

*Unfair by Design:  
A Structural Framework for Game Design  
Analysis*

*Advanced Topics in Game Studies  
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## Abstract

Video games are frequently described as unfair, yet the term is applied inconsistently and often interchangeably with difficulty, emotional frustration, or abusive design. While exploitative mechanics and dark patterns have been widely defined within game studies and human–computer interaction, unfair design remains under-theorised as a systemic property of games. Existing research tends to frame unfairness as a matter of perception or tolerance, rather than as an attribute that can be critically or consistently evaluated.

This paper addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual framework for identifying unfair design based on systemic criteria rather than subjective response. Drawing on literature in game design, ethics, player experience, and exploitative practice, this study synthesises existing discourse to distinguish unfair design from both difficulty and abusive systems. The analysis demonstrates that unfair design emerges when a game violates reasonable expectations of consistency, transparency, or proportionality in ways that disrupt player agency, learning, or meaningful decision-making. By clarifying the structural features that constitute unfair design, this paper offers a more precise vocabulary for discussing challenge and fairness in games, supporting future empirical research and critical evaluation across both commercial and experimental contexts.

# Contents

|          |                                                      |           |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Introduction</b>                                  | <b>4</b>  |
| 1.1      | Notes on Terms Used . . . . .                        | 5         |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Literature Review</b>                             | <b>6</b>  |
| 2.1      | Difficulty, Challenge, and Failure . . . . .         | 6         |
| 2.2      | Player Experience and Perceived Unfairness . . . . . | 7         |
| 2.3      | Abusive and Exploitative Design . . . . .            | 7         |
| 2.4      | Ethics, Agency, and Systemic Evaluation . . . . .    | 7         |
| 2.5      | Findings . . . . .                                   | 8         |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Methodology</b>                                   | <b>9</b>  |
| 3.1      | Conceptual Synthesis . . . . .                       | 9         |
| 3.2      | Criteria Formation . . . . .                         | 9         |
| 3.3      | Evaluative Framework Development . . . . .           | 10        |
| 3.4      | Scope and Limitations . . . . .                      | 10        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Unfair Design as a Distinct Systemic Category</b> | <b>11</b> |
| 4.1      | The Line Between Abusive and Unfair . . . . .        | 11        |
| 4.2      | Why Unfair Is Not the Same as Bad Design . . . . .   | 13        |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Definition and Criteria of Unfair Design</b>      | <b>15</b> |
| 5.1      | Consistency . . . . .                                | 15        |
| 5.2      | Transparency . . . . .                               | 15        |
| 5.3      | Proportionality . . . . .                            | 16        |
| 5.4      | Support for Learning and Agency . . . . .            | 16        |
| 5.5      | Summary . . . . .                                    | 16        |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Discussion</b>                                    | <b>17</b> |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>                                    | <b>19</b> |

# 1 Introduction

Video games are frequently described as unfair. This label is commonly applied to titles characterised by high difficulty, unforgiving mechanics, or punishing failure states. In both academic and player discourse, the term “unfair” is often used loosely, encompassing a wide range of experiences from deliberate challenge to frustration and perceived injustice. As a result, calling something “unfair” has become a descriptive shorthand rather than a clearly defined design concept.

This ambiguity presents a problem for both analysis and critique. While abusive and exploitative design practices have been examined and defined within game studies and human–computer interaction research, unfair design remains comparatively under-theorised. Abusive design is typically understood as a set of intentional practices that manipulate players for extrinsic gain, such as monetisation, retention, or behavioural control (Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019). These practices can be identified through recurring patterns, incentives, and systemic outcomes. Unfair design, by contrast, is often treated as a matter of personal opinion, emotional response, or individual tolerance for difficulty.

The frequent conflation of unfair design with perceived unfairness further complicates this issue. Player frustration, failure, or emotional discomfort is often interpreted as evidence of unfairness, even when a game systems are internally consistent and transparent. Without a clear distinction between subjective experience and systemic design choices, the concept of unfairness risks losing analytical usefulness and potential future exploration within the game media.

At the same time, unfair design cannot be dismissed as purely subjective. Game design relies on implicit contracts between the system and the player, through which rules structure and evaluate player agency (Juul, 2013; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Sicart, 2009). These contracts contribute to expectations of consistency, legibility, and proportionality. When such expectations are violated, players may experience a breakdown in agency or understanding that goes beyond ordinary difficulty. Importantly, such violations do not require malicious intent. A game design may be unfair not because it seeks to exploit the player, but because it obscures information, applies rules inconsistently, or imposes consequences that players cannot reasonably anticipate or learn from.

This paper argues that unfair design should be treated as a distinct analytical category, separate from both abusive design and moment-to-moment player emotion. Its primary contribution is the formulation of a working definition of unfair design grounded in systemic properties rather than subjective response. Specifically, this paper proposes that unfair design emerges when a game violates reasonable player expectations of consistency, transparency, or proportionality in ways that undermine learning, agency, or meaningful decision-making.

By clarifying what constitutes unfair design and separating it from both abusive practices and perceived unfairness, this paper aims to provide a more precise vocabulary for discussing challenge, ethics, and player experience in game design.

## 1.1 Notes on Terms Used

Because terms such as “*unfair design*” and “*unfairness*” are often used interchangeably, it is important to clarify my used terminology:

- **Unfair Design, Systemic unfairness, Unfair systems:** A structural property of a game system in which rules, mechanics, or feedback violate reasonable expectations of consistency, transparency, or proportionality. Such violations undermine meaningful player agency, learning, or decision-making, independent of player perception (Juul, [2013](#); Salen and Zimmerman, [2004](#); Sicart, [2009](#)).
- **Unfairness, Unfair, Perceived unfairness:** The subjective experience or perception that a game is unjust, lacking transparency or disproportionately punitive. While unfairness often results from unfair design, it can also arise from individual skill levels, prior knowledge, or social and cultural framing of the game environment.

## 2 Literature Review

Research on game design has extensively addressed difficulty, challenge, and player frustration, yet comparatively little work has focused on defining unfairness as a systemic design property. Existing literature tends to approach unfairness indirectly, either through analyses of player experience, ethics, or exploitative practices.

### 2.1 Difficulty, Challenge, and Failure

Game difficulty has long been recognised as a central component of player engagement and mastery. Juul, 2013 describes the “paradox of failure,” which is when players seek out challenging experiences that would be undesirable in non-play contexts. From this perspective, frustration and repeated failure are not only expected but often desirable outcomes of game design.

Similarly, Wilson, 2011 argues that intentional unfairness can function as an expressive design choice, particularly in experimental or social play contexts. These works suggest that player discomfort or perceived injustice cannot, on their own, be taken as evidence of design failure. Rather, difficulty must be analysed in relation to how it supports learning, mastery, and meaning.

Robinson et al., 2023 provide an important counterpoint to purely mechanical readings of difficulty by examining how players in an online affinity space negotiate the challenge of *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022). This study shows that players initial impressions of the game as overwhelming, punishing, or unfair frequently shift through communal engagement and metagaming<sup>1</sup> practices (Robinson et al., 2023). Rather than rejecting challenge, players collaboratively develop strategies, humour, and narratives that frame difficulty as purposeful, even virtuous. This suggests that perceived unfairness cannot be understood solely as a product of game systems; it is also shaped by social interpretation and affective labour within player communities. Such findings reinforce the need to distinguish between structural unfairness in a design system and the subjective experience of unfairness that emerges in discourse, reputation or expectations.

However, while difficulty has been extensively theorised, these frameworks do not provide clear tools for distinguishing legitimate challenge from systemic unfairness. As a result, games that are difficult are frequently labelled unfair without a shared analytical basis for that judgment.

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<sup>1</sup>“Metagaming begins where game play ends, describing the practices in which players extend their engagement with the game beyond its formal boundaries, drawing on external knowledge, community discourse, or interpretive frameworks to inform in-game activity.” Sihvonen, 2011

## 2.2 Player Experience and Perceived Unfairness

Player experience research provides valuable insight into how frustration, confusion and perceived injustice emerge during play. Studies in player modelling and game user research often rely on self-reported emotion, interviews, and behavioural metrics to evaluate player satisfaction and engagement (Jenkins, 2004; Nacke et al., 2014).

While these approaches are well-suited for understanding perceived unfairness, they tend to treat unfairness as a whole as an experiential outcome rather than a design property. This emphasis on perception risks confusing individual player response with systemic characteristics of the game. As a result, it is therefore frequently framed as subjective, relative to player skill, preference or patience, rather than as an attribute that can be systematically evaluated.

## 2.3 Abusive and Exploitative Design

By comparison, abusive and exploitative practices in games have been more extensively defined and examined within both academic research and regulatory discourse. Gray et al., 2018 define dark patterns as interface designs that intentionally manipulate users into decisions that benefit the system owner at the user’s expense.

King et al., 2019 further demonstrate how monetisation mechanics such as loot boxes, variable rewards, and artificial scarcity can exploit psychological vulnerabilities.

These works share a focus on intent, incentive structures, and measurable harm. In the literature on abusive and exploitative game design (Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019), such practices are treated as identifiable and actionable categories rather than matters of personal opinion. Importantly, unfairness is often discussed within this literature as a symptom or consequence of abuse, but is rarely examined independently.

## 2.4 Ethics, Agency, and Systemic Evaluation

Ethical approaches to game design provide a foundation for analysing unfair design beyond player emotion.

Sicart, 2009 frames games as moral systems that afford or constrain player agency through rules and mechanics. From this perspective, fairness is tied to the player’s ability to understand, evaluate, and meaningfully act within the system.

Similarly, Salen and Zimmerman’s concept of meaningful play emphasises the relationship between player action and system response (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). When this relationship breaks down (through inconsistent feedback, opaque rules, or disproportionate consequences) meaningful play is undermined, suggesting a pathway for identifying unfair design.

Taken together, these perspectives link fairness to the clarity and reliability of rule-based interaction. Rather than treating unfairness as emotional response or technical error, they position it as a breakdown in agency and meaningful play, supporting an approach that evaluates how systems function rather than how players feel.

## **2.5 Findings**

Despite these contributions, existing ethical frameworks fall short of offering explicit criteria for unfair design. This gap motivates the present study’s focus on defining unfair design as a distinct analytical category grounded in systemic properties rather than subjective experience or exploitative intent.



## 3 Methodology

To establish unfair design as a systemic property of game systems rather than a subjective emotional response, I have adopted a qualitative, theory-driven methodology. Because unfairness is commonly discussed loosely, this approach aims to give the term clearer definition and structure, helping it become a more useful tool for analysis. The methodology therefore combines three components: conceptual synthesis (3.1), criteria formation (3.2), and evaluative framework development (3.3).

### 3.1 Conceptual Synthesis

The first stage involves synthesising existing work on difficulty, player experience, ethics, and abusive design. Rather than treating these domains as separate, this approach identifies recurring principles across them (such as agency, legibility, proportionality, and systemic clarity) and reinterprets them through the lens of fairness. This synthesis draws primarily on game design theory (Juul, 2013; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Sicart, 2009), player experience research (Jenkins, 2004; Nacke et al., 2014), and scholarship on exploitative practices (Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019).

The aim of this synthesis is not to redefine existing frameworks, but to reveal where unfair design emerges as an independent category that is not adequately captured by difficulty, abuse, or perception.

### 3.2 Criteria Formation

From this conceptual foundation, the second stage develops a set of systemic criteria capable of distinguishing unfair design from perceived unfairness and abusive intent. These criteria are derived directly from the theoretical work cited in the literature. Particularly drawing from meaningful play, rule systems, and player agency.

Rather than relying on emotional responses or player preference, the criteria focus on measurable properties of game systems. Specifically, unfair design is evaluated in relation to:

1. **Consistency:** whether rules and mechanics behave reliably across similar contexts.
2. **Transparency:** whether necessary information for decision-making is communicated clearly.
3. **Proportionality:** whether consequences scale meaningfully with the player's choices and available responses.
4. **Support for learning and agency:** whether players can understand failure, improve through iteration, and meaningfully act within the system.

These criteria function as analytical tools rather than emotional or moral judgments, enabling unfair design to be identified through structural observation.

### 3.3 Evaluative Framework Development

The third methodological stage converts the criteria into a practical evaluative framework. This framework is designed to:

- analyse game systems independently of individual player perception,
- identify systemic unfairness even when player response varies,
- distinguish unfair design from difficulty, abuse, and poor execution, and
- support future empirical or design-based application.

This paper focuses on conceptual definition rather than applied case analysis. As a result, the criteria proposed here are not tested against specific games, but developed through theoretical synthesis intended to be expanded, refined, or challenged as further research develops.

### 3.4 Scope and Limitations

This methodology does not attempt to measure emotional responses, behavioural outcomes, intent, or technical implementation quality. Rather, it isolates a narrower but under-theorised question: *How can unfair design be identified as a structural property of game systems, rather than as a matter of subjective perception or exploitative intent?*

By defining unfair design on systemic rather than affective grounds, this methodology provides a conceptual foundation on which future empirical studies may build. Potentially through player testing, comparative analysis, genre-specific investigation or developer-centred study.

## 4 Unfair Design as a Distinct Systemic Category

Unfair design is commonly discussed alongside concepts such as abusive design, difficulty, and technical failure, yet categories describe fundamentally different relationships between players and game systems. This section establishes unfair design as a distinct systemic phenomenon, one that is neither inherently exploitative nor indicative of poor implementation. By differentiating unfair design from abusive practices and from bad design, the analysis clarifies why unfairness requires its own evaluative criteria. These distinctions provide the conceptual foundation necessary for defining unfair design as a structural property of game systems rather than a subjective response or a misunderstanding of related design concepts.

### 4.1 The Line Between Abusive and Unfair

Discussions of unfair design frequently overlap with those of abusive design. This overlap is not accidental, as both concepts address situations in which game systems disadvantage players (Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019). However, treating unfair and abusive design as interchangeable obscures important differences in why these designs exist, how they are structured, and how they should be ethically evaluated (Bulow, 2017; Sicart, 2009). Clarifying the boundary between abusive and unfair design is therefore a necessary step toward a meaningful definition of systemic unfairness.

Abusive design has been examined in both academic scholarship and regulatory contexts as a category of practices that intentionally leverage power imbalance and psychological mechanisms to influence player behaviour for gain benefit, most commonly monetisation or prolonged engagement (Goodstein, 2021; Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019). Research on dark patterns has formalised many of these techniques, highlighting the deliberate exploitation of cognitive biases such as loss aversion, sunk cost effects, and variable-ratio reinforcement (Gray et al., 2018; Linder and Denz, 2017). Regulatory bodies have also begun recognising abusive monetisation as a consumer protection issue, providing legal frameworks to assess exploitative practices (Goodstein, 2021; Wu, 2021).

Unfair design, by contrast, does not inherently require exploitative intent. A game may employ unfair design even when its primary goal is experiential, artistic, or narrative-driven rather than extractive (Juul, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Rather than emerging from monetisation incentives or deliberate manipulation, unfairness may arise from structural properties of the system itself. Drawing on established design theory, unfair design can be understood as the result of several systemic conditions. When a game obscures or inconsistently applies core rules, the relationship between action and outcome becomes unclear, undermining meaningful play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Likewise, when feedback systems do not adequately support player learning, players are unable to develop reliable strategies or mental models of the system (Nacke et al., 2014).

Finally, when consequences outweigh player control or comprehension, failure shifts from being a challenge to being structurally disproportionate, resulting in perceptions of unfairness rather than difficulty (Dennis, 2021; Juul, 2013). In these cases, the harm experienced by the player arises not from manipulation, but from a breakdown in the implicit contract between player and game design—a rupture in the player’s ability to understand, evaluate, and act within the system (Sicart, 2009; Zagal and Altizer, 2014). Such forms of unfairness demonstrate that a game may remain non-exploitative and ethically unproblematic in intent while still producing systemic conditions that meaningfully disadvantage players.

This distinction highlights a key difference in analytical focus. Abusive design is most effectively identified by examining systemic incentives and outcomes, particularly those tied to revenue or engagement metrics (Goodstein, 2021; King et al., 2019). Unfair design, on the other hand, must be evaluated in terms of how a system supports or undermines player agency, understanding, and the ability to form accurate mental models of game mechanics (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Sicart, 2009). While abusive systems often rely on unfairness to function, unfair systems do not necessarily produce abuse (Juul, 2013; Wilson, 2011).

The relationship between unfair and abusive design can therefore be understood as asymmetrical. Abusive design is necessarily unfair, as it deliberately constrains or redirects player agency in misleading ways (Gray et al., 2018). However, unfair design represents a broader category that includes both intentional and unintentional design failures (Juul, 2013; Nacke et al., 2014). Treating unfairness solely as a subset of abuse risks overlooking forms of systemic imbalance that are not driven by exploitative motives but nevertheless produce harmful or exclusionary player experiences (Sicart, 2009; Wilson, 2011).

Another source of confusion lies in the role of player perception. Abusive design is rarely defended as a matter of subjective interpretation; it can often be demonstrated through repeatable patterns and documented techniques (Bulow, 2017; Gray et al., 2018). Unfair design, however, is frequently dismissed as a matter of individual sensitivity or preference, particularly in discussions of difficult games (Juul, 2013). This dismissal ignores the possibility that unfairness can be structurally present even when players disagree on its severity or acceptability (Nacke et al., 2014; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004).

Recognising unfair design as a distinct phenomenon allows for more precise critique of games that are challenging, experimental, or punitive without defaulting to accusations of exploitation (Juul, 2013; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). It also enables a clearer examination of games whose reputations for unfairness may stem from difficulty alone rather than systemic injustice (Nacke et al., 2014).

Establishing this boundary is essential for the analysis that follows. The definition of unfair design proposed in this paper builds on existing work on abusive practices while addressing forms of systemic imbalance that fall outside traditional frameworks of exploitation (Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019; Sicart,

2009). This distinction provides the foundation for applying the definition to games commonly perceived as unfair, and for evaluating whether that perception reflects genuine design unfairness or the intended consequences of challenge (Juul, 2013; Wilson, 2011).

## 4.2 Why Unfair Is Not the Same as Bad Design

Although unfair design is often framed negatively, it should not be equated with bad or poorly executed design. Combining these two collapses distinct design phenomena into a single judgment and risks dismissing analytically meaningful forms of challenge or intentional harshness. Establishing a clear boundary between unfair design and bad design is therefore necessary for evaluating games whose mechanics provoke frustration without necessarily reflecting design failure.

Bad design is commonly understood as a failure of execution rather than structure. In game development, this may manifest as technical instability, unclear affordances, insufficient feedback or mechanics that do not function as intended. From a design theory perspective, such issues are often attributed to breakdowns in usability and communication rather than to the underlying rule system itself (Norman, 2013). In these cases, player frustration stems from an inability to understand or interact with the system due to implementation shortcomings, and is typically addressed through refinement, iteration or technical correction.

Unfair design, by contrast, may be fully functional, internally consistent, and deliberately constructed. A game system can operate exactly as designed while still violating reasonable player expectations of consistency, transparency, or proportionality. In such cases, unfairness emerges not from technical failure or lack of polish, but from the way rules constrain player agency or impose consequences that exceed what players can reasonably anticipate or learn from (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Sicart, 2009).

The distinction between unfair and bad design becomes particularly evident when considering player learning. Research on meaningful play emphasises that players derive understanding through the relationship between their actions and the system’s responses (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Bad design disrupts this relationship by obscuring cause and effect through poor feedback or broken mechanics. Unfair design, however, may preserve clear cause-and-effect relationships while still limiting the player’s ability to respond meaningfully, for example through disproportionate punishment or restricted avenues for recovery.

Importantly, recognising unfair design as distinct from bad design does not imply that it is beyond critique. Intentionality alone does not exempt a system from ethical or experiential evaluation. As Wilson Wilson, 2011 notes, games may deliberately employ unfair mechanics for expressive or social purposes, yet such choices remain open to critical analysis regarding their impact on player agency and inclusion. On the other hand, not all frustrating experiences in-

icate unfair or bad design; difficulty that supports mastery and learning can remain both fair and well executed (Juul, [2013](#)).

By distinguishing unfair design from bad design, this paper avoids reducing all negative player experiences to failures of competence or polish. This distinction supports a more nuanced evaluation of games that challenge players in unconventional ways and reinforces the paper’s central claim that unfair design is a systemic phenomenon deserving independent analysis alongside, but separate from, abusive and poorly executed design.

## 5 Definition and Criteria of Unfair Design

To meaningfully analyse unfair design, it is necessary to move beyond informal or purely experiential accounts and toward a definition grounded in systemic properties of game design. Existing literature provides robust frameworks for identifying abusive and exploitative practices, yet offers comparatively little guidance for evaluating unfairness outside of player frustration or failure.

For the purposes of this paper, unfair design is defined as follows:

*Unfair design refers to a condition in which a game system violates reasonable player expectations of consistency, transparency, or proportionality in ways that undermine learning, agency, or meaningful decision-making.*

This definition deliberately avoids reference to player emotion or designer intent. Instead, it situates unfairness within the structure of the system itself, focusing on how rules are communicated, applied, and experienced over time. By grounding unfairness in systemic characteristics, this definition enables analysis that is both repeatable and comparable across games.

Based on this definition, unfair design can be identified through the following criteria.

### 5.1 Consistency

Consistency refers to the reliable application of rules and mechanics across similar situations. A game exhibits consistency when players can reasonably expect that identical inputs under identical conditions will produce comparable outcomes. Violations of consistency occur when rules are applied selectively, unpredictably, or without sufficient signalling, preventing players from forming accurate mental models of the system.

Importantly, consistency does not require simplicity. Complex or opaque systems may still be fair if their internal logic remains stable and learnable. Inconsistent systems, by contrast, disrupt player agency by invalidating learned strategies without justification.

### 5.2 Transparency

Transparency concerns the extent to which a game communicates the information necessary for informed decision-making. This includes the clarity of rules, mechanics, probabilities, and failure conditions. A lack of transparency may involve hidden mechanics, misleading feedback, or insufficient explanation of consequences.

Unfairness arises when critical information is withheld or obscured in ways that prevent players from understanding why outcomes occur. While games may intentionally withhold information for narrative or aesthetic purposes, such

choices become unfair when they impede the player’s ability to learn or adapt through play.

### 5.3 Proportionality

Proportionality describes the relationship between player action, system response, and consequence. A proportional system ensures that punishment, loss, or failure corresponds meaningfully to the player’s choices and available responses. Disproportionate punishment (e.g. severe penalties for minor or unavoidable mistakes) can undermine learning and discourage experimentation.

A game may be punishing without being unfair, provided that the severity of consequences is clearly communicated and avoidable through skillful play. Unfairness emerges when penalties exceed what players can reasonably anticipate or control.

### 5.4 Support for Learning and Agency

Finally, unfair design can be identified by examining whether a game supports player learning and agency over time. Fair systems allow players to improve by understanding their failures and adjusting their strategies accordingly. When repeated failure does not yield actionable insight, or when success depends primarily on trial-and-error rather than comprehension, the system may be considered unfair.

This criterion does not require that all players succeed, but rather that the game affords meaningful opportunities for mastery. A game that resists mastery entirely, or that negates player choice through arbitrary outcomes, undermines agency regardless of difficulty level.

### 5.5 Summary

Together, these criteria form a framework for identifying unfair design as a systemic phenomenon. They do not prescribe specific design solutions, nor do they imply that unfair design is inherently unethical. Instead, they provide a structured means of distinguishing between legitimate challenge, intentional harshness, and systemic unfairness.



## 6 Discussion

The findings of this paper suggest that unfair design may be understood as a systemic property of game systems rather than a purely subjective emotional outcome or an indicator of exploitative intent. By synthesising existing work on difficulty, player experience, ethics, and abusive design, this paper indicates that unfairness emerges where , transparency, proportionality, and player agency break down. These structural conditions disrupt meaningful play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004) and can limit the player’s ability to interpret, evaluate, and act upon the rules of a game (Juul, 2013; Sicart, 2009).

One implication of this analysis is that unfair design may not be fully explained through traditional approaches to difficulty or frustration. Research on challenge highlights the value of failure, mastery, and discomfort (Juul, 2013; Wilson, 2011), while player experience studies emphasise how perceived unfairness can vary according to skill level, preference, or social context (Nacke et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2023). These perspectives help account for how players feel, but they do not always explain how systems function. The criteria developed here, aims to shift the analytical emphasis from perception to structure.

This shift also helps clarify the boundary between unfair design and abusive design. Whereas abusive systems may rely on manipulation, monetisation, or behavioural control (Gray et al., 2018; King et al., 2019), unfair systems may disadvantage players without intentional harm or economic motivation. A game can therefore be perceived as unfair without being exploitative, and exploitative systems may employ unfair design without defining it. This distinction suggests a potential analytical separation rather than a definitive one.

At the same time, the criteria proposed here illustrates why unfair design is not necessarily equivalent to bad or poorly implemented design. Technical failure, usability problems, and unclear feedback reflect breakdowns of execution rather than structure. Unfair systems, by contrast, may function as designed while still preventing players from forming reliable strategies or learning from failure. This distinction may offer a more precise vocabulary for evaluating challenge, frustration, and player agency within game systems.

Importantly, the scope of this paper introduces several limitations. The conceptual criteria presented here have not been tested through case studies, player analysis, or design evaluation. As a result, the practical applicability remains provisional. The focus on existing literature necessarily restricts the range of perspectives considered. Alternative approaches, including empirical studies, designer interviews, or computational modelling, may offer different interpretations of unfairness in games.

Rather than serving as a finalised model, it functions as a proposed foundation for identifying unfair design. One that can be expanded, refined, or challenged as further research develops. Applying the framework to concrete examples would help test its reliability, highlight its limitations, and clarify how structural unfairness operates across different contexts. That is to say that the evaluative

framework developed proposes a starting point for future empirical research. Although this paper does not conduct a game-specific case study, the framework is intentionally constructed to be portable, allowing future work to apply these criteria to specific games, genres or mechanics.

Despite these limitations, the framework may support attempts to assess whether games commonly described as unfair (e.g. roguelikes, extraction shooters, or permadeath systems) exhibit unfair design or are simply difficult by design. Future research may also explore how players adapt to systems that constrain or undermine agency, as well as how unfairness may shape community debate, identity, or player expression.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper proposes that unfair design may represent a distinct category of game system behaviour, separate from both abusive design and subjective player frustration. Through conceptual synthesis and criteria formation, this study suggests that unfair design can be understood as a violation of reasonable player expectations of consistency, transparency, or proportionality in ways that may undermine learning, agency, or meaningful decision-making.

Recognising unfair design as potentially independent of both difficulty and exploitation may enable more nuanced discussion, particularly in relation to games whose opacity or harshness are deliberate creative choices rather than system failures. This perspective also highlights the value of considering player agency and legibility as central to fair play, rather than as secondary outcomes of usability or balance.

The limitations of this study significantly shape its findings. The criteria presented here have not been tested against specific case studies or empirical data, and the scope of the literature reviewed is necessarily selective. As such, the framework proposed in this paper should be viewed as exploratory rather than definitive. Further work may refine, challenge, or expand these ideas through player studies, comparative design analysis, or close examination of individual games.

In closing, this paper offers one possible approach to understanding unfair design: not as a measure of player frustration or developer intent, but as a structural condition that shapes how rules are learned, interpreted, and acted upon. While the concept remains open to revision, continued investigation of unfairness may support clearer critical vocabulary and contribute to broader conversations about how games structure experience and play.

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