

# Dark Patterns in Games Catalog

## 1 Temporal Dark Patterns

### 1.1 Grinding

#### Definition:

Grinding is a term used to describe performing repetitive and tedious actions to achieve a specific goal. This is often used to coerce the player into spending much more time than anticipated, keeping them engaged longer in the game. Additionally, grinding exploits the player's competitive side because, in many systems, the more one plays, the stronger they become, increasing their chances of winning. This mechanism is subtly introduced, gradually getting the player accustomed to spending more and more time until they can no longer gauge how long it will take to achieve their goal, thus constituting a dark pattern.

#### Example:

In Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) like Black Desert Online, players need to eliminate monsters to earn in-game currency and items, enabling them to progress according to the established system. This progression allows the player to deal more damage, making it easier to eliminate enemy players. As players advance in the progression system, they find themselves needing to spend more time to keep up with others, with no end to the cycle, as the company updates the game with new, stronger items that cost more.

### 1.2 Playing by Appointment

#### Definition:

Playing by Appointment refers to the practice of requiring players to play at specific times set by the game to achieve their goals, punishing those who do not adhere to these schedules. This leads players to adapt their real-world schedules to fit the game, rather than the other way around. The main issue lies in the mandatory nature of completing tasks at the time chosen by the game and the penalties for missing them. If the game has a scheduling system but does not penalize the player, there is no issue.

#### Example:

In online games, special events occur at fixed times, such as 8 AM and 6 PM. If a player does not participate in these events, they miss out on important rewards, putting them at a disadvantage compared to other players. This causes players to reorganize their daily routines, adjusting real-life commitments to be available at these specific times. On the other hand, in a game with fixed event times but that allows players to later complete the same activities for the same rewards, this issue does not arise.

## **1.3 Endowed Progress**

### **Definition:**

This pattern refers to the false illusion of progress "bestowed" to motivate the player to play more than they would like. This occurs due to the feeling that they have already made significant progress and are closer to their goal. Often, this initial "gifted" progress represents a much smaller time investment compared to subsequent levels, thus constituting a dark pattern.

### **Example:**

A game offers a battle pass where the first five levels are easily achieved. The player feels they have made significant progress and are motivated to continue playing. However, as they advance, they realize each new level requires significantly more time to complete. For example, while the first five levels can be completed in an hour, subsequent levels may require several hours each. This leads the player to dedicate much more time to the game than planned, encouraged by the false sense of initial progress.

## **1.4 Fear of Missing Out**

### **Definition:**

Fear of Missing Out (F.O.M.O) is used in games through daily login rewards, battle passes, constant updates, and surprise events with exclusive items. This pressures players to continuously check for new content they might miss. The frequency of game notifications and the randomness of these events cause players to check constantly, generating anxiety and exacerbating the dark pattern.

### **Example:**

In Final Fantasy XIV, an unexpected event may occur at any moment, offering a rare item available for only a few hours if a specific enemy is defeated — an enemy whose appearance time is unknown. The unpredictability and frequency of these updates make players anxious and constantly vigilant, ensuring they do not miss any opportunities.

## **2 Monetary Dark Patterns**

### **2.1 Pay to Skip**

#### **Definition:**

This pattern refers to encouraging players to spend money to skip certain stages or achieve specific goals that would otherwise be much more difficult. After paying, the subsequent levels are made easier, giving the impression that it was worth the cost. What makes this a dark pattern is that future levels also require payment to overcome, frustrating players and making them spend more than they initially expected. This pattern is often associated with Grinding, where players, tired of repetitive tasks, are offered the option to pay to skip them.

**Example:**

A player encounters an extremely difficult stage in a game and is encouraged to buy an item or pay for an upgrade to pass it. After paying, they notice the following levels are significantly easier, reinforcing the idea that the expenditure was worthwhile. However, as they progress, they face even more difficult stages, again encouraged to spend money. This cycle continues, causing the player to spend far more than initially planned.

## **2.2 Loot Boxes**

**Definition:**

Loot boxes are random item containers obtained through in-game progress or real money. The primary issue lies in how the odds of obtaining desired items are presented to players: either the probabilities are not transparently shown, or they are hidden in an obscure section of the game. Additionally, mechanisms compromise the “randomness” of these boxes. In countries like China and South Korea, legislation mandates companies disclose the probabilities of obtaining items and limits daily loot box purchases. However, in most of the world, this remains debated. This leads players to spend far more than they initially intended.

**Example:**

A player buys a loot box hoping for a rare weapon. The chances of getting that weapon are unclear, and the player ends up receiving low-value common items. Disappointed, they buy more loot boxes but continue receiving undesirable items. Consequently, the player spends much more money than planned trying to get the desired item.

## **2.3 Invested Value**

**Definition:**

This pattern relates to the Sunk Cost Fallacy, where players feel trapped in the game due to the time or money already invested. It is considered a dark pattern due to how progress is implemented. The game initially suggests an endpoint, but as progression continues, it extends this goal, making players feel they have come too far to quit, or they would lose their investment. The discrepancy between the initial expectation and the eventual reality is the core issue.

**Example:**

In World of Warcraft (WoW), a player may spend years completing all achievements and objectives. Eventually, paid expansions add new content, extending the finish line. Over time, players feel compelled to continue playing, driven by the time and money spent on expansions and subscriptions.

## **2.4 Pay Wall**

### **Definition:**

This pattern refers to a threshold that the player must pay to pass in order to actively participate in the game. This makes it much harder for players to fully enjoy the game, either in competitive terms or due to content being blocked. This paid barrier is often implemented subtly; players are not necessarily forced to pay, but if they do not, they won't have the same experience as others due to restricted content. In competitive games, this creates an uneven playing field, leading to frustration and pressure to pay. When this paywall was not apparent from the start, and the need to spend money arises unexpectedly, it qualifies as a dark pattern.

### **Example:**

A player starts a game that initially seems free-to-play. As they progress, they realize that certain areas, characters, or essential items are locked behind a paywall. While they can continue playing without paying, their experience is significantly limited. In competitive games, they discover that without paying, their chances of competing on equal terms with others are much lower.

## **2.5 Pre-delivered Content**

### **Definition:**

This pattern refers to games sold as complete but containing content that is locked and only accessible through additional payments. These contents are already present in the game at launch but are disguised as downloadable content (DLC), which originally should offer extra expansions released after the base game. The primary issue is that this misleads players into believing they purchased a complete game when, in reality, they need to pay more for content they assumed was included. The key problem lies in how the game is presented: if extra paid content appears to be included in the initial purchase but is not, it constitutes a dark pattern.

### **Example:**

In fighting games like Mortal Kombat or Street Fighter, the game is marketed as complete. However, upon playing, players realize that several characters and maps, sometimes available at launch, are only accessible through additional payments. These contents are not later expansions but parts of the game that were present from the beginning. The player feels the game is incomplete and is forced to pay extra to access content that should have been included in the initial purchase.

## **2.6 Monetized Rivalries**

### **Definition:**

This pattern exploits the player's competitive nature, encouraging them to spend much more than they would like to achieve their desired competitive status. One primary way to implement this is through leaderboards, which rank players by

performance. To secure their position on these leaderboards, players feel pressured to spend far more than they initially intended.

**Example:**

A game features a leaderboard showing player rankings by performance. To climb the leaderboard and maintain a high rank, players can purchase items, powers, or upgrades to enhance their performance. A competitive player, seeing their position threatened by others who spend money, feels compelled to spend more than planned to keep their rank. This results in the player investing far more money in the game than they intended, solely to maintain their competitive status.

### **3 Social Capital Dark Patterns**

#### **3.1 Social Obligation**

**Definition:**

This pattern refers to social pressure exerted by in-game systems that force players to participate in group activities, with consequences for their social standing if they do not. The game design compels players to join these groups; otherwise, their progress is much slower, and certain content becomes inaccessible. To achieve their goals, players feel socially obligated to meet group objectives, spending more time than expected and risking their social position.

**Example:**

Guild systems in games are the most common use of this pattern. In this system, a guild leader, usually the guild's creator, organizes tasks and obligations for each member, applying penalties for those who fail to complete them.

#### **3.2 Impersonation**

**Definition:**

This pattern occurs when a game pretends to be one of the player's friends to motivate them to play. Despite the severity of this dark pattern — as the game impersonates a real person using their name and image — its effectiveness has significantly decreased due to players becoming aware of this tactic.

**Example:**

A classic example is when the game sends notifications or messages pretending to be from a friend, encouraging the player to return to the game or complete certain actions. This tactic aims to deceive the player to keep them engaged with the game as long as possible.

### **3.3 Social Pyramid Schemes**

**Definition:**

This pattern restricts the player's progress unless they recruit more people to play, offering exclusive benefits in return. Although pyramid schemes are illegal as a business model, these systems are often masked within the design of certain games.

**Example:**

A game requires the player to invite friends to obtain specific items or advance to new levels. Without these recruits, the player's progress is extremely slow or entirely blocked, encouraging the spread of the game in a manner similar to a pyramid scheme.