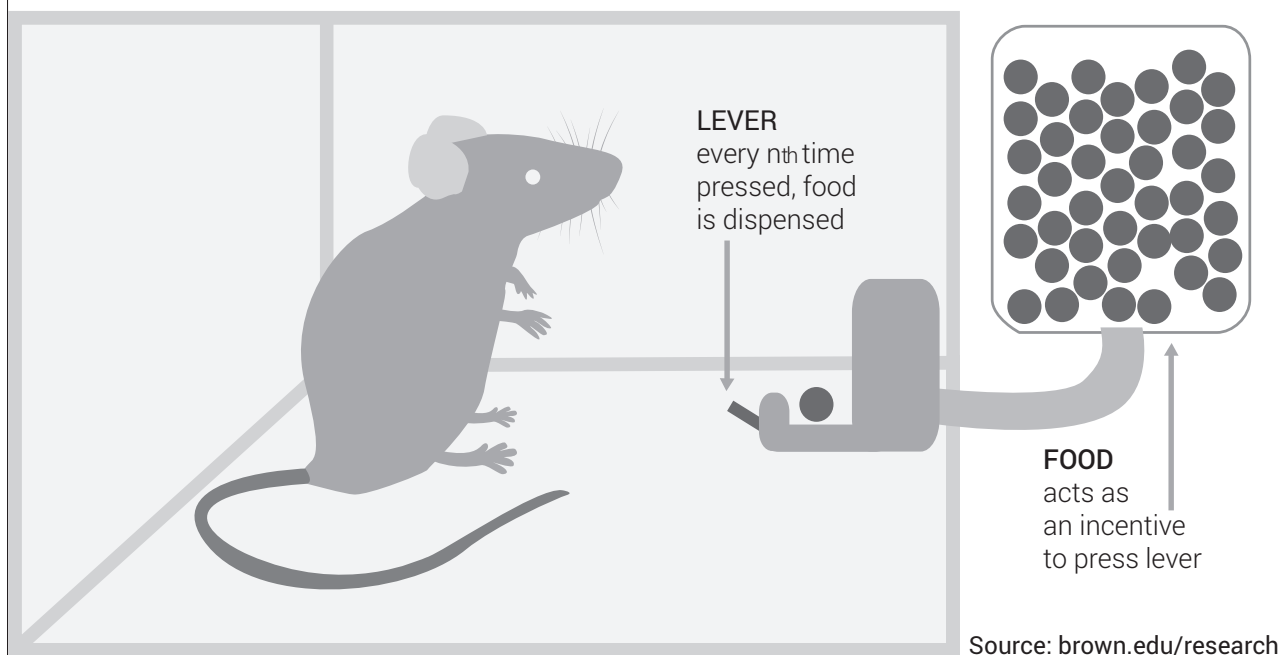


How a Skinner Box Works



News stories shouldn't be exaggerated



Sarah Muir

It's not every day that Kirksville gets national attention. But apparently when it does, the issue at hand is not very newsworthy. A primary school substitute teacher sending a note home about a student's lunch is a national news story, according to a Jan. 24 Fox News article.

A substitute teacher sent a note home urging the parents of a second grade Kirksville student to pack a healthier lunch during the future. One of the parents is a local doctor. The story seems nothing more than a funny incident those parents can tell at parties, but with Fox News picking up the story it seems like there is a different standard of what is and is not considered news.

This story represents the type of small incident that seems to be appearing more often throughout national news coverage. People are making their private matters public, and news outlets are just looking for reactionary stories.

There are two instances of people making things public with this story. First, the substitute teacher who really had no reason to send a note home. Given the student was not in any danger, the teacher had no place to send that kind of note home and ask for a parent's signature on it.

Second, Fox News, when they picked up the story. The article is filed under "outrageous" and the accompanying clip from "Fox and Friends" paints the story as the greatest injustice ever committed. Not everything has to be sensationalized and broadcast across the nation. This type of reporting only leads to overreactions about small things that happen, and distracts from the much more significant, newsworthy events. Incidents like this should be laughed off instead.

Particularly strange is the use of the word "outrageous" about this incident. Merriam-Webster defines outrageous as "going beyond all standards of what is right or decent." When I think of the word outrageous, I think of Boko Haram or the Charlie Hebdo attacks, not school lunches.

The problem with this type of reporting is it elevates everything to the same intensity level as a story about ISIS. There needs to be some kind of rhetorical difference between serious news stories and ones of lesser importance, and that does not seem to exist anymore.

At the end of the day, this story is only one of millions that feed into problems of overreacting and sensationalizing private issues. At least the last time Kirksville was on national news, it was because somebody was throwing arms around. Now that's outrageous.

Sarah Muir is a sophomore political science major from Lee's Summit, Mo.

Don't get tricked by a Skinner box game



Megan Archer
Opinions Editor

To someone who never has heard the term, a "Skinner box" might sound pretty gruesome — perhaps conjuring an image of a box that skins animals without getting blood everywhere. The reality isn't nearly as violent, but it still can be painful to whoever finds themselves trapped in one.

A Skinner box, also called an operant conditioning chamber, was created by B.F. Skinner at Harvard University during 1930 to study conditioning. In the experiment, a rat is placed inside a box with a lever that sometimes will dispense treats when pressed. It was found if there was a fixed number of presses needed to dispense a treat, the rats would press it when they were hungry, according to a 2005 Brown University study. However, when treats were dispensed after a random number of lever presses, the rats spent much more time pressing the lever, according to the same study.

If someone literally trapped you in a box with some levers, you'd probably call the police. However, there are metaphorical Skinner boxes everywhere, and they are easy to fall into without realizing it.

Many comparisons have been drawn between a Skinner box and certain games — especially cheap, flashy cellphone or Facebook games. Psychologist Nick Yee, who has studied the reward and punishment structure of the

game EverQuest, has noted it uses the random ratio to reward players — the ratio that was shown to produce the most constant lever-pushing in the rats.

Humans definitely are different from rats, but we respond to rewards in similar ways. Game developers have noticed this and are tapping into it. Acknowledgment for achievements is the human equivalent of rat treats in that they hold powerful control over our actions, according to the 2008 book "Game Design Workshop." Companies are using this information to design games that set up randomly dispersed rewards which keep humans clicking to get more, despite the fact that the reward is automatic and meaningless.

There's nothing wrong with the basic concept of rewarding players for completing some sort of task — that's a huge part of almost any game. The problem comes when game developers stop trying for anything else. There are games available that get their players hooked just by offering imaginary rewards in exchange for time spent playing, often in ways that require little to no skill. This can trick people into playing long after the game has stopped being fun and can convince people to spend real-world money to achieve meaningless game goals.

I have nothing against frivolous phone apps. Sometimes, the stresses of life get to be too much and it just helps to turn off your brain for a while. However, if you're going to be wasting time, I hope it at least will be wasted in an entertaining way.

If you find yourself glued to your phone, tapping for hours, ask yourself if you're still having fun. If not, put it down and walk away. I promise, the compulsion to get to the next level will fade as soon as you get engaged with something else.

There are many ways to make a game compelling to players — there's no reason to resort to cheap, lazy addiction tricks.

Megan Archer is a senior computer science major from Morrison, Colo.

Be proud of all of your nerdy interests



Trevor Hamblin

According to most teen-focused television shows from the 1990s onward, high school is a very hierarchical experience. The student body is divided into jocks, nerds, cheerleaders and other stereotypical groups. Not that this ever has seemed to have any merit.

This framing of culture has led to, at least for me, self-consciousness

about personal interests and hobbies. Thankfully, college has helped remedy that somewhat.

To all new students who haven't already made this realization — we're all a little bit of a nerd. It might not readily be apparent for some, but eventually it'll come out, and it's great. So don't worry too much about being cool, because no one else is, either.

I'm used to downplaying my interests and backpedaling when I start on a subject, simply because I have a hard time knowing when to shut up. So it was a shock when people around me actually started to show interest in what I was saying about a random subject. Which led me to the revelation that everyone is a nerd, or at least has passing nerdy interests.

Take my suitemate — he's a theatre major who likes Nicki Minaj and

enjoys acting, musicals and sewing. So it was a surprise when he told me on his way out of the room that he was going to play "Dungeons and Dragons" with some friends. It was even more surprising when he told me about how much he loved it after that first session.

This being a school with somewhat high intellectual standards, it is inevitable that nerds, geeks and the like flock to it. The only reason it might not seem like geeks and nerds are everywhere is because of their sheer diversity. They're like fish that way.

Take goldfish — the standard by which all fish are compared, goldfish are like your standard glasses-wearing nerd. Then you have sharks, athletic and threatening, but still fish — I've met my share of more physically inclined nerds. There are

also the super-competitive beta fish, homebody clownfish, goofy-face-making flounders, but at the end of the day, we're all still fish. And being a nerdy fish isn't a bad thing.

Being a nerd just means your interests include activities typically seen as intellectual or "uncool." Certain movie genres, books, intellectual interests, video games, comic books and more are all symptoms of nerdiness — wonderful symptoms.

By embracing our hobbies and interests, we can be truer to ourselves — and truer to those around us. And that's much more important than being "cool."

Trevor Hamblin is a freshman English and communication major from Moberly, Mo.

AROUND THE QUAD

Do you have any unusual hobbies or interests?

I collect really old books. I have one from 1605. And I like being around reptiles.

Paige Cline
Sophomore



I go to hardcore shows, like concerts.

Becca Stebbin
Junior



I'm not sure how unusual playing Pokémon is with college students.

Michael Lowery
Freshman



Not really. I love listening to music and reading, which is pretty usual.

Megan Bode
Freshman

