



OPTIMISM IN GAMES



EXPECTING GOOD THINGS TO HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE

Optimism has a lot to do with how we explain life's events, so we can support optimism by challenging pessimistic thoughts and practicing more positive thinking. Optimists explain bad events as temporary setbacks that are not their fault. They explain good events the opposite way: as outcomes of their own positive, stable traits. But it's also easier to be optimistic if you believe the world you live in is designed for your success. Society doesn't feel this way to everyone — our systems very problematically favor some people over others. But since most games are designed to be winnable, they can give all kinds of players a nice dose of optimism. As players, we trust that a well-designed game will teach us what we need to know to succeed. If you as a designer build trust in your players by creating winnable tasks and allowing them early successes, you're well on your way to inspiring optimism. How else would your game encourage players to expect good things in the future?

ELEMENTS TO ADD

- + A smooth, glitch-free gameplay experience helps players trust that in-game tasks are achievable and the game is winnable
- + Hints that show players what's possible help them think more flexibly about how to overcome challenges
- + More than one way to solve puzzles or overcome obstacles so players are rarely completely stuck
- + Storylines that feature the eventual triumph of good and the value of hope in the face of daunting challenges
- + A helpful in-game or out-of-game community to share hints, tips, and walkthroughs
- + Cooperative play options that encourage players to rely on each other's strengths
- + A thoughtful skill-building sequence and optional tutorials to help players build their skills one bit at a time
- + Provide hints or other encouragement after many failed attempts
- + NPCs who model positive outlooks even when situations look grim, and/or who encourage the player to keep going despite obstacles
- + Player choices that have a real impact on the game world and its inhabitants

ELEMENTS TO LEAVE OUT

- Heavy reliance on killing, looting, or other selfish/harmful behaviors
- Rewards that come too slowly can result in a grind
- Rigid gameplay and a lack of choice
- A game or story that feels "lonely," dark, or cynical may reduce optimism over time
- Fail states that ridicule or belittle the player or their efforts
- Outcomes that aren't logical based on players' choices might discourage continued effort and reduce players' trust in the game system

COMMON PITFALLS

IDON'TWANTNO BUGS

Debugging is a critical component of game design that often gets pushed to the last moment or abandoned completely. However! Nothing will kill a player's sense of optimism -- and motivation to play -- faster than wondering if their struggle is due to a bug or something they're doing. Player must trust you as a game designer in order to persist and believe they can overcome the challenges you give them.

DARK SOULS & CUPHEAD 4EVER

There's a certain pride some players feel from completing intentionally near-impossible challenges. But most players need to feel a sense of hope that victory is possible to remain motivated and optimistic. If you want to make a challenging game, consider building in levels of difficulty so more players can enjoy and feel both challenged and optimistic during gameplay (Celeste is a great example!)

° Bonus: If your game has two or more distinct skill sets, such as solving puzzles AND shooting targets, allow players to change the difficulty on these skills independently. (For example, let players up the difficulty of the puzzles and drop the difficulty of combat).

SPIKING EXPECTATIONS

If your game includes random rewards, make sure that the randomness feels fair. Don't offer random rewards that spike expectations and then fail to deliver. For example, when Destiny launched, players could find color-coded loot boxes, and the color represented the greatest value the reward could be. So every box that indicated rare content was possible and then failed to deliver that content was a blow to players' optimism. Destiny devs addressed this issue by changing the color of the boxes to represent the least valuable item a player could unlock, meaning that players were never disappointed and often were positively surprised by what they found.

GAME GENRES & TYPES



Cooperative Play



Action/Adventure



Social Impact



Platformer



RPG



Real World Impact

SPECIFIC MECHANICAL REFERENCES

Even when Team Rocket stymies you at every turn, all the characters in *Pokémon* are still convinced that the player has what it takes to win.

Undertale models that fighting is not the only way to get the outcome players want when facing enemies — more optimistic approaches like empathizing and befriending can also work.

The humor and silliness of games like *Wario* and *Monkey Island* keep the mood light and thoughts positive despite challenges.

In *Final Fantasy* and BioWare titles, players' decisions matter, reinforcing that they can change the world around them for the better if they choose to.

In *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, when players lose too many lives in one level, the game offers help in the form of the "Cosmic Spirit," a character that leads players to a bronze version of the star until they can win the gold star on their own.

Easy "casual games" like *Bejeweled* can offer players a way to take a quick break from life and achieve something that is reliably rewarding, supporting a sense of control and competence in a short amount of time.

The Sims monitors characters' progress towards many in-game goals, reinforcing the idea that regular, short investments of time and effort pay off in the long run and that all types of skills can be learned and improved.

In *Guitar Hero*, players who are failing can get bailed out by a friend, highlighting that help from others can change the outcome of their efforts.

In cooperative games like *Lovers In a Dangerous Spacetime* or *Forbidden Island*, players learn to lean on each other's strengths to overcome big challenges.

Games like *Foldit* allow players to contribute to real-life good causes, highlighting the power of cooperation and combined efforts to create a healthier, safer future.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR OPTIMISM

Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life* (2nd edition). New York: Vintage Books.

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