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Thinking Outside the Lootbox

Balancing on the Scale of Gacha

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Abstract

Lootboxes currently cause a frequent debate in the games industry where the discussion is often focused on the connection to gambling. In this thesis an addition to this debate is made by taking a closer look at Gacha design – a way to design games around monetization – through theory and player opinions. Conclusions point to that if Gacha is viewed as a spectrum of strength the discussion can benefit from an increased understanding of all monetization systems within games regardless of their abstract definitions. The data was collected through focus groups and analyzed based on current research of the common topics that surfaced during the focus group discussions. The thesis found that overall knowledge surrounding Gacha was lacking and by looking at Gacha as a design method opened up for a broader discussion with connections to Lootboxes.

Keywords: dark game design patterns, Gacha, Gachapon, Gasha, gambling, game industry, Lootboxes, Lootcrates, video games, virtual economies.

Sammanfattning

Lootboxes orsakar för närvarande en återkommande debatt inom spelindustrin där diskussionens fokus ofta är kring kopplingen till hasardspel. I detta examensarbete görs ett tillägg till debatten genom en närmre undersökning av Gacha design – vilket är ett designverktyg för inkomstgenerering – genom teori och spelares åsikter. Slutsatserna pekar mot att om Gacha är sett som ett spektrum av styrka kan diskussionen nyttjas för att bidra till en ökad förståelse av alla former av inkomstgenereringssystem inom spel oberoende av deras abstrakta definitioner. Data samlades genom fokusgrupper och analyserades utifrån nuvarande forskning runt de vanligaste ämnen som uppstod under fokusgruppernas diskussioner. Detta examensarbetet fann att den övergripande kunskapen kring Gacha var begränsad och genom att titta på Gacha som en design method öppnade upp för en bredare diskussion med kopplingar till Lootboxes.

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1. Introduction

Lootbox, which is a way to monetize video games, is a word that has been mentioned across forums, articles and social media a great number of times. A larger discussion was sparked by the release of one video game, *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (EA, 2017a) which was coupled with questions such as: Are Lootboxes gambling? How should they be legislated? How much should a game cost? Many of these questions have been asked and answered in various ways (Chalk, n.d.; Johansson-Sundelius, n.d.; Rose, n.d.; Wilde, 2017), followed by an outrage in the form of industry and player opinions, which all added to a larger discourse about Lootboxes. (Centerstrain01, n.d.; Hunt, n.d.; MBMMaverick, n.d.; RED, 2017). During the data collection of this thesis Belgium enacted a law that essentially bans all Lootboxes that can be bought with real money in video games (Lee, 2018). This spoke on the relevancy of this study and the urgency of contributing to the discussion. Therefore this thesis presents Gacha which is a method of design from Japan that has been largely overlooked and can assist with that contribution (Koeder, Tanaka, & Sugai, 2017).

In this thesis focus groups and former research was analyzed and by using terms within Adam Telfer's definition of Gacha (Telfer, 2017a), a void of knowledge was found. Experienced players discussed their opinions on Lootboxes both before and after they were introduced to the concept of Gacha design, including if they were aware of Gacha design to begin with.

1.1 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the knowledge of those who are well-informed within the subject of games in our society. The discussion surrounding the subject of Gacha game design and Lootboxes could be used to inform people about the practices that some games exercise. The goal is to advise anyone with an interest of video games or its industry to be aware of these design decisions and make them conscious about the design in games. The reason is not to argue for or against this form of design because it can potentially become something that benefits both players and game developers if applied correctly as argued in the *Analysis*. The importance of such information is argued for by using research about Gacha design and its success on the Asian market, connected to subjects surrounding law, addiction and gambling. These three subjects will not be explored further as they have already been discussed in the former research (Abarbanel, 2018; Askelöf, 2013). As such, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

How is Gacha design and Lootboxes discussed by experienced players and what conclusions can be drawn from it while comparing it to previous research?

1.2 Previous Works

In this chapter several key concepts will be explained that has been studied before by other researchers, designers or defined through the research of this paper. Here are the key concepts that will be imperative to the readers understanding of this thesis.

1.2.1 What is Gacha?

Gacha is a term that acts as an umbrella for different kinds of monetization methods used in game design. But as presented by Telfer (2017a) it can be used to design video games. As explained by Koeder (2017, pp. 3–4) the word Gacha has another origin than a virtual one:

The origin of 'Gacha' naming is a real toy lottery machine, 'Gacha Gacha' or 'Gacha Pon', capsuled small toy lottery machine. Player of 'Gacha Gacha' can turn the machine's lever to get a capsule with several hundred yen (several dollar) per a turn. The sound of turning lever is like 'Gacha Gacha' and the sound of opening a capsule is similar to 'Pon'. Generally, Gacha Gacha toy is not sold in a store with price tag. Therefore people who want a Gacha Gacha toy should try their luck by turning Gacha Gacha machine lever paying real money.

This description explains where the word Gacha comes from but does not explain how the word is now used by video game companies mainly from Japan. Although it is most prevalent in Japan (Oku, 2016) it has become popular in the western market as well. The simplest examples to look at is the mobile or social game market, as they have adopted the system and used it for a long time. *Farmville* is a game made by Zynga (Zynga, 2007) where the player is tasked with attending and growing a farm. The player may harvest crops or visit other players to acquire Farm Coins which is the less valuable currency in the game. As mentioned by Bycer (2017), having several currencies to purchase items from is a way of Gacha design that is commonly used and is also known as dual currencies. One is a soft currency that you gain by playing the game, usually the less valuable and a hard currency that you can buy with real money, usually the more valuable resource (Fields, 2014). When a player has planted his crops they become available for harvest after a set amount of time that is different depending on what crops were bought. The crops wither sometime after the crop is harvestable, but the player can buy items that revive the crop, or they can buy instant grow items for real money. This is a form of player retention where the Gacha design is causing players to want to come back and play. If the player misses the chance to harvest their crops the option as mentioned before to revive the plants can be bought for money. The player can also receive or buy livestock or trees that do not wither and die but can be “harvested” for money at a set time after their last harvest. In a talk by Telfer (2017a) regarding how to create strong Gacha for games he claims that the designer must create a need for the player to use the Gacha system to progress in the game. In other words, social games like *Farmville* create a need to use things that cost real money – hard currency – as it becomes more and more relevant as you progress in the game, because harvesting and managing the farm becomes more time consuming and tedious. After expanding the farm about 13 times (FarmVille Wiki, n.d.) the player cannot pay for an expansion with soft currencies but must purchase the expansion with the hard currency, thus forcing the player to use the real money transactions in the game to progress. This has been a proven and very profitable practice in the game industry for a while (Oku, 2016, p. 28).

Adam Telfer is a game designer for the company Chatterbox Games (Chatterbox Games, n.d.) and he separately runs the webpage www.mobilefreetoplay.com. Telfer has one of the most extensive explanations on how to implement Gacha into every game and to see Gacha as *game design*. In the video presentation *The recipe for strong Gacha* (PocketGamerbiz, 2017) he mentions Gacha as something with strength. Gacha strength is a spectrum and Telfer argue that a game can be steered *towards* stronger Gacha by using three lenses:

- **Depth** – How long will the Gacha last? Which means how is the content that is presented to the player, also known as drops, used so that it will create a bigger or updating pool for players to buy from? To increase Depth the designer should use the content within the game to motivate the player to keep purchasing content. This means introducing new content regularly, hindering the player from receiving too much content on each purchase and rewarding them with just enough to keep them from getting buyer's remorse.
- **Width** – Why do the player want all the content? The designer should make all the content in the game as relevant and helpful as possible to the player. This will increase the relevancy of the item bought even if the item is a low valued one. An example would be to have collectable classes or elements that are weak to each other. The designer would make all the classes and elements equally important to trump each other in the game. This increases the will for the player to collect all the content in the game to be as resilient as possible. Another example would be the implementation of implicit counters which makes the collection of all the content to test strategies a big part of the game for players. This is seen in big content updates in games like Hearthstone (Blizzard, 2014). While collection of content is a big part of Gacha Width, upgrading of all the collected content is equally important to draw out the longevity of the game. The amount of content used when entering gameplay should be large and relevant enough to motivate the collection and upgrading of all the content.
- **Desire** – How much do the player care about pulling from (engaging in) the Gacha? Have the players feel a need to pull from the Gacha. This can be achieved with: A strong intellectual property (IP), cosmetics for competitive games or to link it to progression, as explained in the Farmville example. Skill or luck can affect Gacha Desire in a negative way if they are a strong aspect of a game. They can result in having the player feel like they do not need to pull from the Gacha because they can gather the items or achieve wins through skill or luck instead. To avoid this and building an effective Gacha Desire a game should be heavily based on stats.

The more the games design creates a *need* for a player to use Gacha to progress in the game the stronger the Gacha becomes. Therefore, during this thesis, the mention of weak and strong Gacha will be used to define where on the spectrum the Gacha component lays, and because of the extensive definition Telfer gives of Gacha as a whole, it is the one used in the rest of this paper.

1.2.2 What is a Lootbox/Lootcrate?

When talking about Gacha it is easy to see the similarities with Lootboxes: the random chance of receiving an item that can be used by the player in some way (Koeder et al., 2017). The participants in the focus groups had a hard time defining Lootboxes themselves, but all the interviewed groups had roughly the same definition: *a Lootbox is an in-game item which the player either buys or receives for free but must then pay with real money to open. When opening the Lootbox the player receives a random in-game item of differing value that the player can use in some way.*

This definition is troublesome compared to systems that were not considered Lootboxes by the focus groups, but the definition is nonetheless applicable to these systems. One system

that was brought up in the interviews were raid bosses in the game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). The raid bosses could be interpreted as being bought for four attempts each month. Every time a boss dies it has a perceived random chance of dropping an item from a pool of items which the players want. The drops can have varying values as well as being worthless to some classes in the game. This arguably fits the definition given by the participants of the focus groups because some of the participants felt that it was not the same as a Lootbox. One group also brought up *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege* (*Rainbow Six Siege*) (Ubisoft, 2015) as a prime example of a game that does Lootboxes right, but you cannot pay for those Lootboxes at all, therefore it is not an adequate definition to use. As seen in these discussions the Lootbox system is hard to express as one dimensional. But if Telfers talk on Gacha as a spectrum is taken into consideration it becomes easier to recognize that Lootboxes are defined between the range of weak and strong Gacha. It is an ever-moving definition that floats somewhere on the scale of Gacha design, evidently shown in *Rainbow Six Siege's* weak skin-Gacha system and the attempted *Star Wars Battlefront II's* stronger tied-to-progression Gacha system. Using this information, Lootboxes will be defined as a component inside Gacha design.

1.2.3 What is Dark Game Design?

Dark game design is a concept that was introduced in *Dark Patterns in the Design of Games* (Zagal, Björk, & Lewis, 2013). There, Zagal et al. discuss how a game creator's interest does not always align with the player's and by using previous research on design patterns they coined a definition for dark game design:

A dark game design pattern is a pattern used intentionally by a game creator to cause negative experiences for players which are against their best interests and likely to happen without their consent.

As this thesis has both touched upon characteristics of games and their design, this was essential to discuss the responses from the focus groups. Similarities can be found between dark game design and Gacha as they both work in a spectrum as mentioned by Zagal (2013, p. 7) when referencing Juul (2010):

One useful perspective on judging where a pattern might exist along a spectrum of darkness is to use the concept of support. Juul discusses how game designs "support" different play styles [27], and patterns can become dark for a given player when the pattern does not support her chosen play style. When most players must engage with a pattern that does not support them, that pattern's use can be considered as dark.

The aspect of some dark design patterns producing a need to interact with them has similarities to the Gacha Desire of needing to pull from the Gacha. By using the concept of support presented in the quote above and connecting it to Gacha, it can help to discuss why some players with a certain play style prefer certain types of Gacha.

1.2.4 What is Gameplay?

Understanding the definition of gameplay will be important to the discussion of Gacha and Lootboxes as they are used together with game design. The definition of gameplay that will

be used in this thesis is the one formed by Ernest Adams in *Fundamentals of Game Design* (2010, p. 11):

The challenges that a player must face to arrive at the object of the game.

and the definition in a second part:

The actions that the player is permitted to take to address those challenges.

It is clear to see how this connects to what is previously mentioned as strong Gacha. Since linking Gacha to progression is important for a strong Gacha, that progression is a part of moving towards the objective of the game, which in turn is part of what defines gameplay. The second part of the definition lifts the aspect of what the player can do to address the presented challenges. By adding aspects of payment as a player action to affect the outcome of a challenge is what will start to push Gacha design towards Game design.

1.2.5 What is Value?

Value in this paper is used to understand how or why a Gacha can be weak or strong, how the value of a digital item set by developers can drive Gacha Desire and what role value holds when combined with terms such as whales. As all of these topics are frequently discussed among the focus group interviews (Bercu, 2016). Park and Lee (2011) mention monetary value and visual authority value as two of several reasons for purchasing online game items. These two definitions are the ones that will be used in this thesis to describe value in the *Analysis*. The monetary value is described as when:

- The item is worth more than what they cost
- The item is a good product given the price
- The prices of game items are reasonable.

The visual authority value is described as when the player:

- Can adorn his/her game characters to be more fashionable or stylish
- Can make his/her game characters look better
- Is more noticed by others
- Can make a better impression on others

2. Theory

The assumption is that not a lot of players know about Gacha design patterns and may even unknowingly be affected by them. If an experienced player does not even know about these design practices, how could the average person be able to know? This makes the – oftentimes – fallacy in research to only interview a specific group of people a strength in this thesis.

How is this relevant today? Because of discussions as the Hawaiian state representatives Chris Lee, Sean Quinlan and Belgium's Justice Minister brings forward (Chalk, n.d.; Kim, 2017). They want to legislate Lootboxes to protect children or vulnerable people from being exploited. The authors of this paper want to bring forward that Lootboxes is difficult to define and even harder to generalize in one sentence as Lee and Quinlan does by saying

This game is basically a Star Wars-themed online casino designed to lure kids into an addictive cycle of gambling...

about the Lootbox system in *Star Wars Battlefront II* (EA, 2017a).

As shown in, *Previous Work*, the definitions fluctuate and are vague at best. The assumption is that it will replicate what has already happened in Asia – mainly Japan (Handrahan, 2017) – resulting in the circumvention that game companies have done if legislation becomes reality. Because of the vagueness of the definitions they can be changed easily to sidestep regulations. For example the proposed solutions to ban Lootboxes in the west can be found in Japanese legislation from 1962 to restrict gambling in the country (Koeder et al., 2017, p. 4). The response from the game companies was to change the formula and relaunch Gacha under a different set of rules. Gacha designed mobile games are still very profitable in Japan (Oku, 2016, p. 28) and have not disappeared from the market at all. Rather the contrary they have spread to the west to become a viable option for companies to make profit on their game (Oku, 2016, p. 28; Telfer, 2017b). 50 percent of the profit from these microtransactions are generated from a small percentage of the total players (Bercu, 2016; Farrel, 2016). This becomes understandable when Telfer presents how to design games using Gacha. He goes into great detail on how to get players dependent on your game by designing towards strategies often found in slot machines and lottery (Koeder et al., 2017, p. 3). This video presentation brought up the questions if it is ethical to explicitly design a game for the lone purpose to extract money from the player base (Koeder et al., 2017).

For this reason, the topic and research question become highly relevant today to see if people in the west are aware of Gacha design. Also, this thesis explore which paths legally and discursively may be better to take in tackling this topic. Because as previously said, the assumption is that if players do not know about the effects/purpose of Gacha game design, then most likely the public do not know either. By using focus groups with carefully chosen questions and revealing a video presentation in the middle of the interview the thesis compares how the discussion is handled before and after the video is shown. It will show how the gaming community discusses Lootboxes from their own experience and examples with little moderator intervention, and after the video, how the discussion has changed after gaining knowledge about the practices in Gacha game design.

3. Method and Materials

This study is an empirical one, which aims to understand experienced player's perception of Lootboxes and Gacha game design and compare it to former research. Four focus groups were interviewed consisting of two to seven students from Uppsala University Campus Gotland (UUCG) to collect data. As they were studying under several specializations in game development they presented an opportunity of giving an insight of how deep the general knowledge was surrounding different monetization systems not as students, but as players, since they are very likely to have an interest in video games. All four discussions were recorded, but only the two larger groups were transcribed and analyzed fully while the third was transcribed and analyzed on demand, this was decided during the transcribing phase because of time constraints. The decision to only transcribe parts of the third interview was decided since most of its content was homogenous to the other two but contained parts that could not be excluded in the *Analysis*.

The analysis was done by looking at the data in combination with a literature study of former research to help answer the research question. The literature study focused on the subjects of Lootboxes and Gacha, everything of relevance was summarized in the *Introduction* and *Theory* chapters. Using focus groups enabled a free-flowing discussion between the participants, giving a deeper understanding to what opinions were held surrounding the topic.

The authors of this paper took the role as moderators and to lower the risk of effecting the data collected the moderators did not partake in the discussions directly. Instead specific questions were asked by the moderators and can be found under the section *Focus Groups and Questions*. Both authors were present during the interviews but only one at a time was leading the interview and asking the questions.

The material used in preparation for and during the interviews was:

- Microsoft Word
- Adobe Reader
- Blue Yeti Microphone
- Audacity
- Express Scribe Transcription Software
- Filmora

3.1 Focus Groups and Questions

In total there were 16 participants unevenly split over four groups these were contacted by sending an invitation (as shown in *Appendix A*) through a forum used by students of the first and second year. Encouraging them to sign up as the groups that they were working in for their final assignments during spring of 2018 in hope of increasing the chance of getting several participants. The invitation shortly summarized information surrounding the focus group discussion and its purpose, in combination with presenting the main topic that was discussed, which was Lootboxes within video games. Key points of what to think about when partaking in a focus group was also included. Dates was set and chosen by using a digital signup sheet, where participants can choose between dates that were available. This helped in making the recruiting process more accessible. To avoid no-shows, over-recruiting was used, and the maximum number of participants was eight. Other efforts were made to find

participants, such as going out to the different groups and asking them directly. The final number of participants in each group ranged between two and seven.

During the meetings, an introduction was given of the general outline of the discussion and previous information from the invitation was repeated to clarify. Further explanation was given on the recordings of the meeting and how there could not be any guarantees to keep the data completely confidential. Other pointers and recommendations was given to the participants as presented by Alan Bryman (2012, pp. 501–520). During the session a warm up “question” was asked:

- Please state your name and tell us what games you like to play.

The idea of this question was to get all the participants engaged and talking and to get an outline of what types of games they are used to interact with. It was also necessary for the participants to state their first names, so that they could be distinguished from one another during the transcription. The main questions asked during all the sessions were the following:

- How would you define a Lootbox and what do you think about Lootboxes?
- Do you believe that Lootbox systems affect players, in any way?
- Have you heard about Gacha or Gachapon?
 - If yes, how would you explain for someone who does not know what Gacha is?

A short clip on the business view of Gacha was shown (PocketGamerbiz, 2017)

- How did you guys interpret the video?
- Have you thought about Lootboxes this way before?
 - Have you thought of Lootboxes as something that was described in the video?
- What do you think is the right course of action for this?
 - How should this way of designing be met in your opinion?

At times an optional question was asked to further the discussion:

- There are several different definitions of Lootboxes as we previously discussed, what else could go under that definition of payment and receiving virtual objects? For example: Wow bosses, Humble monthly or Hearthstone?

3.1.1 Questions Before the Video

The questions that are indented one extra time were either follow-up questions or differentiated from the original question to be more adjusted to the discussion. All these questions were formed to have the players reflect about their knowledge surrounding Lootboxes and then add new content to see if they shift opinion on either Lootboxes or monetization overall. The decision to keep these questions was formed after testing them on a small pilot group of three people. During the piloting of the questions, it was made clear how some of the questions were interpreted or if they were misunderstood. The questions were adjusted accordingly.

The first questions asked focus on how Lootboxes are defined and perceived by the participants. This is important as the questions set the participants initial opinion on Lootboxes and got the participants to think about what they would define as a Lootbox. It also gave the authors of this paper reference for later questions to compare to.

The second question was used to start the group reflection over what effects a Lootbox can have in any way, to not guide them in any direction. This question was interpreted in varying ways and created some interesting discussions. As the participants explained how they thought Lootboxes affected the games they played, but also how it could affect people's economy and health.

Thirdly, before introducing a shortened video around eight minutes long showing Adam Telfers introduction to Gacha, the participants were asked what they knew about Gacha and a follow up question was, if they did know, how would they go about explaining it to someone else. This helped with comparing how their opinion and definition on Gacha changed after the video.

3.1.2 Questions After the Video

Directly after the video the participants were asked how they interpreted the video, showing their initial reaction. Often it opened for a larger discussion, if not, follow up questions were asked. Such as questioning if the participants have thought of Lootboxes as similar to what Telfer expressed as Gacha. This had the participants express any connections between Lootboxes and Gacha. In addition, the question made their answers comparable to what they had previously stated as their own definition of a Lootbox. Any deviation from their original definition showed the complexity of these terms and how they are very hard to define.

As a final question the participants answered what they thought could be the right course of action surrounding their previous discussions. The question is meant to have the participants try to find a solution to whatever positive or negative arguments they had previously stated, to see if they would reach a conclusion as to what place Gacha and Lootboxes have in the game industry and society.

The optional question surrounding if they saw any connections between the Lootbox as a monetization system and other games/services which can go under the same definition of Lootboxes that they previously presented was also asked. This question was only used to add other perspectives to the discussion, and it was optimal if it came naturally to them. Therefore, this question was asked when the participants were not as engaged in the discussion.

3.1.3 Transcription & Analysis

When all four recordings were completed, the transcription started. Two interviews were completely transcribed simultaneously, a third was transcribed partly and the fourth was not transcribed as its content was similar to the others. The transcribed interviews were categorized and coded following the principles presented by Bryman (2012, pp. 575–588). When transcribing, the names of the participants were changed to P1, P2 etc. While the groups were randomly named group number 1, group number 2 etc. The moderator is identified in the interviews as Moderator. The coding was set up so that different categories, which touched upon common subjects that were brought up, were marked in their own color.

Here are the following categories that were used:

Describing Lootboxes or Gacha

Negative about Lootboxes or Gacha

Positive about Lootboxes or Gacha

Gambling/Addiction

Legality

Player perspective

Designers perspective

Monetization

These were also created partly from the questions that were asked during the interviews. While using the above categories to mark the text, coding was done through writing small comments highlighting interesting discussions and quotes. By using the quotes and structuring the headlines to a before and after showing the participants the video, the analysis was starting to take form. Reflecting over each quote and comparing it to the theory helped with connecting the interviews to the research question.

3.2 Risks

By choosing a method it will naturally come with some pros and cons, some of which are listed below, followed by an example on how they were chosen to be dealt with.

- Choosing students from our school creates a risk of effecting the results.

The participants that were chosen for the focus groups specifically studied game development, so they were a perfect choice as they would have a natural interest in video games. But as they are studying at the same department, which is the Game Department at Uppsala University Campus Gotland this could affect the discussions in a negative way. As the students interact under the same cultural environment where games might be talked and thought about in a similar manner could narrow the discussions held by the groups. The hope is that since the second and first years in UUCG are studying under different main fields of study such as producer, designer, graphics and programming each student might bring their own perspective to the discussion.

- Choosing pre-made project groups as focus groups, can affect the dynamic in a negative way.

As the participants came in a pre-determined group that they were working in this could affect the group dynamic. Since they might have already spoken about similar subjects resulting in them leaving out information that they might feel is not relevant in the group that they are in for clarifications. The positive aspect of using pre-made groups is that it would help the participants feel comfortable in discussing and creating a more natural conversation (Bryman, 2012).

- Getting no-shows

There is always a risk that some participants would not show up during the focus group sessions. To counter this, over-recruiting was used and groups of up to eight people was

asked to take part in the discussions. The participants were also offered pastries and beverages.

- Grounded theory risk

A common criticism of the coding approach to qualitative data analysis is the possible loss of context of what is said. Since parts of the discussions are displayed it can lead to the social setting being lost. To counter this the quotes were presented with as much context as possible, followed by an analysis of them.

- Limited time for transcribing

Since there was only time to transcribe two groups completely a third group was partly transcribed on demand. This was deemed as fine by the authors because the remaining interview touched on very similar topics as the first three transcriptions. As both authors were present during all focus group discussions no content was missed or overlooked. The authors considered that the groups that were transcribed were satisfactory enough for the results.

4. Analysis

4.1 Before Viewing the Video Presentation on Gacha

As the discussion starts, the groups have been informed that the topic that will be discussed is about Lootboxes. The following headlines will present their discussions and then compare it to what they express after they have seen a video on Gacha design.

4.1.1 Describing Lootboxes and Gacha

As the participants in group number 1 was asked to define a Lootbox, they started with their own experiences to express opinions and compare pros and cons. In the following discussion a participant takes *FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT)* (EA, 2017b) as an example:

P4: Yea I mean it's a pretty heated subject, and while reading in to it I, actually some people trace it back to the FIFA FUT mechanic, and I think in that way in FUT, it's actually, I don't mind it. I do mind it if like it offers currency or something that can boost the players ability to earn some advantage in front of me, which I - disregarding if I bought or if it's a free to play game - (...) But I – as they did it in FUT I don't mind it.

P4 mentions that some of *FUT*'s mechanics are comparable to Lootboxes, since the other participants are unaware of the mechanics of *FUT*, P4 continues to explain what *FUT* is, for the other participants:

P4: So, you had to open card packs to unlock the- unlock players and managers for a team which you could build. So, for example if you wanted Messi and Ronaldo in the same team you could have had them. But it was only for a mode for the FUT players, everything else in the game was the same for other players. So, you felt a bit of a disadvantage. You feel like [you] were really in to FUT. But it didn't actually change the way of playing FIFA. So, it didn't interact directly with other game modes.

The above explanation points toward the mechanics of opening a pack of cards by unlocking football players and managers as the mechanics in *FUT* from a player perspective. P4 also expresses how a game mode of *FUT* felt disadvantageous compared to playing regular *FIFA* because of the perceived random chance of receiving good or bad players for your *FUT* team. At the same time the participant did not mind how *FUT* worked by arguing that it did not affect other game modes within *FIFA*. When comparing to Gacha theory, it seems like the player might be unintentionally advocating for a weaker Gacha, as effecting game modes is what Telfer (2017a) argues to be something that should be connected to the Width of a strong Gacha design. Also the random chance within *FUT* can be found within the definition of Gacha (Koeder et al., 2017).

P4: Yea it was Pokémon for football basically, or whatever, Yu Gi Oh, let's call it. So, yeah. And they are the like, the Lootboxes. I still call them Lootboxes like in CS:GO for example which is only skins, which I don't mind, or [in] Dota.

Although P4 tries to define *FUT* through a comparison, his/her argument does not hold as P4 compares *FUT* to *Pokémon* (Nintendo, 1996), *Yu Gi Oh* (Konami, 1999), Lootboxes and simultaneously puts an emphasis on games that focuses on skins as acceptable. Since the examples that the participant compares to are not “only skins” as they are games where you trade and buy cards to get an advantage over other players. P4 defends *FUT* since it is a separate game mode within *FIFA*, unknowingly distancing it from the Gacha as the participant tries to differentiate what is gameplay altering and what is not. However, if *FUT* is

seen as a separate game mode, it should be considered to have its own gameplay and therefore one could argue that it is affecting gameplay within *FUT*. This example demonstrates the complexity of trying to grasp what would go under the definition of Lootboxes and Gacha.

Group number 2 discussed the same question but started with simplified statements on what they would define as Lootboxes and then also transitioned into examples like *Counter Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* (Valve, 2012) and the card game *Hearthstone* (Blizzard, 2014).

P1: I would probably define it as, something you get for free-, a digital item you get for free, but you have to pay in order to unlock it, to actually gain anything from it.

Moderator: Mm. Anyone else thinks-

P3: Well, I've also. I have the impression that you can- there are also those Lootboxes that you can pay for and you don't have to buy a key, but you pay initially.

P4: Yeah-

P3: To (inaudible), but to be honest like, I've never actually interacted with a Lootbox.

[light laughter]

Moderator: Mm.

P6: I mean, the way I see them, as that, something you don't know what you get when you pay for it.

Moderator: Mhm-

*P6: So, even if it's a card pack in *Hearthstone* or a crate in *CS* you pay and you don't know what, so you might have end up just not gaining a-anything from*

Moderator: Mm

P6: something you laid money on, it's completely random.

P1 starts by explaining the definition that the participant feels is right according to P1's experiences. After some thought P3 also recognizes Lootboxes as something you must pay for in some way. Worth noting is that P3 from this group mentions that they have never interacted with a Lootbox before, but he/she will change his/her mind after the revealing of the word Gacha. They all agree on that to be a Lootbox, the player in some way pay for it and then when he/she open it, the content will be random.

Group number 2 continued to talk about which Lootboxes are okay to have in a game, cosmetic or game changing Lootboxes. P4 argued for cosmetic Lootboxes and did not think that Lootboxes that change gameplay were okay.

P4: (...) I don't think it's a bad thing as long as it doesn't affect how we progress through the game. In the sense that- if it's just for flavor as skins and stuff then why not? Like people enjoy that, it's there for a reason. But if it actually affects the gameplay, then, then there is a problem. Since then it becomes the - pay to win aspect of it, you need to spend money in order to progress through the game, that's not a good thing.

P4 states that if the Lootbox does not affect the progress through the game he/she does not mind it. The interesting thing about this quote is the mention of Gacha Desires connection to progression. This participant does not know about Gacha yet but still recognizes some of the components used in Gacha as bad. Without previous knowledge they have still formed an opinion on Gacha but they themselves lack a definition. To clarify, Gacha has not been mentioned to group number 2 at this point, but they still describe Lootboxes the same way as Koeder (2017, p. 3) does with Gacha, showing a non-biased connection towards Lootboxes. When group number 1 was asked the question: “how would you define a Lootbox?” a second time they answered:

P1: A box with stuff in it.

P3: Like random, that you don't know what-

P2: Yea it's a random box, basically

P1: A random box.

P4: Yea I'm paying for something that might drop, something.

P1: I think it might be good or might not be good.

P4: or not, yeah

P2: Yeah

P3: It could just be in game currency as well.

P2: Yeah it could be grinding stuff as well. But yo- but it's an item you receive, that you don't know what it contains.

By using similar words and definitions as group number 2 did the definition can be summed up into: a Lootbox is an in-game item which the player either buys or receives for free but must then pay with real money to open. When opening the Lootbox the player receives a random in-game item of differing value that the player can use in some way.

However, Group number 3 presents an example that separate it from all the other groups. One of the members presents an example of what they would consider to be the best idea of a Lootbox.

P3: Rainbow Six probably have the best idea of when it comes to Lootbox, because there is only two ways to get the Lootbox in the game, you can't buy it with real money. You either unlock it by playing the game and winning certain games and getting a percentage chance of actually, unlocking the crate. After you actually win a game. Or you spend the in-game currency you can't buy with real money to buy more of these boxes.

P1: Yea, and from that viewpoint I think. Is it even fair to call it, I mean, It is a Lootbox to some extent. But is it even-

P3: But are you defining a Lootbox, by how much, that you have to pay for it in order to get it or are you saying it because it is just a gambling device.

P1: Cause I'd say you have to pay for it, for it to be a, you know, a, let say classic Lootbox.

P2: Yea that's the traditional-

P1: Yea, then you have the kind of newer way of looking at it, like Overwatch and Rainbow Six Siege, via actual game time and progression giving you them. The difference being between Overwatch and Rainbow being that you can actually buy Lootboxes in Overwatch.

P2: Oh, yea.

P3: With real money?

P1: Yes.

This is the only example of a game that challenge the previous notion of a Lootbox. P3 presents the example of *Rainbow Six Siege*, which is a game that uses a Lootbox and Gacha system. In the game the player cannot use real world money to buy them as they are only gained through playing the game or through purchasing with in-game currency. It is important to mention that the in-game currency cannot be bought through real world money. This even has the participants discussing what to call a Lootbox and then summarize that it could be considered a “classic Lootbox” when you pay for it. If the concept of Gacha as a spectrum is applied here it could be viewed as a very weak Gacha since it is completely disconnected from the aspect of gaining players money. Therefore, there is nothing that can hinder the player progression. *Rainbow Six Siege* does have a shop where players can buy cosmetics directly with real world money, but the players can buy and choose between what cosmetics they really want. Another side to this is that some cosmetics can only be gained through the Lootboxes and since they can only be received through playing the game, they motivate the player to play more and not buy more (Ubisoft, 2015).

4.1.2 Negative and Positive Views of Lootboxes or Gacha

The value of the objects received are defined by the players themselves which is initially based on the developer’s definition of rarity, such as the term “Common” or “Legendary”. In the discussion below the participants in group number 1 uses the definition of “Legendary” to specify as something to be considered of great value.

P1: if you buy- open an Overwatch box, and you get a legendary skin, you feel amazing cause you got a legendary skin. If you get- well, nothing, like I always do, you feel annoyed because you got a useless box.

P1 sees the receiving of a legendary skin as something positive but also contrast it to the negative fact of receiving “nothing” which would be the opposite of not receiving something “Legendary”, as the player always receives an item when opening a Lootbox in *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016).

P2: But then again, I played a lot of Overwatch, and I only- If I get a legendary- I looked at all the skins and like these are the ones I want then the rest of them are like, even if I get a triple legendary I'm gonna be like: wooh cool, triple legendary, what's the chance- odds of that? But I'm not gonna care about the cosmetics.

A counterargument is presented above by P2. Who have decided which skin they see as valuable and how the aspect of receiving something else, even several “Legendaries”, is seen as less valuable. This type of value is referred to as visual authority value by Park and Lee (2011, p. 2179) which means that the player wants to buy a specific item for a specific

character to adorn them. For P2 the other items are less valuable and, as the participant expresses, something they do not care about. Even though the participants unknowingly touch upon aspects of Gacha Desire, they do not feel that it is strong enough to have them care, which is essential for strong Gacha.

As the discussion continues the participants do recognize that there still might be some players who care strongly about these items.

P2: So, It's, for me at least, every Lootbox is like: oh, yay. Hehe.

[General laughter]

P2: It's nothing more than that.

P1: Yea but there are some people that are more susceptible to that type of um, thing.

P2: yea-yea. Like-

P1: And then they go into a spree and buy more and more.

They mention how some people might be more sensitive towards Lootboxes and that it is happening. This is discussed in a different manner by group number 2, where the Lootbox design of *CS:GO* is compared to a lottery ticket.

P6: you buy a Lootcrate for - I don't know one dollar, and then you get a skin worth five hundred dollars then that's like buying out lottery ticket, only a bit more complicated and maybe a-and especially in the sense that, the person buying it doesn't really know it's like buying a lottery ticket. It's like, oh! Lootcrates. I-I'm gonna get my mom to pay for this...

[General laughter]

P6: and it starts an evil cycle.

P6 continues with arguing for the innocence of the one purchasing the Lootbox, by mentioning that they might not be aware of the lottery ticket characteristics of the Lootbox. P6 ends by taking the perspective of a child who needs to ask a parent for consent. In combination with Zagal's definition of *Dark Patterns in the Design of Games* (2013) this creates clarity in P6 argument.

A dark game design pattern is a pattern used intentionally by a game creator to cause negative experiences for players which are against their best interests and likely to happen without their consent.

Dark game design patterns lift the aspect of game design that is questionable or even unethical. The aspect of giving consent to what negative experiences might befall the player is increasingly important as children cannot themselves give consent without their parents. *Dark Patterns in the Design of Games* (Zagal et al., 2013) goes deeper into the discussion of players literacy in manipulation, where players who are more literate can avoid being manipulated. This creates a transparency that can help players decide on what games to play or not to play. But can still be troublesome as Zagal (2013, p. 7) continues:

(...) while most of us have a grasp of spoken and written rhetoric, and where we can expect to find it, we do not yet have such an understanding when we are faced with persuasive technologies and new media.

Having basic knowledge might not always be enough as the persuasive technologies being used can still have an effect, especially if you do not have a grasp of spoken and written rhetoric, particularly on children. Which is a perspective also held by politicians discussing the topic, such as Chris Lee's previously mentioned statement on *Star Wars Battlefront II* as a *Star Wars*-themed online casino (2017). This added to the discourse surrounding Lootboxes during winter of 2017.

Interestingly enough the discussion of group number 2 moved into similar topics surrounding gambling and addiction as well. As seen in the following example, about how the games incite the player to take part in the gambling.

P1: But say, sorta like, it's not a forced gambling, but its incited gambling, in the sense that, you're not actively choosing to get a crate and then pay to open it. You just get a crate, like here you go, and [the] next time you open your inventory - and right now I'm referring to Counter Strike - and then next time you open your inventory you have to acknowledge that you have received a loot crate in order to see your inventory. So, you get a Lootcrate for free, and like the mechanics of the game force you to look at it and acknowledge that you have the crate.

P4: mm

P3: And then you need a key in order to [inaudible]

P1: Right!

P3: that's pretty shitty

P4: Yea

P1: So, it's still your choice to get it - but not in the sense that it's your choice to walk to a store and buy a lottery ticket.

P4: No...

P1: Because, in this case you are more or less getting half the ticket...

P4: Yea

[general laughter]

P1: And then you have to say, Yes, I know that I have half a lottery ticket.

In the example of *CS:GO*, P1 brings up the observation that the player must acknowledge that he or she have gained a Lootbox before being able to view their inventory. P1 makes the point very clear when comparing it to receiving half a lottery ticket and then having to buy the second half. This is what creates an incentive as expressed by P1 pointing out the lack of choice to receive a Lootbox. The other participants express their dislike to this system, but in Telfer's own definition of Gacha, this system would be much weaker than a lot of mobile games. Even though the acknowledgement of a Lootbox incites the player to buy a key – in this case – it does not force the player to pay to progress in *CS:GO* which would be optimal according to Telfer.

Keeping this in mind – and that the participants have mentioned that as long as the rewards from Lootboxes does not affect gameplay it is okay – P4 in group number 1 mentions an example that it may not be that easy:

P4: But there was actually, in CS the thing is that in one point six they had the spray icons, and then they removed them from CS:GO and then they added, they added them back. And when they added that you could of opened a Lootbox, whatever, box, and get a spray. Which was like black or something, I don't remember, but if you sprayed it in certain areas, like spray's don't actually involve with the gameplay. But if you would spray them in some positions on the map and you would crouch like or duck in front of them you would not be able to be seen by the enemy.

P1: mmh.

P4: So, there are some hats that actually interact with the gameplay a lot. People show like scoping, you would barely see the enemy, because of the spray.

P3: I mean, wouldn't that go for some weapon camos though, as well. Like, some camos could be a bit more hidden, and some-

P1: That happened in StarCraft as well. They disable skins for Blizzcon.

Moderator 1: oh.

P1: Because they can impact performance and make it easier for you to see what happens.

As P4 explains, the players of *CS:GO* had the possibility to receive a spray icon when buying a Lootbox. If they received a black spray icon, which could be used in the game to spray on a wall there was a possibility to use it as camouflage. This means that it would hide you from other players whose objective is to defeat you, therefore affecting gameplay. And as P4 puts it, there are some hats – hat meaning cosmetic items in this case, coming from *Team Fortress 2*'s (Valve, 2007) Lootbox system – that interact with the gameplay a lot although possibly unintentionally. The other participants add to the discussions with their own examples. This further illustrates the complexity of Lootboxes and Gacha, showing how something that would be considered weak Gacha, still could have elements that effects gameplay.

Before the video was shown the question “Have you heard about Gacha or Gachapon?” was asked and the participants from group number 1's response presented the general knowledge about the topic.

P3: No.

P4: No.

P1: Yea.

Moderator 1: Yea, so, then we have a follow up question for you.

P1: Okay.

Moderator 1: “How would you explain for someone who doesn't know what Gacha is?”

P1: [Giggles]

Moderator 1: Shortly, just whatever you think, like there is no right or wrong, so.

P1: Well they're – as far as I remember, they're free to play games. That have like mechanics in them that compel you to keep spending more money. And they're most popular in Asia.

One of the participants had heard of Gacha before and chose to define it as free to play games mostly popular in Asia. This is more in line with Telfers (2017a) perspective on Gacha, which is explained in the introduction. But the participant chooses to categorize Gacha as a genre of games linked to free to play games. Which is necessarily not right or wrong, as Telfer presents many games that successfully implemented Gacha that are specifically free to play games (Telfer, 2017a). Another way to describe Gacha is with the original definition from Japan, previously explained under the “*What is Gacha?*” section.

When group number 2 was asked if they had heard about Gacha before, only one in the group recognized it again by saying:

P3: [laugh] I've lived in Japan, so I've heard about it a lot. It's like a word for these machines where you put in a coin and then you, you know, get a randomized item outside

P5: oh, those things

P3: a-and they, are in little round capsules. And, I guess [laugh] that could be called a Lootbox [laugh]

[General Laughter]

P3: In that case I bought, many, many, many Lootboxes

[General Laughter]

This is the same person that earlier mentioned that he/she would never buy a Lootbox, but now that the word has been introduced the participant recognizes his/her spending habits and admits to buying many Lootboxes. The perspective that the participant has on Gacha is more in line with Gacha's origin as a toy dispenser, but as P3 continues he/she make a clear connection between Lootboxes and Gacha toy dispensers. This can explain group number 2's continued comparison between the two concepts. But this is still not fully consistent with how Telfer choose to present Gacha. In the four groups that were interviewed all groups except one had at least one participant that knew what Gacha was after the word was revealed. The exception group had a member that remembered what it was after the video was shown.

4.2 After Viewing the Video Presentation on Gacha

The group was introduced to the video presentation by Adam Telfer (2017) which lasted for eight minutes. The reactions from group number 2 were apparent directly after the video had ended.

P6: That was a bit depressing.

P3: Yea.

[General laughter]

P6: Holy shit...

The question “how did you interpret the video?” was asked and subsequently group number 2 needed almost no intervention from the moderators. The change in discussion is clear after this. They did not need much coaching in questions, the discussion flowed by itself. Interesting was that one person in the group took a perspective of being positive towards Gacha as a game designer, because the rest of the group usually had a negative attitude towards Gacha.

Here is a quote showing how group number 1 reacted towards the video:

P1: He was talking about how to, just make it work. Just basically how to design, make sure, that they compel you to buy more and more and more and, spend maybe your entire life savings on it.

P3: I mean the concept – I recognize the concept of like that monetization I just never heard the term Gacha before so.

P1: Gotcha (A joke on Gacha)

P3: yea.

Even though P1 shows a dislike towards the design, as in stating that it might compel you to spend all your life savings, he/she do not react as strongly towards the video as group number 2 did. The following conversation moved into discussing aspects of this way of designing and even, by themselves, making connections between game design and Gacha.

P4: Because they basically presented a way to mix together game design and monetization and like (feel) the player that he's not dragged into spend money because it's game design, because I played those games as well now I play a Marvel game which is like the Star Wars and it's the same like I want items for my hero. But I still have credit for- from them but I miss only one so [stutters] it doesn't feel like I need to spend money because I can grind it- I don't know. It's a weird mix between game design and marketing or whatever you can call it.

Moderator 1: You said like mobile specifically, why do you think it fits more, in that category?

P4: Because, I kind of worked at a company that is making mobile games, and I know, how they plan their sprints and everything and it's basically they have a... a way of uh making the player feel like he needs to put in more money and it's suited that thing very well.

P1: I mean it's also because if you compare mobile to PC or consoles, you have different expectations, from the game.

P4 do observe after the video that there is a connection between game design and marketing which is just what Adam Telfer states in the end of the video and is what this thesis is based upon. As P4 continues he/she feel that there is no need to spend money and can instead grind, which means performing repetitive and tedious tasks in order to progress (Zagal et al., 2013). P4 continues to explain how he/she through previous experiences have seen Gacha design in use and feel that it is suited for the mobile market. That could be a reason for why P4 takes a defensive stance towards Gacha.

4.2.1 Negative and Positive Views of Lootboxes or Gacha

Looking at the coded transcript it becomes apparent that the discussions have more substance and the connections to Gacha and Lootboxes are much clearer and frequent. The arguments became longer, and they counterargued a lot. Therefore, a longer quote from group number 2 will be dissected in the next pages, compared to the theories of this thesis and then summarized. This is the discussion after the moderator asked the question “How did you interpret the video?”

P3: Well like, I thought, probably this is what most game designers think, like, okay we can't like not use Gacha, so let's use it the best way we can, by making it essential to everyone. Which is kind of depressing, like, it's like when in the beginning free to play started showing up and you were like, okay well, free to play like I get it-s, but it's just gonna be like limited to these like candy crush kind of games and then now suddenly it's like everywhere and I'm needing to wait several hours in order to finish fucking potions class in Harry Potter, but whatever like(...)

At first, P3 talks about Gacha through a game designer's perspective, the participant knows that this is probably something that every company uses because they must in order to make money. Directly after however, P3 takes a personal perspective remembering when all the free-to-play games were coming to the market, and P3 thought it would only stay exclusive to mobile games such as *Candy Crush* (King, 2012) etc. The connection to Gacha is then made with the quote:

I'm needing to wait several hours in order to finish fucking potions class in Harry Potter

This is a direct connection to Gacha design as the participant makes a joke about having some sort of stamina in the game. The stamina is used in several mobile games to control how much a free to play user can play the game. When the player takes an action the stamina depletes, and when the stamina is at zero the player is required to either wait a specified amount of time or pay a small amount of money to directly fill up the stamina meter. An example of a stamina meter can be found in the mobile game *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery* (Jam City, 2018) where you create your own avatar that attends the wizard school of Hogwarts. When the stamina is depleted, the player's avatar gets choked by a devil snare (a monster in the game) for twenty minutes if the player do not pay a specified amount of money. Combining this example with P3's previous quote and looking further into the research of dark design patterns show how far the game industry is willing to go to have their players pay. As stated in *Dark Patterns in the Design of Games* (Zagal et al., 2013):

We have described several game design patterns that, in different ways, arguably cause negative experiences for players without their consent or otherwise work against their best interests. These patterns can vary in how strongly (or effectively) they cause problems for players: some may not care while others may be outraged. Furthermore, a pattern's effects are also dependent on the context in which they are used, their implementation, intended audience, and other factors.

Looking at the quote above it is important to take into consideration that a pattern's effect is dependent on the context. As factors such as intended audience may be the reason for a player to be outraged becomes evident with all the previous examples. Questioning what ages does the Harry Potter IP appeal to and the fact that their chosen design, strangle the players Avatar, to hinder them from progress is important to understand what effects Gacha design can have.

The emotional response that paying for progress – which is part of Gacha Desire – creates cannot be ignored. P3's expressed irritation of waiting for potions in *Harry Potter*, which in comparison to strangling the player's avatar does not seem that bad, nonetheless P3 still recognizes the Gacha design as something that is annoying in the game he/she plays. This is also connected to Lootboxes as P3 continues by recalling other experiences with Gacha.

P3: Gacha, I guess when you think about it Gacha is, like while he was talking I remembered like several games I played actually have like Gacha, which is basically Lootbox and the most fun way example is like I play Sailor Moon Drops, which is basically Sailor Moon themed version of Candy Crush and [you] can get certain characters if you finish like certain amount of levels within a limited time, they have like events. And so, you have to finish like those levels over and over in order to be able to maximize that character's level. So first you get the character and then you can get the characters maximized level. But that just means that the character can be leveled up it doesn't mean that it levels up immediately, it's just that it has the potential. But if you don't want to do all that, which is annoying and the only reason why I never progress in the game, 'cause I'm always doing those events, then you can pay for Gacha and I never considered doing that because I was like. I will never steep so low as to pay for this game.

[General laughter]

P3 makes a connection towards Lootboxes in this quote as the participant recognizes the pattern similarities. This is the first person to speak about the video in group number 2 and the tone is set for the rest of the discussion. The participant brings up several different Gacha designs: You want to upgrade all your characters (Gacha Width, see *What is Gacha?*), chance elements tied to the leveling up (Gacha Width) with implicit counters as events which is also tied to progression in the game (Gacha Desire) and that P3 can never progress because he/she does not pay for anything. This is a good example of where the Gacha has a negative effect on the player. As Zagal (2013, p. 7) says in *Dark Patterns in the Design of Games*,

While a game may employ dark patterns, these may be transparent to players, thus rendering them ordinary patterns or ineffective. By transparency, we mean that players develop literacy in manipulation.

This might be what P3 is doing because he/she is literate enough in the manipulation present in the game – the aspect of the game becomes annoying instead. P3 even says he/she will never steep so low as to pay for the game. It is worth noting that P3 still plays the game. The conversation has been negative towards Lootboxes up until this point but when one participant mentions how a game does not have to be fun anymore to make money P1 objects to the idea.

P6: (...) if you can make more money they're gonna do it but like in the end it's just gonna make things worse for the people who playing the game. And, that, it's sad that the way to make the most money out of a game isn't to make it as fun as possible.

P3: It's like to fool the players almost.

P6: Yea...

P1: Well I mean at the same time, in order to make sure that players desire...

P6: Mm

P1: to buy Lootcrates and so on - you sort of have to make the game fun enough

P6: Mm

P1: to play, to get them hooked, right?

P1 argues that players will not play a game if they feel that it is not fun. If the game was not fun from the beginning then it doesn't matter how big the desire is, because no one will play the game anyway. P7 who have been silent until this point also comments on the same topic.

P7: But I mean, I think it feels wrong, but at the same time it's perfectly fair, if you know like, in the sense of okay I'm gonna make some really cool things that they have to pay to get, you know like it's kind of, it's fair, it's sad - yes but, I mean it's, it's fair as long as it's not like a kid, you know.

P3: Yea but I mean it's-it's

P7: as long as you decide that you want it and you decide that you are willing to take that risk with Lootcrates

The interesting part here is that P7 shows empathy towards the game developers that needs to make money. But what he/she forgets to take into account is the fact that the item that is made will, in this case, be put into the pool of all the other possible items that can be randomly acquired via a Lootbox. This is also assuming that the player wants the item. If additional content is added to games that do not have the microtransaction model it is the choice of that player to pay for that item if he/she wants it. But if it is added to a pool of items in the game the chance of receiving the item that the player really wants weakens. The analogy to children is brought up here again as a confirmation that it is not fine to do this towards them, but a grown person can make a conscious decision which makes it their responsibility to make the best choice for themselves. The discussion continues:

P3: I guess but like as he was saying in the video like you have to make sure that the player need this Gacha in order to proceed

P4: Yea...

P3: then you come to the fact that it's like okay you already paid for this game maybe, or you didn't, but like you're playing this game you like it but, but then like they're making the Gacha essential so it is not a choice anymore, you know.

As previously mentioned by P3, he/she does still play the games that he/she complains about, but in this argument, there could be an explanation to his/her reasoning to keep playing the annoying games. Because Gacha is hidden in the game design and it is made to be essential to play the game, then there is no choice anymore. The choice is either to stop playing or to keep playing and because the game still has some attraction to him/her the choice becomes hard to make. This is an interesting point as this is not only a personal perspective but also a perspective of those that is not literate enough in the manipulation practices as previously mentioned. These people cannot make a choice because they did not know they were choosing from the beginning.

Summarizing this longer conversation, the participants gained more substance to argue with after watching the video. It begins with P3 recalling different experiences with Gacha design in games that he/she has played. The tone is negative against annoying timers and slow progression. The discussion shifts when P6 mentions that "(...) it's sad that the way to make the most money out of a game is not to make it as fun as possible." This sets off a discussion about developers that need to make money and that games need to be fun to make players

desire to want more. One participant showed empathy towards the developers while saying that if they made something cool for the game they would like to be paid for that item.

The participant also claims that if the player is an adult, he or she can make a choice. The quote ends with asking the question about choice: If the player was never aware of being manipulated, did that player choose to pay for progression in the first place or did the developers take advantage of them? P7 said that if children are not affected it is fine. Possibly because of the lack of consent they can give in choices they do not understand. It is usually an adult that makes that choice for the child, but what if the adult is the one not capable of making the choice because of a lack of understanding? Who will take care of them? As was previously discussed by Zagal (2013, p. 7),

(...) while most of us have a grasp of spoken and written rhetoric, and where we can expect to find it, we do not yet have such an understanding when we are faced with persuasive technologies and new media.

When new media develops so does the methods in persuasive technologies, and as a result every person cannot be literate enough to notice when it is affecting them. But the risk of parents own unawareness was missed by the participants.

As they debate topics surrounding that children might come to harm through dark design, it led to a question of responsibility but did not consider the fact that even adults can be illiterate in the ways of manipulation.

Group number 1

P1: I'm not saying it's right, but it's also a part of the parent's responsibility to take care of them to not do it. It's both sides of the [inaudible]

Group number 2

P4: That's the key, you need a credit card and the thing is even if you're underaged you need a credit card. How do you get a credit card? By your parents. So, in the end, the parents really need to take responsibility before the- what the kid does. If you give them a credit card they can't buy online with, then you apparently have some trust for them or whatever, whatever. But if they go and steal your card, like-

The argument was held by two participants in the discussion, that it was not just the designer's responsibility to consider their games' intended or unintended effect on children. Instead they thought it to be the child's parents who are responsible to manage what the child interacts with. Since the participants did not know about certain parts of dark design, they overlooked that adults themselves can be affected by it. But as argued by Brett Abarbanel (2018):

Research, legislation, and regulation often cannot keep up with the speed of technological change, and the case of gambling is no different. The emphasis for all parties, be they government, industry, or consumer, should be on the need for self-education and due diligence in understanding the complexity and nuance of games and gambling.

There is a need to understand the aspects of new media for all parties involved. The complexity and nuances mentioned in the quote also take shape in the discussions held by the focus groups. Especially as they are trying to define Lootboxes and Gacha after watching the video.

4.2.2 Other Interesting Arguments

As stated in the *Method section*, one of the questions asked was “There are several different definitions of Lootboxes as we previously discussed, what else could go under that definition of payment and receiving virtual objects? For example: *World of Warcraft* bosses, *Humble monthly* or *Hearthstone?*”, and as previously mentioned, Group number 2’s discussion needed little moderation after the video presentation because they asked the question themselves. This was interesting, and it became a validation to the relevance of the questions that were asked during the interviews. The conversation steered towards what the question was intended to ask which was if *World of Warcraft* raid bosses could be considered being Lootboxes. The question was also supposed to be based on their own definition of a Lootbox from the beginning of the interview.

P1: for most players, and I mean there is still an element of luck in terms of what you unlock. For instance, if we’re all playing the same raid, over and over again, someone - just one of us might get that awesome, drop, that we want.

P4: Yea no, in the randomizations

P1: And you have to keep paying the subscription if all of our goal is to get that one item and then stop playing.

P3: No, that’s true but, at the same time, like. Let’s say that you have that - you paid for that one month subscription and there are two people looking for the same drop, one person might get it after five tries, but then the other person - if they don’t get it - can continue within that time span like there is still, they don’t have to pay every time they try and raid that one place again, like of course there could be, there could be, a instance where someone gets, b-get better drops from like enemies than another player does, that’s true but it’s not the same in your face kind of randomization because, you will be able to try again until you get, I mean, until you get that drop without having to pay for every each time you try.

(...)

P1: Eh, but I mean, for instance I like raids in World of Warcraft,

P4: Yea

P1: you can only play them once a week? Once a...?

P4: Yea

P1: Once a week?

P4: Once a week.

P1: And how much do you pay for one subscription?

P4: one hundred and f-fifty crowns?

P6: Shit I don’t remember.

P1: And that’s for a month?

P3: a month!

P1: A month

P4: Yea

P1: So, you are paying a hundred and fifty crowns, for four attempts. Essentially.

The connection between Lootboxes and *World of Warcraft* is made by P1 after the argument that P3 alleges. P3 says that the bosses in *World of Warcraft* is not the same “in your face randomization” as Lootboxes are, P1 instead argues that the difference in presentation does not matter if the essential outcome is the same. In this case paying for four tries to get the loot, which could be compared to buying four Lootboxes each month. In group number 1, P4 argues from the perspective of someone who plays for the loot, he/she continues with the following example.

P4: I played it for the loot.

P2: Yea, so it's different.

P4: And it- It feels like a Lootbox. Definitely.

P2: yea

P4: Because if I'm a Mage and the boss drops fro- something for the [warrior?] then I'm locked for twelve hours.

P2: yea

P4: It's like I-I pay money to not get my item

P2: yea, so it's-

P1: I just paid for- I paid for progression. I wanted to kill the bosses I didn't care about the [inaudible]

There are similarities between P4's argument in group number 1 compared to what was said by P1 in group number 2. They both see a part of *World of Warcraft* as a Lootbox, looking at the outcome of their actions, such as paying and receiving that what they consider to be of value: loot. Compared to the definition of what the groups themselves previously all agreed upon as Lootboxes, *World of Warcraft* would go under that definition. Why some of the participants argue against *World of Warcraft* being a Lootbox might be a result of what they themselves found as valuable to them and held a monetary value as described by Park and Lee (2011).

But the cost of that value is discussed by group number 2, as P4 talks about how much he/she spent on a free to play game.

P4: As P1 said, with the - if there was a free game, you know they haven't spent any money compared to [a] game you spent 80 dollars on, that's like the ironic thing that I've experienced at least for me and my friends and everyone else that I know play, that the most expensive game they have ever paid for, is a free-to-play game. Say for example, I've played League of Legends for a fair amount of time and that is by a long shot the most expensive game I've ever played, since there are microtransactions in the game. So, you feel from time to time, oh well this is nice, and this is nice, and this is nice compared to having the whole Mass Effect trilogy or the Skyrim seri- or the Elder scrolls series like they're not close in the amount of money I've spent.

P4 finds it ironic how a free to play game is the most expensive game he/she has ever played, because of the microtransactions within the game. Comparing it to someone who might buy a

trilogy of games costing 60 dollars each and saying that cannot be compared to the amount spent by P4. The game *League of Legends (LoL)* (Riot Games, 2009) would be considered weak according to Gacha design as it does not have Gacha's pay to progress aspect. But, since *LoL* player base have grown, seven years into the games life they have reached 100 million players each month (Kollar, 2016). Therefore, the IP of *LoL* has become stronger each year, gaining fans all over the world and an increasing interest in buying cosmetics within the game. A strong IP is part of what creates a stronger Gacha and improving on Gacha Desire, which can result in the type of spending that P4 is referring to.

Contrasting to the previous quote, where P4 is describing how large amounts of money was spent in *LoL* as a follow up on P6 former mentioning of an amount spent on a series of games known as the *Elder Scroll Series* (Bethesda Game Studios, n.d.). Which resulted in P6 changing his/her mind.

P6: But it's also interesting what you said about lifespan of the game because... Most free to play games or games with the, with that business model. Or actually games, so for example. When did you start playing league?

P4: When it came out, 2009-10

P6: Yea and it's still a good game now it's just, [inaudible] it because it has tons of updates to do stuff every time, with it. I mean for example, if I, when I bought Oblivion, they haven't updated it, in quite a while and that's fine because I like it and I go back and play it but I still, I paid for it and I got a set amount of hours worth, but if you keep playing a game, for, online game, it's sort of. I mean it's obvious that they need to sustain that game. So, they need someone to chip in some money, then and now.

P4: Yea

P6: To get some funding for the game.

P1: Yea

P6: So, in those cases its, actually, a very sound business model, not, dishonest as I was previously talking about.

P6 looks at P4's spending as an investment over time. Starting off by asking when P4 started playing *LoL* and continue to argue from the perspective of the developer and their need to sustain the game over a time span of several years. This is also an opinion held by game industry professionals as stated by Alha et al (2014):

Similarly, it was noted that F2P games are often developed forward after the launch. Other games make most of their profit right away, and there is not a similar interest to keep evolving them. F2P games have to earn the money after the player has already made the acquisition decision.

Furthermore, Alha et al. also presented how aggressive monetization was seen as bad and a way of greedy companies. However, it was also noted that aggressiveness seemed to be something that worked and should not be rejected completely. What is understood as aggressive monetization is not developed further than:

In some cases, this has resulted in exploitative game design where aggressive monetization strategies aim for short-term profits instead of long-term player engagement.

What is not mentioned in this example is the aspect of all the other games that exist between short-term profits and long-term player engagement. Every commercial game aims to turn profit in some way and some with the hope of engaging the player. There might be those who just want to turn a profit and some who just want to create a fun game. But Gacha Design takes all of them into consideration as it tries to balance aggressive monetization and good game design and even mixing the two as previously mentioned under *After Viewing the Video Presentation on Gacha*.

Going back to the aspect of players spending large amounts of money on free-to-play games is also something that group number 1 talks about.

P2: They ar- I think they talked about it in the GDC that they earned more money from- if they have a, zero point ninety-nine- skin, and one forty-five-dollar skin.

P4: mm

P2: They earn more money from the forty-five-dollar skins.

P1: yea because it-

P2: Because there are few people that buy the most expensive stuff.

P1: It's an arbitrary value.

P2: yea

P1: That's set by them. And then people want them because it's like, ah this one must be better right? Because it's more expensive.

The contradictory statement by P2 is interesting because of how he/she argues that the companies earn more money on the expensive skins because fewer people buy them. But it could be argued that what P2 meant was the concept of whales. Whales buy the most expensive items and accounts for a large part of the total income in free to play model games while at the same time making up a minority of players (Bercu, 2016). P1 mentions that it has an arbitrary value because it is the developers that sets the prices on skins. Other research show that this arbitrary value increase Gacha Desire. Park and Lee (2011) present in their conclusion, by using an analysis tool known as partial least squares (PLS) (Rosipal & Krämer, 2006), that:

Using PLS, it was determined that as game users perceive greater values of game items, they are more inclined to purchase such items.

This finding is important as it demonstrates that there is a direct connection between some items perceived value and the will to purchase said item. The need to have players purchase an item is a fundamental part of Gacha Desire. Comparing this to the research on whales spending more money on larger amounts, it can therefore be argued that the arbitrary values set by developers can increase Gacha Desire. Consequentially, monetary value and visual authority value (as mentioned previously) are two reasons for purchasing online game items, the cost of an item adds a third reason. This concludes that the amount spent on an item is part of the actual desire that drives the player to buy it in the first place. The buying of expensive skins for a character that the players feels a connection to can be motivated by these three constructs. Either it is perceived as worth the money or they want some bragging rights when playing the game.

Sometimes the skin can be a psychological provocation towards the enemy team. P4 in group number 1 argued before the video presentation that by buying a skin for a character in a game it shows other players that he/she is skilled with that character.

P2: Yea it is also, if you are- if you play the game for the gameplay itself.

Moderator 1: yea

P2: then the Lootbox, it doesn't matter... at all. If you are like, I want to be the best at this game you don't care about the Lootboxes. But if you really like, oh I like this cosmetic, if you play like a bit.

P4: But

P1: You can think of it as [Inaudible]

P2: yea

P4: There are like, for example, I wanna talk about Dota but like,

[Giggles]

P4: There's eh, there's a really good... Pudge Character-Player, Pudge is a character that hooks like if he, like in Overwatch, yea. And he's called Dendi, and steam is releasing items named after him designed by him. So, players that which are like fans of Dendi, they will buy those items. And it's a way of showing that I'm good with that character and look at me. So, like in a way – I'm kind of affected of it as well because they released an Arcana in Dota for that hero, Arcana meaning it's an item that changes visually and sound and whatever. So, I want to buy it to show off that I am good with that hero. I don't know it's my stupid thing, but I did it. I spent thirty euros to buy it.

At the start of this quote P2 express an opinion surrounding players who only care about being the best and thus you would not care for the cosmetics in the game. But P4 uses a counterargument from his/her own experience with the game *Dota* (Valve, 2013). As P4 likes the game he/she also look up to skilled players who are well known within the *Dota* community. This admiration for some players might translate into a desire to buy those players self-designed cosmetics. Looking at all the previous quotes, showing how popular games IPs can grow and create a stronger IP as well as the players own found value in the items they want, can all add to the strength of a games Gacha. Not only does the different arguments from the participants connect to Gacha design in varying ways but also in new ways. As the design of both games and marketing systems are very complicated in their form, the participants try to find an answer to each question without reaching a solid conclusion.

5. Discussion

This thesis has presented Lootboxes through the lens of Gacha design. Width, Depth and Desire, the three dimensions that is part of forming a Lootbox but also all other ways of monetization were observed. Seeing Gacha as a spectrum of strength facilitated a possibility to understand where the participants arguments were faulting since their arguments were based on Gacha and Lootboxes being separate or seen as tantamount. This resulted in many of the participants utilizing their own experiences to establish their thoughts and express their opinions surrounding the subject. This aided in establishing a connection to Gacha and Lootboxes on several occurrences both before and following the watching of the video presentation. To look at the players' own experiences is important to understand the players' relation to Gacha.

5.1 Understanding the Players

When the participants questioned if *World of Warcraft* bosses could be considered a Lootbox the response was mixed although the groups were never one sided in their argument. One interesting observation was that even though the participants had described how they would define a Lootbox before watching the video as almost identical to how a *World of Warcraft* boss could be defined, some of the participants did not agree that they were comparable. One reason could be that the discussion about Lootboxes and Gacha had been quite negative up until that point, so when discussing a game they probably like very much having elements from Lootboxes could be interpreted as arguing against their own opinions. One other instance of this happening was when one participant separated *FIFA* and *FUT* to argue that it was not affecting the gameplay because it is separate. However, considering Adam's (2010) definition of gameplay in the *What is Gameplay?* section, *FUT* does change the gameplay in *FIFA*. The participant argued that the players can choose to not play *FUT* if they do not want to engage in that activity. But as reported in *Polygon* by Sarkar (2014) 65% of *FIFA 14* players played *FUT*, which arguably makes it the main part of the game. As the popularity of *FIFA* has increased since 2014 the new numbers can only be larger while looking at the prognosis of the growth from 2009 to 2014 in the same article. *Electronic Arts* have not released any numbers for *FIFA 18* but a tweet post from *EA's* Twitter account revealed that 1.6 million concurrent players played in the opening weekend of *FIFA 18* (EA, 2017c). Lootboxes are a big part of *FIFA* and thus the players are deeply affected by it, making the argument that *FUT* is a better version than other stronger progression-based Gacha systems irrelevant because they are the same. The *World of Warcraft* discussion took place after the video presentation by Telfer was shown, and the discussion about *FUT* was before the video. When comparing these two opinions it shows that the participants do not change opinion regardless if they know about Gacha or not. The participants show a tendency to defend games they find appealing even though they argue strongly against these practices in other instances.

The assumption was: "If players do not know about the effects/purpose of Gacha game design, then most likely the public do not know either", as can be shown in the discussions mentioned above – especially that the players do not know about the effects and purpose of Gacha design – when informed (in the *World of Warcraft* example) almost actively ignore it. The participants fail to understand that Gacha can be good for games such as *World of Warcraft* or *FIFA*. The importance of understanding Gacha as something that is weak or strong is imperative to argue what people may or may not like. Some people do like to play

FUT in *FIFA* even though they have to pay some additional money, because as said in the *Analysis* some players want to support the growth and life of a game that they enjoy.

5.2 Gacha Desire as a Component

The main topic after watching the video presentation by Telfer (PocketGamerbiz, 2017) was Gacha Desire. Many examples of games where the participants recognized the Desire component was brought up and discussed in the groups. One example was the game *League of Legends* where a participant recalled that it was the most expensive game he/she ever played. The interesting observation that was made during the analysis was that this Gacha should according to Telfer's definition (found in *What is Gacha?*) be rather weak because the vanity items in the game does not interact directly with the progression in the game. But it is still the most expensive game the participant has played. In Telfer's definition of Gacha there is a part about the games IP where he explains that if a game has a strong IP, like *FIFA* with Messi or Ronaldo or *Star Wars* with Darth Vader, the players will pull from the Gacha because they *want* those characters in the game. This can be applied to *League of Legends* as well because the games IP has grown a lot since its release (Kollar, 2016). This could mean that the Gacha in any game can be designed as weak at first but become strong as the game grows in popularity without changing the design of the Gacha. This can bring some clarity as to why some games were more accepted than others by the participants in the discussion. The participants pointed out that these games must have constant content updates to keep the pool of items that is available up to date. That could be a reason to why they argue that this is deserving of players' money. Telfer defines this as Gacha Depth mentioned previously in the section *What is Gacha?*

The term coined by one of the participants was incited gambling and it differs from regular gambling as described by the participant. When gambling the person must go to a casino or take part in similar activities and grant consent to playing, but in the example of *CS:GO* the player receives an item or a Lootbox that he/she must acknowledge before being able to view their inventory of other vanity items. In the case of receiving a free Lootbox the player cannot open it without paying a small fee to gain access to a key. This is what the participant argued as being incited gambling because the player technically does not receive anything before buying a key. The analogy of receiving half a lottery ticket and then being forced to buy the other half is interesting as it plays on the emotions of people that is not literate in the design pattern. When they have been given a free Lootbox the price to open it is small enough to motivate a transaction. Comparing this to dark design the consent could be argued is given when the player acknowledges the Lootbox. But as discussed previously in the analysis, what if it is a child or a person who is not capable of understanding the consent that is given? Some participants argued that it is the parents' responsibility to keep an eye on their children's online spending habits. But, again, what if it is the parent that does not understand? The participants recognized the possibility of adults that need help with such problems, but they distanced themselves from that behavior even though one participant admitted to buying "(...) *many, many, many Lootboxes*". An assumption is that this distancing could show that the participants turn a blind eye towards the uncomfortable parts of addiction, but this needs further study.

Even though *League of Legends* is the most expensive game the participant has ever played, he/she still enjoys and plays that game. Possibly because the participant thinks that it is worth spending some small amount of money every now and then knowing that he/she has contributed to the games longevity. The participant is an adult that can give consent to the

purchases done in the game and he/she have discussed this issue with his/her friends before, making the participant aware of the huge amount of money spent. The difference in this situation and the one brought up by the participants about incited gambling is that the technique used by *CS:GO* is closely related to a Barker standing outside of a store trying to get people to spend money there. If a person is vulnerable to impulse payments receiving a “free” Lootbox and having to buy the key does arguably incite that player to spend more money.

5.3 Consent and Transparency

It can be argued that Gacha should replace the word gambling in the gaming industry as a description for the monetization models containing slot machine-like design. As shown throughout the *Analysis*, Gacha have been connected both to different components of video games as well as lotteries and slot machines. Examples on Gacha being able to be weak or strong have been given, when using Telfers definitions, and it has both been considered good and bad by players regardless of its strength. The wide area that Gacha covers in its definition is perfect for capturing all the characteristics surrounding the debate of Lootboxes and gambling. But looking at the *Analysis*, it is important to note the potential interaction between Gacha and dark game design. Because dark design patterns can be used to drive strong Gacha but Gacha can exist entirely without the help of dark design.

An example of where Gacha exist entirely without the help of dark design is *Rainbow Six Siege* as mentioned in the *Analysis*. The game uses a weak Gacha system that is completely disconnected from hindering the players progress, instead it is used to incentivize the player to play more. The element of Gacha is still present as players can bet in-game currency to receive a Lootbox, the difference is that players cannot spend real world money to interact with the Gacha system. *Rainbow Six Siege*'s current Gacha system cannot use dark design patterns since the only thing the player can lose is time and consent for that was given when the player chose to play the game.

An example where dark design drives Gacha is shown in the *Analysis* with *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*. As previously established in the thesis, consent cannot be given if the design of the Gacha system have effectively steered the players intent, navigating them towards a choice they otherwise would not do. That choice in this case is to pull from the Gacha system, in other words creating a stronger Gacha.

So, to increase literacy, giving the players and the public the tools to identify dark design patterns in Gacha systems and increasing the possibility to give unaffected consent can be done through transparency. An example of such transparency could be: The games intention or the amount of money that the players are expected to invest should be presented clearly. This could give players, parents and politicians a better understanding for a game's Gacha.

If self-education is practiced through discussion about Gacha in the game community, industry, in newspapers, blogs, social media, new media and old media it can help with the society's understanding of what the Lootbox phenomenon is about. Considering that the discussions in the interviews did often recall gambling as a key aspect of different video games, which is mirrored on a global scale, we believe that the conversation is ill focused and instead should be on Gacha design viewed as a spectrum and its emotional effect on players. If an understanding of Gacha spreads it will force the industry to abide by the publics new found knowledge.

In this paper the research question has been thoroughly studied via focus groups. The discussion from the interviews shows the perspectives of experienced players. The participants touch on all the theories presented in this thesis, but they never quite reach a conclusion in their discussions. Frequently going off on tangents and anecdotes which makes drawing concrete deductions from the interviews challenging. This shows that the knowledge that experienced players have of this topic is not adequate enough to muster a valuable solution through their conversation about a problem that clearly is important to them. Therefore, we believe that education will help the medium in reaching a healthier debate about a topic that is – according to us – badly focused.

In this paper the authors do not intend to criticize the participants in the focus group nor to assign blame to game creators but rather to add to the debate and increase transparency of game design systems. An argument on the behalf of the participants can be made as the only information they had presented to them was the invitation found in *Appendix A* and an eight-minute video summarizing Adam Telfers definition of Gacha. This information will not be enough to educate anyone sufficiently on Gacha. In addition, dark design was not mentioned to the participants during the interviews. This proves how a deeper understanding of the subject is imperative to formulate a clear understanding of the subject.

A counterargument towards our proposed solution of creating transparency is found in the section of *Understanding the Players*. The players show that information on Gacha might not be enough to change players opinion around games they find appealing. As argued in the above paragraph, not receiving enough information on Gacha and surrounding topics could also be a reason to why they do not change their opinion. In the light of this we propose further research in this area as presented in the conclusion.

6. Conclusion

Our research question for this thesis was: How is Gacha design and Lootboxes discussed by experienced players and what conclusions can be drawn from it while comparing it to previous research?

When analyzed, the data brought clarity to what the common awareness was surrounding the subject from an experienced player perspective. It was however discussed with a lack of knowledge as assumed. The conclusions drawn when comparing to the theory resulted in a deeper understanding of Gacha and several other findings.

The players discussed addiction as the foremost problem of Gacha and how it can be an issue for some people. But they did not empathize specifically with adults who according to the theory can be affected by Gacha design. The players even distanced themselves from that group and at the same time admitted to taking part in superfluous consumption of Lootboxes. As the discussions continued it covered several other topics, often coming back to players that like to pay for a game if it adds to the longevity of it. But when techniques that incite a player who is vulnerable to spend more money was used it was considered a problem.

As the discussions were compared to the theory it led to several conclusions surrounding Gacha. First and foremost, the definition of Gacha as presented by Adam Telfer was proved to be correct as it does work within a spectrum which is expressed as strength. This spectrum was imperative for the analysis as it helped to form an understanding of the players subjective opinions. Thinking about Gacha as a spectrum also showed how it could increase in unexpected ways connected to IP. Which assisted in arguing for players positive perception of certain games that use Gacha.

In addition to this a connection to dark design patterns was found as it was part of what could drive a strong Gacha. Dark design patterns can only exist if there is a lack of consent, similarly to a strong Gacha system which aims to manipulate the player to pay. This part of the Gacha spectrum is what could replace the word gambling in the ongoing discourse about Lootboxes. Subsequently Gacha design can produce components as serious as gambling but also as casual as a game. The term Gacha resolves the confusion of comparing Lootboxes to gambling – being a much wider concept – Gacha is what connects games, Lootboxes and gambling contributing to an elevated discourse in society.

This thesis also concludes that an increase of transparency in the game industry can help to create a literacy in the design of games and monetization. Together with media holding a responsibility for assisting the community in self-education surrounding Gacha's emotional effect on players as well as Gacha as a spectrum. Forcing the industry to abide by the public's new found knowledge.

Further research in subjects of Gacha can include:

- After players have been educated in Gacha design, how do their gaming habits change?
- Can Gacha be used as a tool to check if a game uses too much predatory design?
- Where would games be placed on the spectrum of Gacha if it is visualized?
- What other methods can be used in the light of Gacha design when creating legislations surrounding monetization?
- How much of a difference is there in opinion if a certain amount of Gacha is presented to experienced players?

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Appendix A

The invitation that was sent out to find participants for the focus groups.

We are welcoming any 1st and 2nd year student project groups, studying under the Game department at Uppsala University Campus Gotland, to take part in a focus group discussion about Lootboxes in video games for our C-thesis. This means that you will take part in a discussion led by a moderator who will present questions surrounding the topic. It is up to you to express your opinion and there is no right or wrong, you just have to show up and that's it.

Good to know:

These sessions will be recorded and transcribed. During the session everyone will address each other by first name. The names will be changed into letters or numbers during the transcription. Since this is not sensitive data we can't guarantee complete anonymity.

Please note: we will give you fika if you show up and participate!

More information will be given during the meeting. Here is a signup sheet where you can sign up for one of the meetings, choose a date and time that fits for your group: (...)

Choose a spokesperson for your Arcade or Vertical slice group who can write to us on messenger so we can contact you easily.

If you have any questions, you can reach us by email or on messenger:

Erik Jigvall: Erik.Jigvall.3995@student.uu.se

Kevin Alonso: Kevin.Mustinalonso.4374@student.uu.se

Appendix B

This is the collection of all the transcribed interviews in downloadable links.

Interview of group number 1:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1uD9N87eoL4lAVjnfF-kakWljMkwkmTwg>

Interview of group number 2:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1mhD1XVg42_fBc_sIfx3W2ZZednXXi5Xe

Interview of group number 3:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1pXkpuJEEiduC8AbO5A6oAM1_V_YSqMv