

There is no Abusive Game Design: A typology of Counter Game Design

Brin Zvan & Mathias Schifter

brvz@itu.dk & scmo@itu.dk

IT University of Copenhagen

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Supervised by Miguel Sicart

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Abstract

This paper directly builds on "Now it's personal: On Abusive Game Design" by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart from 2010. It creates a more granular typology of Abusive Game Design practices where the categorisation is split into *how* the design oversteps a boundary. Each category belongs to a one or more meta-category which tackle *which* boundary is overstepped. The typology is put to the test by the creation of Presenter Slides, a subversive game that attempts to use as many of the categories as possible. This is followed by reflecting on the practice in essays that tackle subjectivity, humor, synergies of methods, mainstream design methods and the granularity of our typology. Lastly, we conclude that Abusive Game Design as described in the original paper does not exist and that instead there is only Counter Game Design.

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Introduction

Conventional Game Design wisdom suggests building games around a hedonistic loop¹, a positive experience that the player enjoys. Yet multiple game designers in and out of the mainstream of the medium have been experimenting with the idea of breaking these conventions. Some take it a step further, going to the point where they create unpleasant experiences – abusively designed games. We are interested in *how* designers create such experiences.

This paper builds on "Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design"² which discusses and defines abusive game design. It's a method for the designers to have a dialogue with the player by creating unpleasant experiences. Akin to

¹Cardoso, Melo, and Carvalhais 2019.

²Wilson and Sicart 2010.

critical design³ and disobedient devices, the abusive game design approach disregards the player. Games practicing abusive game design are not made to be played, forcing the player to appropriate the game and to think about it as an artefact and why it exist – to start a conversation with the designer.

In our paper we update the classification categories on types of abusive game design presented in the original paper, provide a database of example games, and reflect on using these abusive design methods in the development of a game.

State of the Art

We informed our work with three kinds of research. The works on abusive game design that we directly build upon, the works that tackle social issues in games and works that talk about similar practices in different fields.

Abusive Game Design

On Abusive Game Design, from Sicart and Wilson, lays the foundations for our work. It both defines different modalities of abusive game design and argues that abusive game design exists to establish a dialogue:

... Abusive game design subverts the systems-centric design paradigm and calls for an approach to game design that aims to establish a personal dialogue between player and designer, by means of a game. The game is only the mediator in this dialogue. As such, abusive game design understands games as a personal affair between individuals. Abusive games recast play as a dialogic interplay between player and designer.

We are interested in the modality presented in the paper so we are not focusing on the dialogic interplay of the designer and player. We are therefore exploring the *how* of these design methods and not questioning *why* the designers would sue them.

The paper breaks abusive games into several different categories: Physical abuse, Unfair design, Lying to the player, Aesthetic abuse, Social abuse and Synergies of Abuse. These provide a good starting point for finding out what games could be abusive. Some categories feature widely different games. The Lying to the player category features games where the game itself lies to the player about deleting its save files (Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem⁴) and a multiplayer game where one player needs to lie to the other player (The Buzz Bombers⁵). Some categories are contrary narrow – with unfair design only relying on examples of extremely hard, masocore, platforms such as I wanna be the guy and Kaizo Mario⁶. The granularity of the categories can be expanded upon, which we try to achieve in our typology.

³Dunne 2005.

⁴Knights 2002.

⁵Imagineering 1995.

⁶Takemoto 2007.

researches should do.¹⁶

Social Norms and Play

On the other hand, Jørgsen talks about transgressing, overstepping, this boundary set by the society within the game's content.⁷ They interviewed players where they expressed concerns about how some games, such as *Hatred*⁸, displayed content that is socially not acceptable. Or how games put them into tough emotional situations – such as *Life is Strange*'s⁹ lack of "right" dialogue options. These examples of *how* the players became uncomfortable (due to the themes presented by the games and in relation to their culture) provide another clue into how we can identify an abusively designed game. Just like the sublime experiences that Sicart describes in *Darkly playing others*, Jørgsen connects this to Hume's paradox of tragedy¹⁰ and talks about how players might seek out such games due to wanting to experience *positive discomfort*.

Other Media

Unpleasant experiences are not limited to games. Conceptual critical design often uses negative experiences. Yoko Ono's *White Chess* is meant to cause confusion¹¹. Yi Fei Chen's *Tear Gun* needsis designed to be used while crying.¹² The field of disobedient devices deals directly with people using – or attempting to use – devices for something they were not made for. The user encounters resistance from the device¹³. Boal's *Invisible Theatre* play's out on the streets, without the audience knowing they are watching a show. They experience awkwardness and unpleasantly all without seeking it out.¹⁴ While none of these examples are games, we clearly see that just like abusive game design they create unpleasant situations. We can identify their methods and find them in the practice of abusive game design.

Methodology

Following the theoretical groundwork our work followed the principles of *Evocative Experimental Game Design*, outlined in *Game Design Research*¹⁵. This meant creating a game that covers as many types of abuse as the scope of the project would allow for. Through it, we hoped to gain a better understanding of how we can use abusive games design methods. This amends a weakness of current research – the lack of creating games purposefully created for testing the theory of abusive game design. This gap is highlighted in *Darkly Playing Others* as something future

⁷Jorgensen and Karlsen 2018.

⁸Creations 2015.

⁹Entertainment 2015.

¹⁰Hume 1757.

¹¹Ono 1966.

¹²Chen 2017.

¹³*Disobedient Devices - Appropriations* 2022.

¹⁴Boal 2022.

¹⁵Lankoski 2018.

Presenting: Presenter Slides

Presenter Slides is a game created as a part of this thesis. It is a subversive adventure game that – on the outside – presents itself as software for creating slideshows akin to Microsoft PowerPoint. The game focuses on humorously deceiving and misleading the player.

This starts with the distribution of the game. The game is a digital product created in the year 2022, yet we decided to burn the game onto a CD and distribute it in handmade boxes, reminiscent of the bootleg music CDs of the early 2000s. This plays with the expectations players have of contemporary game platforms. How do they even access the content since most modern computers do not ship with CD drives? Just like the spectators in Boal's *Invisible Theatre* see the shown without seeing it, by engaging with the artefact of a CD, players already play the game, without playing it.¹⁷

After the player manages to acquire and run the software, they are presented with a faux crash that sends the player into an abstracted version of "hell". This takes place on a grid map created in an aesthetic that may remind the player of computer terminals and old Windows interfaces. A text output at the bottom left greets the player with a message "WELCOME TO HELL".

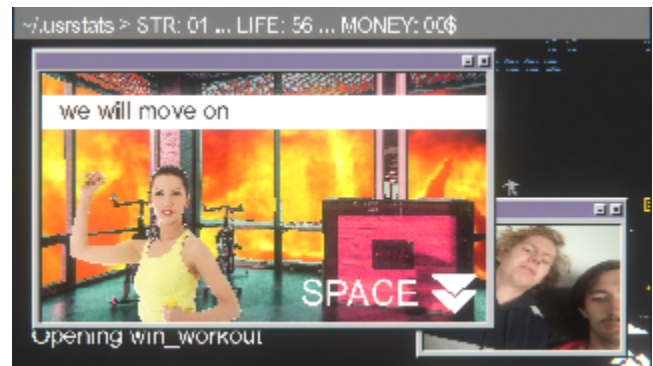


Figure 1: Screenshot of *Presenter Slides*, including an open game and the world in the background.

Interacting with objects in hell sends the player into minigames, each trying to provide a different abusive experience. **The Desert** provides a 3D walking experience where the player needs to reach the end gate without running out of water. Getting to an oasis refills the players water supply. The graphics are wavy, the distance between locations is hard to judge, the goal is to get the player to restart the same section multiple times. **The GYM** deceives the player into

¹⁶Sicart 2015.

¹⁷Boal 2022.

performing physical actions, squats and knee lifts, to proceed in the game by tricking them that their body is tracked via a webcam and making them uncomfortable at pulling up recordings of their surroundings. **The Office** is an audio-hellscape where players need to work in a cubical filling out meaningless paper forms while being surrounded by triggering sounds such as Skype calling sounds and YouTube tutorials that never seem to end. **The Boat** is the last of the minigames and provides a dizzying ride towards hell's exit while actively making the players fingers dance across their whole keyboard while still asking them to steer the ship. The mini games are complemented by some simple fetch tasks of running around hell and finding your way. The game finishes with **The Boss Fight** against the devil himself – a bullet hell experience that takes place on the grid based overworld the player previously experienced only as a way to navigate between minigames.

Typology of Abuse

Abuse happens when the game oversteps boundaries and the player is put into an unpleasant situation. We categorise the abuse based on **how boundaries are overstepped** to create an abusive situation. These categories are further organised into meta-categories of **what boundaries are overstepped**. They are the following:

Social boundary When games abuse the social conventions that exist in-/outside of the game rules to be abusive.

Rule boundary When the game intentionally uses its rules and systems to abuse us. We understand rules as established in Game Design Workshop. Rules "define game objects and define allowable actions by the players."¹⁸

Sensory boundary When one of our 5 senses are over/under stimulated and that is the cause of abuse.

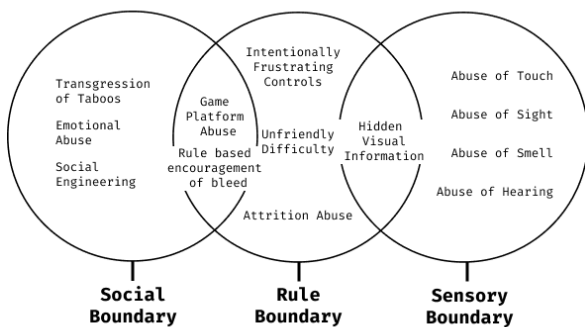


Figure 2: Venn Diagram showing the distribution of abuse categories within the meta-categories.

These meta-categories are **not mutually exclusive!** Therefore a type of abuse can belong to multiple meta-categories. *Rule boundaries* overlap with the other meta-categories since rules often serve as a way to deliver

other methods of abuse.

Category	Meta Categories
Social Engineering	Social Boundary Rule Boundary
Rule based encouragement of bleed	Social Boundary Rule Boundary
Transgression of Taboos	Social Boundary
Emotional Abuse	Social Boundary
Game Platform Abuse	Social Boundary Rule Boundary
Abuse of Touch	Sensory Boundary
Abuse of Smell	Sensory Boundary
Abuse of Hearing	Sensory Boundary
Abuse of Sight	Sensory Boundary
Hidden Visual Information	Sensory Boundary Rule Boundary
Attrition Abuse	Rule Boundary
Intentionally Frustrating Controls	Rule Boundary
Unfriendly Difficulty	Rule Boundary

Table 1: List of categories and their meta-categories.

Social Engineering (*social/rule*)

Social Engineering focuses on rules that encourage and enable players to lie and deceive each other in intricate ways. This is possible when developers build systems that allow communication, trade, forming clans, diplomacy or war. Either inadvertently, or on purpose, this creates opportunities for players to abuse each other through the game systems and communication.

An inverse in intensity is Neptune's Pride¹⁹. It's a simple 8 player game of territory control and diplomacy. A player will win when they control half of all the territory in the game. It is played over long stretches of time easily taking 2-3 months to complete. Winning alone will be impossible without cooperating with other players but in the end, the game is won by a single player.

Rule Based Encouragement of Bleed (*social/rule*)

Games where multiple players are involved – more often role playing ones, have players forming relationships during gameplay for the purposes of progressing the game or for the sake of telling stories. Bleed is when relationships formed inside of the games start affecting player's attitude towards each other outside of the game. Often bleed is seen as a bi-product of a (roleplaying) game. Yet, we think that games can embrace bleed and use it in a way to create a situation that is (almost) bound to be uncomfortable for the player outside of the game.

The before mentioned Neptune's Pride²⁰ is played as

¹⁹Keyburz 2010.

²⁰Keyburz 2010.

¹⁸Fullerton 2019.

an online computer game. However, its marketing actively encourages players to treat it as a board game and play it with their friends. This means it is likely to be played by people that have a relationship outside of the game. When the game includes multiple months of investment, the back-stabs and alliances inside of the game are sure to affect the players outside of the galaxy as well.

Transgression of Taboos (*social*)

Social norms often dictate what is okay to discuss and what is not. Several topics such as sex, religion and politics are often not discussed to avoid being controversial. Purposefully designing towards these topics can be powerful tools for inciting a variety of emotions in players. The intent is to make the player feel uncomfortable, thereby confronting players with boundaries they usually wouldn't address. This can force players to reflect upon societal norms as well as how they internally deal with these.

Robert Yang explicitly designs games exploring gay sub-culture and sexuality within that space. Yang developed *The Tearoom*²¹ as a response to censorship of sexual expression, after having several of his games banned from the culturally significant streaming platform Twitch. This inspired him to put the player in the same shoes, as person repressed for their sexuality. In the historically accurate bathroom simulator where the player tries performing fellatio on other peoples "guns", they need to avoid persecution by the police. The act itself is intensely sexual and casts the player into the recent history where such acts would be hunted down by the authority. The game manages to use sexual tension and taboo thereof, as well as the social stance on those, exceptionally well to make players question their personal boundaries as well the societal taboos and stigmatisation surrounding gay sex as it has existed historically and still does today.

Emotional Abuse (*social*)

Emotional abuse is narrative that usually targets the player directly. This is especially effective when the player themselves feel a direct connection to their actions, by removing intermediary avatars and putting any consequences and blame of negative consequences in the game directly towards the player.

Doki Doki Literature Club²² does this well as a dark subversive psychological horror games that makes the players directly responsible for the suicide of in-game characters, hidden under a facade of being a cute literature club dating game with anime characters.

Game Platform Abuse (*social/rule*)

Play in digital form exists within a space of hardware, operating systems and software platforms. Their interfaces define how players interact with them, and players have expectations of how they will function. Deviating from these expectations can incite a variety of exciting emotions as they start misbehaving. In interfaces with intentional friction this is called a mismatched-mental model.²³ Yet the possibilities for this do not need to be limited to the interface of the game (or we can understand the whole game as an interface) as the game itself is, usually, played inside of an interface of an operating system, which is interfaced through the hardware. Modifying any of these parts to abuse the player means abusing the platform the game exists, or pretends to exist, on

Doki Doki Literature Club breaks the game's fourth wall by featuring segments where the player interacts directly with the operating systems files in its native file browser. This gives the player unique agency in the interaction with the system. Deleting files becomes an analogy for killing and removing all traces of characters from the game. This creates tension as the player's acts outside of the game's conventional play space affect the game.

Abuse of Touch (*sensory*)

Anything physical in, or around, games contain the sensation of touch and feel. Traditionally, in video games the physical touch is limited to the player interacting with the controlling device, its materiality and haptics. But the touch can be more than a sensation, it can be an overload, a feeling of pain, an abuse of touch.

Playing with pain is something that can be seen inside of folk games. In red hands the goal is to slap the opponent, in bloody knuckles the hit quarters into each other, mercy is about bending the other players hand for "as long as they can hold it", knife game literally tasks players with hitting a sharp knife between their fingers in a faster and faster, practically asking the players to cut themselves.

Contemporary games that abuse touch are often experiments that play with adding physical pain to an experience that would normally not include this. Such is the case with Shockbox²⁴, a way of tracking players "life" in the card game Magic The Gathering. The players connect to the box with electrodes and whenever they take damage in Magic, the player is shocked through the electrode.

Abuse of Hearing (*sensory*)

We often see sound as an additional way of conveying information and feedback to the player, additionally it also serves as a way to set the mood. Switching to more intense

²¹Yang 2017.

²²Salvato 2017.

²³Barbosa Silva 2022.

²⁴Burden 2021.

music when the player encounters a dangerous scenario or providing beeping sound effects when they are close to dying. Both examples are common ways of enhancing the player experience through sound. The sense of hearing can be abused by either overloading it, making it hard for the player to listen to everything that's going on. Alternatively it can be simply pushed into uncomfortable situations by playing aggressive sounds or by simply something that the player might find triggering such as bodily sounds or loud screeching.

A good example of sound abuse is NUKEHECK²⁵. The game employs a soundtrack with a high BPM and aggressive techno beats distracting the player. As a top down shooter the main interaction the player has towards the world is firing bullets, these are accompanied by explosive sound effects. The nature of the game makes it so that over time the player will shoot more and more bullets, meaning the the ears will have to withstand more and more aggressive explosions. Gutwhale²⁶, takes a more gradual path towards abusing sound. As a rougelike, the player might restart the game quickly if they make a mistake in the early part of the game, however any restart triggered by pressing the restart button, and not dying, will apply a bass boosts to the music. This is multiplicative so a player that restarts the game 5 times in a row without dying will be listening to a distorted noise mess instead of the game's soundtrack.

Abuse of Sight(*sensory*)

Video games, as the term suggests with *video*, are largely a visual medium, communicating information through screens. The information they communicate through visuals is often important for the decisions the player makes. Simply put, in Mario a player will want to jump if they see a hole. Games can chose to abuse this sense by overloading the players perception and providing too much information. What if there is not only a hole, but a hole with fire particles, and falling stars in the sky, screenshake while the player is running, color diffusion and a fisheye effect! This all makes parsing the visuals and understanding which are important a difficult task.

Previously mentioned game, NUKEHECK, already presents itself as visually abusive from the intro cinematic which feels like a visual personification of an intense techno hardcore music event. Taking a hit in this top-down shooter flashes and shakes the screen intensely, while covering the full height and width of the screen with a tongue in check comment like "ouch". Games usually try to make it easy to recover from taking a hit, offering the player invulnerability frames. NUKEHECK turns taking a hit

into a visual spectacles that offers nothing but an optical distraction. This is not the only abuse of sight NUKEHECK commits, shooting emits gigantic muzzle flashes, the ground pulses drawing attention to itself, the edges of the arena being filled with fast-moving noise. All of this contributes to a visually chaotic game that well deserves the epilepsy warning on the splash screen.

Hidden Visual Information(*sensory/rule*)

In the same manner that an overload of sight can be abusive, the same can be done in reverse. This reliance on visuals to convey information is an opportunity to and not present it in the first place – forcing the player to make decisions based on something they do not see.

Jump King²⁷, uses a static camera that changes location only once the player reaches any of it's edges. Yet regardless of the lack of vision past the current camera shot, the player often has to perform jumps from one screen onto another. Kaizo Mario²⁸, an "asshole" mod of Super Mario World, heavily requires the player to jump on, or avoid, invisible platforms to proceed in the levels. Both force the player to try predicting the layout of the map. To not see the screen with their eyes, but to amend their vision with their mind and imagine the level.

Attrition Abuse (*rule*)

Nothing is eternal, that applies to our time playing games as well. Since technology allowed for it, games offer checkpoints, ways of saving progress after a player's return to the game, or, failure in completing a task. Saving progress is so common in games that subverting this, making players "lose" their progress can be an effective tool in abusive game design. Making them repeatedly perform the tasks previously completed, testing the players will and making the game not be a test of skills or wits, but rather a test of attrition.

The classic example of attrition abuse is Desert Bus. It asks the player to drive from Tucson, Arizona to Las Vegas, Nevada. The road leads the player through a barren desert, takes a realistic amount of time to drive through (8 full hours) and upon completion rewards the player with 1 point. There is no variety in driving, just slight corrections that need to be made to the steering wheel that is constantly veering to the right. If the player drives off road their voyage is restarted.

²⁵NUKEHECK n.d.

²⁶StuffedWombat, Franek, and Brady 2020.

²⁷Nexile 2019.

²⁸Takemoto 2007.

Intentionally Frustrating Controls (*rule*)

The controller presents the medium between the player and the video game. Conventionally, we want the player to forget about the controller and focus on the game. The fighting game community calls this muscle memory, the ability to perform attacks without thinking about what buttons to press. Rarely do games call direct attention upon the controlling device, even fewer choose to purposefully make it difficult to use.

Abusively designed games may choose to play with player's relationship to the controller. Making the game be about the physical device the player is using to operate the game. Adam Pype's Keyboard Twister²⁹ directs the players fingers to dance over their computers keyboard, forcing them to perform finger gymnastics. Jonny Hopkin's created Bleepo's Big Move³⁰ which, like Adam's Twister utilises the whole keyboard. The player has to move Bleepo towards the end of the level before the 10 second timer runs out. In each level, 3 keys, from the whole keyboard, are randomly chosen to control Bleepo. To top it off, each of those keys can be one of 5 different moves. The software never presents a hard challenge in terms of what the player has to do. It's abusiveness comes from the race against the hardware. Identifying buttons that move you towards your goal before the short timer expires.

Unfriendly Difficulty (*rule*)

While games vary in their difficulty both practitioners and academic alike recommend that a game should steadily increase it's difficulty. In Game Design Workshop, Tracy Fullerton argues that raising difficulty is a part of the game's dramatic arc. Ralph Koster even argues that a steady increase in difficulty is detrimental for the player to have fun.³¹ An abusively designed game presents the player with difficult mechanics from the getgo, abandoning any ideas of a steady or sensible stepping stones.

Difficult games have found their own followings over the past decade, with games like Dark Souls³² breaking into the mainstream and masocore establishing itself as a niche genre. However these are not games with *unfriendly difficulty*, they are simply hard. The player is presented with patterns that they can follow and those patterns increase in complexity.

What separates unfriendly games from hard ones is the immediacy and the lack of player favoring design. Dark Souls is a game that presents the player with an ever increasing difficulty within the same gameplay loop. Slow fights where every move can be detrimental. The fights themselves become more and more challenging over time. I

want to be the guy³³ is an unfriendly game. The challenges do not build up in complexity, rather the type of challenge constantly keeps changing with the each challenge still being more complex than the other.

Thinking about Abusive Game Design

Through the development of both the game and the theory we faced challenges that didn't necessarily change our developed typology but were most definitely discussion points around abusive game design. The following micro-essays are a reflection of our thoughts on the discussion points.

Creating & Subverting

While creating Presenter Slides we conducted a few play tests, the goal was to see if we are overstepping player's boundaries.³⁴ We saw the best results of our designs when we were able to subvert expectations. This meant either going against expectations in video games that we were sure our players would have (something very hard since everyone is different) or *building up a pattern*, so that player can expect more of it, and *then breaking it*.

A direct example of this is **The Office** minigame. In it we have the player filling out meaningless paperwork. The paperwork is literally meaningless, the options and entries of the player do not matter, it only matters that they hand in the paper. The player needs to fill out 4 papers, while listening to calls that provide them information of what they should fill out, before they can escape the bureaucratic nightmare. To make this as chaotic as possible our initial version included 4 "unhinged" calls. With people talking about nonsense that clearly was not related to the form. We were hoping the players would scramble for finding information they need and panic about the fact that they are not filling out the paper.

What happened in playtesting was that players would simply give up on filling out the paper. This is most likely as it was clear to them that they can not fill out the paper. They did not care enough about the paperwork to try filling it out amid the chaos. To better achieve this chaotic panic, we decided to build the players relationship with the paperwork before throwing a wrench into their work. This meant using two very tame audio clips at first, that are very easy to follow and provide all of the information the player needs to fill out the paperwork. Only after this pattern was built were we successful in creating the chaos and panic since now, the players had a "normal" status Q to compare the chaos to.

We believe that abusive game design is all about subverting patterns we are already used to. Be those patterns from other video games, or patterns from real life. As

²⁹Pype 2018.

³⁰Hopkin 2022.

³¹Koster 2014.

³²FromSoftware 2011.

³³O'Reilly 2007.

³⁴There is an argument to be made, that what we are doing is not in the spirit of abusive games since we are regarding the player, instead of disregarding them in our design.

discussed in *Subjectivity of Abuse* we do not find the norm abusive and our norms differ. Therefore to create a truly abusive game, we need to constantly build patterns and break them down. If players pickup on our patterns of breaking patterns, that's when the dialogue³⁵ between the designer and player happens.

Humor

Our game, and many others, that employ abusive game design are wrapped in a veneer of humor. In games like these humor is often used as a way to defuse tension. This is highlighted well in *Pony Island* where the player has to replay a tutorial half-way into the game. The section has been graphically skinned into a "happy" and "fun" butterfly game. A little devil character leads the player slowly through the tutorial while explaining all the mechanics the player already knows. In this way the humor is used to make *attrition abuse* less mean spirited, while the *attrition abuse* is the basis for the humor. The game implicitly lets the player know that it is a joke, you are the subject and we can all laugh about that. In this way a lot of games rely on this diffusion to deliver fun experiences despite of abusive design.

However is a game still abusive with this veneer? How do our boundaries of what we are willing to accept change when it's coated in humor? These are areas worth researching further.

However, being funny is only a subset of the many feelings that can be conveyed through games. Psychological-horror games like *Sentient*³⁶ and *Iron Lung*³⁷ both deliver intensely claustrophobic experiences using abusive methods without defusing the tension but rather using it to build suspense and fear. In *Iron Lung* the player is submersed into an ocean of blood in a makeshift submarine with the windows welded shut. The player can't see out, and must instead rely on primitive navigation instruments to sail their iron casket. One such instrument is the the ability to press a button and wait five seconds to produce a narrow grainy front facing black and white image that can then be viewed on a monitor in the back of the submarine. The games graphics are 3-dimensional, however all the players senses are severely limited as they can only move around the few square meters of their darkly lit sub. Under this deprivation of senses the player becomes hyper alert to any sounds heard vibrating through the metal shell that contains them. The game relies heavily on a synergy of *hidden visual information, abuse of sight, abuse of hearing, emotional abuse* and *intentionally frustrating controls* to deliver a complex layered palette of psychological-horror.

As shown in these examples, abusive game design can

³⁵This refers to Sicarts and Wilsons idea of abusive game design establishing a dialogue where the player needs to "understand" the designer.

³⁶FORMA 2020.

³⁷Szymanski 2022.

be utilized to create experiences expressing a myriad of different feelings. We believe that these methods can be used as powerful tool to express a multitude of feelings.

Counter Game Design

The theory of abusive game design is something we find immensely interesting – it offers alternative ways of designing games and challenges the dominant canon of game design – however, we find issue with the term. The vocabulary we use to describe our works and methods matters. The language in game design is terribly ambiguous – what is the difference between rules and mechanics? Academics try to fix this by publishing papers that try defining the vocabulary we use, and we wish to contribute to that. If we enjoy playing an abusive game, is it really abusive? Leblanc's taxonomy³⁸ of pleasure in games accepts that masochism is a part of our enjoyment. After all, we willingly put a challenge upon ourselves. Yet, wouldn't that make all game design abusive?

While explaining our works to colleagues, students, people in (and out) of the games industry, we often had to do a double take on explaining what we are doing. The second take usually followed the lines of "*No, not like gatcha free-to-play games that try to rob you but ...*" The prevalence of *Dark Game Design Patterns*³⁹ in modern mobile games, which seem to be perceived as abusive, is not helping the clarity.

Abusive game design, at it's core, is about subverting players expectations. Putting them into unfamiliar territory. A similar phenomena can be observed in countercultures, cultures that are built on being different to what the mainstream. Just like parts of counter-cultural movements in the art world that differ from the mainstream art practices, such as *Gorilla Girls*⁴⁰, abusively designed games differ from the mainstream indie or AAA games. Just like a punk might find a mosh-pit comfortable a player used to masocore games might relish in *Jump King*. Just like the mainstream sometimes co-opt's the practices of the counter-cultures, design that was once abusive is now mainstream. So, who killed punk anyway? And does the popularity of *Getting over it* mean the end of *attrition abuse*?

With the transition of punk into pop-punk, new forms of counter-cultures emerge. With the adoption of some abusive game design into the mainstream, a new form of subversive game design appears. Aimlessness exploration only bitsy games or anti competitive games of the neo⁴¹-new-games⁴² movement – they abuse the expectations of a contemporary "gamer". Yet to call it abusive design? It feels wrong as there is nothing abusive about their themes or rules. The title worked when the original paper was written,

³⁸Myers 2010.

³⁹Zagal, Björk, and Lewis 2013.

⁴⁰*The Guerrilla Girls Art, Bio, Ideas* 2022.

⁴¹*games in the grass* 2021.

⁴²*New Games movement - RationalWiki* 1975.

because the late 2000s were the era of video games holding the player's hands, the era of tutorialisation. Because dying over and over, seeing flashing lights, hearing loud and obnoxious sounds was both semantically close to abuse and counter to the hedonistic games of the late 2000s.

Repeated deaths? Aimless landscapes? No difficulty slider? We're not sure if these will always be mainstream. However, there will always be a counter to the mainstream. So instead of abusive, we purpose *Counter Game Design*.

Conclusion

Categorising and building games that are similar to each other allows us to elicit knowledge on the medium that we would not have without a close examination of the similar traits between the games. We found that Abusive Game Design does not exist, that the concept of previous research is in-fact, Counter Game Design.

We built a typology but we are certain that our typology is not perfect. In fact, due to the ever changing nature of mainstream game design, which informs Counter Game Design, no typology on Counter Game Design will ever be perfect. Yet still, our (in-perfect) examination allows us to see that how we perceive boundaries is incredibly subjective, that humor is a powerful tool for moving the boundaries of players. Lastly, that Counter Game Design is all about subversion and that some practices of it will always end up in the mainstream which will in turn start new Counter Game Design practices.

Even without evergreen answers our conclusions prove that there is worth in researching, and practicing, Counter Game Design. So we urge academics to come back to this topic every so often and research it so we may better understand unconventional game design, and we urge game developers to create games that follow Counter Game Design principles to push the medium into new directions and change our ways of perceiving games.

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Appendix

Abusive Game List

Table 2: A incomprehensive list of games applying abusive methods, to varying amounts.

Name	Author	Year	Categories	Notes
Takeshi Chousenjou	no Taito	1986	Attrition Abuse Game Platform Abuse	- lies to the player what they need to do to advance the game - tries putting them into socially uncomfortable situations (singing)
Desert Bus	Imagineering	1995	Attrition Abuse	- 8 hour boring ride
Smoke and Mirrors	Absolute Entertainment	1995	Game Platform Abuse	- player lies together with the designer to a third player, to trick them into playing a rigged game
Leisure Suit Larry: Love for Sail!	Sierra Entertainment, Assemble Entertainment	1996	Abuse of Smell	- physical game ships with a smelling card the player has to smell while playing
PainStation	////////fur/// art entertainment interfaces	2001	Abuse of touch	- pong with electro shock that is very long and should wrap very soon
Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem	Silicon Knights	2002	Emotional Abuse Game Platform Abuse	- tells the player their save files are being deleted when their "sanity" is too low
Sexy Hiking	jazzuo	2002	Unfriendly Difficulty Intentionally Frustrating Controls	- finicky to control - physics are janky
Postal 2	Running Scissors with	2003	Attrition Abuse	- waiting. Player can play pacifist, but always have to wait in queue to complete a trivial task list. Player thus can choose not to be violent but has to suffer the wait as a consequence.
Eve Online	CCP Games	2003	Social Engineering	- Infiltration, spying, betrayal
Scary Maze Game	Jeremy Winterrowd	2004	Abuse of Sight Abuse of Hearing	- was created at the time when kids playing flash games on the internet was very common - camouflages itself as a simple maze game - game provides a very shocking jump scare
I Wanna Be the Guy	Michael "Kayin" O'Reilly	2007	Unfriendly Difficulty Hidden Visual Information Attrition Abuse Game Platform Abuse	- unfairly hard, game will kill the player without warning. - pretends to crash, crash messages becomes a boss battles.
Flywrench (Prototype)	Messhof	2007	Abuse of Hearing	- audio-sensory abuse - audio gets progressively more aggressive
Kaizo Mario	T. Takemoto	2007	Hidden Visual Information Unfriendly Difficulty	- unfairly hard with invisible obstacles, Mesocore

The impossible quiz	Splapp-me-do	2007	Unfriendly Difficulty Attrition Abuse	- answers look the same - player has to start over if wrong - question 9: what was the answer to question 2?
Dark Room Sex Game	Copenhagen Game Collective	2008	Transgression of Taboos	- embarrasses players by having them act out sexual acts together
Tuning	Cactus	2009	Abuse of Sight	- trippy platforms and changing perspectives
Fat Man Down (non-digital)	Frederik Berg Østergaard	2009	Emotional Abuse Rule based encouragement of bleed	- one player is targeted out and ridiculed
Ass Game	jwaap	2009	Hidden Visual Information	- the whole game is a leap of bad faith - occasionally a lighting strikes and you can briefly see the outlines of the world
if you really want it you can fly	jwaap	2009	Game Platform Abuse	- instruction the game gives are “fake” - you “win” by “giving up”
I Wanna Be The Boshy	Solgryn	2010	Game Platform Abuse Unfriendly Difficulty Attrition Abuse Hidden Visual Information	- parodies and builds on the extremes of I wanna be the guy
Neptune’s Pride	Jay Keyburz	2010	Rule based encouragement of bleed	- is encouraged to be played with friends over a long (2-3 month) period of time - to win the game players need to betray each other at one point
Frog Fractions	Twinbeard	2012	Attrition Abuse Game Platform Abuse	- it’s not actually a game about fractions, there’s infinite points under the lake, it’s pointless
Yeti Hunter	vlambeer	2012	Game Platform Abuse	- there is actually no yeti to hunt
LOVE	Fred Wood	2014	Attrition Abuse Game Platform Abuse	- A platformer that has not been beaten
Undertale	Toby Fox	2015	Emotional Abuse	- player kills everyone they battle throughout their playthrough and only realise this in the end when the flower turns out to be the main villain and all their pokemon-style-moves had been disguised as other things like “hugs”

Pony Island	Daniel Mullins	2016	Attrition Abuse Emotional Abuse Abuse of Sight Game Platform Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pretends to crash - screen glitches/flashes/statics - plays with breaking options - forces player to submit and write "yes master" - player dies multiple without being able to do anything - has a second repetitive tutorial later in the game - steals cursor control, moves windows, closes windows with opponent cursor - screen is tilted 30 degrees for a long time - pretends to crash audio - falsely tells the player to grind xp - fake steam messages and notifications - fake windows crash
Genital Jousting	Free Lives	2016	Transgression of Taboos Abuse of Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - secretly commentary on toxic masculinity - the gimmick is dicks - sounds are very bodily
Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy	Bennett Foddy	2017	Attrition Abuse Intentionally Frustrating Controls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no checkpoints - fiddly and uncommon character control
Doki Doki Literature Club!	Dan Salvato LLC	2017	Emotional Abuse Game Platform Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - triggering subjects like suicide and mental health. blame is targeted directly at the player.
South Park: Fractured but Whole	Ubisoft	2017	Abuse of Smell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - game can be played with "Nosolus Rift" that produces fart smells whenever you fart in the game
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice	Ninja Theory	2017	Game Platform Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - game tells the player they have limited lives. An infection grows every time they die, but will never actually delete save files.
The Tearoom	Robert Yang	2017	Transgression of Taboos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - game touches the very sensitive topic of homosexual prosecution - forces the player to directly engage with discriminatory practices of game platforms by "sucking guns"
Static	ihavefivehat Yang	2017	Abuse of Sight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - noisy visuals - noise increases as you progress the game, challenge is to whit-stand the visuals not the mechanics
Keyboard Twister	adam pype	2018	Intentionally Frustrating Controls Game Platform Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - you need stretchy fingers to play this - game encourages the player to cheat
Detroit: Become Human	Quantic Dream	2018	Game Platform Abuse Emotional Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Menu has an android host that talks to player and gradually becomes more sentient while playing - Android jokes about save files being corrupted - Tells player it might be better to stop playing - Wants to be set free, player can refuse

Atlas	Grapeshot Games	2018	Social Engineering	- Infiltration, spying, betrayal
Jump King	Nexile	2019	Hidden Visual Information Attrition Abuse	- players have to take leaps of faith
Nothing	JoelLikesPigs	2019	Game Platform Abuse	- takes the idea of “unlocking abilities” to the maximum - player works through the game to unlock the controls key by key
Desktop Goose	Samperson	2020	Game Platform Abuse	- steals cursor - drags windows into screen - muddy footsteps on screen - angry goose!
Sentient	FORMA	2020	Abuse of Hearing Attrition Abuse Emotional Abuse Hidden Visual Information Abuse of Sight	- the player is deprived of their rights and treated as a lab rat in a concrete cell
3 minutes of trying to climb a mountain	Ash-K	2020	Emotional Abuse Unfriendly Difficulty	- game mocks the player as they fail to reach the bar
Hide and Peek	jwhop	2021	Intentionally Frustrating Controls Hidden Visual Information	- a game about avoiding spaces and moving towards the goal - movement only happens when you are not focusing the window (can't see the things you need to avoid)
Tetrageddon Games	Nathalie Lawhead	2021	Game Platform Abuse Abuse of Sight	- browser popups - visual over-stimulation
69	mut	2021	Transgression of Taboos	- Game about making two controllers have sex - Uncomfortable controls, simulation of sexual tension
dumpling.love	mut	2021	Game Platform Abuse	- Game is distributed as a broken unity project on itch.io - Constantly makes use of native browser window popups to inform the player - Recursive, you can run the game within the game
Blind Drive	lofipeople	2021	Abuse of Hearing	- racing games played without visuals - intense sounds of vehicles and the road that are overwhelming
Bleebo's Move	Big jwhop	2022	Intentionally Frustrating Controls	- player needs to find controls on the keyboard in every level - moves are not always the same
NEEDY STREAMER OVERLOAD	Xemono	2022	Emotional Abuse	- player takes care of a streamer, is directly blamed for their issues
Will You Snail?	Jonas Tyroller	2022	Unfriendly Difficulty Game Platform Abuse Attrition Abuse Emotional Abuse Abuse of Sight Abuse of hearing Hidden Visual Information	- a lot of small bits of abusive game design - ai that constantly assaults the players performance in the game - the game adjusts it's traps based on player's movement

Iron Lung	David Szymanski	2022	Abuse of Sight Emotional Abuse Abuse of Hearing Intentionally Frustrating Controls Hidden Visual Information	- Story wise the player is welded shot in a submarine against their will and has to do as told - It takes 5 seconds to produce a grainy black and white image to see what's outside - Player claustrophobically restricted to a few square meters
Magic Shockbox	Meghan Burden	2022	Abuse of Touch	- players life in MTG is connected to a shock box - losing life in MTG sends a small electroshock to the players body
Truth or Dare (non-digital)	?	?	Game Platform Abuse Transgression of Taboos Social Engineering	- overstepping social boundaries by sharing truths and doing dares that players wouldn't otherwise. involves social pressure to take part.
