mangled that slightly, but the quote is something like that. Things that are fun – Fun is not the opposite of productive, right? Unproductive is the opposite of productive. Fun can actually be a great complement to productive.

You may know, perhaps not all of your listeners know, solid peer-reviewed science. Not done by me. Not done by Joe Schmoie, but done by PhD's who are having their PhD peers review their papers before they're published in academic journals. Scientists have found that if you boost someone's happiness, you boost their productivity 12 to 25% or more depending on who you are and what you're doing.

So long scientific story short, if we take a random group of people, randomly divide them in two, make half of them miserable and half of them happy, typically done with short film clips, and then ask them to write, edit, program, etc. We see a significant productivity boost. 12 to 25% is a major productivity boost. That comes from happiness.

So that means if you take 5% of your time to boost relationships and happiness at work and you get a 20% productivity boost from that investment, then taking 5% of your time to play fun games with colleagues was fantastic return on investment.

[0:14:30.5] PF: Those are terrific numbers. I think any manager would change their mind immediately if they were opposed to games upon hearing that.

[0:14:38.4] SC: Honestly, like I'll take 1%. How about 1% –

[0:14:42.0] PF: Right? Exactly.

[0:14:43.3] SC: How about 1% of your meeting time? Those boring meetings where people aren't engaged and people aren't connecting and moods are dropping and therefore productivity is lowering. Give me just 1% of your meeting time where we get to play a game together. Give it to me at the beginning of a meeting, and I will deliver you a more engaged meeting with better results and a happier, more engaged workforce coming out of that meeting as well.

[0:15:10.6] PF: That's fantastic. Scott, you have so much to teach us. Wish we had more time. We don't. But we are going to tell listeners how they can learn more about what you're doing. How they can learn about Happy Brain Science. How they can learn about Choose Happiness at Work and where they can go to get all these great accessory items for workplace happiness.

That was Scott Crabtree of Happy Brain Science, and we'll be back in just a couple of minutes to tell you more about how you can learn about his happy game. But now we're going to talk with Chris Libby again. We're bringing Chris in because he has a great column that he writes on livehappy.com and talks about some fascinating happiness facts.

[0:15:53.7] CL: It's very exciting.

[0:15:54.8] PF: Tell me your top favorite happiness factoid that you've discovered here in the last couple of weeks.

[0:16:00.4] CL: This one just came out. So it's hot off the presses. It's that new research from the Perelman School of Medicine and the school of arts and sciences at University of Pennsylvania, which we reference a lot content. The green spaces, and if you turn vacant lots into green spaces, it can lower, significantly lower depression rates in the surrounding areas, especially in urban areas. So cities that have a lot of distress and lack of money in some of those areas, and some of the poor neighborhoods, if you turn these vacant lots, which are usually kind of just drab and filled with trash and stuff like that, if you clean it up, you can improve the mental health of the community, which is fascinating.

[0:16:41.7] PF: I can see that, because nature overall has such a great impact on us, and there's even studies that show having a tree outside your window or even a plant in your cube is going to make you feel better.

[0:16:53.3] CL: Well, there are few things that are happening here. One, it improves safety and health, because it reduces crime, violence, and stress levels. One study showed about a 29% decrease in gun crime violence in these treated areas.

[0:17:08.2] PF: Really?

[0:17:08.2] CL: Yeah.

[0:17:08.8] PF: Just by turning it into nature?

[0:17:10.3] CL: Mm-hmm. They're traveled more. There's more people walking around and increases exercise, healthy behaviors, and of course the positive biological calming effect that you get from being exposed. Plus, these green and blue spaces too water, helps to property values go up around these. So it kind of – It's like a rising tide that raises all ships.

[0:17:33.5] PF: So were there any downsides? It sounds like there are so many positives to this. Were any downsides found to that?

[0:17:38.9] CL: Probably upkeep. It does cost a little bit of money, but it is a cost-effective way for a city to improve the well-being, but you also have to maintain it.

[0:17:45.9] PF: That's awesome. that's awesome to hear. This is fun. What else you got? What else do you got for us, Chris?

[0:17:51.2] CL: Let's see. People who are married to their best friend enjoy more life satisfaction over those who are unmarried according to a study from the Vancouver School of Economics, and this just isn't in the honeymoon stage, but it's throughout the whole relationship. So this serves people especially well in an area life that we talk about a lot that midlife slump around 50 helps you through those times in your life when stressors really pile on, and couples who feel like they're married to their best friend, they experience about as twice as much contentment.

[0:18:24.3] PF: Choose well. Is that what you're telling us?

[0:18:26.3] CL: Pretty much.

[0:18:27.5] PF: So we're going to get more nature. We're going to make sure we're married to our best friend. Can you give me one more thing about happiness?

[0:18:33.3] CL: The next one, this one is especially for those people who have kids. This one, it's extra beneficial I think, or eye-opening, because a recent study published in the Journal of Motion said that psychological well-being of America's youth decrease after 2012. Now, one thing that increased was digital devices.

So teens who spend more time on their devices and less time on device-free activities, like sports, face-to-face interaction, they felt a decline in their personal happiness. But you don't have to — because I mean, it's everywhere. So technology is not going away, but you don't have to completely quit technology cold turkey. But researchers find that the happiest teens use their devices less than one hour a day. So more than one hour increases unhappiness.

[0:19:25.2] PF: Well, okay. So first of all, I'm shocked to learn that there is a teenager that uses their device for less than an hour a day.

[0:19:33.6] CL: Yeah, that's a tricky one.

[0:19:33.9] PF: That's amazing.

[0:19:34.9] CL: I guess as a parent you have to be strict about it. If you have a kid who's the smaller ages, and I know I'm guilty, because my kid is on a tablet all the time, and we tried to definitely restrict more, because we do notice a change of behavior once she's off of the iPad and she doing more creative things, like figuring out how to play on her own or doing some crafts or stuff like that.

I think when you're on these tablets, even when you're communicating with other people through these tablets, you're still in isolation mode. You're not paying attention to what's going on around you. You're not interacting with your family. You're not interacting with other people, which is so crucial for human connection and happiness.

[0:20:16.6] PF: Well, this is all great stuff. Our listeners can go online and can read about these things and more.

[0:20:22.4] CL: Yeah. The blog is called Finding Happiness.

[0:20:24.5] PF: Finding Happiness. We'll look for that. Now I'm in a go steal all my nieces' digital devices from them so they can't stay on them.

Thank you, Chris. We will chat again with you next week.

[0:20:34.3] CL: All right. Thanks.

[0:20:35.6] PF: That's all for this episode of Live Happy Now. Be sure to visit us at livehappynow.com to learn more about the game; Choose Happiness at Work, and if you like a free book on gamification, text "Happy Game" to 345-345. That's "Happy Game" to 345-345.

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That's all we have time for today, so please join us back here next week. Until then, remember to make every day a happy one.

[END]