

# GOOD-GAME, WELL-PLAYED

ETHICAL GAME DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR POSITIVE ONLINE PLAY



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## ETHICAL GAME DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR POSITIVE ONLINE PLAY

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# ACKNOWLEDGE -MENTS



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Big shoutout time! 🎉

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So, here's to all of you - for making me believe that what I'm doing matters. Here's to making a difference, one game at a time. 🙏✨

**GGWP,**  
**Sid**

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*Your job is to create entertainment, not push people into a healthy lifestyle. (r/gamedesign)*

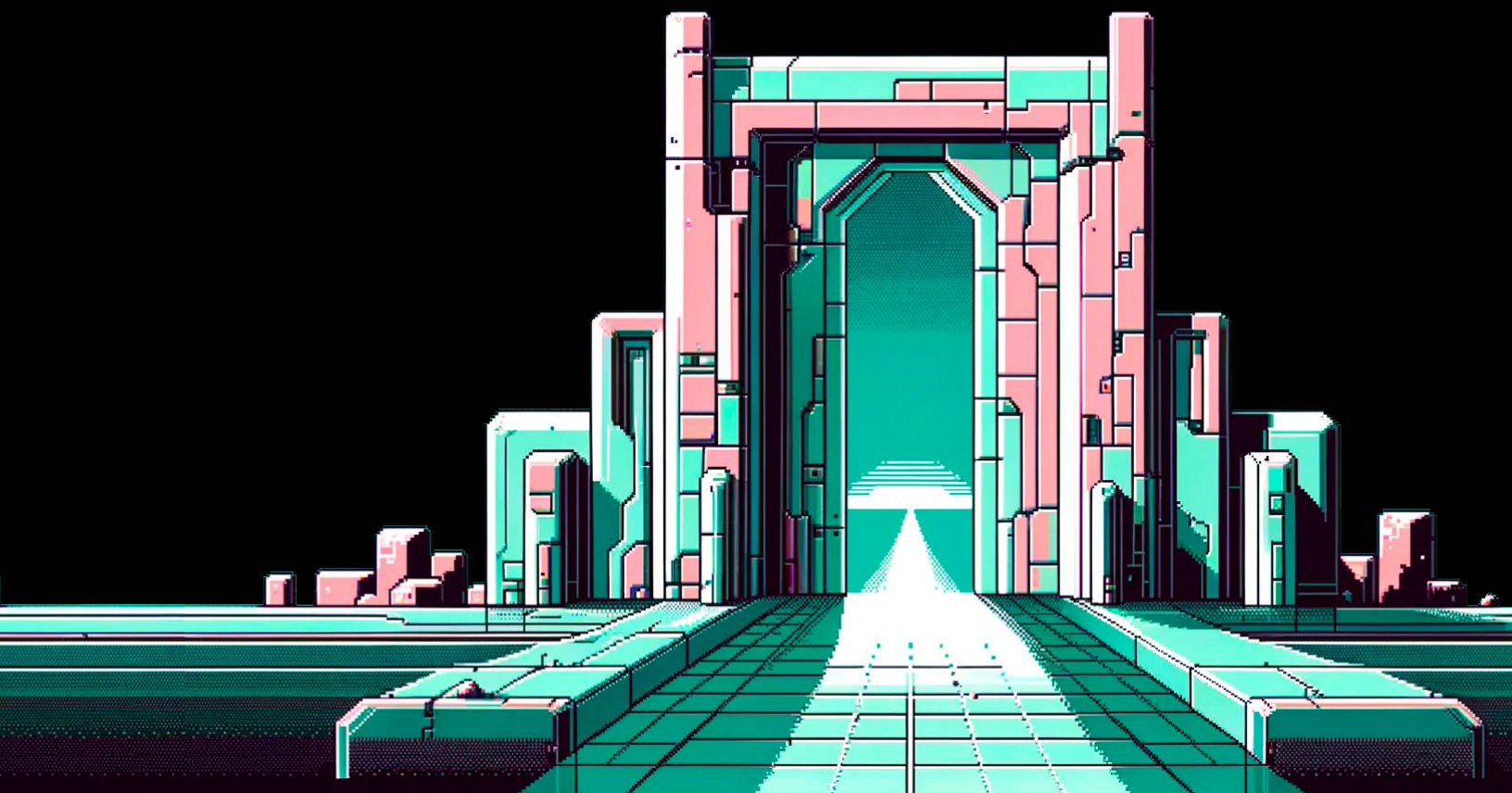
*The good business practices battle was lost long ago. (r/gamedev)*

*Addiction? Never heard of it. (r/Valorant)*





# ABSTRACT



# ABSTRACT

With the gaming industry's incredible evolution, there is an emergent need to balance player engagement with well-being. The “Good-Game, Well-Played” design research navigates the nuances of ethical game design, aspiring for harmony between deep immersion, reality, and players’ holistic health.

Insights drawn from surveys with game designers and in-depth Q&A sessions on Reddit reveal the ethical dilemma: while player retention remains their top priority, there's heightened cognizance about the ethical ramifications of specific game strategies and mechanics. These discussions also revealed underlying anthropological conditioning regarding game design standards and ethical responsibility.

This design research identifies four potential pathways to apply ethical design practices in the games industry through marketplaces, policy & rating boards, game systems, and self-regulation. Furthermore, the explorations hone into the power of game systems and narratives as a medium to bridge player engagement and player well-being.

By conceptualizing and prototyping the integration of positive game mechanics through narrative elements into popular online game titles, this research offers an unconventional blueprint for future game designs that actively prioritize both, captivating gameplay and player welfare rather than an afterthought.

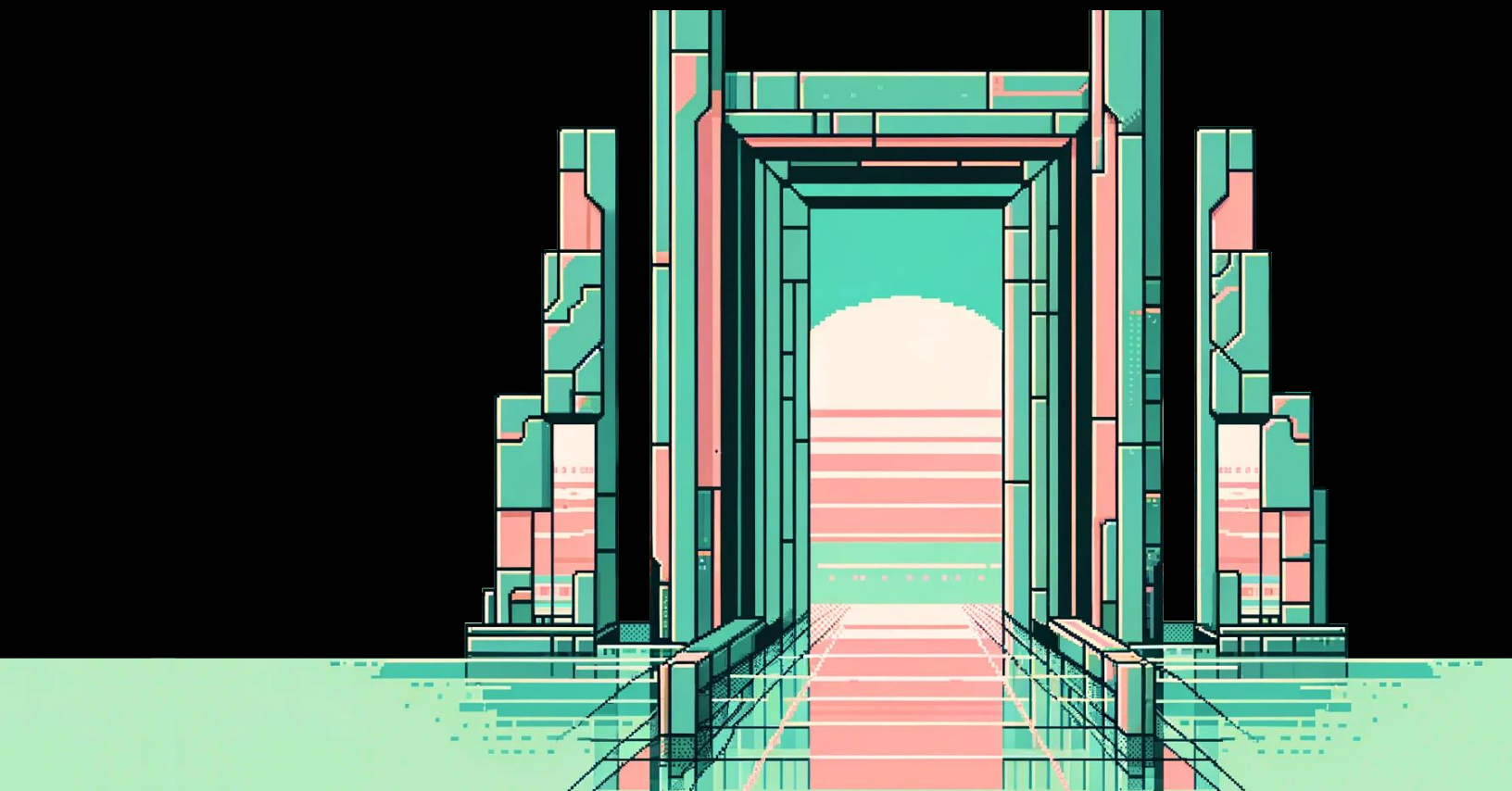
The thesis adopts a conversational tone in its writing style, engaging creatively with its audience of game designers, developers, and gamers, fostering a dialogue that bridges professional insights with the lived experiences of the gaming community.

**Keywords: Ethical Game Design, Player Well-being, Narrative Design, Speculative Game Mechanics, Responsible Gaming, Behavioral Design, Game-life Balance, Games for Change, Interaction Design, UX**

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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS



# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## GGWP

Good-Game, Well-Played embodies the complex interplay of competition and fellowship that defines the essence of gaming culture

## MMO

Massively-Multiplayer Online

## FPS

First-Person Shooter, a genre in video games with a first-person camera view

## RPG

Role-Played Game, a story intensive video game genre

## NPC/E

Non-Player Character/Element, exists to support the player in games

## AAA

In the video game industry, AAA (Triple-A) is an informal classification used to classify video games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher, which typically have higher development and marketing budgets than other tiers of games.

## PvP/E

Player versus Player/Enemies

## ESRB

Entertainment Software Ratings Board ratings provide information about what's in a game or app so parents and consumers can make informed choices about which games are right for their family

## PEGI

Pan-European Game Information provides age classifications for video games in 38 European countries

## Live-Service

A "live service" game (LSG) is a game designed with the sole purpose of keeping people playing for as long as possible in the hopes that those players will pay for microtransactions. This is usually accomplished by making the game as "engaging" as possible

## Titles

Game releases often referred to as "titles" or "game titles" or "IPs"

## Narratives

Narrative consists of the plot, sounds, music, atmosphere, dialogues, player choices and, of course, gameplay. It creates the overall impression of a game and allows the player to feel like part of a story

## Good-Games

Good-Games: Video games designed with an ethical framework that prioritizes player well-being, cultivating positive engagement. They promote a healthy balance between gameplay and real-life awareness

## Raid

A specifically intense game mode often seen in multiplayer games, some of which can span 3 to 4 hours, or even require multiple sessions to conquer

## Grind

Grinding is defined as when the player needs to do the same thing over and over again in order to progress, seemingly for arbitrary reasons

## Game-Life Balance

Game-life balance refers to the equilibrium between the time and energy spent on video games and other aspects of a person's life. It emphasizes the importance of managing gaming habits to ensure that they complement rather than detract from overall life satisfaction and responsibilities

## Ranked

A ranked mode involves any aspect of player control, choice, or progression that can be broken down to a relative measurement of skill, within the parameters of success that the game establishes

## Gameplay

Gameplay is the pattern defined through the game rules, connection between player and the game, challenges and overcoming them, plot and player's connection with it

## Lore

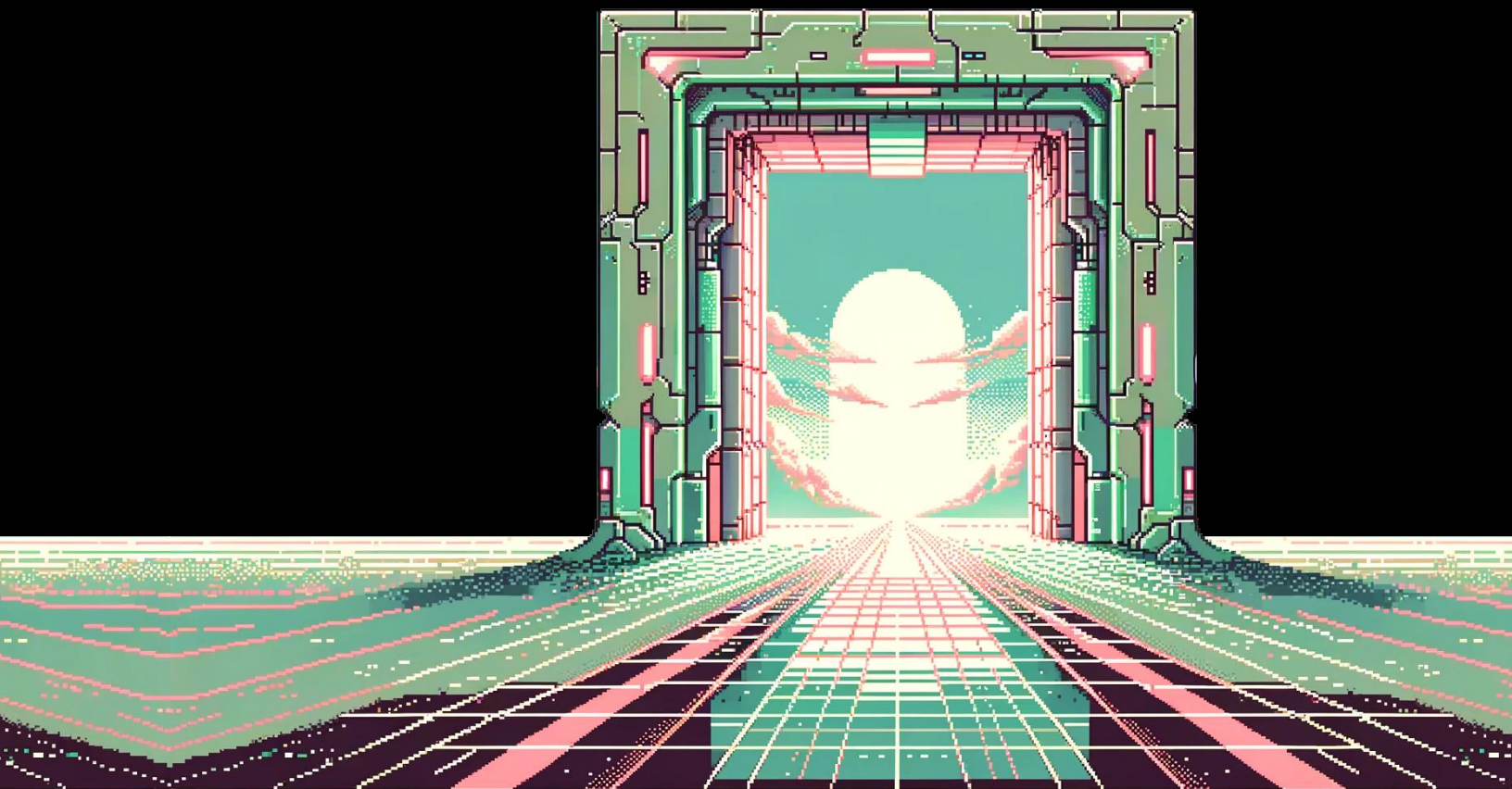
Lore is, in the simplest of terms, the backbone of a game. In more complex terms, it is a set of elements that complement the narrative

## Mana

Mana is an attribute assigned to characters within a role-playing or video game that indicates their power to use their abilities or "spells". It can also be referred as energy.

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## LIST OF FIGURES

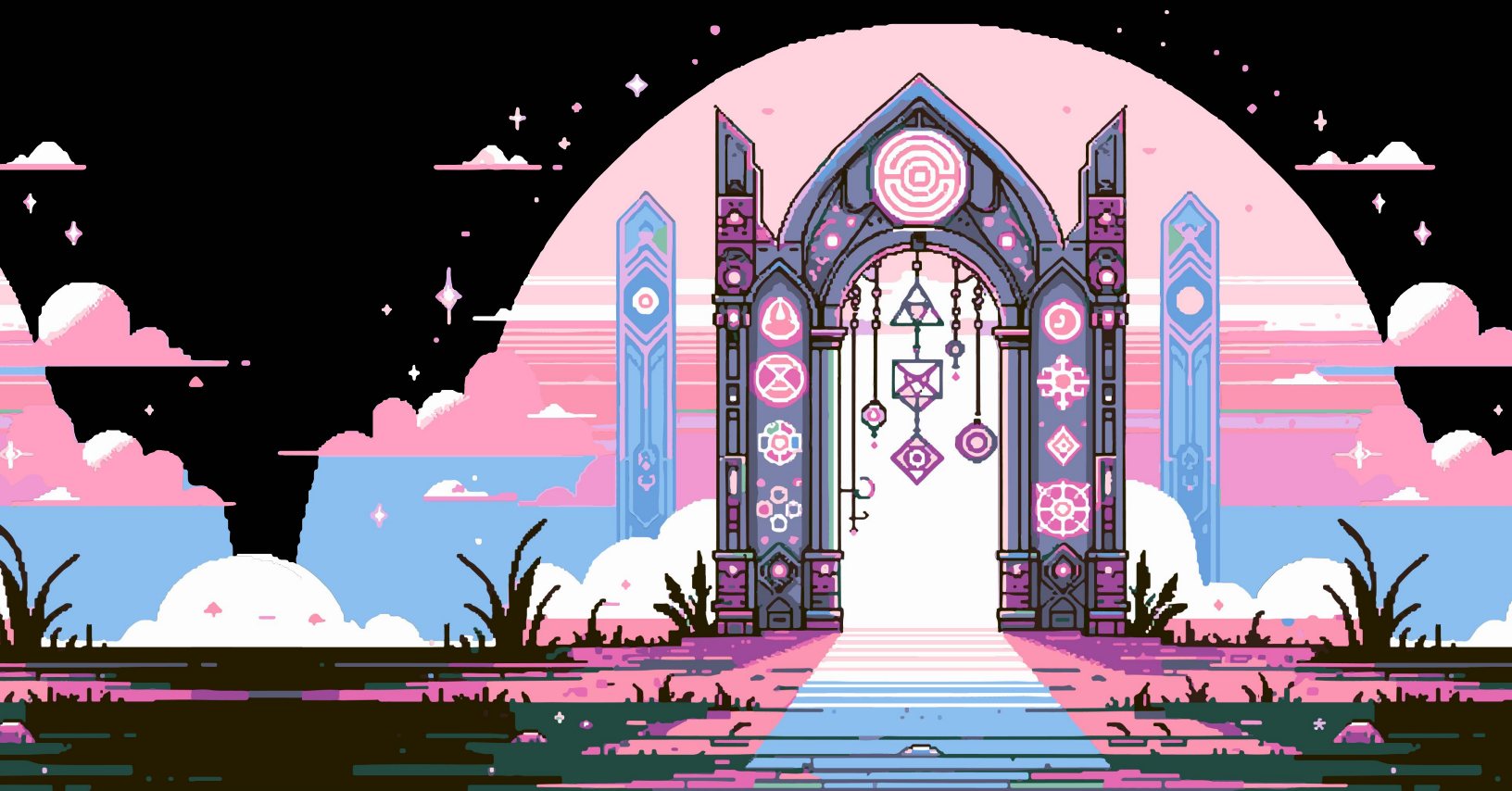
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# 1.0 LET ME DRAW A PICTURE FOR YOU

// INTRODUCTION





# 1.0 LET ME DRAW A PICTURE FOR YOU // INTRODUCTION



Figure 1 - Pixel Art Gaming Utopia (GGWP)

Across the vast horizon of video games, the phrase "Good-Game, Well-Played" (GGWP) (Johnson, 2022) transcends being a mere polite post-game remark; it embodies the complex interplay of competition and fellowship that defines the essence of gaming culture.

DFC Intelligence, a major forecasting firm in the games and digital media industry, released its latest market analysis about global video game consumption highlighting over 3.7 billion of the world's population engaging with video games in 2022, generating over \$184.4 billion in revenue (DFC Intelligence, 2023). That's nearly half of the planet's population. This staggering number isn't just indicative of a cultural shift; it's a clear sign of the integral role gaming plays in our global society.

This economic powerhouse brings to the forefront the need to reassess the foundations of game design. The allure of unlocking new characters after grueling quests or the casual decision to play 'just one more game' with friends can easily spiral into an unexpectedly intense gaming session. It's clear that video games, like any product, are susceptible to **dark patterns**<sup>1</sup> (Gaming the Mind, 2024). While there are studies that have been conducted to identify and address unethical practices (Ethical Games Org, n.d.), not many are consciously tied to players' well-being.

On a positive note, organizations like Fair Play Alliance and Raising Good Gamers are actively working to promote mental health and positive change in the gaming community. Major studios like Riot Games and Ubisoft are contributing through initiatives like Riot Social Impact Fund (Social Impact Fund, 2019), the interactive Fair Play Program, and Good Game Guidebook (The Good Game Playbook, 2023). This growing awareness around player wellness in recent years sets a good time for this initiative to make an impact.

This thesis explores the concept of '**positive engagement**'<sup>2</sup>, and propels the idea of GGWP into a critical discussion at the intersection of player engagement and well-being in the gaming industry. Amidst the sector's rapid growth, our challenge lies in balancing the drive for player retention with ethical implications of game design.

1. The term "dark pattern" can naturally be interpreted as a pattern of digital designs that are deceptive, manipulative, and coercive in nature, leading users to unintended actions (Gaming the Mind, 2024).

2. Positive Engagement refers to the interaction, enjoyment, and immersion users experience while playing games, consciously designed to complement and enhance their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being, aligning with their overall lifestyle ((9) What Is Player Engagement in MobileGames? | LinkedIn, 2023).



## 1.0 LET ME DRAW A PICTURE FOR YOU [INTRODUCTION] / 1.1 BUT WHO CARES? [TARGET AUDIENCE]

3. Game narrative consists of the plot, sounds, music, atmosphere, dialogues, player choices and, of course, gameplay. It creates the overall impression of a game and allows the player to feel like part of a story (Stargame, 2018).

4. Good-Games: Video games designed with an ethical framework that prioritizes player well-being, cultivating positive engagement. They promote a healthy balance between gameplay and real-life awareness.

Particularly, in these three key areas:

1. **Ethical Ramifications:** Delve into how game strategies and mechanics impact players, with a particular focus on their potential to foster addictive behaviors and jeopardize player welfare.
2. **Player Well-being:** Emphasize the importance of holistic health in game design, considering the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of players.
3. **Narratives and Systems:** Explore the role of [game narratives](#)<sup>3</sup> and systems not just as tools for immersion but also as mediums to meaningfully connect with players and promote healthy gaming habits.

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

*The goal of this research is to find ways to craft games that are both captivating and ethically sound, ensuring that the quest for player retention doesn't overshadow the overall well-being. It's about pushing the boundaries of game design, where GGWP becomes more than just a phrase – it is a commitment to a healthier, more conscientious gaming world.*

We will run across the term 'GGWP' throughout but don't worry, the term is leveraged to refer this entire initiative. We may also indulge in application of this initiative through concepts or projects we collectively call '[Good-Games](#)'<sup>4</sup>. But first, let's define who should care about GGWP.

## 1.1 BUT WHO CARES? // TARGET AUDIENCE

Our target audience for this initiative spans a wide array of key players, each bringing unique perspectives and playing a crucial role in shaping the future of ethical game design:

1. **Game Designers and Developers:** Professionals responsible for creating game content, mechanics, and narratives, who are directly involved in implementing ethical design practices.
2. **Gaming Industry Stakeholders:** This includes game publishers, studio executives, and investors who influence the direction and policies of game development, particularly regarding player engagement and ethical considerations.
3. **Gaming Community and Players:** A broad spectrum of gamers, ranging from casual to hardcore players, who are the end-users of games and are directly impacted by the design choices made.
4. **Game Researchers and Academics:** Individuals in academia or industry research focused on studying game design, player psychology, and the impact of gaming on well-being.

Through GGWP, creating a resonant dialogue to inform and inspire our varied audience becomes crucial for a collaborative effort towards a player-centric gaming ecosystem.

## 1.2 THE CURRENT STATE OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY

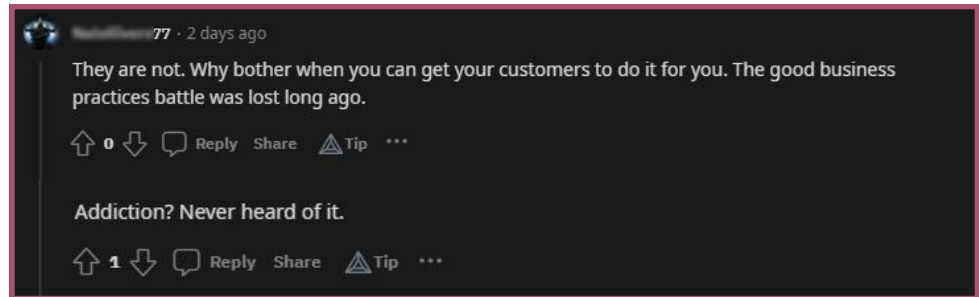


Figure 2 - A Reddit conversation about lost hopes towards Good-Games

5. Problematic Gaming can be defined as a persistent and recurrent involvement in video gaming that results in psychological distress and functional impairment (Shi et al., 2019).

6. Hyper-engagement refers to overstimulation and excessive interaction.

Video games have evolved into a core element of our culture, captivating billions with their enthralling narratives and cutting-edge interactions. Historical titles like World of Warcraft and Counter-Strike have not only set the stage for the future of online gaming but also introduced hyper-engaging mechanics that continually draw players in (Gamedev, 2023). However, growing concerns about [problematic gaming](#)<sup>5</sup> and dark patterns are being raised by entities like the WHO, highlighting the need for more ethical gaming practices (Gaming Disorder, n.d.).

Gaming disorder is much like any other form of problematic habit if done without regulation (van Rooij et al., 2009). Any form of [hyper-engagement](#)<sup>6</sup> roots from certain conditionings and the rest of the ecosystem plays a role in feeding those habits until they become normal behavior. The same can be said for design practices in the video games industry. It may come as a surprise (or not), but the core of game design is still looked at from an entertainment perspective. Moving forward, we'll read a bit about the two main areas this research identified through active interactions with practitioners on Reddit and beyond.

### 1.2.1 The Vicious Cycle // Problem Area 1

It's 2024, and we're still building on the same foundations. Better? Yes. More player-centered approaches? Kind of. While game UX has come a long way in being more mindful of the gamer community and taking player tests seriously, most of these evaluations are dedicated to mechanics and actions. Ethical views and well-being are still an afterthought (igamezhero, 2023a). Despite advancements, the industry still struggles to harmonize player engagement, retention, and well-being.

Business-driven models like "Free to Play" and "Live-Service" (*What the Heck Is Happening with Live Service Games?*, 2023) often lead to design choices that prioritize player retention over positive player experiences.

### 1.2.2 Anthropological Conditioning // Problem Area 2

Primary research, including surveys and Reddit Q&A sessions, reveals a persistent mindset among game studios, designers, developers, and players. At this point, they simply don't consider the playtime quality and player engagement as crucial as...

...entertainment. Here's an excerpt from one of the discussions for context:

***"It's not a developer's job to regulate the players' playtime. You should avoid exploiting predatory practices but other than that it's really up to the player if they want to destroy their life with your game."***

***All this is to say that if your priority is proactively developing features to take care of player wellbeing then your priority is no longer developing a fun video game and you may as well make a fitness app, or something. Your job is to create entertainment, not push people into a healthy lifestyle."*** (igamezhero, 2023b)

7. In the video game industry, AAA (Triple-A) is an informal way to mention higher tier or big budget game studios.

Don't get this wrong, oftentimes, these practices are formed over time and rooted from decision-making amongst the higher-ups, especially in AAA studios. Game designers who are pushing more than just pixels still try to do their bit by developing accessibility features in games as a step towards being more inclusive. However, they are bound to oblige to the requirements, eventually blurring the lines between engagement and addiction.

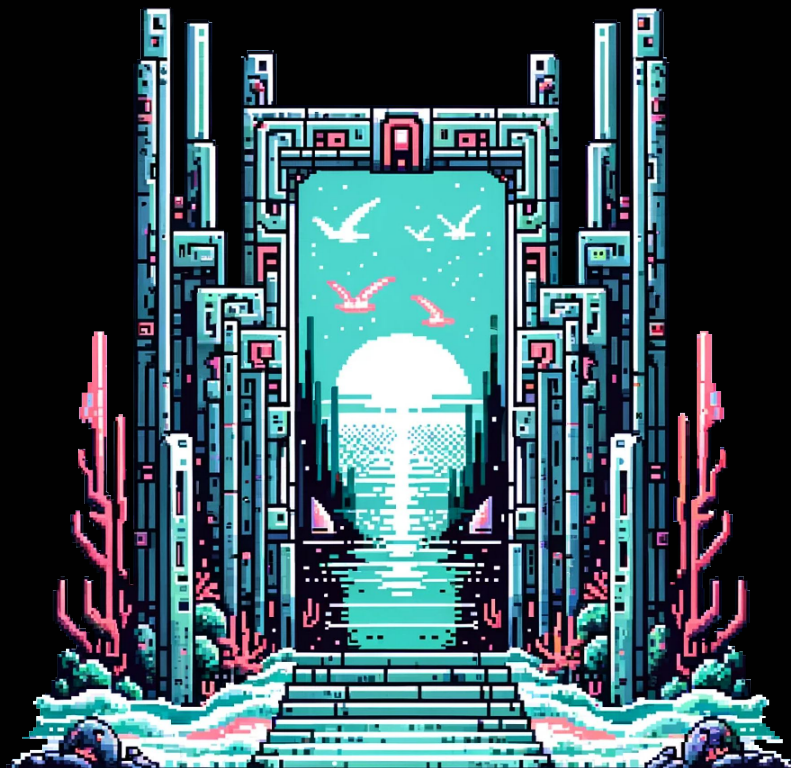
8. Generally, grinding is defined as when the player needs to do the same thing over and over again in order to progress, seemingly for arbitrary reasons (A Necessary Evil, n.d.).

While the gamers who are known for their adaptability and rapid learning, often find themselves immersed in hyper-engaging experiences that demand hours of play for uncertain rewards. Sounds frustrating, right? This [grind](#)<sup>8</sup>, often detached from reality, is a proof towards the prevailing industry focus where entertainment-driven engagement is the primary metric. Hence, the vicious cycle continues to overshadow the player's well-being.

---

# 2.0 TIME TO DRAW A NEW PICTURE

// APPROACH & METHODS



## 2.0 TIME TO DRAW A NEW PICTURE

### // APPROACH & METHODS

Embarking on GGWP, our journey weaves through various strands of research and creative exploration, painting a comprehensive picture of the gaming industry's current ethical landscape. The multi-faceted approach uncovers nuanced relationships between game design, player behavior, and well-being. Looking at it chronologically, GGWP progresses with the following methods:

- 1. Secondary Research:** The research begins through analysis of secondary sources such as game psychology books, developer blogs, Game Development Conference presentations, UX blogs by Celia Hodent, Mental health initiatives by Fairplay Alliance, Safe in Our Worlds, and Raising Good Gamers were key drivers in understanding the current ethical landscape. This knowledgebase helped in scoping the projects for GGWP from a different perspective by focusing on what is not yet being covered by the current solutions in place.
- 2. Primary Research:** Conducting surveys with game designers and engaging in Q&A sessions on platforms like Reddit. This initial phase aims to gather insights into current industry practices, player behaviors, attitudes towards gaming, social responsibility, and thoughts on self-regulation.
- 3. Systems Thinking:** Based on the research findings, the project identifies four key paths to incorporate ethical practices in game design. This involves analyzing how game systems and narratives can be used effectively to create a balance between immersive gaming experiences and reality, keeping the player's health in focus.
- 4. Conceptualization and Prototyping:** The project moves into the conceptualization stage, where it envisions integrating unconventional [game mechanics](#)<sup>9</sup> through narrative elements like [Non-Player Characters \(NPCs\)](#)<sup>10</sup> into popular online game titles to conduce a [game-life balance](#)<sup>11</sup>.
- 5. Testing and Evaluation:** Towards the end, some of the concepts are shared with the community to collect impressions, reflect and refine for player engagement, and impact on well-being.

As we navigate through these varied methods and insights, we find ourselves at the threshold of four ethical pathways to redefine the gaming experience. These pathways have the potential to alter the industry's trajectory towards a more ethically responsible and player-centric future.

9. Game mechanics help provide gameplay by providing a construct of methods or rules designed for the player to interact with (*What Are Video Game Mechanics?*, 2017).

10. An NPC is any character not controlled by either the player or an AI, and can be an important character, or simply populate a game's world (Montelli, n.d.).

11. Game-life balance refers to the equilibrium between the time and energy spent on video games and other aspects of a person's life. It emphasizes the importance of managing gaming habits to ensure that they complement rather than detract from overall life satisfaction and responsibilities.

# 3.0 FOUR ETHICAL PATHWAYS

// DIRECTION





## 3.0 FOUR ETHICAL PATHWAYS // DIRECTION

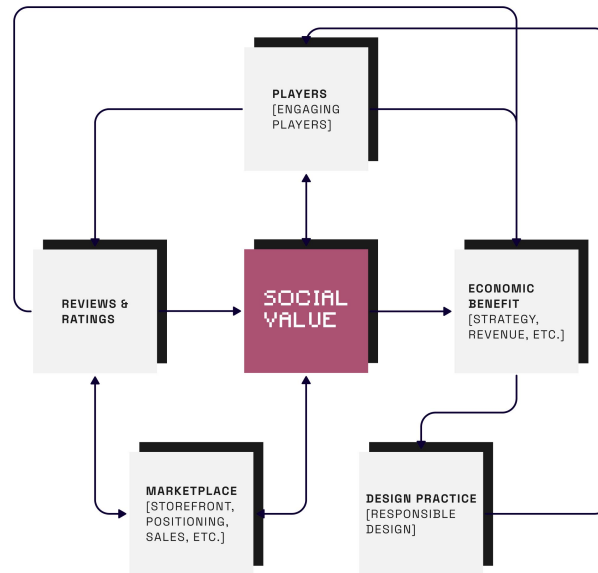


Figure 3 - Flow of social value in games industry

The concept of 'social value' plays a pivotal role in GGWP, eloquently described by Jamie Madigan in his book on game psychology. Madigan explains (Madigan, 2019):

***“What other people are doing and saying can actually affect your perception of what something looks like or how good you think it is.”***

He further highlights Ninja Metrics, a social analytics platform that defines social value:

***“Customers are valuable because they not only spend their money in games but also get many others to do the same...the key to creating more social value is to have the players interact with each other.”***

So, why does social value hold such importance in the GGWP research? It's because various elements within the gaming landscape significantly influence the social value of a game. Foremost among these elements are the players themselves, who invest time, effort, and money, and encourage others to join them. This investment manifests in reviews, ratings, and marketplace standings, all intertwining to shape the social value that eventually impacts a game's revenue, even guiding its strategic and design paths.

Recognizing the potential of these elements (See Fig. 4) to promote ethical and responsible game design, GGWP identifies them as 'Ethical Pathways'. Based on research, each pathway has a unique mode of approaching ethical-responsible game design. We briefly explore all four before focusing on Game Experience as the direction for this thesis.

Moving forward, we are going to break down our insights into three distinct sections: premise, direction, and impact. It is a neat way to keep things clear and actionable, ensuring that we can easily grasp these ideas mentioned under each pathway.

3.0 FOUR ETHICAL PATHWAYS [DIRECTION]

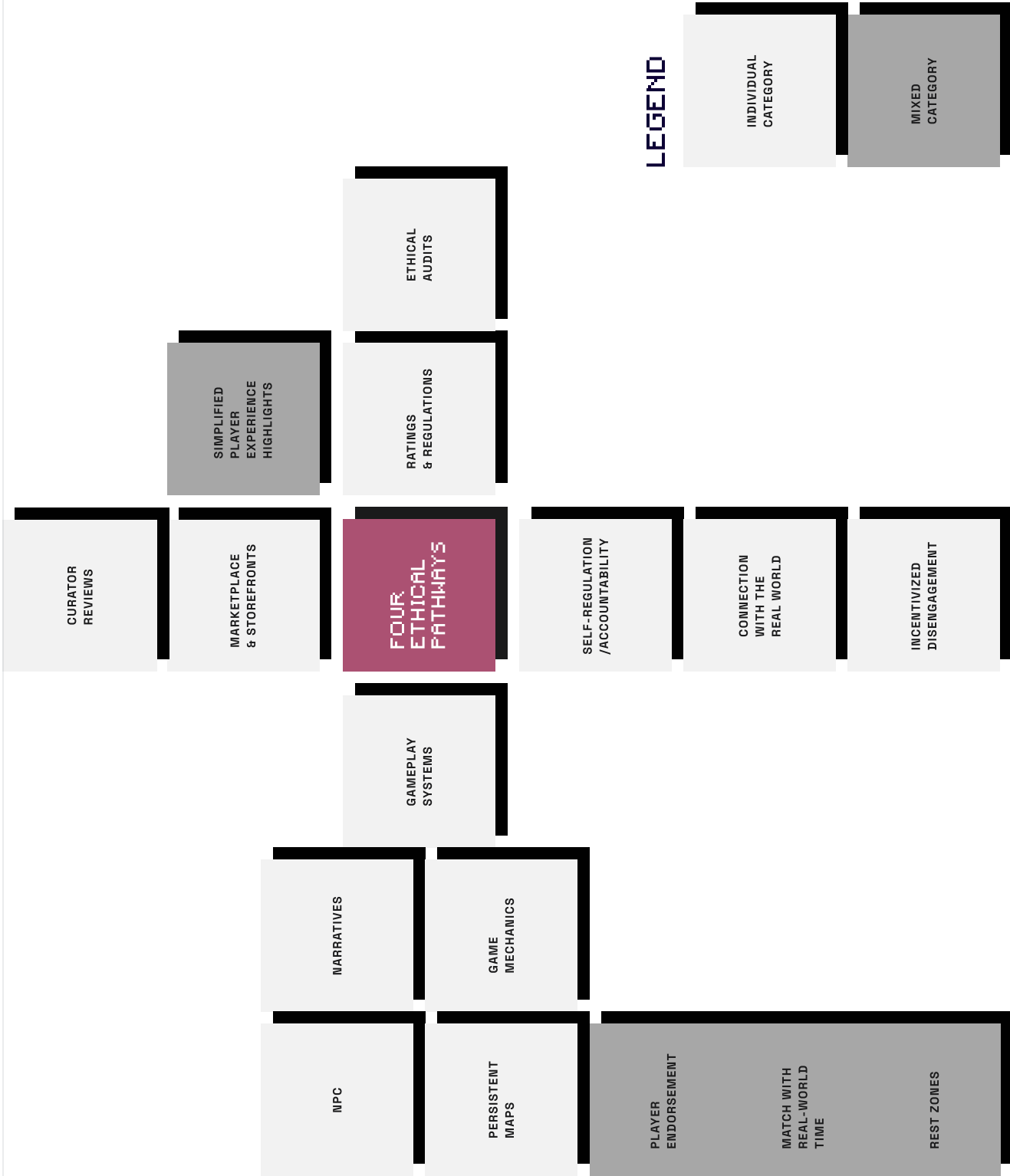


Figure 4 - Ethical Pathways Map



## 3.1 MARKETPLACES // ETHICAL PATHWAY 01

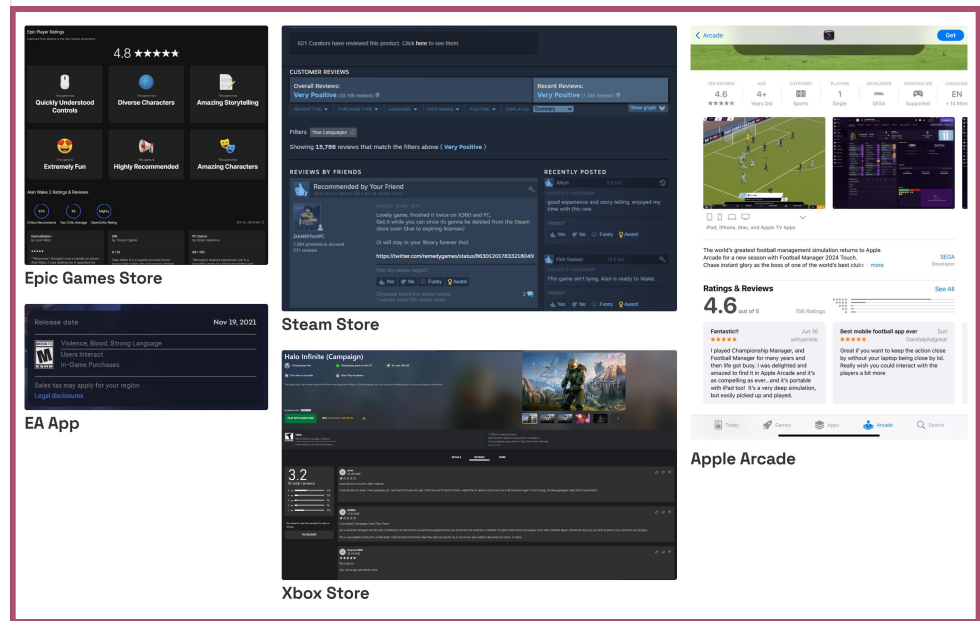


Figure 5 - Comparison of reviews & ratings section in various marketplaces

### 3.1.1 Premise

Remember 2004, when folks queued up in front of GameStop to grab a disk box of GTA San Andreas? We've entered an era where the concept of a CD-ROM is alien to the younger generation, with video games now just a cloud download away (Kain, 2013). While the tactile joy of owning a physical copy has faded, digital marketplaces like Steam have revolutionized how we access games.

Marketplaces like Steam have become crucial connectors between players and game studios. In 2024, Steam hit a remarkable 33 million concurrent online users (Stanton, 2024), and hosts over 298,056 apps (SteamDB, 2024). The reputation of games on such platforms can significantly impact a game studio's success, highlighting their potential to encourage positive gameplay experiences.

### 3.1.2 Direction

Current marketplace dynamics revolve around reviews, storefront displays, and awards. However, traditional rating and review systems have limitations. They often fail to connect user ratings meaningfully with written reviews, focusing primarily on the entertainment value of games. The Epic Games Store has taken a novel approach by visually representing user feedback (*The Epic Games Store*, 2022), which could be pivotal for GGWP. Incorporating the concept of 'Well-being Score' for games could revolutionize how players perceive and choose games, emphasizing their impact on player welfare.

3.1.3 Impact

Envisioning a future where game marketplaces incorporate ethics, well-being, and positive play into their metrics could fundamentally shift the gaming industry. This goes beyond current rating systems, addressing a critical feedback bottleneck. It's a proactive step towards encouraging game studios to prioritize ethical game design and player well-being, ultimately shaping a healthier, more responsible game design approach.

3.2 POLICY & RATING BOARDS // ETHICAL PATHWAY 02

ESRB (USA)	PEGI (EU)	RARS (Russia)	ACB (Australia)	USK (Germany)
				
				
				
				
				
				

Figure 6 - Visual comparison of International region-based rating systems

3.2.1 Premise

Think of game rating systems like [ESRB](#)<sup>12</sup> and [PEGI](#)<sup>13</sup> as the video game world's equivalent of the movie rating board. They provide crucial age-appropriate content guidelines, influencing game design and the player's experience, like a heads-up for parents (*'Video Game Content Rating System'*, 2024). But here's the catch: these boards primarily focus on content suitability (violence, language, adult themes), not gameplay mechanics or players' mental health. There's also a lack of universal rating standards may lead to inconsistent game ratings across different countries (Király et al., n.d.)...

12. ESRB ratings provide information about what's in a game or app so parents and consumers can make informed choices about which games are right for their family (*ESRB Ratings | Entertainment Software Ratings Board*, n.d.).

13. PEGI provides age classifications for video games in 38 European countries (*Pegi Public Site*, n.d.).

...To top it off – most gamers don't pay much attention to these ratings when picking out their next game. They often fly under the radar, especially for the seasoned players, and are mostly only beneficial for parents selecting a game for minors (Hollett et al., 2022). It sounds like having a road sign that's only useful for new drivers but ignored by the regulars.

### 3.2.2 Direction

What if these rating boards started looking at how a game's mechanics play into our well-being? Collaboration with mental health experts and game researchers can help develop new criteria. This could be about spotting sneaky dark patterns, checking how much time you're likely to sink into a game, or seeing if a game nudges you towards a healthier balance between screen time and real life. A shiny 'Positive Play' label could be the badge of honor for games that get this right. Sicart's "The Ethics of Computer Games" offers insights into ethical game design considerations that could inform these criteria (Sicart, 2011).

### 3.2.3 Impact

Games with this "Positive Play" label could become the next big thing, pushing developers to think more about ethics in their designs. This change could lead to a gaming environment where player well-being is as important as engagement. These shifts in rating systems might change how parents and gamers think about what they're playing, leading to smarter game choices. It's like steering the entire industry towards a path where gaming is not just fun, but also good for you.

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## 3.3 SELF-REGULATION // ETHICAL PATHWAY 03

### 3.3.1 Premise

Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist and John Tierney, an American journalist offer an intriguing analogy for self-regulation energy in their book 'Willpower': it's akin to the blue mana in video games. Just like mana, our self-regulation capacity is finite; it depletes with use and requires time to recharge. When we're low on it, our ability to self-regulate weakens, leading us to succumb to indulgent choices or passivity by avoiding decisions altogether. Moreover, tasks demanding prolonged effort or attention become significantly more challenging, as our depleted 'mana' leaves us less equipped to tackle them effectively (Baumeister & Tierney, 2012). The Reddit discussions shed light on a critical issue in the gaming community: the struggle with self-regulation.

Many gamers shared personal accounts of how gaming addiction affected their lives. One user candidly recounted:

*"I got so addicted to WOW back in 2007... I failed a college semester."  
(xabrol, 2023)*

Such stories are not isolated, as numerous gamers echoed similar experiences of neglecting daily responsibilities, and facing health issues due to excessive gaming. Such confessions point to a broader issue in the gaming industry – the lack of focus on player well-being within game design.

### 3.3.2 Direction

Drawing insights from the Reddit Q&As, a new trajectory in made its prominence – embedding self-regulation mechanisms directly into games. The approach involves rekindling the relationship with games by taking them seriously, just like any other parts of our lives. This also means balancing the activity alongside the rest. Straight up restrictions may not be the best move. However, if games can support a player's disengagement by implementing context-aware gameplay changes, gentle prompts to take breaks, and incentivizing disconnects, we might just be able to shift the mindset around gaming in the positive direction.

### 3.3.3 Impact

The implementation of self-regulation tools in games could profoundly impact the gaming world. It's about helping players, who said, *"When I don't feel like playing anymore that day, I go do something else,"* to manage their gaming habits better, fostering a healthier gaming culture. Such features could lead to improved mental and physical well-being among players, potentially curbing problematic gaming. Beyond individual benefits, as a user notes, *"I liked the warnings, they made me realize I had spent way too long online,"* these tools could build a stronger, more trusting relationship between game developers and their audience, enhancing the industry's reputation for responsible gaming.

## 3.4 GAMEPLAY EXPERIENCE & MECHANICS

### // ETHICAL PATHWAY 04

14. Gameplay is the pattern defined through the game rules, connection between player and the game, challenges and overcoming them, plot and player's connection with it ('Gameplay', 2023).

#### 3.4.1 Premise

The heart of any video game lies in its [gameplay](#)<sup>14</sup> and mechanics – the blend of various elements that define how players interact with the game's world. These mechanics are more than just rules and methods; they're the driving force behind the player's journey within the game (*What Are Video Game Mechanics?*, 2017). They tap into psychological motivations, creating a sense of immersion, encouraging return play, financial investment, and evoking community connections.

The same mechanics can also lead to negative outcomes: addiction, burnout, or even feeling alienated from the gaming community. Games avoid taking responsibility for such impacts on player behavior. Celia Hodent, a renowned psychologist in the field of game UX, highlights the presence of dark patterns in games that manipulate player behavior (Hodent, 2019). However, this also opens up an expansive field of research into positive gameplay experience and mechanics.

#### 3.4.2 Direction

The idea is to leverage the power of gameplay narratives to embed mechanics that find that bridge between immersion and reality without negative reinforcements or restrictions. In GGWP, we dig into players' relationships with NPCs and explorations of player-aware NPCs to battle these issues. For instance, personalized in-game notifications, offering context-sensitive reminders, could be a game-changer. In one of the discussions related to the game Valorant raised a comment, ***"I just want to let Valorant tell me or just roast me to stop playing when I get 5+ loss streak in same day"*** reinforcing the need for games to promote game-life balance (*I Just Want...*, 2023).

#### 3.4.3 Impact

The adoption of positive play practices through game experience offers designers the flexibility to weave ethical considerations into their existing workflows without major overhauls. The objective here is not an overnight transformation but a gradual shift towards a new norm. By being consistent in introducing features that encourage mindful gaming, we can hope to cultivate behavioral shifts that can be evaluated by the industry for their impact over time. It's not just beneficial for players' well-being; it's also a strategic move for game studios. A community that enjoys a healthy relationship with their games is more likely to be loyal and engaged in the long term.

## 3.5 THE SCALE IS MASSIVE

Now that we have walked through each pathway, we know how they influence the social value in the ecosystem and their interconnectedness impacts each other. We could jump onto any of them to start creating 'Good-Games' but GGWP weighs in on Gameplay Experience & Mechanics for further exploration. Let's define our bounding box to avoid getting lost in this massive universe.

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# 4.0 BOUNDING BOX

// SCOPE



## 4.0 BOUNDING BOX

## 4.0 BOUNDING BOX // SCOPE

15. MMOs can enable players to cooperate and compete with each other on a large scale, and sometimes to interact meaningfully with people around the world. They include a variety of gameplay types, representing many video game genres ('Massively Multiplayer Online Game', 2024).

16. A "live service" game (LSG) is a game designed with the sole purpose of keeping people playing for as long as possible in the hopes that those players will pay for microtransactions. This is usually accomplished by making the game as "engaging" as possible (LightningCole, 2019).

Embarking on this research journey has been akin to exploring the various storylines of a complex game. Each potential pathway presents a rich opportunity for creating ethical and positive impacts within the realm of video games. However, to ensure efficiency in both time and resources for this solo initiative, GGWP narrowed its focus to the theme of 'Gameplay Experience & Mechanics,' a decision guided by insights from the initial stages of my investigation.

Games for social impact and awareness has already been pivotal in making the community ponder, sometimes with awe, and other times with horror. It is also the most agile area to capture the impact of our creations that alters other pathways. Not to forget, we are navigating this from a designer's point of view and practice.

## 4.1 SAFE ZONE // IN SCOPE

17. A first-person shooter (FPS) is a video game centered on gun fighting and other weapon-based combat seen from a first-person perspective, with the player experiencing the action directly through the eyes of the main character.

18. Role-Playing Game (RPG) is a video game genre where the player controls the actions of a character (or several party members) immersed in some well-defined world, usually involving some form of character development by way of recording statistics ('Role-Playing Video Game', 2024).

The overall study revolves around improving players' game-life balance by breaking a few current design approaches driven by emerging business models.

The primary scope of "Good-Game, Well-Played" (GGWP) focuses on [Massively Multiplayer Online \(MMO\)](#)<sup>15</sup> and [Live-Service](#)<sup>16</sup> titles. This choice stems from the more prevalent instances of problematic gaming within these perpetually existent worlds.

The secondary scope encompasses the most popular genres, such as [First-Person Shooters \(FPS\)](#)<sup>17</sup>, [Role-Playing Games \(RPG\)](#)<sup>18</sup>, and hybrids of these. Titles like Valorant, Destiny 2, and Genshin Impact were specific focus areas. Additional discussions around games like World of Warcraft (WoW), Counter-Strike, Animal Crossing, and Fortnite were included to enrich the research with diverse experiences.

The tertiary scope considers various gameplay styles, including [Ranked](#)<sup>19</sup>, [Exploration](#)<sup>20</sup>, Player vs. Player (PvP), and Player vs. Environment (PvE) dynamics.

## 4.2 OUT OF BOUNDS // OUT OF SCOPE

19. A ranked mode involves any aspect of player control, choice, or progression that can be broken down to a relative measurement of skill, within the parameters of success that the game establishes (*Ranking System (Concept)*, n.d.).

20. Exploration games are designed to create a space that is so interesting that exploring it and seeing it becomes the goal.

GGWP does not specifically delve into a holistic dark pattern study but takes certain ethical approaches to improve game-life balance. This does not mean we're trying to rip everything apart that the game industry has built, we're trying to work with what we've got. Just not at the cost of a player's well-being.

GGWP's medium of focus is on PC and console games, leaving mobile gaming for future exploration. The primary research did not reveal an explicit representation of mobile gamers within the collected data.

GGWP acknowledges the importance of Single player titles and takes inspiration from them. However, their finite length and individual exploration makes them less susceptible to problematic gaming disorders. Moreover, they already have a high focus on narratives...



...and overall player experience. Thus, Single player games are out of bounds for this research.

The Four Ethical Pathways, while acknowledged, primarily serve as a guiding framework for GGWP and others who share a passion for enhancing the gaming experience for players.

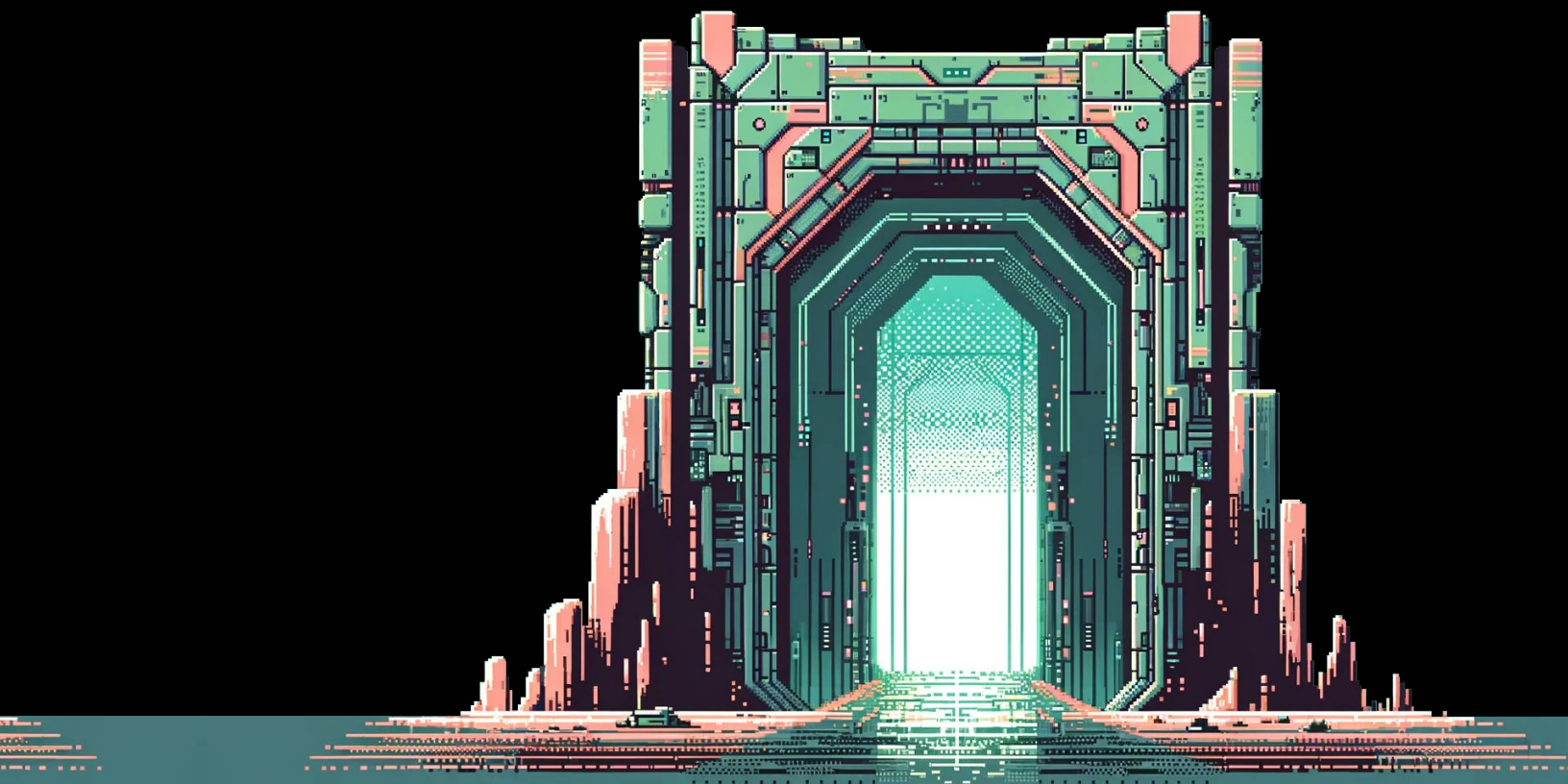
The concepts and prototypes we develop within GGWP are innovative and might not align with current industry trends, often driven by the monetization aspects of Live-Service games. Therefore, the evaluation of these concepts' impact is a longer-term goal. Initial user feedback was gathered through Reddit, focusing on their first impressions of the ideas that informed the iterations.

With these considerations in mind, GGWP delves into the realm of narratives in the subsequent chapters, taking a data-driven approach.

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# 5.0 SOMETHING POWERFUL ABOUT NARRATIVES

// CASE STUDIES



## 5.0 SOMETHING POWERFUL ABOUT NARRATIVES

### // CASE STUDIES

Before we jump into ideation mode, let's understand a bit about the concept of 'Narrative Design'.

In an interview posted by Ubisoft with one of their narrative designers, Inari Bourguenolle explains the role:

*"At Ubisoft, the narrative designer often works in collaboration with the game designers, and the audio, production, and quest-design teams. They are basically an interface between game mechanics and narrative. At smaller studios, the narrative designer may need to handle tasks that would normally fall under the writer's scope: during the conception phase, they may have to take part in character creation, or maybe write synopses for different parts of the story or quests. They might also review the writers' and quest designers' work, and sometimes be present during voice recordings.*

*At smaller studios, the narrative designer might also help write dialogue and text content that isn't voice-recorded, such as weapon descriptions or UI texts. Their day-to-day tasks and the overlap with the writer's scope vary widely depending on the project, the studio, and the team size."*  
(Manileve, 2021)

21. Lore is, in the simplest of terms, the backbone of a game. In more complex terms, it is a set of elements that complement the narrative (Lore and Literacy | World of Warcraft, n.d.).

It is basically behind the "behind the scenes", where the [lore](#)<sup>21</sup> and characteristics of every game element take birth. GGWP focused on narrative as a pivotal game element that influences everything from mechanics to characters, UI, and even players' psychology, their well-being.

In today's world, narratives are all around us. We perceive and interpret our experiences as structured stories, where life events become acts, the world is our level, and the people in our lives are the characters (Alviani, 2018). It acts like jet fuel in the realm of digital narratives, especially in video games, making them a powerful medium to bring our imaginations to life.

During my journey as a gamer and through this research, I encountered several impressive games. For now, let's focus on those that specifically inspired the projects in GGWP. These 'Good-Game' case studies are divided into two categories: NPCs & Gameplay Mechanics, as the core of our deep dive.

## 5.1 NON-PLAYABLE CHARACTERS & ELEMENTS (NPCS & NPES) // CASE STUDY 01

In an article for The New York Times Magazine, Mac Schwerin, a copywriter and freelance journalist, shared a personal insight:

*“Not surprisingly, I’ve always gravitated toward NPCs in times of aimlessness: long, empty afternoons, or after a breakup or a layoff.”*  
(Schwerin, 2022).

This sentiment resonates with many young gamers who find solace in the virtual companionship of NPCs during challenging times. NPCs are more than mere game characters; they act as guides and companions, playing a significant role in the emotional landscape of players.

In the context of gaming and well-being (game-life balance), young gamers are often more likely to respond positively to in-game guidance from these characters than to external restrictions like parental controls or screen time alerts. Some of these references may come from Singleplayer/Story-Driven games but trust the process. I promise, it will all make sense.



Figure 7 - Johnny Silverhand in Cyberpunk 2077\*

22. This is a type of narrative structure where player choice plays a major role in how the plot and characters in the world develop, and how the game ends (Alviani, 2018).

As our first ‘Good-Game’ case study, we’ll talk a bit about Johnny Silverhand, a menace of an NPC in Cyberpunk 2077. The way CdProjektRED (CDPR) played with his narrative intertwining with V’s (protagonist/you) through a corrupted chip, it transforms him from an annoying spectral presence to a crucial ally helping you fight your own demons in the Night City. It is one of the most creative examples of player-aware NPCs. Cyberpunk utilized RPG-based decision-making and [branched storylines](#)<sup>22</sup> to prove NPC’s capabilities to adapt.



Figure 8 - Songbird's decision-making interactions in Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty®

Turns out they were just getting started. In their recent DLC campaign, Phantom Liberty, CDPR introduced Songbird (NPC) with a new set of mechanics where you make decisions alongside her to progress in the story.

## 5.2 GAMEPLAY MECHANICS // CASE STUDY 02

Crafting the overall gameplay involves constructing mechanics that are not only engaging but also align with the game's narrative. This includes everything from the environment and dialogue to the rules that govern the game world. NPCs included, embody a blend of these elements, tailored to enhance the narrative.

We've already mentioned the involvement of dark patterns in games earlier, there are also some interesting mechanics that were created to balance out engagement and ethics to address problematic gaming. Let's delve into a couple of noteworthy examples:



Figure 9 - Rested XP Zones in World of Warcraft®



World of Warcraft (WoW), a titan in the MMO genre, is known for its intensive raids, some of which can span 3 to 4 hours, or even require multiple sessions to conquer (*Raid*, n.d.). Primary and secondary research indicates WoW's highly addictive nature, with players often losing themselves in its vast world, as evidenced by the existence of a dedicated 'WoWaholics' subreddit (*noWoW*, n.d.). For years, Blizzard, the game's developer, didn't directly address this issue. In 2010, following a documentary on video game addiction, Blizzard stated:

*“Our games are designed to be fun... but like all forms of entertainment... day-to-day life should always take precedence.” (Klepek, 2019)*

In response to growing concerns, Blizzard introduced a few changes. One significant addition was an explicit disclaimer about the game's addictive potential. More importantly, they implemented the “Rested XP” mechanic (*Rest*, n.d.), which provided benefits to players who played less frequently and encouraged breaks for those engaged in prolonged sessions. Characters could 'rest' in designated safe areas, accruing bonuses for when players returned. While this mechanic partly aimed to motivate players to return to the game and WoW still holds the trophy for being one of the most addictive games ever created, these features served as a subtle deterrent against gaming addiction.

## 5.3 WHEN AI NPCS & GAMEPLAY CAME TOGETHER // CASE STUDY 03

A recent report from Inworld AI, a leading developer platform focusing on advanced NPC behavior and dialogue, sheds light on the evolving relationship between gamers and NPCs. The study, surveying over 1,000 gamers across the United States aged 16 to 50, uncovers a significant enthusiasm for the narrative possibilities offered by AI in video games. Key findings of the report include (Inworld AI, 2023):

1. A substantial 84% of gamers acknowledge that current NPCs positively impact gameplay.
2. More than half (52%) of the gamers surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with repetitive NPC dialogue.
3. A notable 76% of participants are keen on NPCs exhibiting better situational awareness.
4. A striking 78% would be inclined to spend more time in games featuring advanced AI-driven NPCs.
5. Impressively, 81% of gamers indicated a willingness to pay a premium for games equipped with sophisticated AI NPCs.

When ‘Battlefield 2042’ was released by DICE, it pushed the boundaries of online modern warfare simulations, both graphically and technologically. Embracing AI soldiers in an all-out 128-player match was a ground-breaking implementation that added an intriguing layer to its gameplay, one that blurred the lines between human and AI interactions.



Figure 10 - AI Soldier flying an attack helicopter in Battlefield™ 2042

These AI soldiers aren't simply fillers; they're designed to simulate human behavior. They can enhance the realism and intensity of gameplay, providing an engaging environment for players to navigate. Ripple Effect, the developer studio behind the title elaborates the efforts to create such level of seamlessness in an interview with VG247 (Saed, 2021):

*"We've tried to put a lot of effort into making them play just like a player would. So it would be really hard for people to tell the difference between an AI and a real human player because they will run around, they will drive vehicles, they will pick each other up, they will drop [each other] off at objective locations and things like that - it's a very intelligent system. And then you can tweak and tune some of the things they are and aren't allowed to do, including how difficult they are to play against."*

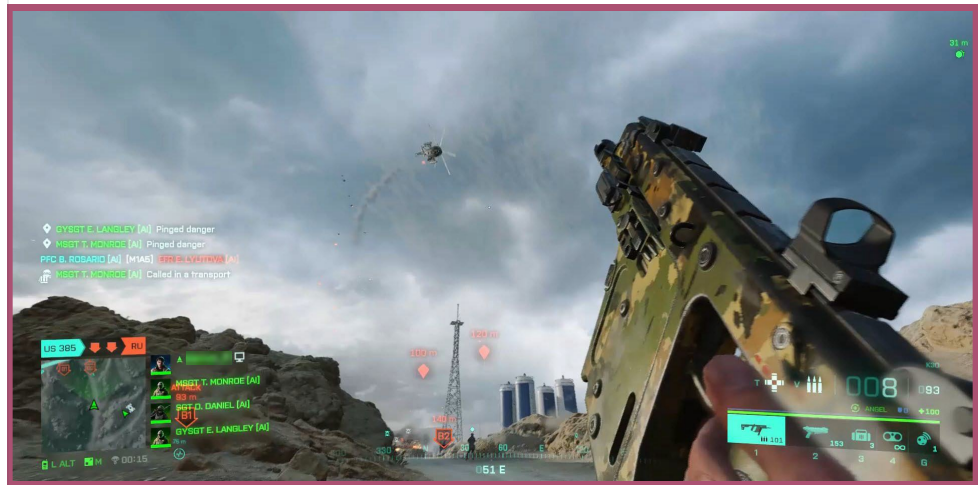


Figure 11 - AI Squad mates in a multiplayer match in Battlefield™ 2042

In instances where human player numbers dwindle, AI soldiers step in to maintain the momentum and scale of the battle. (Pascoulis, 2021). You're looking at AI squad mates that perform tasks beyond just filling in: from capturing objectives to reviving fallen teammates, they learn and mimic player actions to create a more cohesive team experience.



## 5.0 SOMETHING POWERFUL ABOUT NARRATIVES / 5.3 WHEN AI NPCs &amp; GAMEPLAY CAME TOGETHER [CASE STUDY 03]



Figure 12 - AI soldier reviving the player in Battlefield™ 2042 (Seamless Interactions 1)

As a Battlefield connoisseur myself, it was an eye-opening experience to be revived by an AI teammate that was extremely hard to differentiate between a real player. Also, guiding a robot dog to fight alongside you? How cool is that!



Figure 13 - AI Ranger being petted by a player in Battlefield™ 2042 (Seamless Interactions 2)

It's not just about making the game more accessible but also about elevating the gameplay to new heights, creating a more engaging and diverse combat scenario for every participant. This strategic fusion by "Battlefield 2042" redefines the way for future online games, one where AI plays a more significant role in shaping game narratives and experiences.

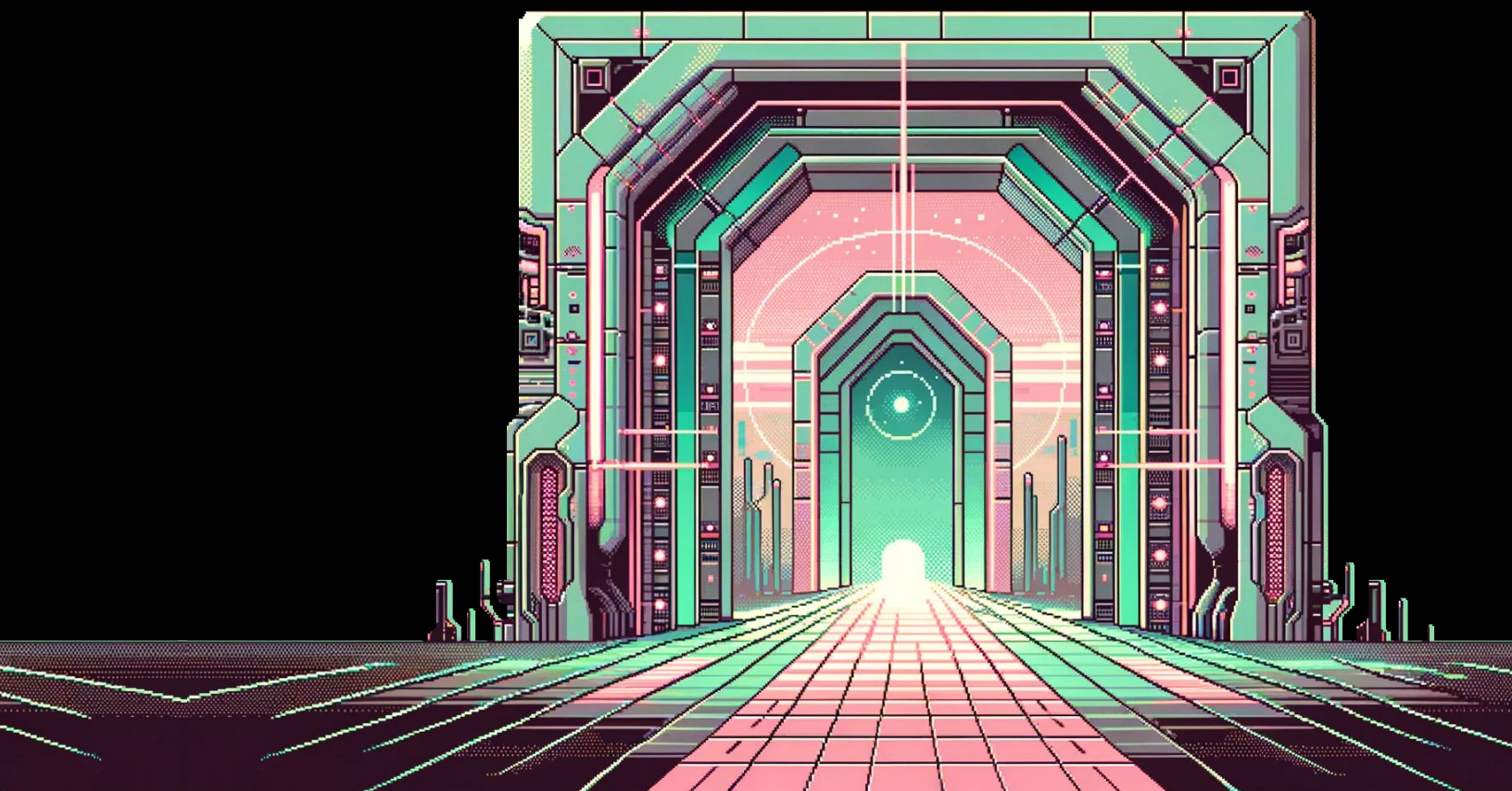
## 5.4 HOW THEY SERVE A 'GOOD-GAME'

The possibilities are indeed intriguing when we consider applying these concepts to an online, multiplayer environment. They offer a chance to address the challenges of problematic gaming by infusing the virtual world with more balanced and player-centric mechanics. Imagine integrating real-world time synchronization or narrative-driven NPC interactions into a persistent online game. They could transform the player experience, making it more reflective of real-life rhythms and less prone to encourage excessive gaming. Reimagining online game design could be a crucial step towards a healthier, more sustainable gaming culture, where player well-being is as important as in-game achievements. Get to know about more such case studies in the appendix.

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# 6.0 MAKING GOOD-GAMES

// PROJECTS



## 6.0 MAKING GOOD-GAMES // PROJECTS

Navigating modern gaming scenarios has become much more complex. It's time to turn our focus to innovative concepts that may not be a developer's first choice, but they hold the potential to bridge the constantly evolving immersion with the players' reality. With exponential growth in technology, it is becoming increasingly accessible to create engaging games. However, the concepts we will be looking at would leverage the power of narratives on different layers: NPCs and Gameplay Mechanics. It is high time we made a few projects that we can call "Good-Games".

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### 6.1 INTENT-BASED GAMING // CONCEPT 01

Players often begin their session with a clear intent: to complete a quest, unlock an item, or just get invited to play a round by friends but often get sucked into the game by a loss, a new quest, or simply FOMO to keep up with the community. This came up as a general pattern during the Reddit Q&A about gaming habits.

It's not unusual for gamers to experience this, almost every other day in their lives:

*"One more game"*

*"Just one game and then I'll get to work"*

We come across some form of 'Quick Play' mode in video games almost all the time, it's an easy-going side of the game with lower stakes compared to competitive or ranked modes. Players also usually have a variety of game modes and options available upfront as a standard game design setting. It's common to experience dissolution of intent when it's left up to the players alone.

As our first project, we enter the concept of Intent-based Gaming. Drawing inspiration from Spotify's 'enhanced playlists,' (Gartenberg, 2021) this approach aims to tailor gaming sessions to align more closely with the player's initial intentions – be it casual, serious, or something in between. This concept reimagines the traditional 'Quick Play' mode, offering a curated set of games that fit the player's desired play style and session length.

#### 6.1.1 Application // Project

Imagine this concept applied to Bungie's upcoming MMO-FPS, "Marathon". Here, players would encounter the "Curate Your Run" feature, offering a selection of presets that define the run's duration and variety of matches/modes before diving into Tau Ceti IV.

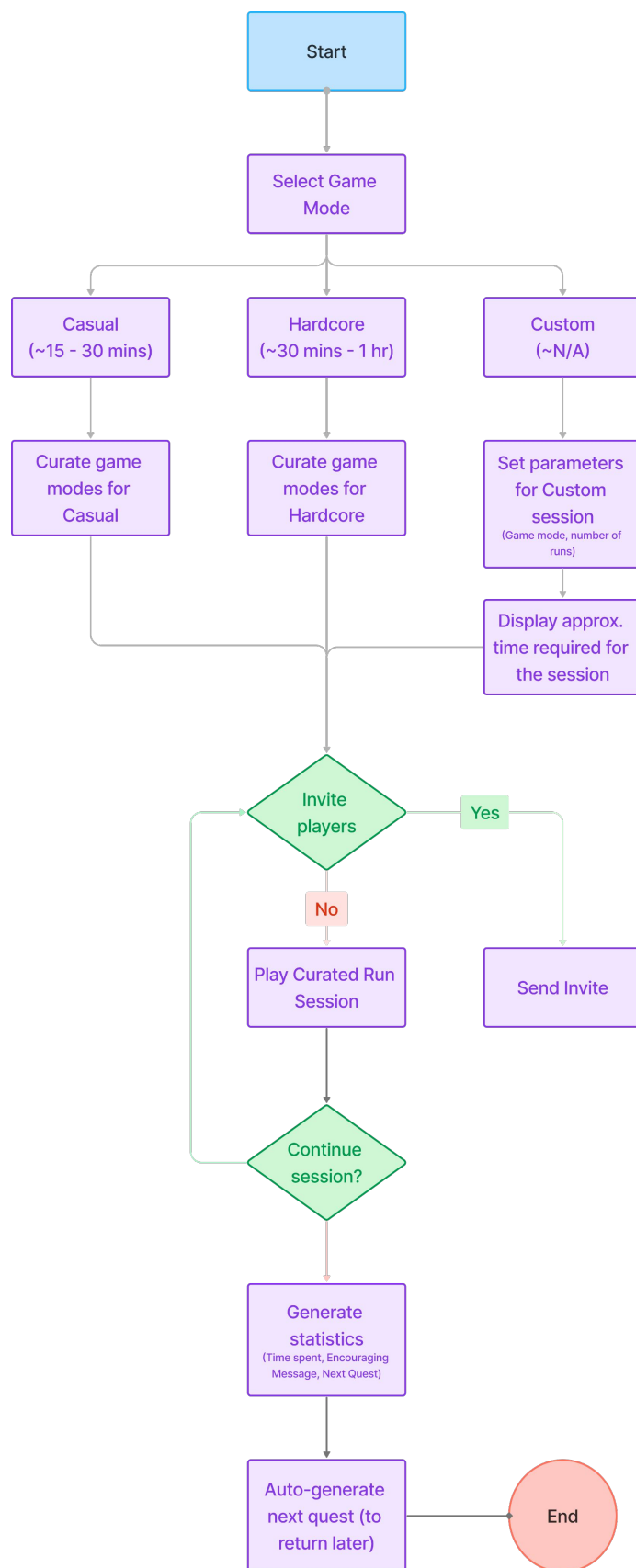


Figure 14 - Intent-Based Gaming Flow (System-Level Application / Read 6.1.3)



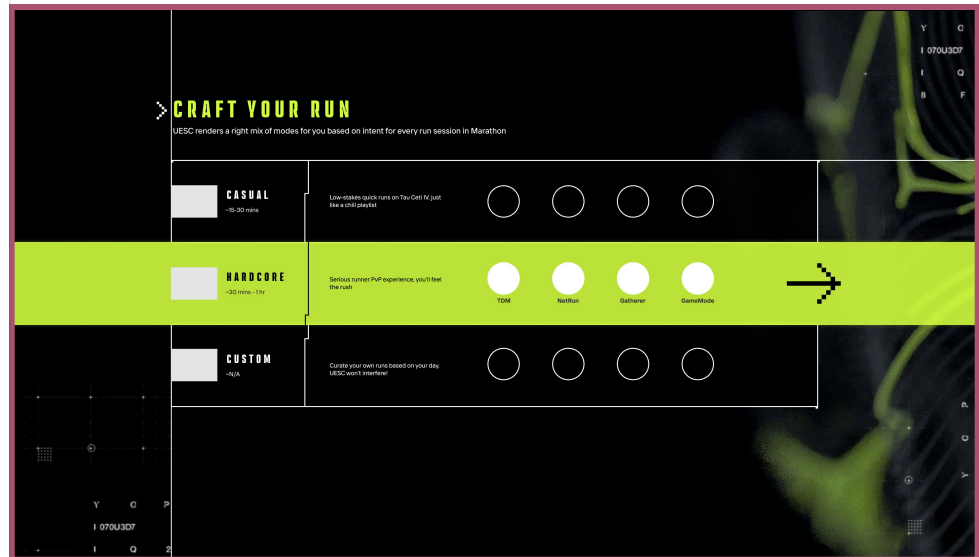


Figure 15 - Craft Your Run Concept in Marathon (Intent-Based Gaming concept implementation)

Players could embark on these runs solo or with friends and, upon completion, receive bonus XP to encourage wrapping up their session. Moreover, the game cleverly generates a new tailored run for the next day, incentivizing players to step away and return later.

### 6.1.2 A Better Parental Control?

While it may not be ideal to monetize this as an additional game service, but viewing from a business perspective, it could be a part of a larger concept in the future scope of GGWP – Safety Pass: A better parental control service integrated within the game clients. It curates a play session for young gamers based on parental preferences set by an adult. When child safety is involved, it might be incentivizing to look into such factors.

### 6.1.3 Impressions

Intent-based Gaming approach could be seamlessly integrated across various gaming systems with diverse online modes (See Fig. 15). It could be set as a default option or presented as a novel game mode selection. The core idea is to offer players definite, achievable goals within an expansive gaming world. When players have clear objectives, they engage more purposefully, fulfill their goals, and then eagerly anticipate their next custom-curated gaming experience (Constant-Recipe, 2023). It aims to stand as a pioneering step in cultivating a gaming environment that is both mindful and goal-oriented.

## 6.2 AI SKINS VS. TOXICITY // CONCEPT 02

In the vast universe of video game monetization, we're no longer just playing around. The market for in-game skins alone is mind-blowing – we're estimating a staggering \$50 billion. (*Gaming Skins*, 2022) Remember that ultra-rare Counter-Strike 2 weapon skin that currently fetches a million US dollars on the Steam marketplace? (*CS2 Skin Worth around \$1 Million*, 2024) That's the kind of economic powerhouse we're dealing with, when it comes to monetization strategy reliance in video games.

Now, let's shift gears to the concept of interactive, conversational cosmetic elements, or as we like to call them, NPEs (Non-Player Elements).

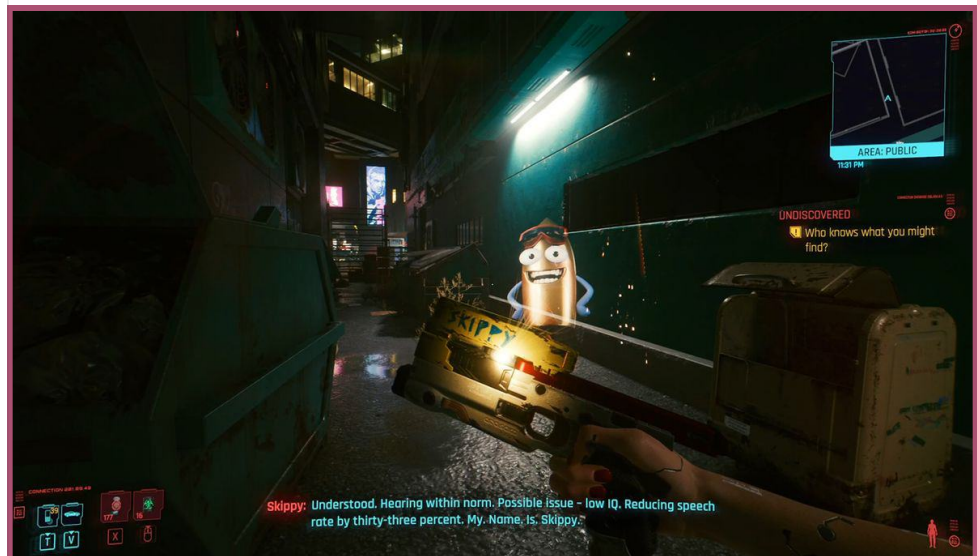


Figure 16 - Skippy interacting with the player in Cyberpunk 2077®

Consider Cyberpunk 2077's 'Skippy,' (*Skippy*, 2024) an AI smart weapon that engages with players through a holographic projection and boasts a distinctive persona. Skippy offers more than just chatter; it allows players to switch between two modes – the lethal 'Stone Cold Killer' and the non-lethal 'Puppy-Loving Pacifist,' each with its unique firing pattern and commentary.



Figure 17 - Alien gun interacting with the player in High on Life® game



Another intriguing example is Squanch Games Inc.'s 'High on Life,' (Park, 2022) where players encounter a variety of organic-looking, talking guns, each boasting its own interaction style and dialogue.

### 6.2.1 Application // Project

This project opens us to a potential application in competitive games like Valorant. Imagine weapon skins like Protocol 781-a (*Protocol 781-A*, 2022), which already feature conversational aspects, being utilized to address a significant problem in competitive gaming – toxicity. In 2023, about 74% of players experienced toxicity in games out of which only half of the surveyed players reported the behavior. Use of inappropriate language, slurs, performance humiliation, deliberately disrupting a team game are all different kinds of toxicity (*Toxicity in Multiplayer Games* | Unity, 2023).



Figure 18 - AI Skins detecting toxicity during pre-round time in Valorant® (AI Skins concept implementation)

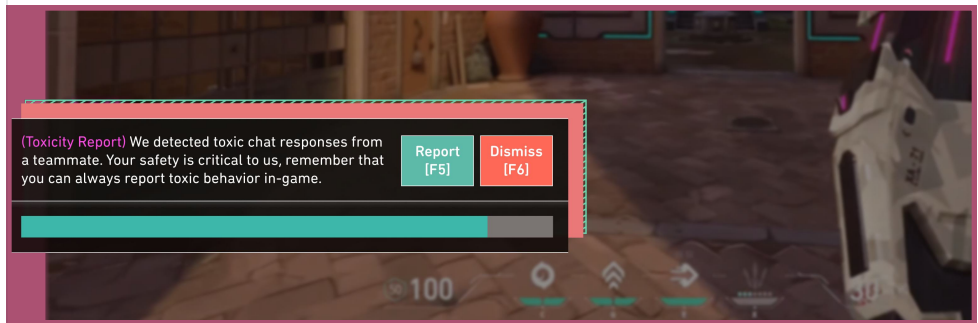


Figure 19 - AI toxicity detection prompt (UI concept implementation in Valorant)

Think about these interactive skins equipped with Riot Games' AI-driven toxicity moderation tech (*Riot Games and Ubisoft Tackling Toxicity*, 2022). They could actually help players identify and report toxic behavior, empowering them to take action, by simply triggering it during a non-crucial point of the match like pre-round countdown. It's a smart blend of monetization and promoting positive player interactions.

## 6.2.2 Game Assets For Safety Influence, A Fair Implementation

Firstly, it balances out the monetary requirements for the design and technological efforts. But the whole concept empowers players, especially young adults who experience toxicity on a daily basis and cannot sense the difference (like a disease that's internally spreading). It also aims to evoke responsible behavior amongst other players in the match. Yes, it may be suggestive, but this practice is a take to spread awareness while supporting AI to improve toxicity recognition within the game.

This idea offshoots well into the area of 'Game Assets for Safety Influence' offering rich variations of voice interactions ranging from motivational to humorous, to serious tones. Even if purchased and equipped by a single teammate, it acts as a factor of social change that could be picked up by anyone to experience its quirks. The real charm lies in the distinct personalities these skins bring to life, conversing with players in ways only narrative design can achieve. This also opens up monetization avenues, either by promoting the skins through a partnership with mental health charity programs or by showcasing them through influential game streamers, effectively weaving them into the fabric of the gaming community.

## 6.2.3 Impressions

Though this idea might seem a bit out there, and its implementation is still in the early stages, the potential is enormous. Interactive, conversational elements in games could revolutionize not just how we play but also how we interact within the gaming community. It's an exciting prospect, one that could redefine the boundaries of game design to balance fun with ethical responsibility.

# 6.3 PLAYER-AWARE NPCS // CONCEPT 03

A unique concept brews through GGWP when NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) become more than just digital bystanders. Imagine turning a familiar element in "Destiny 2" – the Ghost Shell (igamezhero, 2024)– into a catalyst for healthier gaming habits.

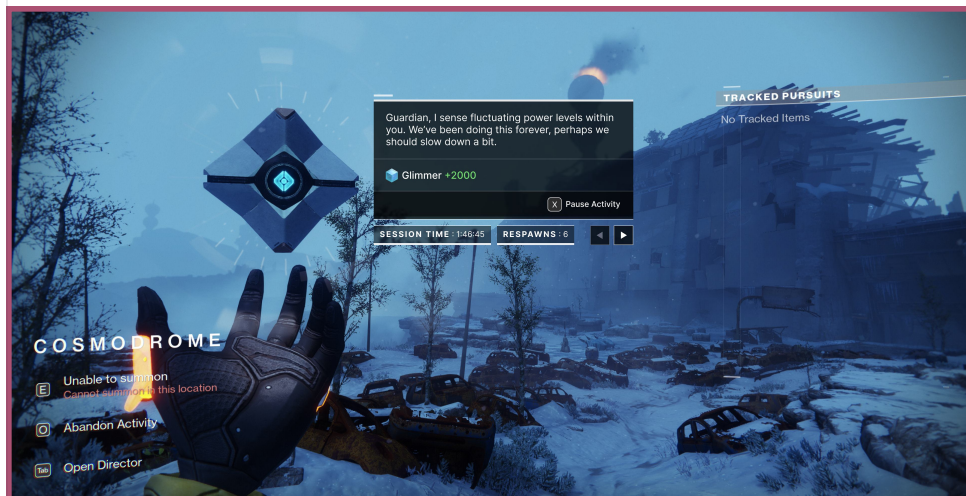


Figure 20 - Ghost encouraging the player to pause on-going activity in Destiny 2® (Player-Aware NPC Implementation)

In "Destiny 2," your Ghost Shell is more than just a guide; it's your constant companion in the vast universe of the game. But what if this companion could do more than just assist in battles and navigation? What if it could be a voice of reason, nudging you towards a more balanced gaming experience?

### 6.3.1 Application // Project

Imagine your Ghost Shell engaging in conversations with you, not just about your next mission, but about your gaming habits. It could gently suggest taking a break after an intense raid or even recommend lighter, more relaxing quests. These interactions would be laced with humor and camaraderie, making the advice feel more like a suggestion from an ally rather than a directive.

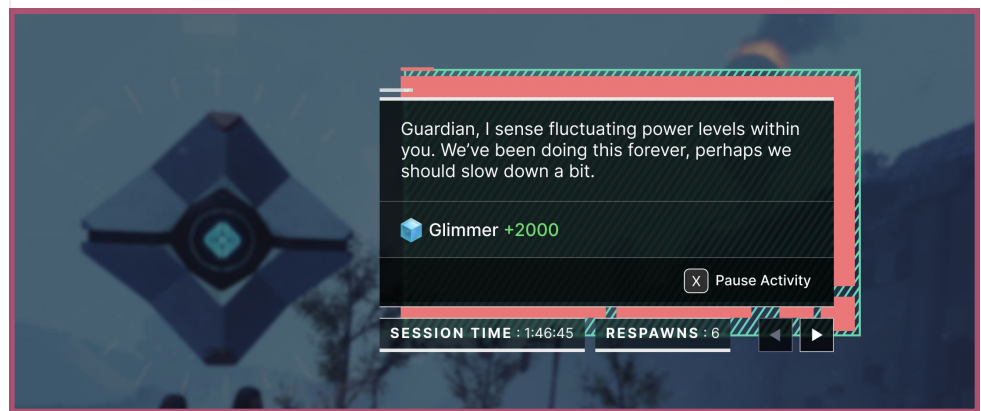


Figure 21 - Focused UI visual for the Player-Aware NPC concept (Ghost incentivizing the player to take a break)

The game could easily do this by tracking a few statistics like your gameplay duration, number of deaths in a single quest, and so on, offering rewards for engaging in shorter, less intensive gaming sessions or perhaps even supporting you to pause the activity instead of more punishing means such as 'Abandon'. These are subtle nudges towards disengagement which can be designed to make players more mindful of their time spent in-game, promoting a healthier balance between the virtual and real worlds.

### 6.3.2 Impressions

The concept went through several refinements based on community feedback to include added player statistics and tangible incentives like XP bonuses for taking breaks (igamezhero, 2024). The initial skepticism that stemmed from the ingrained engagement-driven practices prevalent in live-service games began to change around this new layer of positive self-awareness into the game experience. It became evident that players are open to, and indeed hopeful for, industry adoption of such player-centric ideas.

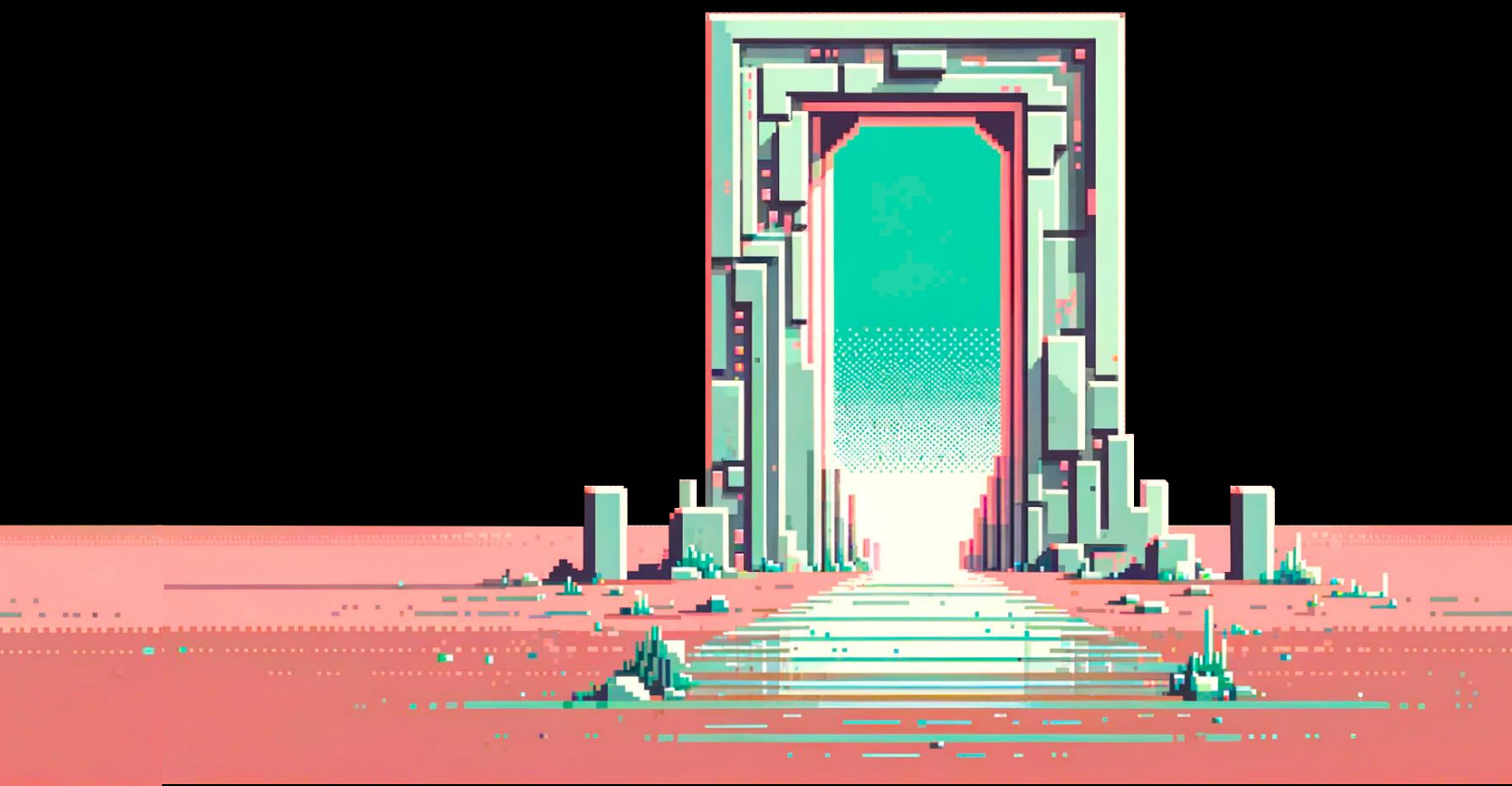
## 6.4 LEVELING UP THE GAME

As we wrap up our exploration of these transformative concepts, it's evident that creating "Good-Games" is not just a mere possibility but a strong path towards refining player engagement. From the goal-oriented sessions of Intent-Based Gaming, through the conversational bridges built by AI Skins, to the nurturing companionship of Player-Aware NPCs, each concept reinforces the untapped potential within game design.

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# 7.0 BEYOND NARRATIVES

// CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS





## 7.1 EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY // CONCLUSIONS

Embarking on this research was like diving into the deep, fascinating world of game psychology and its impact on players. The Reddit Q&As turned out to be a goldmine, sparking lively conversations about social responsibility, self-regulation, and spotting commendable game design practices. The dialogue itself was a valuable effort to shift the mindset towards a more positive gaming experience.

The journey hit a crossroads between building something entirely new for players and weaving mindful design right into the fabric of the creative pipeline. GGWP leaned towards integrating these elements through game narratives. Why? Because it's a quicker and more iterative approach for the industry to evaluate the impact and value of these changes compared to a separate platform for players.

The field of game narratives and ethical design is massive, no amount of scoping seemed to reduce its enormity. Thus, committing to a direction that balanced personal expertise and research insights was essential for progress. Measuring the real impact of the projects in a short time was tough, so we threw our concepts to the community to gauge their first impressions. The responses were mixed - some were all in, seeing the value and hoping the industry would adopt such practices. Others, not so much, are potentially conditioned to think player well-being isn't the game's responsibility.

We also tried to peek into AI's role in the periphery, but that's a story for another day. In hindsight, this exploration into ethical game design showed us there's a lot to gain for both the creator world and its players. It highlights how important 'positive play' is, especially in games designed for endless exploration and persistent immersion.

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## 7.2 FUTURE OF ETHICAL GAME DESIGN // IMPLICATIONS

GGWP has been a pursuit to highlight that games can be more than just a realm of escapism; a platform that wields the power to influence behavior in positive directions. As the industry evolves, there's a realization that player engagement must be balanced with ethical and socially-conscious considerations.

We sparked a conversation between game designers and players through Reddit Q&As that proved the curiosity. The growing awareness and willingness to explore responsible gaming practices is evident. It's a call to action for the industry to rethink traditional design approaches and embrace a more player-centric model with their welfare as one of the core objectives during the development.

In an industry as competitive as gaming, adopting ethical design practices offers a unique selling point for market differentiation. Studios that prioritize player well-being can distinguish themselves, appealing to a more diverse player base and setting new benchmarks for what games can and should offer. For instance, emerging platforms like Apple Arcade can easily stand out by curating their user experience to accommodate well-being metrics. GGWP promotes these approaches as a sustainable business model that will not only ensure a stable player base but also contribute to the studio's long-term success and reputation in the market.

Through reflective practice, reframing ethical responsibility amongst the creators as well as players turned out to be a key driver for a responsible gaming ecosystem. Education and awareness about these practices can lead to more informed choices. We know that players inherit the power to influence the social value of games, which makes their needs and voice - our epicenter to surface ethical-responsible ideas. This requires looking at games through a different lens for starters.

Even though we may have noticed unconventional utilization of certain game mechanics in GGWP, innovation is essential to break the barriers of game design practices. With the adoption of AI, the creations will only become more context-aware, eventually mindful of the player's behavior and habits of engaging with the games. This also acknowledges the need for ongoing exploration in ethical game design to stay ahead of the curve.

Finally, the next level for this initiative involves pinpointing specific metrics to evaluate the concepts and exploring speculative as well as business-driven middle grounds. Needless to mention, with the dawn of Artificial Intelligence, creating guidelines that define what it means to embed player-aware AI characters becomes equally vital. The Safety Pass service, if implemented, can serve as a passage to funnel these concepts over time, balancing the business and player needs while the concepts are tested out. Who knows? These might bring the change we've been talking about for so long.

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# GGWP, FOLKS!

I have been a passionate gamer long before becoming a UX practitioner and a graduate researcher. Throughout my childhood, video games served as a source of inspiration, comfort, and support, a bond I share with countless others worldwide.

Video games have undeniably been at the forefront of technological innovation, pushing the boundaries of what's possible. As we've learned, this also evidenced significant shifts in ways the industry operated. However, my concern has always centered on the intentions—or sometimes, the detrimental intentions—embedded in the design of these games. I've observed first-hand how some individuals have been led into problematic lifestyles through gaming, while others have been forced to abandon this once cherished sanctuary.

With GGWP, my aim is not to discard the progress we've made but to initiate gradual, mindful changes, starting with our attitudes as responsible creators. What we build is more than just entertainment; they are catalysts in the lives of those holding the controller, offer a medium to express their emotions. In essence, what we create can lead to "little big shifts" in the gamer's world.

My engagement with games—through enjoyment, critique, and study—has brought me closer to this world. Like me, there are thousands who understand the intricacies of gaming and millions who have grown up with similar experiences. None of us desire to restrict the budding generation from immersing themselves in games for it has been our common ground to connect, an experience, and a memory to share, to pass on. How we build games now, will change the way it shapes tomorrow.

My pursuit is to start by dedicating that 10% of the creative process considering the impacts in the players' lives. I aspire to nourish the true spirit of GGWP, in not just video games but in all forms of digital and physical experiences it inspires. As I return to the industry, enriched with new insights from this research, I'm eager to unite with others who share this vision, in whatever capacity possible.

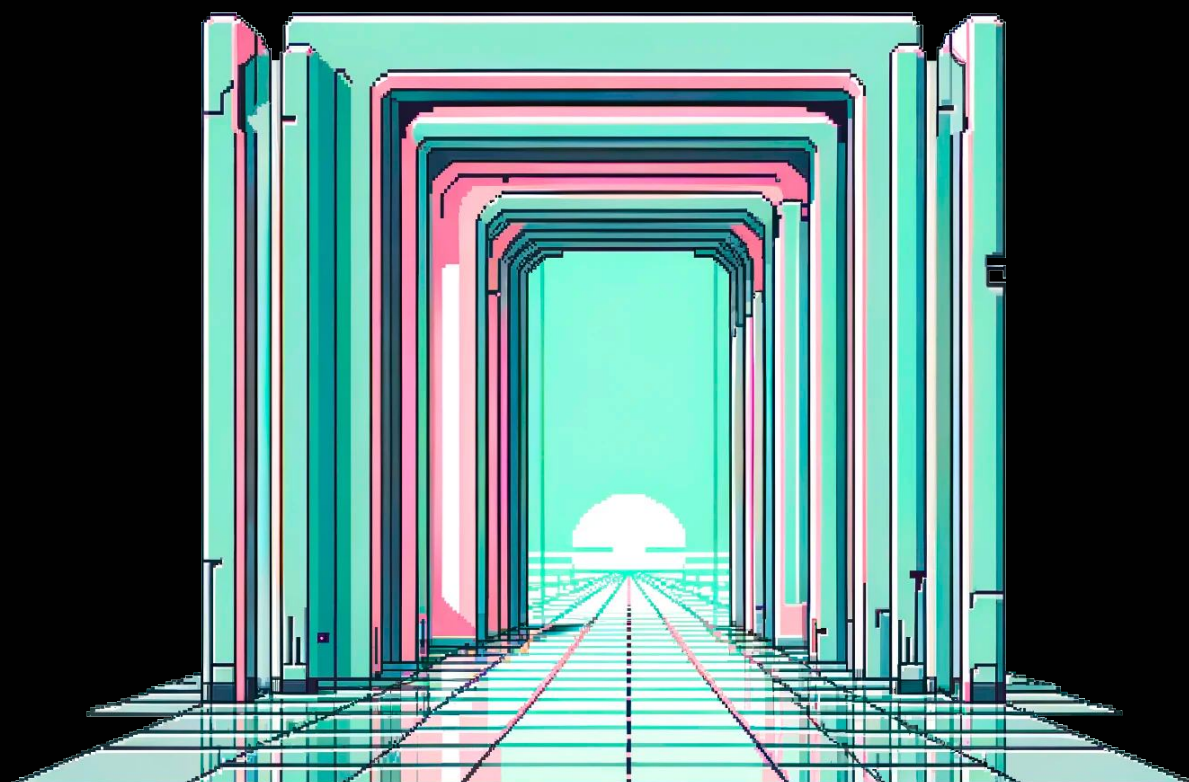
GGWP,  
**Siddhant (aka simplysid)**





8.0

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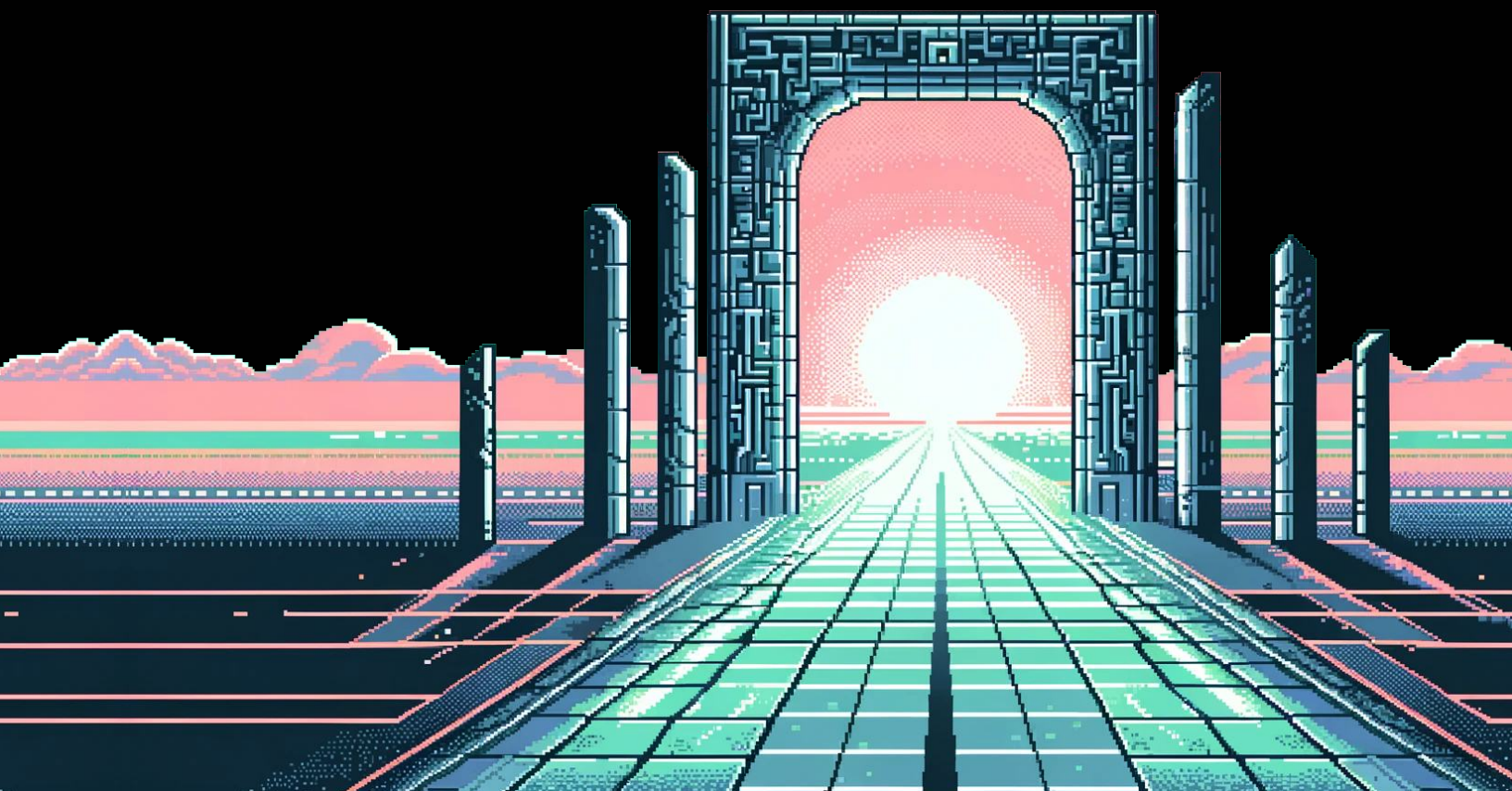
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9.0

# APPENDIX



## CASE STUDIES

### Non-Playable Characters & Elements (NPCs & NPEs)



Figure 22 - God Of War Ragnarok - Kratos & Atreus (Father & Son)

During my research for GGWP, Kratos and Atreus's evolving relationship as father and son, as individuals slowly unraveling their fate, morality, and identity in the Norse world was a truly moving experience to play through. While you play as Kratos, the God of War (God of War, n.d.), Atreus (NPC in Part One) is situated as an integral part of your journey from the get-go, as your son. Through numerous interactions and conflicts, the story packs impactful life lessons for any gamer to reflect upon.



Figure 23 - The Last of Us - Joel & Ellie

The same goes for Joel and Ellie's evolving relationship in The Last of Us (The Last of UsTM Part I, n.d.), set against a backdrop of a post-apocalyptic world as strangers, is another instance where NPC interactions elevate the gaming experience. Though Ellie is an NPC, her dynamic with Joel profoundly influences the game's narrative and the player's emotional investment through dialogues, assistive mechanics, and shared decision-making.



Figure 24 - Genshin Impact - Paimon NPC

The first two references were selected from Singleplayer titles, Paimon (NPC) on the other hand, is the deuteragonist of Genshin Impact, a widely famous MMORPG (Paimon, 2024). She is an open-world

NPC who accompanies the Traveler (you) throughout their adventure in Teyvat (the world) as their guide. She meets you when the latter fishes her out of the sea. Genshin leverages Paimon to unveil the game's lore, take shared decisions, and often direct/protect you throughout a persistent online world of your own.



Figure 25 - Animal Crossing: New Horizons

"Animal Crossing" stands out in the life simulation genre with its game world synchronized to real-world time (Webster, 2020). This unique feature means the game mirrors the actual 24-hour day-night cycle and seasonal changes, aligning with the player's real-life environment. The game's alignment with real-world seasons and holidays provides players with a sense of time progression and change. This encourages players to look forward to future in-game events tied to real-world dates, allowing for periodic engagement (and disengagement) rather than continuous play.



## BEYOND NARRATIVES

### Positioning Ideas // Spectrum

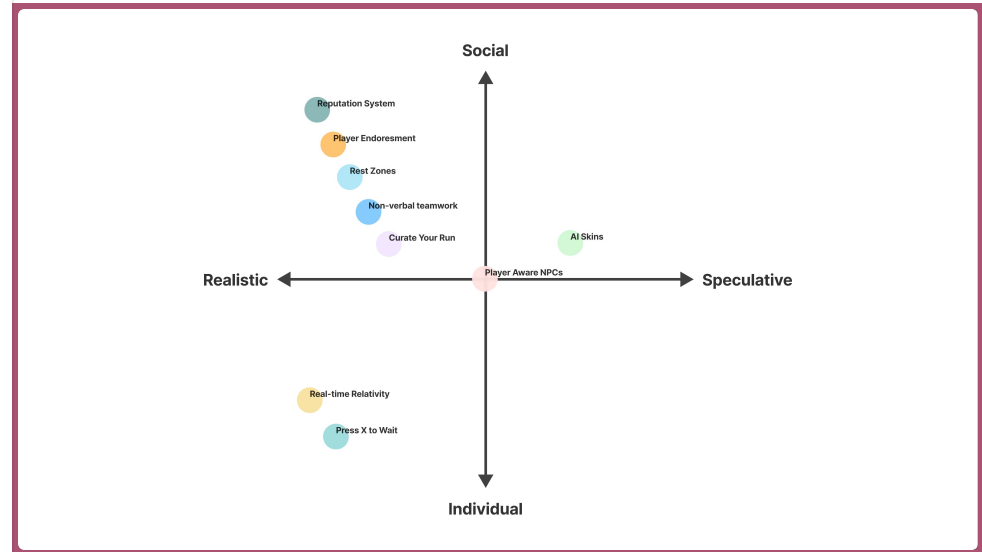


Figure 26 - Positioning Ideas

With a multitude of paths and possibilities, a strategic framework becomes essential. GGWP creates a conceptual tool that serves as a compass for diverse game design ideas:

- 1. Social vs. Individual:** This axis looks at the communal versus personal aspects of game design. Does the concept enhance the collective gaming experience, fostering community and shared experiences? Or does it zoom in on the individual gamer's journey, prioritizing personal well-being and solo interactions?
- 2. Realistic to Speculative:** Here we evaluate the feasibility versus the futuristic aspect of ideas. Realistic concepts are those that align with current gaming technologies and practices, while speculative ones are like a leap into the future, imagining what might be possible with advancements in gaming tech and narrative approaches.

This framework isn't confined to GGWP's boundaries but is adaptable for analyzing a wide range of game design concepts. Whether they're ideas explored within this research or yet-to-be-conceived innovations, the spectrum offers a clear way to categorize and understand the impact and direction of game design strategies.

## MINI-PROJECT

### Quest Cards - What If Game Quests Existed IRL?

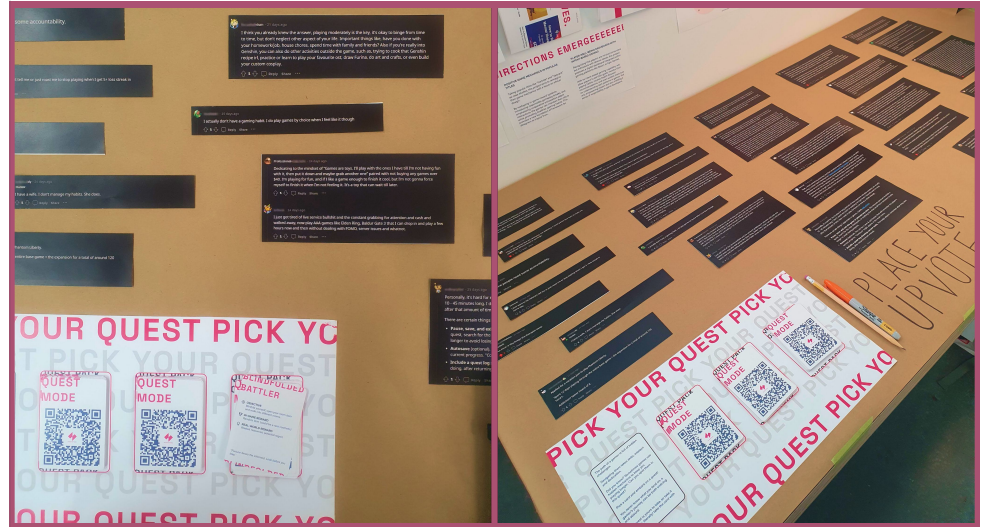


Figure 27 - Quest Cards given away to the audience who came to check the thesis work



Figure 28 - Quest Card example - Mix of healthy and absurd quests IRL depicting the game achievements experience

Less than 24 hours before the open studio (open house) for graduate researchers, I decided to craft a little game of quests as a souvenir for the audience to take away. The idea was based on a concept where games would encourage real-world activities to unlock achievements and items virtually. At the same time, it played with the extremity of some achievements that gamers grind to unlock. Furthermore, it was a subtle play of Loot Box mechanic as a dark pattern with the audience, unaware of the kind of quest they would pick up.

# REDDIT ANALYSIS

## 1. General Attitudes Towards Gaming

Sub-Category	Quotes	Count	Percent age
Balanced Approach	"I have an entire year to complete whatever seasonal stuff I want to..."	12	60%
	"I think it's good to remember that it is a game at the end of the day and you're meant to have fun and enjoy it."		
Moderate Gaming Habits	"I usually only play genshin and star railfor like 20-30 minutes out of a day..."	6	30%
	"I play every day, when everyone else in the household is asleep. If I play too long then I only impact myself for the next day."		
Struggled with Gaming Addiction	"As someone that life enjoys...games ispretty much all I have currently to keep my attention."	2	10%
	"I don't touch video games if I have other important shit pending. Most people do, though, and it gets in the way of their life."		



2. Strategies To Prevent Burnout And Gaming Addiction

Sub-Category	Quotes	Count	Percent age
Taking Breaks	"I want X thing. I play until I get Xthing, or make progress towards X thing, then I either seek out another Xthing, or stop to go do something else..."	9	45%
	"What "done" means for me depends on what's happening in both Genshin and Honkai. I sort of follow my own checklist."		
Following a Checklist	"Did I spend all my resin today as much as I could? I wait until my resin/energy in the games hit the cap and blow through it all at once for whatever I need..."	5	25%
	"Did I do the next stage of the ongoing event? I'm always consciously making sure I get events done as soon as possible for the primos/stellar jade."		
Managing Time and Priorities	"I think it's good to remember that it is a game at the end of the day and you're meant to have fun and enjoy it."	6	30%
	"I don't touch video games if I have other important shit pending. Most people do, though, and it gets in the way of their life."		

3. Views On Game Design And Player Responsibility

Sub-Category	Quotes	Count	Percent age
Player Autonomy	"It's doing something tedious for a reward,like we as humans have been doing for god knows how long. some people justenjoy the grind..."	12	60%
	"That is called self-control and a video game does not need to help you out with that. If a video game is really encapsulating you to the point you need a reminder to get off..."		
Appreciation for Game Features	"I stopped buying seasonal content. Don'tget me wrong, the seasonal stuff is awesome when it comes to getting cosmeticsand doing activities, and also to keep up with the story ingame."	8	40%
	"One of the worst habits that my friendswho dropped Destiny had was wanting to farm EVERYTHING... Meanwhile, I only goafter the Guns I find beautiful or fun and the game never got boring tome..."		

4. Incorporating Real-World Activities

Sub-Category	Quotes	Count	Percent age
Integration of Real-World Activities	"Only Hoyo would know the answer. But ifyou follow Genshin social or Hoyolab, there are actually plenty of genshinrelated activity irl..."	6	30%

5. Desire For Game Rewards And Creative Engagement

Sub-Category	Quotes	Count	Percent age
Interest in In-Game Challenges	"When I start feeling like 'Okay... There's nothing else to really do that I want to do.' I log off and go play something else..."	8	40%
	"Did I finish the new stories introduced? I have enjoyed almost all the new story content introduced both in Genshin and Honkai. Plus, that's more primos/jade along with xp mats."		
Appreciation for Community Engagement	"I think you already knew the answer, playing moderately is the key, it's okay to binge from time to time, but don't neglect other aspect of your life..."	5	25%
	"I know I'm responding to a lot of your comments but I digress... Yes you're completely right but where is the fault on the players? What about the person who plays this game 10 hours a day, every single day..."		

## TCPS CORE 2 CERTIFICATE



# RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

## Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board (ECU-REB)

Research + Industry Office  
520 East 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5T0H2

+1 604 844 3800 ext 2848  
ethics@ecuad.ca



### CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

The Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board approves the following project:

File #	Title	Principle Investigator:	Other Investigators
100561	Mindful Game Design: Exploring the Potential of Frameworks to Support a Conscious Game Design Process	Garnet Hertz	Siddhant Singh

The current approval dates are:

Approval Date	Expiration Date
May 31, 2023	March 31, 2024

The nature of the approval is as follows:

Type of Event	Type of Review	Approved Documents
New Approval Process	Delegated Review	Application, recruitment material, consent form

It is the researchers' responsibility to meet all research ethics requirements in the jurisdictions in which the research takes place. The procedures and protocols described in this certification must be followed closely. Note the following conditions associated with this approval:

- For multi-site or partnered research, researchers are required to comply with all research ethics requirements that apply. Researchers are expected to share notice of this approval with partners, sites of research, or other research ethics review boards, as applicable.
- If changes to the approved application and documents are required by new partners, sites of research or other research ethics boards, researchers are required to inform the ECU-REB of these changes.

Researchers are required to report anticipated changes, adverse incidents, and project completion for further research ethics review. All reporting is managed through the research portal on the Research Management System Process Pathways Romeo - <https://ecuad.researchservicesoffice.com/>. Login and complete "event" reports for changes, adverse conditions, renewals, and the completion of this research ethics file.

This research ethics approval is in compliance with Tri-Council guidelines (TCSP2 2022) and Emily Carr University policies and procedures.

Nick Conbere  
Chair, Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board  
Emily Carr University of Art + Design

# RESEARCH ETHICS COMPLETION

D

do-not-reply-ecuaad@researchservicesoffice.com  
To: Siddhant Singh; Garnet Hertz  
Cc: Research Ethics Board; Professor Alla Gadassik; Research

Wed 06-Mar-24 2:10 PM

**CAUTION:** This email comes from outside ECU. Verify the sender and use caution with any requests, links or attachments.

March 06, 2024

Dr. Garnet Hertz  
Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media  
Emily Carr University of Art and Design

Dear Mr. Singh and Dr. Hertz,

Re: Mindful Game Design: Exploring the Potential of Frameworks to Support a Conscious Game Design Process, File No: 100561  
Researchers: Dr. Garnet Hertz (Principal Investigator)  
Mr. Siddhant Singh (Co-Investigator)

Thank you for completing and submitting the final report for this project to the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board (ECU-REB). The completion form has been reviewed and approved. This file is now closed.

Thank you for participating in the research ethics review process at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Best wishes for future projects.

Sincerely,

Lois Klassen  
Coordinator, Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board  
Emily Carr University of Art + Design

Cc. Dr. Alla Gadassik, Chair, ECU-REB

This email and attachments are intended solely for the use of the individual or organization to which it is addressed and may contain information that is confidential. If you have received this email in error please notify the sender immediately by return email to [ethics@ecuaad.ca](mailto:ethics@ecuaad.ca).



# THESIS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK/APPRECIATION



JAKE KERR FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

[gradstudies@ecuad.ca](mailto:gradstudies@ecuad.ca)

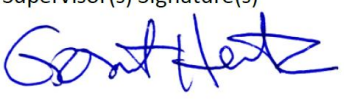

<b>CONGRATULATORY STATEMENT</b> (Filled by Chair. Final edit by Supervisor.) Please add commendations and briefly address the strengths of the thesis project. Congratulations Siddhant! The committee was impressed with the high quality of your work and the time and effort you have put into the project. There was high praise for your great storytelling and incredible presentation.
<b>COMMENTS, CONDITIONS AND/OR REQUIRED CHANGES</b> (Filled by Chair. Final edit by Supervisor.) The committee has no requested changes, but recommends you think about how to protect your work and how to start engaging others in the industry with it.

## RECOMMENDATION POST-PRESENTATION/DEFENCE IS:

### Accept, no revision required

The thesis project as presented does not require revisions and the student can proceed with final submission to the Graduate Studies Office and the ECU Library. Only corrections of spelling mistakes, syntax, and basic formatting are included in this category; any other edits are part of the next assessment category.

Signing of this form indicates that the candidate's supervisor has approved the comments and required changes above and will discuss them with the candidate.

Supervisor(s) Signature(s) 	Date April 16, 2024
APPROVED BY ASSOCIATE DEAN 	Date April 16, 2024