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What techniques do video games use to maintain player engagement, and how can ethical techniques be distinguished from manipulative design?

Introduction

The video game industry has grown into one of the largest entertainment sectors in the world, surpassing both film and music in annual revenue. With 3.6 billion players globally and an industry valued at \$189 billion (Newzoo, 2025), video games have become a major leisure activity for many people. As games have evolved from simple arcade experiences to complex, interconnected digital environments, developers have also changed their methods for capturing and retaining player attention. While some of these methods create enjoyable experiences that enhance gameplay, others face criticism for taking advantage of psychological weaknesses and prioritizing profit over player wellbeing. Knowing the difference between these methods is crucial for players, developers, and regulators to keep gaming a positive and ethical form of entertainment.

This dissertation asks: What techniques do video games use to maintain player engagement, and how can we tell ethical techniques apart from manipulative design?

This dissertation aims to break down both forms of engagement and explore how each shapes the player experience. Positive engagement comes from thoughtful design choices like fair challenges, compelling stories, and mechanics that promote player independence and skill. Negative engagement, on the other hand, arises from systems that use pressure, compulsion, or artificial scarcity to keep players engaged, even if they are not enjoying the experience. By comparing these two approaches, this dissertation shows how different design philosophies can either enhance a player's experience or seriously undermine it. To address the research question, this dissertation focuses on four main aims. First, it looks at the psychological roots of player engagement by reviewing existing literature on motivation, flow, and reward systems. Second, it identifies and classifies both positive and negative engagement techniques used in the gaming industry. Third, it assesses player awareness of these techniques using primary survey data collected for this research. Fourth, it suggests a framework for distinguishing between ethical and manipulative design, with implications for players, developers, and the wider industry.

Methodology

This dissertation uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative literature-based research with primary survey data. These approaches were selected due to the exploratory nature of the research question and the breadth of existing material available on player psychology and game design practices.

The literature review draws on academic publications in psychology and game studies, foundational texts on game design theory, and case study analysis of specific games. Academic sources provided theoretical grounding, particularly research on player motivation and the psychological effects of monetisation mechanics. Direct observation and analysis of specific games supplied concrete examples of engagement techniques in practice. Sources were identified through searches on

Google Scholar, YouTube, and games industry publications using search terms such as "game engagement," "player retention," "dark patterns in games," "ethical game design," "loot boxes," "monetisation," and specific game titles.

Notes were taken systematically while reviewing each source. Key points were condensed into single sentences, with the game or source name recorded alongside. Where a source had multiple insights, several sentences captured its full contribution. This made it easy to compare across sources and spot common themes, recurring mechanics, and where different perspectives agreed or disagreed.

A primary survey gathered data on player awareness of engagement techniques. The survey received 32 responses and covered demographics, gaming habits, spending behaviour, and perceptions of manipulative design. The sample is too small for universal conclusions, but the responses offer useful insight into how players perceive and respond to the mechanics discussed here. Limitations of both methods are addressed in the Critical Analysis section.

Definitions

Before diving into engagement techniques, some key terms need defining. Clear terminology helps avoid confusion when discussing player psychology and game design.

Player

A player is someone actively engaged in a video game by their own choice. Their focus is on the game, and they've decided to play of their own free will. This distinction matters: someone pressured into playing, like a friend dragged into a *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) split-screen session, wouldn't count as a player here. Their engagement is fundamentally different from someone who actively seeks out the experience. For this research, a player is someone who genuinely wants to play.

Engagement

Engagement in games refers to a player's sustained attention, emotional investment, and desire to remain involved in the experience. This is often achieved through what Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 3) describes as "flow": a psychological state of complete absorption in an activity where "a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable." Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p. 50) add that "meaningful play occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game." In other words, engagement requires players to understand the immediate results of their actions and to see how those actions contribute to their overall progress. Simply put, engagement describes what keeps a player playing the quality that makes a game compelling enough to maintain a player's investment over time. Without engagement, a player has no reason to continue; engagement is therefore a fundamental requirement for any game to hold a player's attention.

Positive and Negative Engagement

Positive engagement happens when a game keeps players interested through methods that benefit or respect them. This includes well-designed challenges, compelling story, satisfying mechanics, meaningful progression, and genuine social connection. Self-Determination Theory says positive engagement supports feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the three core psychological needs identified by Ryan and Deci (2000). When a game achieves positive engagement, players feel satisfied, fulfilled, and in control. They keep playing because they genuinely enjoy it, not because they feel compelled or obligated.

Negative engagement happens when a game keeps players interested through methods that harm them. This includes mechanics designed to foster addiction, encourage excessive spending, create negative feedback loops, or pressure continued play. Examples include loot boxes, daily login rewards, limited-time events, energy systems, and battle passes that punish absence. These systems may successfully retain players, but they do so by exploiting psychological vulnerabilities rather than providing genuine enjoyment. Players may keep playing, but they often feel anxious,

obligated, or regretful instead of satisfied. Negative engagement puts developer profit above player wellbeing.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter looks at how games maintain player engagement, distinguishing between designs that create genuine enjoyment and those that use psychological tactics for profit. Using game examples and motivation research, it builds a framework for assessing when engagement benefits players and when it becomes exploitative.

Player engagement can be categorized as either external or internal. External engagement stems from motivations outside the game, such as the pursuit of 100% completion, self-imposed challenges like 'Iron Man' or 'no-hit' runs, or financial incentives for streamers seeking to attract and retain audiences. These motivations originate from the player's personal goals or external incentives, rather than the game's design. In contrast, internal engagement is driven by in-game elements that sustain player motivation. Factors such as compelling storytelling, robust gameplay mechanics, and balanced reward systems contribute to this form of engagement.

The principle of fairness is closely linked to discernibility, defined as the player's ability to perceive the outcomes of their actions. As Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p. 51) state, 'If you shoot an asteroid while playing a computer game and the asteroid does not change in any way, you are not going to know if you hit it or not. If you do not receive feedback that indicates you are on the right track, the action you took will have very little meaning.' *Dark Souls* exemplifies effective feedback mechanisms: every enemy attack is clearly signaled, each successful dodge creates an opportunity to counterattack, and every player death imparts new knowledge. In contrast, *The Impossible Quiz* (Splapp Me-Do, 2007) frequently lacks meaningful feedback, making it difficult for players to distinguish between correct and incorrect reasoning.

Rewards are another key part of engagement. Players stay engaged when they have clear goals and can see tangible progress—whether through story advancement, new

abilities, or achievements. Reward structures create a feedback loop that keeps players focused and motivated. Studios like Ubisoft and Naughty Dog are good at combining story, exploration, and gameplay into a cohesive loop that maintains momentum.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (Naughty Dog, 2009) achieves high completion rates by balancing narrative, gameplay challenges, and exploration into a continuous flow that keeps players emotionally and mentally invested throughout.

Research based on Self-Determination Theory demonstrates that when games meet the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, players experience deeper and more satisfying engagement (Ryan, Rigby and Przybylski, 2006). Players who feel in control of their experience, who are appropriately challenged, and who feel connected to the game's world or community are more likely to develop a healthy, lasting relationship with the game. In contrast, negative engagement occurs when systems rely on extrinsic or manipulative design practices. Studies have shown that loot-box style rewards resemble gambling structures and can negatively influence player wellbeing (King and Delfabbro, 2019). These systems may increase short-term interaction metrics but do not foster healthy or meaningful long-term engagement.

A notable example of how framing affects engagement perception comes from World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Blizzard originally implemented a system where playing for long periods reduced experience point gains. The experience modifier slowly dropped from 100% to 50% the longer a player remained logged in. Players never literally lost earned experience, but their future gains were penalised the more they played. This system was designed to discourage excessive play sessions, but players perceived it as punishment. The community response was overwhelmingly negative, with players calling it 'the fatigue system' or 'sleeping tax.' Blizzard responded by reframing the system entirely. Instead of reducing experience for long sessions, they introduced 'Rested XP,' which rewarded players for taking breaks. The underlying mathematics remained essentially the same, but the psychological framing shifted from punishment to reward. This case demonstrates how player perception and intent behind a mechanic are as important as the mechanic itself. A system that punishes feels

manipulative; a system that rewards feels generous—even when the outcome is identical.

Analysis of Engagement Techniques

Negative Engagement Mechanics

Looking at various games and industry practices, three main categories of negative engagement techniques stand out. These methods push players to spend more money or time through psychological manipulation rather than genuine enjoyment.

First: randomisation and chance-based rewards

This includes random rewards, gacha systems, loot boxes, and random upgrade chances. These mechanics rely on probability rather than guaranteed outcomes, creating excitement and anticipation through unpredictability. By making rewards uncertain, games encourage repeated engagement as players chase the possibility of obtaining rare items. This mirrors the psychological mechanisms behind gambling. In Genshin Impact (miHoYo, 2020), players spend premium currency for a chance to unlock characters, with no guarantee of obtaining the one they want.

Second: incentive structures and limit of play

This design philosophy encompasses systems such as battle passes, downloadable content, preorder bonuses, and daily login rewards, all of which are intended to guide player behaviour toward regular engagement and monetisation. Many games are structured to encourage frequent, short play sessions rather than allowing players to progress at their own pace. For example, Halo Infinite (343 Industries, 2021) implements a battle pass system that imposes artificial experience caps. A daily challenge may reward 500 battle pass points, while subsequent matches provide only 50 points each. To illustrate the effect of this design, consider a 100-level battle pass requiring 1,000 experience points per level, resulting in a total requirement of 100,000 points. At 500 points per daily mission, a player must complete 200 daily missions to

finish the pass. However, relying solely on post-cap match rewards would require 2,000 matches to achieve the same progress a tenfold increase. The game does not explicitly inform players that these experience caps are deliberate, subtly incentivising consistent daily logins over flexible or extended play sessions. This approach extends to broader engagement-restricting mechanics such as energy systems, limited lives, and experience gating. These systems regulate how long or how often players can engage with a game, typically through timers or resource regeneration, and are commonly used to control pacing while encouraging habitual return play. For example, in Genshin Impact (miHoYo, 2020), progression is controlled by the Original Resin system, which limits access to high-reward activities such as bosses and domains. Resin regenerates at 1 every 8 minutes, up to a cap of 160, encouraging daily logins rather than long play sessions.

Third: value abstraction

Value abstraction refers to the process by which real-world money is converted into virtual currencies or points within a game. By separating actual cost from in-game spending through multiple layers of currency conversion, players may lose track of how much they are truly paying, making purchases feel less significant and encouraging increased spending while reducing transparency. In Genshin Impact (miHoYo, 2020), players purchase Genesis Crystals using real-world currency, with entry-level pricing set at \$0.99 USD for 60 Genesis Crystals, alongside larger bundled options that include bonus crystals. Genesis Crystals are then converted on a one-to-one basis into Primogems, and 160 Primogems are required per “Wish.” This means a single Wish does not correspond to a clear or direct real-world price, obscuring the true cost of each pull.

Positive Engagement Mechanics

In contrast to manipulative design, four categories of positive engagement stand out. These methods create genuine enjoyment and respect player autonomy, building long term engagement through quality rather than exploitation.

First: aesthetics

Aesthetics refer to a game's visual style, art direction, sound design, and overall presentation. This includes character design, environments, user interface, music, and animation. Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) features hyper-realistic vistas that create a sense of immersion and place, while Ōkami (Clover Studio, 2006) uses a distinctive ink-brush art style inspired by traditional Japanese painting. Well crafted aesthetics can create emotional attachment, immersion, and brand identity, encouraging long-term player engagement through the sheer pleasure of inhabiting a beautifully realised world.

Second: story

Story covers narrative structure, world-building, characters, and lore. A compelling story can motivate players to keep playing to uncover plot developments or experience character arcs. The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013) is a prime example, using emotional storytelling to create deep player investment that sustains engagement throughout the experience. When players care about what happens next, they're intrinsically motivated to continue because they genuinely want to see the story unfold.

Third: community.

Community refers to the social ecosystem surrounding a game, including multiplayer interaction, fan spaces, social media, forums, and content creators. Strong communities increase player retention by fostering shared experiences, discussion, and a sense of belonging. Helldivers 2 (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2024) exemplifies this approach: its community rallies around communal events called 'Major Orders,' where players coordinate attacks and discuss strategy on online forums. This creates engagement through camaraderie and shared purpose rather than guilt or social pressure.

Fourth: gameplay

Gameplay covers core mechanics, controls, systems, and moment-to-moment interaction. Well-designed gameplay provides challenge, satisfaction, and mastery,

encouraging players to improve their skills and keep playing because playing itself is enjoyable. Devil Daggers (Sorath, 2016) is a great example: a game with no story and minimal visuals that remains highly engaging purely through its tight, skill-based gameplay and pursuit of mastery. Players return not because of artificial hooks or psychological manipulation, but because the core experience is genuinely satisfying.

The Complexity of Engagement: Intent Versus Outcome

While positive and negative engagement techniques can often be clearly categorised, game design is rarely that simple. Many games use mechanics that look like one category but produce outcomes from the other. A technique typically seen as manipulative might create genuinely positive experiences in certain contexts, while a technique usually considered ethical can produce negative outcomes when poorly done. Understanding these contradictions matters for evaluating engagement design.

Positive Outcomes from Negative Techniques

The *Pokémon* series (Game Freak, 1996) provides a compelling example of randomisation producing positive engagement rather than exploitation. On paper, the core catching mechanic shares similarities with gacha systems and loot boxes: the player is not guaranteed any specific Pokémon, encounters are randomised, and the odds of finding species vary by location and rarity. Furthermore, each Pokémon has randomly generated stats and natures, meaning no two creatures are truly identical. By the logic applied to mobile gacha games, this system should be considered manipulative.

However, the effect on players is overwhelmingly positive. The randomness creates a sense of uniqueness and personal connection. Because the player does not know which Pokémon will appear, what nature it will have, or whether they will successfully catch it, each encounter feels meaningful. Players often project personality onto their Pokémon based on these random attributes, a Pikachu with a "Jolly" nature feels different from one with a "Serious" nature, even if the mechanical differences are minor.

The uncertainty transforms what could be a repetitive grinding loop into a series of small, memorable moments.

If every player received the same Pokémon with identical status, this connection would be lost. The randomness makes each creature feel like *your* Pokémon, caught through your own efforts and luck. This illustrates how a mechanic often associated with negative engagement randomised rewards can foster genuine emotional investment when implemented thoughtfully and without monetary exploitation. The key difference is that Pokémon's randomisation costs nothing and never hinders progression - every player can complete the game with whatever creatures they catch.

Negative Outcomes from Positive Techniques

Conversely, *Gotham Knights* (WB Games Montréal, 2022) shows how a typically positive mechanic can produce negative engagement when poorly implemented. The Batman Arkham series built its reputation on fluid, satisfying combat and tightly paced storytelling. *Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios, 2009), *Arkham City* (Rocksteady Studios, 2011), and *Arkham Origins* (WB Games Montréal, 2013) achieved critical acclaim without any gear progression system. *Gotham Knights*, developed by the same studio behind *Arkham Origins*, abandoned this approach. In the *Arkham* games, players unlocked new gadgets and abilities as the story progressed, but there was no grinding for loot or equipment stats.

In *Gotham Knights*, however, WB Games Montréal introduced a gear and upgrade system that required players to accumulate resources and grind for improved equipment. Progression systems are generally considered positive engagement techniques: they provide a sense of achievement, reward investment, and encourage mastery. In role-playing games such as *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) or *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), the slow accumulation of power is central to the experience and integral to the game's identity.

However, *Gotham Knights* is not an RPG. It is a story-focused action game with a combat system designed for immediate satisfaction. The gear system feels

disconnected from the core experience. The basic gear items provide only minor moment to moment stat increases, and the game's structure does not evolve in ways that incentivize extended grinding. The existence of three successful predecessors without such a system demonstrates that it was not required for the game to be engaging.

The most likely explanation for its inclusion is to artificially extend playtime. By requiring players to grind for better gear, the game increases its total play hours—a metric often used by publishers to justify value for money or keep players engaged between content releases. This transforms a positive technique (progression) into a negative one, prioritizing time investment over enjoyment. A simplified approach, consistent with the previous games, would have served the player's experience far better.

Primary Research: Survey Findings

A survey gathered primary data on player awareness of engagement techniques. With 32 respondents, the sample is too small for broad generalisations, but the responses offer useful insight into how players perceive and respond to the mechanics discussed here.

Gaming Habits and Motivations

The survey revealed high engagement levels among respondents. Half (50%) reported playing video games every day, with the remainder split relatively evenly across one to two, three to four, and five to six times per week. Session duration varied considerably, with roughly equal proportions reporting sessions of under 30 minutes, one to two hours, and two to four hours. This variability suggests that "engagement" manifests differently across player types—some prefer frequent short sessions while others engage in extended play.

When asked how many different games they play per week, 60% reported one to two games, while 35% played three to four. Only one respondent played five to six different games weekly. This suggests that most players focus their attention on a small number of titles rather than spreading engagement across many games, which has implications for retention-focused design: developers benefit from creating games that sustain long term engagement within a single title.

The most popular genre among respondents was shooters (50%), followed by RPGs and JRPGs. Rhythm games were the least represented. When asked their primary reasons for playing, the overwhelming majority selected "fun" and "relaxation." Approximately 40% cited escapism, 40% cited story, 30% cited social connection, 30% cited competition, 30% cited achievement, and 40% cited boredom relief. This distribution supports the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review: intrinsic motivations (fun, relaxation, story) appear to be primary drivers, while extrinsic factors (achievement, competition) serve as secondary or supplementary motivations.

Perceptions of Enjoyment

Respondents were asked what makes games enjoyable, with multiple selections permitted. Nearly every category received 50% or higher selection rates, making it difficult to identify a single dominant factor. However, a general trend emerged: factors related to intrinsic enjoyment—fun gameplay, challenging content, engaging stories, and social interaction—ranked higher than utilitarian factors such as freedom, rewards, achievements, or character customization. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as drivers of genuine engagement.

When asked about losing track of time while playing, most respondents selected "somewhat," suggesting they typically set intended play durations but frequently exceed them by small amounts. Very few reported never losing track of time, while a substantial minority reported regularly losing track. This pattern suggests that most players experience mild flow states that extend play beyond intention, but without the

compulsive loss of control associated with addiction.

Spending Behaviour and Monetisation Awareness

The survey examined player spending habits to understand how monetisation practices affect real-world behaviour. Regarding new game purchases, approximately 40% reported not purchasing a new game in a typical month, while 60% did make purchases. There was a clear tendency toward minimising spending, with most respondents reporting conservative purchasing habits.

For in-game purchases, 60% of respondents reported spending no money within games they already own. Among those who did spend, amounts varied from £1 to £50, with no respondents reporting high spending levels. Notably, while the majority of players admitted to having spent money on loot boxes at some point, none described their spending as excessive or frequent. This suggests awareness of and resistance to aggressive monetisation, though not complete avoidance.

When asked specifically about spending money on randomised rewards to obtain specific items, no respondents reported doing so. This is a significant finding: players appear willing to engage with randomised systems casually but resist targeted spending to "chase" particular outcomes. This distinction may reflect awareness of the gambling like nature of such behaviours.

Regarding pay-to-skip mechanics (spending money to bypass artificial waiting times), only 30% of respondents reported having done so. The majority preferred to wait rather than pay, suggesting that time-gating mechanics may be less effective at generating revenue than developers assume, at least among this sample of relatively engaged players.

When asked whether they had ever lost track of how much money they spent in games, only 20% responded affirmatively. However, approximately 50% reported actively thinking about the real-money cost of in-game items before purchasing. This suggests that players are generally conscious of monetisation and actively resist losing control of spending, even if a minority have experienced such loss of control.

Awareness of Engagement Techniques

The survey tested player awareness of specific techniques games use to maintain engagement. Awareness was relatively evenly distributed across categories, with daily login streaks being the most recognized technique and artificial difficulty spikes being the least recognized.

The low awareness of artificial difficulty spikes is noteworthy. It is possible that the prevalence of intentionally difficult games such as *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) has normalized challenging gameplay, making it difficult for players to distinguish between legitimate difficulty and manufactured frustration designed to encourage spending. When a game becomes suddenly difficult, players may interpret this as intended challenge rather than deliberate manipulation.

When asked whether they had ever felt a game was designed to waste their time, 60% answered yes. This majority indicates that most players have, at some point, recognized when a game was artificially extending its duration without providing proportional value. The 40% who had not experienced this feeling may play different types of games or may be less attuned to such design patterns.

Respondents who answered affirmatively were asked to elaborate. Common responses included complaints about mobile games, detailed descriptions of grinding requirements, and frustration with games that demanded excessive repetition to achieve goals. The specificity and emotional weight of these responses suggest that experiences of time-wasting design are memorable and impactful—players do not forget when they feel exploited.

Experiences of Manipulation

While 60% of respondents recognized time-wasting design, fewer (approximately 40%) reported feeling manipulated into spending money or playing longer than intended. This discrepancy is significant. Time-wasting is a relatively obvious form of negative engagement—players feel bored and recognized the padding. Manipulation into

spending or extended play is more insidious, operating through psychological mechanisms that players may not consciously recognize.

For example, modern *Call of Duty* titles feature deliberately cumbersome user interfaces that make navigation frustrating, while purchasing in-game currency is streamlined and instantaneous. Players may not consciously connect these design choices, experiencing only a vague sense of friction that is relieved by spending. The 40% who did not report feeling manipulated may have experienced such manipulation without recognizing it as such.

Approximately 80% of respondents reported noticing when games gave paying players advantages over non-paying players. This high recognition rate suggests that pay-to-win mechanics are relatively transparent—games actively display purchased advantages, perhaps to incentivize others to spend. The visibility of these advantages may explain why 60% of respondents reported having stopped playing games due to pay-to-win mechanics. When unfairness becomes blatant, players disengage entirely.

Interestingly, most players reported not feeling anxious about missing daily login rewards. This suggests that while daily login systems are widespread and recognized, they may be less psychologically effective than developers assume or that players have developed resistance to this particular form of pressure.

Overall Industry Perception

The survey concluded with broader questions about industry ethics. Approximately 90% of respondents agreed that they had noticed games intentionally designed to encourage spending. This near-universal recognition indicates that manipulative monetisation is sufficiently prevalent that almost all players have encountered it.

Most significantly, when asked whether the gaming industry uses these tactics ethically or unethically, no respondent selected "ethically" without qualification. This complete absence of positive ethical assessment suggests widespread player cynicism about industry practices. Players appear to have accepted manipulative design as an unavoidable feature of modern gaming, something to be tolerated and navigated rather

than a violation of trust.

This resignation is concerning. When players expect manipulation, they may become desensitized to increasingly aggressive practices. The normalization of negative engagement techniques benefits developers in the short term but as discussed throughout this dissertation, erodes long-term trust and goodwill.

Limitations of the Survey

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was small and predominantly male, limiting generalizability. The sample was also weighted toward engaged PC gamers rather than casual mobile players, who may have different experiences and awareness levels. Self-reported data is subject to recall bias and social desirability effects—respondents may underreport spending or overreport awareness to appear more sophisticated.

Additionally, the survey was conducted among a population likely to have some existing awareness of game design, potentially inflating recognition rates for manipulative techniques. A broader sample including less engaged or less critically aware players might reveal lower awareness and greater susceptibility to manipulation.

Despite these limitations, the survey provides valuable primary data supporting the theoretical framework developed in this dissertation. Players demonstrably recognize and resist many negative engagement techniques but also demonstrate gaps in awareness—particularly regarding subtle psychological manipulation and artificial difficulty. The near-universal perception that industry practices are unethical underscores the importance of developing frameworks for distinguishing positive from negative engagement.

Critical Analysis

Connecting Theory to Player Experience

The survey findings, looked at alongside the theoretical framework from the literature review, reveal clear patterns in how players perceive and respond to engagement techniques. Self-Determination Theory says genuine engagement emerges when games satisfy the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The survey data backs this up: when asked why they play video games, 78% chose relaxation and fun, while extrinsic factors ranked much lower. This suggests players fundamentally seek experiences that provide genuine enjoyment rather than external validation.

The Spending-Awareness Paradox

One of the most striking findings is the disconnect between player awareness and industry perception. A substantial 84% of respondents indicated awareness that games may be designed to manipulate them into spending more money or time. Furthermore, 75% reported recognising when paying players receive unfair advantages, and 63% have stopped playing games specifically because they felt too pay-to-win. This high level of awareness suggests that manipulative design practices are not invisible—they are recognised, resented, and actively resisted.

Despite this awareness, the survey revealed that very few respondents considered the gaming industry's use of engagement tactics to be ethical. Only 6% selected ethical, while 53% selected neutral and 41% selected unethical. This near-absence of positive ethical assessment is remarkable and suggests that players have largely become resigned to manipulative practices as an unavoidable feature of modern gaming. The industry appears to have normalised behaviour that the vast majority of its consumers refuse to endorse as ethical.

Gaps in Awareness: Where Manipulation Succeeds

While players demonstrate high awareness of many engagement tactics, the survey revealed notable gaps. Loot boxes and daily login streaks were identified by 72% of

respondents. However, artificial difficulty spikes were recognised by only 31%—the lowest awareness rate among all listed tactics. This disparity is significant. Monetisation-focused techniques appear relatively transparent to players, likely because they directly involve financial transactions that prompt conscious evaluation. In contrast, engagement techniques that operate through gameplay manipulation are less readily identified.

The low awareness of artificial difficulty spikes may be partially explained by the normalisation of challenging gameplay through titles such as Dark Souls. When a game suddenly becomes more difficult, players may interpret this as intentional design rather than manufactured frustration intended to encourage spending or extended play. Players appear less equipped to identify when difficulty serves the player experience versus when it serves developer metrics.

The Continued Play Problem

Perhaps the most troubling finding relates to compulsive play. When asked whether they'd ever continued playing a game even when not enjoying it, 63% answered sometimes, while another 6% answered often. Only 31% reported never continuing unenjoyable play. This directly contradicts the fundamental purpose of games as entertainment. If nearly 70% of players regularly persist through experiences they're not enjoying, something has fundamentally broken in the relationship between player and game.

This supports the distinction between positive and negative engagement. Positive engagement keeps players interested through genuine enjoyment; negative engagement keeps them through compulsion, obligation, or sunk-cost fallacy. The high rate of unenjoyable continued play suggests negative engagement techniques are succeeding at their intended function—keeping players engaged regardless of satisfaction.

Intent Versus Outcome: Evaluating Design Ethics

The survey findings support the framework from the literature review: engagement techniques can't be evaluated just by their presence but must be assessed by their purpose and who benefits. The same mechanic—progression systems, randomised rewards, or social features—can serve player enjoyment or developer profit depending on how it's implemented.

Consider the contrast between respondents' favourite games and the games they identified as manipulative. Favourite games included titles renowned for intrinsic quality: *The Last of Us*, *Hollow Knight*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, and *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*. These games achieve engagement through narrative, aesthetics, and gameplay excellence rather than monetisation pressure. Meanwhile, games identified as manipulative or time-wasting were predominantly mobile titles or games with aggressive live-service models. The pattern suggests that players can distinguish between games designed for their enjoyment and games designed to extract value from them.

The critical question, then, is not whether a mechanic is present, but why it exists. When a developer includes a progression system to provide satisfying feedback on player improvement, this serves the player. When a developer includes a progression system to artificially extend playtime and justify ongoing monetisation, this serves the developer at the player's expense. The survey confirms that players perceive this distinction, even if they cannot always articulate it technically. The overwhelming majority's refusal to label industry practices as ethical demonstrates an intuitive understanding that design intent matters.

Limitations and Considerations

Several limitations need acknowledging. The sample of 32 respondents, while enough for identifying patterns, limits statistical generalisability. The demographic skew toward male respondents (78%) and PC gamers (75%) means perspectives from female players and mobile-primary users are underrepresented. Since mobile gaming employs many of the most aggressive monetisation techniques, a sample with more mobile

representation might reveal different awareness levels and spending patterns.

Additionally, the survey population probably has above-average awareness of game design. Respondents who engage with research about gaming practices may be more critically minded than the general gaming population. The high awareness rates might therefore represent a ceiling rather than an average. Players less engaged with industry discourse may be more susceptible to manipulation techniques that this sample readily identifies.

Self-reported data also carries inherent limitations. Respondents may underreport spending due to social desirability bias or overreport awareness to appear sophisticated. Actual spending behaviour tracked through transaction data might reveal different patterns than players consciously report. Despite these limitations, the survey provides valuable primary evidence supporting the theoretical framework developed through literature analysis.

Conclusion

This research set out to examine how video games maintain player engagement and to differentiate between techniques that create genuine enjoyment and those that exploit psychological vulnerabilities for profit. Through academic literature, industry analysis, and primary survey research, a consistent framework has emerged for understanding and evaluating engagement design.

The central finding is that engagement mechanics exist on a spectrum rather than in binary categories. Progression systems, randomised rewards, social features, and challenge structures are neither inherently ethical nor inherently exploitative. The same mechanical foundation can produce vastly different outcomes depending on implementation intent. A progression system designed to provide satisfying feedback serves the player; one designed to artificially extend playtime serves the developer. Randomised encounters in Pokémon create emotional attachment and personal ownership; randomised loot boxes in mobile games create compulsive spending and

regret. The mechanic is neutral; the purpose is decisive.

The survey findings reinforce this framework while revealing important nuances about player awareness. Players show substantial recognition of manipulative tactics, with 84% acknowledging awareness that games may be designed to exploit them. This awareness correlates with spending restraint: most respondents report minimal or zero in-game purchases, and most have never lost track of spending due to currency abstraction. However, awareness doesn't fully protect against negative engagement. Nearly 70% of respondents admit to continuing play even when not enjoying themselves, suggesting compulsion-based retention techniques succeed even among critically aware populations.

Most significantly, only 6% of survey respondents considered industry practices ethical, while 94% selected either neutral or unethical. This near-unanimous refusal to endorse the status quo shows that players perceive a fundamental misalignment between their interests and developer practices. The normalisation of manipulative design hasn't produced acceptance; it has produced resignation. Players expect exploitation but don't condone it.

For players, the implications are twofold. First, developing critical awareness of engagement techniques provides meaningful protection against financial exploitation, even if it can't fully prevent compulsive behaviour. Second, players have more power than they may recognise: the 63% who've abandoned games due to pay-to-win mechanics show that collective behaviour can impose consequences on exploitative design. For developers, the framework suggests that ethical engagement and commercial success aren't mutually exclusive. Games that prioritise genuine player enjoyment achieve lasting success through quality rather than manipulation.

For regulators and industry bodies, this research supports continued scrutiny of gambling-adjacent mechanics, particularly loot boxes targeting younger audiences. However, regulation focused solely on monetisation may miss equally problematic engagement techniques that exploit time rather than money. A comprehensive approach would consider both financial and temporal exploitation as potential harms.

Future research could expand this investigation through larger, more demographically diverse samples, particularly including mobile-primary players who encounter the most aggressive monetisation practices.

The video game industry stands at a crossroads. The techniques exist to create genuinely enriching experiences that satisfy psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and connection. The same knowledge can equally be weaponised to create compulsive loops that extract value while providing diminishing returns. The choice between these paths isn't inevitable; it's made by developers with every design decision. This research has attempted to provide a framework for making that choice visible, both for those who design games and those who play them. Understanding the difference between positive and negative engagement is the first step toward demanding, and creating, a gaming landscape that serves players rather than exploiting them.

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