



## Gambling and dark design

***“The problem is a lot of the [free-to-play] games do use the gambling style mechanics to generate an addiction to try and maximise the revenue from those players. So done well with the right game, I don’t think free-to-play is a problem at all. But like anything it can be used irresponsibly.” – quote from an interview with a developer. [LSD28783](#).***

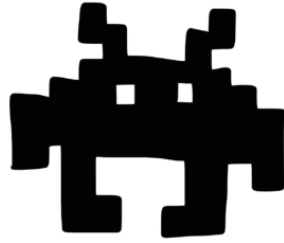
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**Keywords:** [Ethics and Games](#), [Gambling](#), [Gamification](#)

**Who will find this scenario particularly interesting?** [Developers](#), [Educators](#), [Parents](#), [Policy makers](#), [Researchers](#)

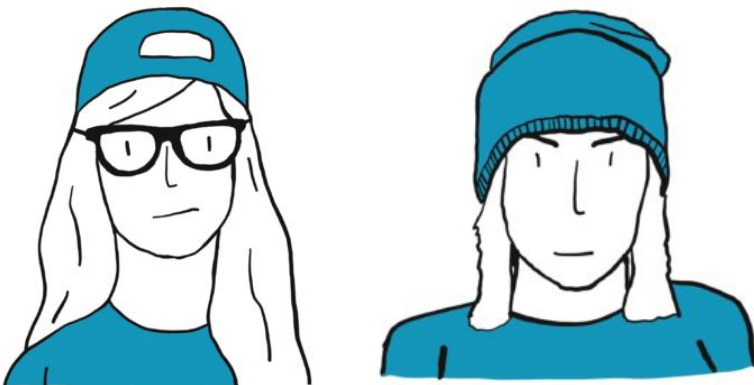
### Description

While academic research demonstrated a bias towards studies of violence, developer and player stakeholders in particular were more concerned about the manipulative application of psychological principles linked to dopamine triggers in the brain. These were referred to broadly as ‘dark design patterns’ and commonly tied to paid activities, such as compulsive buying of in-game goods or creating gambling-related reward systems. These systems frequently exist in legal grey-areas. For example, under British law the purchase of ‘loot crates’ (random collections of in-game items that may significantly improve the player’s performance) is not considered gambling because the player cannot ‘cash out’ their winnings (i.e. sell the in-game items), but other



countries have varying legal perspectives on this. Regardless of perspective, many competitive games rely on small loot-crate-esque purchases to bring in the only source of revenue that the developers get, so changing the legal status of loot crates may have a profound impact on many game developers; however, the methods of stimulating purchases can be done in a variety of ways, on a scale from fair to manipulative. When implemented unfairly, these systems can result in heavy financial burdens for vulnerable players. The loot crate idea, and other systems like them, are not a priori manipulative, but the presentation and surrounding systems may make them socially problematic. Careful evaluation and tracking of such systems is likely to be a much more urgent concern for the future ethical status of video games than scare-mongering stories about violence.

Meet Karen and Davide, players of an online multiplayer warfare game



Karen and Davide have been playing online together for a few years. They both have two jobs to try and make ends meet, so playing a free game online in the evenings is a cheap way of relaxing. Characters in the game can be slowly made stronger, but there's a random chance of getting a big boost to your character if you pay for a loot crate. Most of the crates have only minor improvements in them, but occasionally a bigger benefit will be in there and many players want to accelerate their characters' growth to win more fights.



While some players may have enough money to spare to invest in virtual in-game goods, not everyone does. Some games are purposely balanced to entice players to buy a random loot crate in the hope that the reward will enhance their overall enjoyment of the game. However, each purchase is a gamble that might pay off, and if it doesn't players can feel like it is worth spending more to have another chance of success. Various social mechanisms, variable-ratio schedule reward systems, game design choices, balancing of league competitions, and other techniques can be applied to push players to spend their money. These psychological techniques are linked to both gambling and addiction, and may affect players differently. Without sufficient current research, it is hard to say whether vulnerable players may particularly be negatively impacted, or if there are appropriate precautions that game developers could take to maintain their livelihoods without the risk of damaging or exploiting their players.

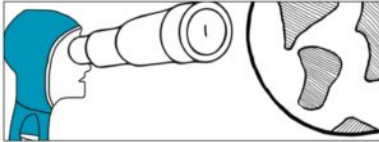
## In a nutshell

**The ethical spotlight in video game research is often pointed at violent games, but other aspects of game design would benefit from ethical study. Dark design patterns that exploit or manipulate players need to be closely examined with a balanced review that can guide developers away from using them either intentionally or accidentally.**

Studies into past and present systems of monetisation and compulsion-inducing gameplay should be conducted. Great care needs to be taken to recognise the complexity of game systems and balancing: loot crates and many similar aspects of game design are not automatically unethical, and neither are free-to-play games, but aspects of their content and context may lead them to be exploitative or manipulative. Such studies will need to be conducted with the assistance of

industry professionals who can assess and the multiple subtle ways in which such systems are implemented across the whole game experience, not only as an isolated systems. Such an isolation would result in flawed or binary moral/immoral judgement that does not match the nuance with which such systems can be integrated into games; such an outcome would not benefit the industry, nor would it contribute to potential guidelines.

## Resources



- [Star Wars Battlefront 2's loot crate controversy: everything you need to know](#) Polygon staff. (2017, November 13). Star Wars Battlefront 2's loot crate controversy: everything you need to know. Retrieved December 22, 2017.
- [The Math Behind Why Eververse Is Going To Strangle 'Destiny 2' To Death](#) Tassi, P. (2017, December 09). The Math Behind Why Eververse Is Going To Strangle 'Destiny 2' To Death. Retrieved December 22, 2017.
- [Dark Patterns in the Design of Games](#) Zagal, J. P., Björk, S., & Lewis, C. (2013, May 14). Dark Patterns in the Design of Games. In Foundations of Digital Games. Retrieved December 22, 2017
- Game Theory is a humorous YouTube channel that explains in an light-hearted way how loot boxes work by acting on the brain's inner workings:

## Game Theory: How Loot Boxes HACK YOUR BRAIN!





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## Partners



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