



ZEST IN GAMES



EMBRACING EXPERIENCES OR LIFE IN GENERAL WITH POSITIVITY, ENTHUSIASM, AND ENERGY.

Zestful emotions like enthusiasm, determination, and “feeling alive” feel good and help us to open our minds, engage deeply, think more flexibly and creatively, and build resources to cope with difficulty. People who feel zest aren’t easily deterred and don’t stay down long when they fail. Among character strengths, zest has one of the strongest associations with life satisfaction. Zestful people tend to be happy people! But zest can look different depending on who’s expressing it. More outward expressions of zest might include smiling and laughing, jumping into a debate, or recruiting others to join a cause or activity. Quieter expressions of zest, which feel more natural for some people, might include listening closely, asking thoughtful questions, trying something new, or performing beautifully a skill honed over time. When designing for zest, think about all the ways it shows up, not just the more outward expressions. How would your game encourage players to feel or show zest?

ELEMENTS TO ADD

- + Awe-inspiring scenery, nature, and intriguing open worlds
- + Ways to fail that are spectacular and funny to encourage risk-taking
- + Opportunities to move in real life or via an avatar (in-game parkour, platforming)
- + Humor, silliness, and playful colors and characters
- + Opportunities to hone timing and accuracy to keep players active and determined
- + Chances to go “above and beyond” by completing extra quests, finding hidden rewards or trophies, etc.
- + Suspenseful decision points where players can exercise their moral compass and agency
- + Lots of ways for players to express themselves
- + Unique, interesting visuals and mechanics that inspire curiosity and wonder
- + Random elements that produce joy, laughter, or surprise

ELEMENTS TO LEAVE OUT

- Rewards that come too slowly or not at all can result in a grind
- Rigid gameplay and a lack of choice
- A game that feels “lonely” or cynical may reduce zest over time
- Repetitive play that goes for too long without changing
- Punishments for risk-taking
- Fail states that ridicule or belittle the player or their efforts
- Design structures that tell players what to do or think rather than allow them to explore their surroundings or own mind

COMMON PITFALLS

BLAND DESIGN

Bland games are those that look, sound, or act like stereotypes from other game genres. Clones are boring, be bold! Let your own zest come through in your game by making it uniquely you.

OBEDIENCE TO CONVENTION

When designing, ditch assumptions and question everything. By approaching your design with a curious mindset, you’re more likely to create something unexpected and spark creativity.

TOO MUCH RANDOMNESS

Having random elements in a game can add to a feeling of zest and joy, but if there are too many random elements that remove player agency, that’s going to grow frustrating quickly and impact player retention.

NO REASON TO CARE ABOUT THE WORLD

Undertale included quirky characters named after fonts, and in-game objects like Dog Salad and a quiche you find under a bench. Small, interesting, unusual details — and really relatable characters — help players care about the world and stay deeply engaged. Don’t make a game too predictable.

DEPRIVING THE PLAYER OF AGENCY

Games where the player’s decisions and actions make no difference to the world or situation can be less meaningful and fun for players.

GAME GENRES & TYPES



Adventure



Platformer

Endless Runner



Sports



Party

Dance

SPECIFIC MECHANICAL REFERENCES

Pikmin and *Zoombinis* feature whimsical characters and sound effects. *Grim Fandango* and *Monkey Island* are silly with over-the-top characters, quirky art, and funny situations.

Million Onion Hotel's zany soundtrack and random elements spark surprise and engagement. In *The Sims* serie, unexpected and delightful things happen when players combine certain actions or when characters with certain personalities meet.

In *Assassin's Creed* and *Infamous*, players feel the thrill of parkour without the physical risk. In *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD*, players execute awesome skateboarding tricks without getting hurt.

Goat Simulator and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* are absurdly silly and allow players to do almost anything with unexpected and often hilarious results.

Minecraft absorbs players fully in building anything they can imagine.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and *Uncharted* allow players to explore lavish environments and uncover stories of intrigue, inspiring a sense of adventure.

Classic adventure games like *Myst* intrigue players with fun puzzles.

Games like *Dance Dance Revolution* require movement, boosting energy levels. Games that simulate high-energy movement can also be exhilarating: sports games like *FIFA*, games with platformer elements like *Super Mario Odyssey*, and endless runners like *Temple Run*, *Sonic Dash* and *Jetpack Joyride*.

Party games like *The Metagame* let players interact with, perform for, and play off of each other in creative, self-expressive ways.

Players might be energized by the real-world impact of *Sea Hero Quest* and *Foldit*, where in-game efforts translate into real advancements in science.

"Completionists" show zest by exploring, doing, and collecting everything possible in open-world games like *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* or collection-heavy games like *Pokémon Go*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR EMPATHY

<https://characterlab.org/tools/zest>

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