

FROM POVERTY TO FINAL BOSS

MERITOCRACY, GREED, AND DESPAIR IN VIDEO GAMES

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TABLE OF **CONTENTS**



3	INTRODUCTION
6	METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE
13	POVERTY NARRATIVES IN VIDEO GAMES
26	PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS
27	APPENDICES

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, video games have grown from a niche form of entertainment into a cornerstone of popular culture, appealing to diverse demographics and influencing other media content. Games have been adapted into films¹ and vice-versa.² Popular celebrities are commonly represented in games, and sometimes even record dialogue for their in-game characters.³

The visual appearance of game worlds and the behavior of *non-player characters (NPCs)*⁴ have become increasingly realistic. Game designs have evolved from linear progressions and storylines—where players follow one path to achieve a series of cumulative goals—to open-ended *sandbox worlds* that offer players a multitude of activities from which to choose. Players can now draw from their own personal aesthetic tastes, interests, and moral sensibilities to make unprecedented kinds of gaming decisions.

For example, in Rockstar Games' iconic *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, players can choose from a variety of activities, missions, and goals to create their own gaming experience. Players can decide to behave like criminals, or choose to rescue NPCs and capture outlaws. Players can customize their character's appearance, demographic background, and personality. More choices in the *GTA* experience means more personal expression for the individual gamer.

Once considered a solitary pursuit, video games have increasingly become social experiences. According to the Entertainment Software Association, 63% of gamers play video games with others.⁵ Multiplayer game modes encourage the individual to play with others in a communal online or physical space. Game developers have taken advantage of growing high-speed internet access to create online worlds where players can encounter each other in competition or cooperative play. Game publishers now cultivate game communities by promoting competitive tournaments, gameplay video screening, and leaderboards that allow players to compare scores with one another. Fans have developed many ways to share their enthusiasm for games, and they can expect to see their favorite characters in other media products. Games can be a significant part of a

¹ [Category:Video games based on films](#)

² [Category:Video games adapted into films](#)

³ [List of celebrities portrayed in video games](#)

⁴ NPCs are characters that the player encounters and interacts with, but are controlled by the game software.

⁵ [2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry](#)

consumer's lifestyle or identity. Indeed, gamers commonly produce fan art and wear costumes of their favorite game characters at well-attended events and conventions.

Video games now take place on almost every kind of device and screen—including phones, TVs, consoles, kindles, and personal computers. Once considered a living room activity, games have extended across multiple platforms to become a portable and ubiquitous modern experience.

Once dominated by a specific in-group of hobbyist coders, the field of game development is now opening to diverse artists and developers through accessible college courses and programs. According to a 2015 study, undergraduate video game departments show greater diversity than other computer- and STEM-related majors.⁶

According to a 2019 report from the Entertainment Software Association:⁷

- 75% of U.S. households have at least one gamer
- 46% of gamers are female
- The average age of gamers is 32 (for men) 34 (for women)
- 78% of gamers report that games have a positive influence on their lives

Entire generations grow up playing games, and their cultural reach is wider than ever.

Because video games reach such a wide audience, like TV, film, and music they have the potential to shape public attitudes and opinions on social issues. This study examined the extent to which key cultural narratives of poverty and wealth are evident in popular video games, not only explicitly through characters or story, but also the ways in which these narratives are embedded in the game structure. We examined 50 best-selling games and franchises through the lens of meta-narratives about poverty and economic mobility identified by GOOD Inc.'s (GOOD) 2019 research.⁸ We also spoke with game creators about their creative processes and how they understand video games in relation to these core narratives. Our ultimate goal was to identify ways in which advocates and game developers might collaborate to challenge flawed narratives about poverty, while still maximizing the gameplay experience.

⁶ [Our State of Play Higher Education Video Game Alliance Survey 2014-15](#)

⁷ [2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry](#)

⁸ [GOOD: Public perceptions and narratives of poverty in the U.S.](#)

GOOD Research: Public Perceptions and Narratives of Poverty in the U.S.

In 2019, GOOD identified six common meta-narratives about poverty and economic mobility. These narratives consist of 22 beliefs about individuals, communities, and institutions.

CHARACTER

- Poor people are dishonest.
- Poor people are dirty.
- Poor people have low intelligence.
- Poor people are a drain on society.
- Poor people have no one to blame but themselves.
- People generally get what they deserve.

SYSTEM

- Racism makes discrimination against poor minorities worse.
- Poor people experience prejudice and discrimination in hiring and promotion at work.
- Poor people are the victims of discrimination.
- Poor people lack opportunities for training and continuing education.
- Our government is insensitive to the plight of the poor.
- Poor people lack affordable housing options.
- People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.
- There just aren't enough good jobs for everyone.

GREED

- There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.
- Welfare mothers (welfare queens) have babies to get more money.
- Poor people think they deserve to be supported.

MERITOCRACY

- Everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

- Everyone has an equal opportunity to get a good education.
- Anyone can attain the American Dream.

FATE

- Almost by definition, someone has to be poor.

CULTURE

- There is a persistent subculture of poverty in America.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the 50 best-selling games at two intertwined levels of analysis:

1. **Structure:** what the player must do with the game controls in order to manipulate in-game elements and their in-game goal. For example, in a *Mario Brothers* game, the player must maneuver Mario through maze-like edifices. In his efforts to reach the level's end, Mario must skillfully leap over obstacles and enemy creatures. This structure forms the game's *implicit narrative*.
2. **Story:** the narrative, plot, protagonists, antagonists, and settings that give context to the player's actions and goals. The story provides a *reason* for the character's behavior and motivates the player to care about the character's success. For a *Mario Brothers* game, Mario must navigate obstacles and enemies to rescue Princess Toadstool, who has been captured by the reptilian Bowser. The content of the story provides character motivation and a narrative frame through which the player makes sense of the choices, actions, and goals that are built into the game structure. This story constitutes the game's *explicit narrative*.

While all games have a *structure*, game stories may range from non-existent (*Tetris*) to highly-developed (*Red Dead Redemption*). The game structure is always more important than the game story.

All game storylines exist primarily to encourage player engagement with the game structure.

While a game’s explicit story can be an important part of the player experience, the game’s structure is more critical to the game’s commercial success. Even in games with very rich and complex stories, the player is usually concerned with completing their character’s next task, regardless of its meaning to the character’s personal narrative. While defeating a dragon may produce the thrill of accomplishment, the stories that make sense of this accomplishment are secondary and relatively superficial. Because of this, as well as the relative lack of explicit narratives of poverty in video games, we focused our analysis on game structures.

In an effort to further understand the processes, goals, and constraints that take place behind the scenes of video game production, we interviewed five game creators and designers who have worked on major game franchises.

Interview Subjects

We asked game creators about the challenges involved in making successful video games, how game designs impact players and audiences, how common narratives about poverty are reproduced or challenged in popular games, and how games might encourage constructive dialogues about poverty.⁹



Saxs Persson and **Deirdre Quarnstrom** work on *Minecraft*, currently the most popular video game. Persson is the game’s Chief Creative Officer and is in charge of setting a vision for the future of the franchise. Quarnstrom is responsible for strategy, product development and community engagement, including using *Minecraft* for education.

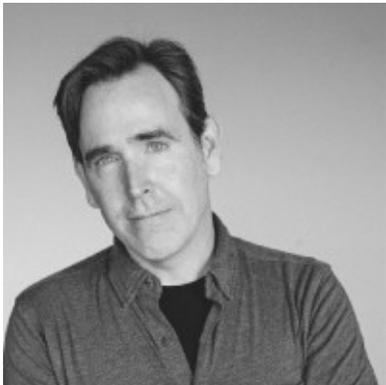
⁹ See Appendix A for interview questions. See Appendix B for detailed biographies of the game creators.



Nick Fortugno is an interactive narrative designer and the founder of Playmatics, an interactive development company. He also teaches and writes about interactive narratives and game designs. Many of his interactive projects and games focus on building communities and educating audiences about social issues.



Juan Gril heads the game development studio Gametapas. For the past two decades he has overseen the design and production of over 50 mass-market games for PC, console, and mobile platforms.



Hal Milton is the design director at Pipeworks Software. He has 25 years of game design experience across multiple platforms. He has worked on a variety of games, from casual games to detailed simulations, for almost every major games publisher.

Video Game Sample

We compiled a list of the 50 best-selling video games of all time and then grouped them according to franchise or series.¹⁰ For example, Nintendo has produced a dozen top-50 games that take place in the *Mario Brothers* universe. Instead of referring to each game individually, we refer to *Mario Brothers* as a franchise. We treated Rockstar Games's *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption*

¹⁰ See Appendix C for a list of all 50 games.

series similarly. Although they are made by different companies, we also combined *Diablo* and *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* because of striking similarities in their structures and stories.¹¹

We sought to understand the appeal of these mainstream games to determine how advocates might work with game developers to address misconceptions about poverty. Educational games that are designed for schools or curricula, as well as ‘social impact’ games that are designed to deliver messages about social issues can be effective, but do not have the same reach or popular appeal as more mainstream games. In 2018, educational games grossed \$3.5 billion,¹² while mainstream game sales grossed \$43 billion.¹³ Working with the most successful game franchises to shape narratives relating to poverty could yield a greater social impact. The games described below do not represent the full sample, but those we considered to have the greatest depth in terms of poverty narratives, either explicit or implicit.

Minecraft¹⁴

With over 180 million players, *Minecraft* is currently the world’s most popular video game. The core game experience involves using cubic blocks to build structures in a three-dimensional virtual world. The game can be played cooperatively or competitively.

Minecraft gives players access to resources they can use to build anything they like. This means that players determine the appearance of their world and the style of their gameplay. *Minecraft*’s



two gameplay modes are *survival mode*, wherein players collect resources to build shelter and maintain health, and *creative mode*, wherein players have unlimited access to resources to build imagined structures.

Individual blocks have different attributes: Some glow and can be used for illumination, others are strong and can be used to fortify buildings.

Crucially, an individual player can only manipulate one block at a time. This restriction encourages cooperative gameplay.

¹¹ While Activision’s immensely popular *Call of Duty* franchise was part of the sample, it had little to do with poverty narratives so it is not discussed at all.

¹² [Serious games revenues worldwide 2024](#)

¹³ [NPD: US video games sales reached \\$43.4 billion last year](#)

¹⁴ [Minecraft Official Site](#)

Similar games include *Terraria*,¹⁵ which features more structured goals. *The Sims* series¹⁶ also shares *Minecraft*'s 'build your own world' approach.

***Grand Theft Auto*¹⁷/*Red Dead Redemption*¹⁸**



Over the past 20 years, Rockstar's 'open-world' games have engaged hundreds of millions of players. Players explore entire cities and wild west environments, interacting with computer-controlled NPCs to complete missions. These games are notable for their 'deep' gameplay: players can drive, fight, shoot, ride horses, fly helicopters, gamble, hunt, collect flowers, play virtual

instruments, and work various jobs in any number of in-game activities. *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* was one of the first games to employ the sandbox gameplay experience. Instead of following linear goals, players can choose their own activities and experiences within the defined virtual world. With



Red Dead Redemption, Rockstar reproduced the depth of *GTA*'s gameplay and storytelling, but set the narrative in the wild west of the late 1800's.

These series also include complex storylines that assign the player various tasks. These storylines are based on gangster/outlaw tropes that usually involve violence. The player controls the game's outlaw protagonist. The story is delivered through

a series of 3D rendered *cutscenes*: non-interactive, in-game videos that reveal new story developments and contextualize upcoming goals. The series started as a single-player experience. However, recent releases have taken advantage of multiplayer online gameplay.

¹⁵ Terraria.org

¹⁶ [The Sims Video Games - Official EA Site](http://TheSimsVideoGames.com)

¹⁷ [Grand Theft Auto: The Official Site](http://GrandTheftAuto.com)

¹⁸ [Red Dead Redemption 2 – Rockstar Games](http://RedDeadRedemption2.com)

Mario Brothers¹⁹



Mario and Luigi, Nintendo's plumber brothers, have been battling the evil Bowser and his Koopa Troopa minions in the Mushroom Kingdom to save Princess Toadstool since 1985. The games have been played across all of Nintendo's console and hand-held devices, and spawned a multitude of TV series, movies and additional genres of games.

While the game experience has evolved across many game hardware platforms and new forms of gameplay, Nintendo has ensured that the characters and world have changed very little.

Diablo²⁰/Elder Scrolls²¹

These two game franchises were created by different companies, but have very similar structures and stories. The *Diablo* series is the most popular of the 'Dungeon Hack' genre of games which



exist in fantasy worlds of orcs, dragons, magic, and swordplay. Players explore dark, medieval worlds, fighting fantastic creatures and collecting lost treasures. Characters are framed by different 'classes' with various abilities, such as a wizard with expertise in magic or a warrior skilled in combat.



Elder Scrolls: Skyrim is an open-world game in *Diablo's* fantasy genre that involves wizards, dragons, magic, dungeon exploration, and accruing wealth. The game features NPCs and complex storylines. Both game series involve collecting items to improve the character's fighting abilities.

¹⁹ [The official home for Mario - Home](#)

²⁰ [Diablo® IV](#)

²¹ [The Elder Scrolls](#)

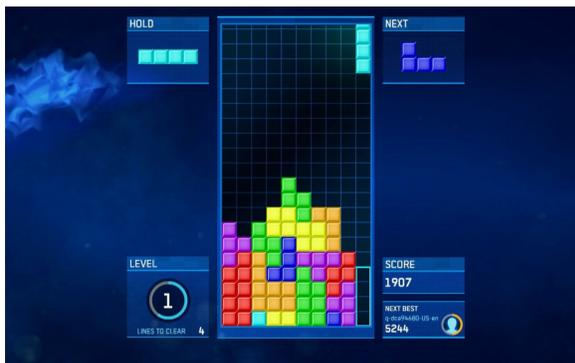
FIFA²²/EA Sports Series²³



What began as a sports game with simple mechanics has evolved to include more complex simulations. In the *EA Sports* series, the player competes against realistic computer-controlled opponents and tactics. The *FIFA* series now includes a career mode in which the player can contribute to a character's long-term professional development. *FIFA Soccer* is the highest-grossing game in the hugely successful *EA Sports* series.

Other *EA Sports* titles portray college and professional football, hockey, basketball, boxing, baseball, and golf. Many of these games involve the participation of real-world athletes, who lend their images and voices to their in-game avatars.

Tetris²⁴



Released in 1984, *Tetris* is one of the first *casual games*, easy-to-play games with simple controls and short play sessions. Casual games appeal to a broad base of players, many of whom consider themselves to be 'non-gamers.' *Tetris* long predates the rise of mobile gaming—games designed to be played on mobile phones. Similar games include *Bejeweled*,²⁵ an iconic and popular casual game.

²² [FIFA 19 - Football Video Game](#)

²³ [EA SPORTS](#)

²⁴ [Tetris | The addictive puzzle game that started it all!](#)

²⁵ [Bejeweled Video Games - Official EA Site](#)

*Wii Sports*²⁶/*Fit*²⁷



Games designed for the Nintendo *Wii* are notable for their active gameplay and broad appeal.

Instead of using handheld controls, *Wii* consoles use sensors that track player movement, thereby encouraging more physical, ‘on your feet’ gameplay. Players can create in-game representations of themselves and use games to improve their real-world physical fitness.

POVERTY NARRATIVES IN VIDEO GAMES

GOOD’s *system* and *meritocracy* narratives relate most closely to game structures and the player’s experience. An examination of how these two narratives manifest in games, and how they are implicitly or explicitly employed by game designers, reveals four key points about poverty and economic mobility in video games:

1. **Game structures rely on artificial meritocratic systems to incentivize and reward players.** Games perpetuate commonly-held beliefs about meritocracy—the belief that, through effort and the exercise of their abilities, everyone has a chance to reap the proper rewards.
2. **Merit-based game designs guarantee success for the player, reinforcing the meritocratic myth.** Game systems guide players through the game experience, rewarding them for success, compelling them to take on new challenges, and helping them when they falter. This implies the existence of a safety net that prevents people from ‘failing.’
3. **A game simulating the inherent unfairness of poverty would be frustrating to play.** Games that mimic the experience of poverty in which effort and ability are not always rewarded would be frustrating and dispiriting, making for an unpleasant game experience.

²⁶ [Wii Sports Club for Wii U](#)

²⁷ [Wii Fit](#)

4. **There are ways games can challenge flawed narratives about poverty.** Despite the challenges, there are ways to use games to enlighten large audiences and communities about the myth of meritocracy, and highlight the structural barriers faced by those living in poverty.

Game designs rely on artificial meritocratic systems to incentivize and reward players

Many of the games we examined reflect GOOD's *meritocracy* narrative, which presumes that every American has an equal chance to benefit from effort and skill. People play games under the assumption that they can succeed with enough merit and focus. The player usually assumes that the game is fair, and that anyone who buys it will have access to the same in-game tools, information, resources, and challenges. It is usually presumed that the game can't be hacked and that no player can cheat the system to achieve a better outcome or experience than those who play by the rules. Every copy of a game is identical, such that individual success can be attributed to the player's skill—independent of their class, gender or race. For games that simulate real-world activities, players can mimic the achievement of otherwise unattainable goals, such as wealth or athletic ability. Someone who is considered poor in real life might play a very wealthy character in *GTA*. Someone who lacks physical strength or dexterity in real life can play an expert swordsman in *Diablo*. In order to feel a sense of accomplishment, players must believe they have earned their in-game rewards.

Games use poverty as motivation for players to succeed

Games often use poverty as a narrative catalyst for gameplay. The game character may start a game without any resources or possessions. In the *GTA* series, the protagonist starts as a poor, small-time criminal who lacks resources and power. As the player succeeds in the game, their character is rewarded with better weapons, vehicles, and other possessions.²⁸ In *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, the protagonist starts as an escaped prisoner who accrues better armor and more weapons as he progresses through the game. These possessions make the protagonist more powerful, allowing the player to battle stronger enemies and earn greater riches.²⁹ The *FIFA Soccer* series has also introduced a storyline involving a protagonist who comes from a working-class London neighborhood and works his way up to become a professional footballer.³⁰

²⁸ [Protagonist | GTA Wiki | Fandom](#)

²⁹ [Last Dragonborn | Elder Scrolls | Fandom](#)

³⁰ [Alex Hunter \(character\)](#)

In *Diablo*, higher levels bring tougher and more damaging monsters. However, more gold, experience, and item rewards also await the player on more challenging levels.³¹ The game is designed as a closed system that rewards merit with success; the player must collect enough gold to buy the sword that is necessary for defeating a dragon. When that first dragon is defeated, a more difficult dragon awaits. The player must buy an expensive weapon to defeat that more difficult dragon. In *GTA*, the player requires a fast car to complete a main mission, and must complete smaller missions to earn enough in-game money to buy the car. Owning the fast car then opens up more missions for the player.

Starting with nothing is common in video games. Once the player completes a task, they are rewarded with resources the protagonist can use to escape their impoverished circumstances. The player's in-game success is measured by accrued virtual currency, in-game items, points, achievement badges, access to new levels, and other rewards. *GTA* presents an explicitly financial reward system; completing missions gives the player in-game money which can be used to buy items like weapons, clothes, and vehicles. Using poverty as a starting point for the character's narrative arc means that poverty must be presented as meaningfully unpleasant.

In video games, poverty is represented as an individual situation to be escaped, rather than a social problem to be fixed.

Poor people are often portrayed as dangerous enemies



Many fantasy games and first-person shooters take place in lawless societies. Dangerous and treacherous neighborhoods are populated by desperate, violent NPCs. These circumstances justify the player's use of force for survival and success. Characters that populate poor neighborhoods in games are often nameless and exist only to be killed by the protagonist.

For example, the world of *GTA* depicts poor neighborhoods as dangerous for the protagonist. These neighborhoods are populated by gangs, petty criminals, and crooked cops.

³¹ [Diablo III](#)

Greed is rewarded

Games often encourage player greed and accumulation of virtual materials. Players are congratulated for finding hidden collectibles, achieving high scores, and obtaining valuable objects.



Greed and desire focus the player on in-game goals. *Diablo* shows the player an empty inventory at the beginning of the game, with open slots that are to be filled with treasure, weapons, and armor. These empty slots are meant to compel the player to accumulate as many rewards as possible. This premise is accepted because the game structure is presumed to be fair and merit-based.

Greed in the context of games is considered normal and acceptable among all audiences. In video games, gathering in-game objects usually does not come at the cost of others.

Real money has a role in game worlds

As game designs continue to evolve, game publishers seek new ways to monetize games and profit from their audiences. Historically, video games were sold as complete, standalone experiences. As games offered deeper gameplay, game publishers began monetizing games by offering additional levels or items at an extra cost to the player. This trend has led to the emergence of *Free to Play (F2P)* games that initially have no cost to the player, but require payment for additional gameplay. This format enables players to sample many games for free and pay for only those that are most enjoyable.



This emergent business model presumes that players are willing to make *microtransactions*—small amounts of money spent for additional gameplay, access to locked levels, in-game items, or in-game virtual currencies. Many of these games also offer extra *downloadable content* that provides additional gameplay. While this model gives players minute control over how much they

pay for a game, it generally increases the final cost of the game. As a result, players may end up

spending much more on the game than they originally intended.³² The *F2P* model has become increasingly popular, especially in mobile games that are played on phones. However, none were among the top 50 of all time.

Real-world wealth further intersects with gameplay experiences when multiplayer competition is related to purchasing in-game resources. *Pay to Win* games are those that gain revenue by selling in-game items that help players succeed in defeating others. Of the games we examined, only the *Call of Duty* franchise employs a *Pay to Win* model in their online gameplay. Theoretically, any player is capable of defeating any other player. However, in reality, the player with the more expensive equipment and in-game abilities has a competitive advantage. The *Pay to Win* business model is controversial within the online gaming community. In 2018, the publishers of *Star Wars: Battlefront 2* (an online multiplayer game that is not on our top 50 list) removed their *Pay to Win* transactions after they provoked a severe negative reaction by their online gaming community, who felt they were being pressured to spend money to compete against each other.³³



Finally, real-world money comes into play through competitive gaming, wherein players compete for money and fame in professional *eSports* tournaments.³⁴ However, only a small percentage of elite gamers are able to successfully cash in on their gaming skills. *Twitch*,³⁵ an online streaming service that allows audiences to follow gamers, has brought increasing notoriety to competitive gaming tournaments. Professional gamers can win

valuable cash prizes, earn sponsorships, and play in arenas in front of sold-out audiences.³⁶ In-game merit can now lead to real-world successes, and can therefore be viewed as a means of financial gain for a small number of elite gamers, in the same way that professional sports is sometimes viewed as a path out of poverty.

³² [The Psychology of Loot Boxes and Microtransactions - Psychology and Video Games](#)

³³ [EA Admits Defeat, Unlocks All Battlefront 2 Heroes, Removes Pay-to-Win Mechanics](#)

³⁴ [ESL Gaming | The ESL Gaming Network](#)

³⁵ [Twitch.tv](#)

³⁶ [Top 100 Highest Overall Earnings - Esports Player Rankings](#)

Game designs reward skill, cleverness, and tenacity

Game structures often parallel the meritocratic narrative. Games commonly reward skill: the most accurate aim, fanciest move, or quickest reflex. However, certain games such as *Minecraft* devalue



skill and speed in favor of cleverness and tenacity. Part of *Minecraft*'s appeal is that blocks must be placed one at a time. *Minecraft*'s Saxe Persson asserts that although players sometimes request the ability to place multiple blocks at once, ***“we will never change that. It's this limitation that gets the world playing together.”***

In *Minecraft*, the one-block restriction means that time has value. A player who shares a picture of a house they built can earn admiration for the time they invested. This limitation encourages players to work together, share resources, and protect one another. Building a castle or city requires either cooperation or large individual time investment. *Minecraft*'s one-block limitation can therefore encourage tenacity, ingenuity, and cooperation.

Other games, such as *Red Dead Redemption*, may reward the player's tenacity with hidden collectible objects. Such tenacity may be consistent with a player's greed or desire for accumulation. While endurance is not always directly rewarded in real life, video games generally offer a direct relationship between effort and reward.

In games, tenacity often means persevering until absolute success is achieved. However, in games where some kind of failure is inevitable, success amounts to relative endurance. Hal Milton points out that in games like *Tetris* and *Bejeweled*:



Failure is inevitable and part of the experience. Time is the ultimate opponent. The player gets offered more and more terrible choices until the player is overwhelmed and they fail.

Tetris players will always fail, but some will fail later than others. Those who haven't made it very far in a game may want to see others' winning strategies. Milton, who grew up poor, understands the value of grit and endurance. Thus, he values

showing players how they've failed and encourages them to try new approaches. However, rewarding relative endurance in games risks perpetuating the narrative that endurance is likely to be rewarded in reality.

Merit-based game designs guarantee success for the player, reinforcing the meritocratic myth

Game structures must challenge the player, but also guide them to success. Hal Milton defines gameplay as **“developing a mastery to fulfill a power fantasy.”** Whether the task at hand is wielding a weapon, playing a sport, or creating a home, the game will involve gaining a skill and feeling powerful. Games must challenge the player without being overly difficult or frustrating. Thus, games must ensure that most players can make progress in the face of repeated setbacks.

Game designs carefully calibrate challenges to ensure the player always has a chance to succeed

An axiom of game design is: **‘No first level too easy, no last level too hard.’** Thus, the enemies the player first encounters in *Elder Scrolls* are easily defeated, but get progressively stronger as the player advances in the game. Games like *Tetris* provide a sense of accomplishment by slowly making gameplay faster and more challenging.

Game systems give players control over challenges



Many game structures inspire players to overcome challenges while allowing them to customize the game's difficulty level. Players may adjust the number of enemies, NPC power, or amount of available resources. *FIFA Soccer*, for example, offers six levels of difficulty that adjust the opposing NPC team's speed and ability.³⁷

Game structures can give players the illusion of skill and ability. While *Wii* games encourage players to exercise moderately, they depict more vigorous activity in onscreen avatars. Such unrepresentative on-screen depictions are intended to motivate healthy behaviors.

³⁷ [FIFA 20 – Difficulty Levels](#)

Other common features of games produce structures that do not accurately reflect the financial challenges of real life. In games, failure is not a permanent state; the player's ability to restart a game reduces the consequences of poor decisions. A player can change the setting of a game to make goals easier to achieve. Players can lower the skill level of their NPC adversaries. A player can choose to sidestep a challenge by adjusting game difficulty. Some games even offer 'cheat codes' that provide invincibility, stronger abilities, or access to resources and equipment.³⁸ Thus, while such game structures may reflect many aspects of the meritocracy narrative, they only reward merit to the extent that doing so is satisfying or fun for the player. While mimicking a meritocracy can give the player a sense of accomplishment, games allow players to sidestep the barriers of a pure meritocracy by providing a safety net that in real-life only exists for the wealthy.

A game simulating the inherent unfairness of poverty would be frustrating to play

Consumers often play video games in order to escape from real-world concerns, and as discussed previously games frequently produce and enable fantasies of mastery and autonomy.³⁹ Video games also create systems and structures that enable players to succeed and feel a sense of accomplishment. Indeed, video games may appeal to Americans precisely because they offer an enjoyable experience of meritocracy that players lack in their real lives.

Developers deliberately fine-tune their game structures to provide an optimally fun balance between effort and reward. Successful game structures present just enough difficulty to foster a sense of realism and challenge, but not so much as to make gameplay frustrating or discouraging. With relative ease and deceptively minimal effort, Mario runs and jumps through various fantasy worlds to accumulate a stockpile of gold coins. Simulation games, like flight or driving simulators, often simplify complex real-world experiences in a fun way and are rarely designed for player failure.

In short, the reward structure of video games is always intended to produce an enjoyable and rewarding experience, not necessarily to mimic real-world challenges.

Games that are designed to educate players about social issues therefore face a challenge: How to make a compelling, popular, and fun game that simulates systemic inequality, hopelessness, and despair?

Those in poverty often feel a loss of control, and a sense of randomness that can make hard work seem pointless. ***"Poverty is easy to quantify: You have two, but you need three,"*** says Nick

³⁸ [GTA 5 Cheats and Secrets - GTA 5 Wiki Guide](#)

³⁹ [Why We Play: How Our Desire For Games Shapes Our World](#)

Fortugno of Playmatics. Fortugno grew up poor and has an experiential understanding of the suffering associated with material want. A lack of control plays a large part in this feeling of frustration: ***“When I was poor, I could do everything right and still fail.”*** What would it mean for a game to simulate the lack of control that affects poor people?

Frustrations caused by real-world simulations

Fortugno designs games that explicitly simulate the experiences of people living in poverty. According to Fortugno, such simulations of poverty should capture a sense of unfairness, such that skill, cleverness, and tenacity do not guarantee success within the game. Unfortunately, frustration generally does not make for an enjoyable or profitable game experience.



Fortugno’s educational game *Ayiti*⁴⁰ simulates the choices a poor family in Haiti must make to survive. One of the items for purchase in the game is a house. However, Fortugno says there’s no way a player can make enough virtual money to buy it: ***“I wanted the game design to model despair.”***

However, Fortugno never intended for the game to be played as a recreational experience outside of the classroom. Students played the game after following an introductory curriculum about poverty, then discussed the outcome of the game with their teachers. This educational setting gave Fortugno latitude in making the game harder than it otherwise would have been. He did not create the opportunities for success that mainstream games typically require. Indeed, the game was also released online, but was not particularly successful.

For many game players, a loss of control contradicts a core part of the gaming experience. Overcoming obstacles and feeling a sense of accomplishment is part of what makes games fun, and players simply won’t play a game if they’re not having fun. Juan Gril of Gametapas noted:

In order to be effective, a game must fundamentally be fun. If gameplay does not engage, the theme is lost.

⁴⁰ [Ayiti: The Cost of Life](#)



The guarantee of success produces an unrealistic narrative about real-life struggles like poverty. Fortugno struggles with this issue in his game structures and narratives that relate to social problems: **“Finding that balance is very tricky.”**

Fortugno’s *Aiyti* game offers unreachable items for purchase to underscore the sense of hopelessness that is experienced by individuals in poverty. Players saw that they could purchase a house, yet had no way of accumulating enough money to

meet the price. Some players might consider such an unreachable goal a violation of the pact between game designer and player: goals can usually be reached through skill, cleverness, and tenacity. Players sometimes go to extreme lengths to attain seemingly unreachable goals. Juan Gril pointed out a game with a goal the developers thought was unreachable:

In the online MMO (massively multiplayer game) Tibia,⁴¹ there was a door that required you to have maximum experience points to open. It was calculated that if you played eight hours a day, it would take nine years of playing to get the experience points to open the door. The developers created the door as a joke, but players saw it as a challenge. One player finally got through the door.⁴²

Presenting unattainable goals can elicit feelings of hopelessness, which may more effectively simulate the experience of poverty. However, for most players, feelings of hopelessness do not contribute to an enjoyable game experience.

There are ways games can challenge flawed narratives about poverty

Games have the potential to effectively challenge flawed narratives about poverty, such as the meritocracy myth, if they are created under the right conditions. Below are some recommendations for how game developers might be able to cultivate new narratives without alienating their audience.

⁴¹ [Tibia \(video game\)](#)

⁴² [This Game's Secret Door Has Been A Mystery For 12 Years. Now, It's Solved.](#)

Present the challenge directly to players

Games that highlight structural barriers by provoking difficult gameplay decisions under unfair material conditions can both engage players and educate them about real-world economic problems.



Minecraft stands apart from other top-selling games insofar as its players build their own virtual environments. This open design encourages players to collaboratively develop creative solutions to material obstacles and resource constraints. Saxe Persson sees *Minecraft* as “**a creative space that creates empathy and breaks down language and social barriers.**” *Minecraft* has been used to help communities collectively address real-world social issues. In

collaboration with the United Nations, Deirdre Quarnstrom oversaw Block by Block,⁴³ a program that used *Minecraft* to help 72 global communities envision neighborhood improvement projects:

We worked directly with the community, holding workshops with the UN Habitat Team. Using the program, schoolgirls in Hanoi found a way to make their path too school safer, a neighborhood in Kosovo turned abandoned space into gardens, playgrounds, and a skate park, and a fishing village in Addis Ababa renovated their waterfront.

Minecraft generated interest around the program by working with popular YouTube channels to address larger gamer communities. Block by Block ultimately encouraged collaborative innovation to incrementally address large social problems.

Modify existing gameplay by making ‘poverty’ a game mode

Adding elements that mimic the experience of poverty to an already successful game structure could help educate players. *Minecraft* gives players the option to play in *survival mode*, which challenges them to build shelters and gather resources to ensure their character’s survival. Players must also battle computer-controlled enemies, and must explore their world to gather needed items. Players can also work cooperatively in multiplayer mode. Although players can ‘complete’

⁴³ [Block by Block](#)

survival mode by slaying a final dragon, they can continue playing after this point to accumulate more resources, explore more areas, and build more structures. In survival mode, adversaries appear unsystematically and the initial environment is randomly-generated. Otherwise, all players are initially given the same resources for surviving. Hypothetically, this gameplay mode could be modified to randomly give some players more difficult obstacles or fewer resources, thereby partially simulating a non-meritocratic system.

Similar gameplay modes in *FIFA Soccer* could simulate the experience of poverty by giving a working-class character greater challenges than their wealthier counterparts. Such a character might also be treated poorly by NPCs, or may not receive the same rewards as more fortunate characters. The introduction of this type of realism into a video game could be associated with differential outcomes for similar amounts of effort.



The 2017 role-playing game *Southpark: The Fractured but Whole*⁴⁴ initially including a slider that allowed the player to change the protagonist's skin color. According to the in-game commentary, a darker skin tone would result in a more difficult game experience, thereby mimicking the experience of racial bias. The protagonist would make less money and be treated unfairly by NPCs.

However, the character's skin color did not actually affect the game experience; the slider was included only as a superficial commentary on racism. As one commentator suggests:

Rather than introduce a conversation regarding discrimination, racism and stereotyping, South Park: The Fractured but Whole uses the discrimination blacks and people of color face every day for a quick laugh in the character creation screen.⁴⁵

Similar avenues for reproducing the experience of social problems could be pursued by game developers. Even more abstract games such as *Tetris* might allow the player to choose a character who starts the game with fewer blocks or resources. Randomly assigning players to this poor character identity could further simulate the unfairness of a non-meritocratic system.

⁴⁴ [South Park: The Fractured but Whole](#)

⁴⁵ [The darker the skin, the harder the game: How South Park pretended to care about race](#)

Allow players to see themselves as poor characters



While explicit or overly-frustrating simulations of poverty may discourage player engagement, onscreen player representations and avatars might provide one channel for introducing gamers to themes of wealth inequality. Some video game research suggests that players care more about game outcomes when they see themselves represented visually as video game protagonists.⁴⁶

Accordingly, in the *Wii* game series, players may create on-screen personas and avatars called *miis*, which are intended to represent their real-life appearances. The more the player exercises, the happier their *mii* appears. NPCs praise and encourage the player as they achieve their exercise goals. This use of representational *miis* is meant to encourage the player to exercise in real life.⁴⁷

By this logic, games that show visually representational avatars—possibly in challenging financial situations—may increase player identification with individuals living in poverty or provide other connections to real-world social problems.

Focus on failure and unfairness as a game experience

While *Tetris* and *Bejeweled* present increasingly difficult challenges as the game progresses, the game will eventually and necessarily overwhelm the player. Here the player's sense of accomplishment depends on how far they progress before ultimately failing, rather than achieving any absolute 'success.' This type of gameplay may to some extent mimic the challenge of escaping impoverished circumstances. Future games might creatively explore other types of player failure that can implicitly communicate messages about success and failure.

According to Hal Milton, a game with a depressing theme can still be engaging, as long as the core gameplay is fun: ***"The journey is the destination. Compelling gameplay will bring the player in, like reading a story where you know the main character is going to fail."*** Milton suggests that some kinds of failure in games may reduce the need for explicit messaging about poverty in story content. Heavy-handed or overly-direct messaging in stories may also backfire. Milton notes: ***"Nobody says 'being poor is bad' in The Grapes of Wrath."***

⁴⁶ [The Psychology of Video Game Avatars](#)

⁴⁷ [Study: Virtual avatars improve fitness motivation](#)

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Video games' immersive qualities and player agency create ideal opportunities for fostering greater understanding of the structural barriers inherent in poverty. However, communicating effectively about these topics means balancing story and structure throughout the process of game conceptualization, production, and dissemination. When possible, advocates should refrain from 'reinventing the wheel' of game structures and partner with experienced creators who are open to experimenting with poverty narratives.

- **Partner with an existing game franchise.** A long-term, successful game franchise will be supported by a trove of experience, creativity, and best practices. Partnering with the right developer and publisher will allow for effective communication between game creator and advocate. Larger publishers may also be better able to dedicate design and tech resources to conceptualization, prototyping, and game testing.
- **Build on existing gameplay.** Rather than creating an entirely new structure to support desired poverty narratives, build on existing gameplay systems, mechanics, rules, actions, and goals. Most new games build upon existing frameworks, genres, designs, and interfaces that are known to successfully engage audiences.
- **Reach out to an existing community.** It is significantly easier to influence an existing game community than to build a new community from scratch. Tying poverty narratives to an already popular game can produce a sense of purpose and empowerment among key audiences.⁴⁸
- **Get the right people in the room.** Deirdre Quarnstrom's experience with Block by Block taught her that creating a fun and educational game means that ***"the right people must be in the room."*** For Quarnstrom, the 'right people' means developers who are experienced with game testing and scaling, experts on the issue in question, representatives of the community being represented, and notable 'superfan' players⁴⁹ who may share the game with a larger audience. According to Quarnstrom, ***"You need these people to work together to make a great game experience."***

⁴⁸ [Up, up, and away! The power and potential of fan activism](#)

⁴⁹ See *Minecraft's* Stacy Hinojosa at [stacyplays](#)

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

The interviewees were sent the GOOD Report's key findings in advance to familiarize themselves with the six narratives. Each interview covered the following topics and questions:

1. What beliefs or themes do you have in mind that you focus on when creating a game, or adding features to it? For example the theme in Minecraft is “to get the world playing together” and to “turn the next generation into creators.” What "experiences" does your audience want to simulate re: success in a game? Do they aspire to become wealthy?
2. How do you turn a theme into a game experience? Do you focus on the mechanics first, then apply a theme, or vice-versa?
3. What general processes or strategies do you apply in creating a game? Do you build on existing, successful game mechanics, or start from scratch? How does money and wealth factor in the choices you offer your players?
4. How much effort is put into ensuring the player embraces the theme of your game?
5. How do you think poverty, or any of the GOOD narratives, resonates in the games you've made? In the storyline? In the game design?
6. How does game design reinforce or ignore real-world experiences? Does the need to balance gameplay work against simulating real challenges?
7. How do you handle failure in the game experience? Do you try to ensure the player can always succeed, or do you allow them to fail? What systems do you use in game design as indicators for success or failure?
8. What are the benefits or pitfalls of creating a game with a clear outcome, or message? If we made a game about the experience of being in poverty, what game design elements could be used, and what should be avoided?

Appendix B: Interviewee Biographies

Hal Milton, Design Director, Pipeworks Software

Hal has twenty-five years of game design experience across mobile, social, original and licensed IP games for casual and core audiences on PC, Web, Mobile, Handheld, and all modern consoles. Over the years, he has worked with almost every major publisher and developer including Microsoft, Sony, Disney, Sega, Konami, Nintendo, Warner Bros, Dreamworks, Electronic Arts, Activision, Ubisoft, and others. As the Studio Creative Director for Pipeworks Studios, he currently oversees and contributes to a slate of original, licensed and serious development for a variety of partners.

Nick Fortugno, Founder, Playmatics

Nick Fortugno is an entrepreneur, interactive narrative designer, and game designer based in New York City. He is a founder and principal of Playmatics (www.playmatics.com), an interactive development company. Playmatics has created a variety of digital and real-world experiences for organizations including ProPublica, Red Bull, AMC (such as the CableFAX award winning *Breaking Bad: The Interrogation*), Disney, American Museum of Natural History, the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent. For the past ten years, Fortugno has been a designer, writer and project manager on dozens of commercial and serious games and served as lead designer on the downloadable blockbuster *Diner Dash* and the award-winning serious game *Ayiti: The Cost of Life*. Nick is a Lead Artist on the *Frankenstein A.I.* project (featured at the Sundance New Frontier Festival in 2018) and has worked extensively on interactive narrative projects in a variety of formats. Nick is also a co-founder of the *Come Out and Play* street games festival (www.comeoutandplay.org) hosted in New York City and Amsterdam since 2006, and co-creator of the *Big Urban Game* for Minneapolis/St. Paul in 2003. Nick has taught game design and interactive narrative design for 15 years at institutions such as Columbia University and the Parsons School of Design and has participated in the construction of game design and immersive storytelling curriculum. Some of Nick's writing about interactive narrative can be found in the anthology *Well-Played 1.0: Video Game, Value, and Meaning*, published by ETC-Press.

Juan Gril, Principal, Gametapas

For the past 2 decades, Juan has been involved in the design and production of mass market games. In the late 90s Juan was one of the original members of Yahoo! Games (the first and most

popular gaming website in the early years of the Internet). From Yahoo! he went to found Joju Games, a successful casual games studio which in the span of 12 years developed more than 50 games for PC, console, and mobile platforms, for big media companies and game publishers. Currently, Juan heads up Gametapas, an instant-games development studio.

Juan is Advisor for the Free2Play Games Summit at GDC, and judge for the "Sense of Wonder Night" Game Festival at Tokyo Game Show.

Saxs Persson, Chief Creative Officer, Minecraft

Saxs has 25+ years in the Video Game industry spanning VR, AR, console, PC and mobile and is currently Sr. Partner at Microsoft and the co-CCO for Minecraft. primarily focused on setting a vision for the future of the franchise and connecting said vision with execution. Saxs recently drove Minecraft Earth from idea to early access with a long-term vision of taking the beauty and creativity of Minecraft into the real world.

Deirdre Quarnstrom, General Manager, Minecraft

Deirdre Quarnstrom is a General Manager in the Xbox division at Microsoft where she is responsible for strategy, product development and community engagement for Minecraft Atlas which includes Minecraft Accessibility, Minecraft China, Minecraft: Education Edition, a version of the video game Minecraft created for education, and Minecraft Hour of Code with over 150 million coding sessions recorded. Previously, Deirdre served as Chief of Staff for Xbox and held finance, operations and strategy roles at T-Mobile USA and StairMaster, Inc. In 2013, Deirdre was a mentor aboard the Semester at Sea Spring Voyage for the "Unreasonable at Sea" social entrepreneurship accelerator. Deirdre currently serves as a Director on the board of Block by Block, a non-profit partnership between Mojang and UN-Habitat which uses Minecraft to empower youth and women in the developing world. Deirdre is also a Trustee on the Board for the French American School of Puget Sound and co-chair of the school's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee. She holds an undergraduate degree in Economics from McGill University in Montreal, an MBA from Seattle University and completed the Stanford Executive Program at Stanford University in 2018. Deirdre, her husband, and their two daughters live in Seattle, Washington.

Appendix C: Top 50 Video Games by Copies Sold

GAME TITLE	TOTAL COPIES SOLD (UP TO MAY 2020)	PLATFORM(S)
<u>Minecraft</u>	176,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Grand Theft Auto V</u>	120,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Wii Sports</u>	82,880,000	<u>Wii</u>
<u>PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds</u>	60,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Super Mario Bros.</u>	48,240,000	Multi-platform
<u>Pokémon Red / Green / Blue / Yellow</u>	47,520,000	<u>Game Boy / 3DS VC</u>
<u>Wii Fit</u> and <u>Wii Fit Plus</u>	43,800,000	Wii
<u>Tetris (Nintendo)</u>	43,000,000	Game Boy / NES
<u>Mario Kart Wii</u>	37,240,000	Wii
<u>Mario Kart 8 / Deluxe</u>	33,220,000	<u>Wii U / Switch</u>
<u>Wii Sports Resort</u>	33,110,000	Wii
<u>New Super Mario Bros.</u>	30,800,000	<u>Nintendo DS</u>
<u>Terraria</u>	30,300,000	Multi-platform
<u>New Super Mario Bros. Wii</u>	30,280,000	Wii
<u>The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim</u>	30,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Diablo III</u> and <u>Reaper of Souls</u>	30,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Pokémon Gold / Silver / Crystal</u>	29,490,000	<u>Game Boy Color</u>
<u>Red Dead Redemption 2</u>	29,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Duck Hunt</u>	28,300,000	<u>NES</u>
<u>Wii Play</u>	28,020,000	Wii
<u>The Witcher 3 / Hearts of Stone / Blood and Wine</u>	28,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas</u>	27,500,000	Multi-platform
<u>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3</u>	26,500,000	Multi-platform
<u>Call of Duty: Black Ops</u>	26,200,000	Multi-platform
<u>Grand Theft Auto IV</u>	25,000,000	Multi-platform
<u>Pokémon Sun / Moon / Ultra Sun / Ultra Moon</u>	24,950,000	<u>Nintendo 3DS</u>

<i>Pokémon Diamond / Pearl / Platinum</i>	24,730,000	Nintendo DS
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</i>	24,200,000	Multi-platform
<i>Kinect Adventures!</i>	24,000,000	Xbox 360
<i>FIFA 18</i>	24,000,000	Multi-platform
<i>Sonic the Hedgehog</i>	23,982,960	Multi-platform
<i>Nintendogs</i>	23,960,000	Nintendo DS
<i>Mario Kart DS</i>	23,600,000	Nintendo DS
<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2</i>	22,700,000	Multi-platform
<i>Pokémon Ruby / Sapphire / Emerald</i>	22,540,000	Game Boy Advance
<i>Borderlands 2</i>	22,000,000	Multi-platform
<i>Super Mario World</i>	20,972,500	SNES / Wii VC
<i>Lemmings</i>	20,000,000	Multi-platform
<i>Grand Theft Auto: Vice City</i>	20,000,000	Multi-platform
<i>Frogger</i>	20,000,000	Multi-platform
<i>Brain Age</i>	19,010,000	Nintendo DS
<i>Super Mario Bros. 3</i>	19,000,000	NES / Wii VC
<i>Call of Duty: Ghosts</i>	19,000,000	Multi-platform
<i>The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild</i>	18,910,000	Switch / Wii U
<i>Super Smash Bros. Ultimate</i>	18,840,000	Nintendo Switch
<i>Mario Kart 7</i>	18,710,000	Nintendo 3DS
<i>Super Mario Land</i>	18,370,500	Game Boy / 3DS VC
<i>Grand Theft Auto III</i>	17,500,000	Multi-platform
<i>Super Mario Odyssey</i>	17,410,000	Nintendo Switch
<i>Pokémon Sword / Shield</i>	17,370,000	Nintendo Switch

Appendix D: About the Author



Michael Ahn specializes in qualitative analyses for social justice organizations to identify and create narratives that inspire empathy and change. His career in video games includes seven years as a product planner and content lead at Microsoft's PC games and Xbox teams, as well as working as a narrative consultant for Nike, Hewlett-Packard, Lifetime TV, and A&E Networks. Learn more about his work at: <http://storysaveslives.com/>

The Norman Lear Center's research team also contributed to this report.