

Kind Games: Designing for Prosocial Multiplayer

Workgroup members

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Introduction

What if we proactively design our games to facilitate positive human relationships? We propose that games built on a foundation of **kind aesthetics** can deliver greater player satisfaction, greater long term engagement, and richer human experiences.

Internal studio research increasingly shows that social features facilitating friendship are highly [predictive](#) of [long term](#) retention in online games. Despite this, many games are based on single player or competitive gameplay and only add friendship-focused social features as an afterthought.¹

Let's make **kind games** where players help one another in safe, supportive environments. We define kind games as **multiplayer games designed from the start with systems that deliberately promote prosocial behavior**. We observe this as an emerging design trend in hit multiplayer games like *Sky: Children of Light*, *Sea of Thieves*, *Final Fantasy 14*, *Death Stranding* and even distinctly uncozy games like *Elden Ring*. In this paper we hope to jumpstart the conversation by covering practical tools, constraints and real world examples. There's a grand opportunity to design multiplayer prosocial games that bring out the best of humanity.

Outline

This paper is organized in the following chapters:

1. **Defining Kind Games:** Our basic definition of kind games
2. **Opportunity:** Why we might want to make kind games
3. **Prosociality:** A detailed dive into prosociality including common design patterns and anti-patterns.
4. **Game design patterns for prosocial mechanics:** Some key game mechanics that you should take into account when designing for prosociality. Includes both patterns and anti-patterns with supporting examples.
5. **Process for making kind games:** Discussion of codevelopment with your community.

¹ For the purposes of this discussion, we are examining games that have been released in the last decade. The [Steam Charts](#)—which reflect the most popular games on the platform (as defined by most played and most purchased)—are commonly dominated by first person shooters or single player games.

Limitations of this paper

- **Multiplayer, not single player:** We've limited discussion to synchronous and asynchronous multiplayer games, rather than single player games. Single player titles can examine kindness or show kindness via parasocial relationships, but for true social behavior, there must be at least two real humans involved. However, dynamics discussed here have analogues in narrative structures ("practicing" kindness with NPCs) – so feel free to steal liberally if you are authoring a kind single player title.
- **Borrows heavily from social systems design:** We reference previous work from political economy, game theory, social psychology and other game design papers on [trust](#), [friendship formation](#), [group sizes](#) and more. There wasn't enough room to cover all of these in exhaustive detail. At best we've tried to point interested designers in the right direction but we realize there is a lot more work that can be done in this area.
- **Mostly about the questions:** Though we've included real-life examples throughout, the concept of 'kind games' is new enough that future kind games will tend to be original designs. As such, we are examining kind games generally, and many of the lenses we cover exist to primarily inspire *the asking of interesting questions* about your own designs. It is up to you to find your own answers to how your specific project can express kindness.

Chapter 1: Defining Kind Games

Challenge: Reactive and short-sighted social systems design

Over the past 30 years, we've personally witnessed two common practices for social systems design:

- **Reactive design without social systems thinking:** A team starts with a small multiplayer prototype and 'finds the fun', often within the limited social context of their team playtests. The game launches. Then as various exploits, issues with scale and issues with toxicity are discovered, the system is reactively patched. This process also often neglects real world social dynamics between groups of anonymous strangers.
- **Copying design:** A designer facing a social design problem looks at solutions in existing games. For example, they may need a grouping system, so they look at existing MMO guild designs. A large portion of their 'new' design is a copy of older designs with minor adaptations to accommodate their current game. This process reduces design risk, but can inadvertently bring along deep seated issues present in the older designs.

These historical design practices have substantial weaknesses. Especially in our modern world where games have moved far beyond close knit LAN parties and now can involve populations larger than many countries.

- **Reactive designs often inadvertently generate toxicity:** Design fixes targeted at individual-level player problems miss behaviors that only show up in larger, more diverse populations. When multiplayer shooters moved over to quick matchmaking (to shorten matchmaking queues), they threw strangers together with voice chat turned on by default. Even as early as 2012, research showed that players who were identified as having feminine voices would receive up to three times more negative comments than a male voice or no voice.² Recent studies have shown that this has not improved, and also includes toxicity on the grounds of race.³

² Jeffrey H. Kuznekoff and Lindsey M. Rose, "[Communication in multiplayer gaming: Examining player responses to gender cues](#)", *New Media & Society* vol 15 Issue 4.

³ See, for example, Chapter 4 of Kishonna Gray's *Intersectional Tech* outlining the travails of voice chat at the intersection of race and gender. Additionally, [this article](#) highlights a consequence of ongoing toxicity.

- **Toxicity continues to thrive in heavily moderated games.** Consider *League of Legends*, which has poured [years of effort](#) into downstream moderation. As of 2022, 81% of adult players [report being harassed](#), an increase from 75% in 2019. Riot’s newer title *Valorant*, which theoretically benefits from years of learning best practices, reports 84% harassment.
- **Toxicity in digital social systems can have real world consequences.** Killing an NPC might have no impact on the real world, but social toxicity does transfer to real people. Facebook designers sought to quickly connect people via “soft tie” interactions to maximize simple engagement metrics – they didn’t intend to facilitate genocide, but then [Myanmar](#) happened. And then [Ethiopia](#). From doxxing, brigading and swatting, to fostering hate groups, to increased isolation, depression and anxiety, systems that throw millions of strangers together without context or the opportunity to develop nuanced relationships have done real and lasting harm.

Proposal: Proactively design for kindness

We propose a fresh approach. **Kind games are multiplayer games intentionally designed to emphasize prosocial behavior** (players helping one another). Kind games in our definition have the following attributes:

- Systems encourage players to help one another and their community.
- Players form authentic attachments that alleviate loneliness.
- Groups interact peacefully with each other.
- Toxic behavior is carefully monitored and mediated.
- Social systems foster belonging.

Kind Values

Kind games are games that adhere to **kind values**. These are the top-level contracts you, as a developer, make with players to promise a specific type of experience.

Primary value: Prosocial experiences

The primary behavior we want to see in a kind game is player **prosociality**: **players help each other** and behave in a generally altruistic fashion. They are less likely to engage in selfish or harmful activities.

Supporting values

The following secondary values help increase the likelihood of developing a kind game. While these values are related, or can exist in some form other sorts of games, we believe that these values have to be present to a degree for a kind game. Specifically, the more your game has each of these elements, the easier it will be for your game to attain kindness.

- **Safety**: Players feel they can share and contribute without fear. They can opt into additional intimacy if they desire.
- **Interdependence**: Interdependent players coordinate with one another and work together to achieve more than an individual can accomplish alone. Cooperative systems provide underlying incentives for players to be kind. Like many of the values we discuss, there’s a sweet spot. Depending on the exclusivity of each player’s role and the skill level required, [interdependence can be a double-edged sword](#).
- **Shared purpose**: Players work towards something bigger than themselves. This helps players put aside selfish perspectives.
- **Belonging**: Players belong to a community. Belonging is a fundamental social need and provides a source of intrinsic motivation for kind behavior.
- **Empathy**: Players learn to listen and understand the perspective of others.

- **Diversity:** Players value diverse identities and perspectives. They have richly diverse social networks⁴ and avoid groupthink, which can devolve into outgroup policing.
- **Friendship formation:** Players form strong, meaningful bonds with others. Players start with positive interactions with strangers and build towards connections of [trust](#), [sympathy and support](#).
- **Healthy conflict:** Inevitable conflict is handled in a healthy, productive manner.

We'll dig into each of these in more detail in Chapter 4.

Situating kind games

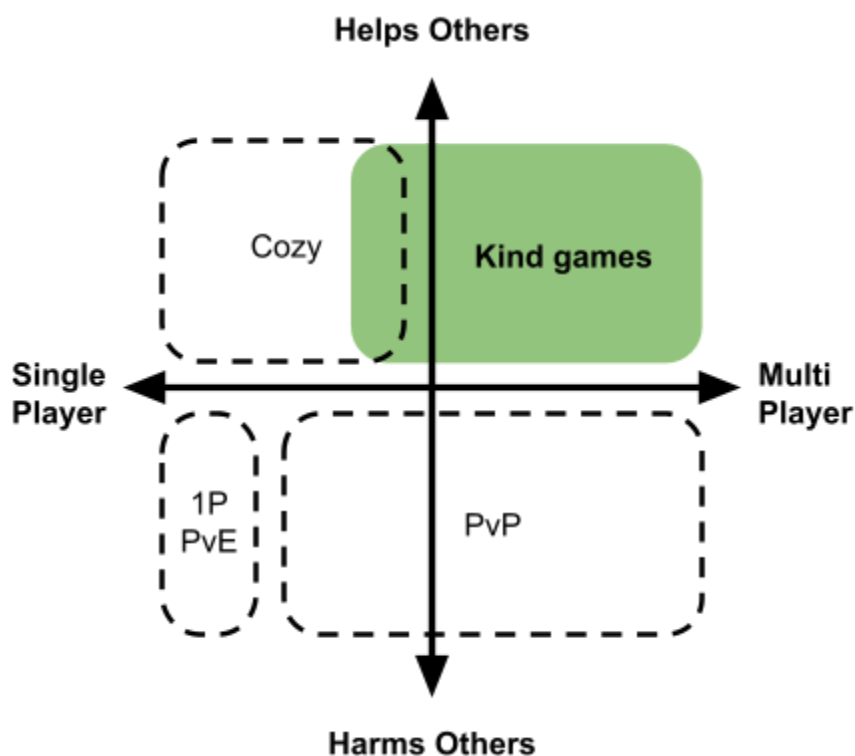


Diagram: Mapping out a playspace where one axis shows if primary action in the game is about helping or harming others (can be NPCs) while the second axis shows group size.

- Kind games are distinctly multiplayer, not single player. Kindness is by definition a relational property: you are *kind to* someone. Consequently, you need to be playing with other people to build authentic [human bonds](#) and perform kindness. (Maybe you could be kind to real animals or plants, but as yet they don't play video games.)
- Kind games focus on cooperative or interdependent play. They generally shy away from competitive play.

Though we talk about an idealized 'kind game' throughout the paper, it is critical to note that kindness in games exists along a spectrum. It is a design ingredient, not an absolute classification. You'll find individual systems that facilitate kindness, even within a game that has intense PvP modes. This is also a somewhat new space. There

⁴ Robert Putnam makes the point that specifically social isolation of the marginalized group is what causes an imbalance in the social dynamics of a community. When players have diverse social networks (not just diverse members of a community) it leads to higher levels of trust.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228241907_Segregation_and_Mistrust_Diversity_Isolation_and_Social_Cohesion

are historical games that showcase strong prosocial systems, but we suspect the fullest realization of a kind game has yet to be developed.

Examples of kind games

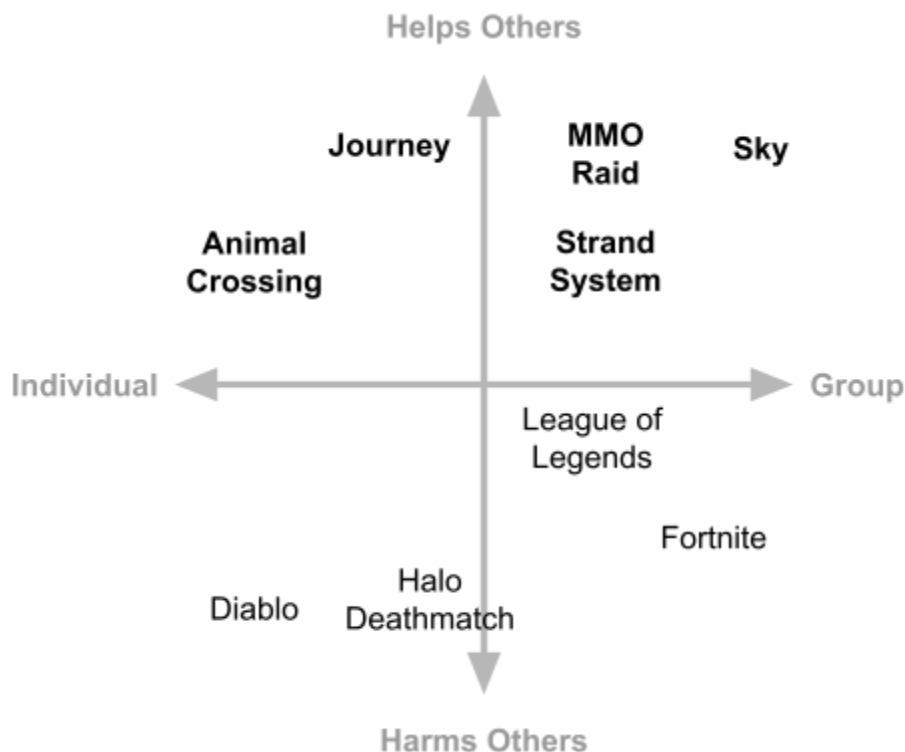


Diagram: Where various games map onto the kindness playspace. Note that only a portion of a game might exhibit kindness (as we see with the Strand System in Death Stranding)

Here are a few canonical kind systems worth studying.

- **Sky: Children of Light:** One of the world's more [popular](#) MMOs, *Sky* demonstrates best-in-class onboarding of new players into healthy friendships.
- **MMO guilds and raids:** These rely on older social designs, but they consistently produce peak experiences due to an emphasis on player interdependence via specialized roles. Unfortunately, they also exhibit worrying levels of toxicity. They would benefit from a kind redesign.
- **Animal Crossing:** Though primarily a single player game, *Animal Crossing* carefully manages multiplayer interactions to reduce toxicity and create intimate spaces.
- **Journey:** In our opinion, *Journey* is one of the earliest examples of a successful kind game. It showcases the anti-toxicity effects of [narrowly constrained social affordances](#) where players can only beep at one another. Griefing is nearly impossible. It has the downside of limiting player intimacy and provides no pathway to building long term friendships.

Chapter 2: Opportunity

Why should we care about making kind games? Kind games actively seek to foster meaningful relationships between players through the promotion of the values we identified above. However, from a business perspective,

they are also an effective approach to building high retention titles with deep community engagement. For a commercial developer, focusing on kind games is a win-win. You can make honest money and still sleep at night.

The ethical opportunity

Games are one of the primary social spaces available to people in our increasingly fragmented world. With the erosion of traditional third spaces like playgrounds, bars, social clubs and offices, people have reported an [uptick in loneliness](#), a decrease in trust within their community and a general decay of meaningful social bonds.⁵ It is high time for games to take responsibility for the role they play as modern social spaces. We can create:

- Games that facilitate healthy friendship formation, increasing [social capital](#).
- Games that reduce loneliness by providing rich, authentic bonds of sympathy and support.
- Games that reduce toxicity by preemptively mediating friction, setting healthy boundaries and providing tools for health conflict.
- Games that provide a sense of purpose and belonging.

In short, we want to build robust social systems that make the lives of our players [better](#) through increasing connection between humans. This is a goal that you as a game developer can feel good about dedicating your life towards. Game developers often wrestle with the thought that they are merely wasting a player's precious time or creating a machine that extracts money. Kind games are a higher creative calling. Creators of kind games help our fellow humans thrive and that is a worthy end towards which we can dedicate both our labor and our lives.

The business opportunity

If you are a working commercial designer, you know that any game pitch needs to survive some pretty serious business expectations. Consider the following assumptions:

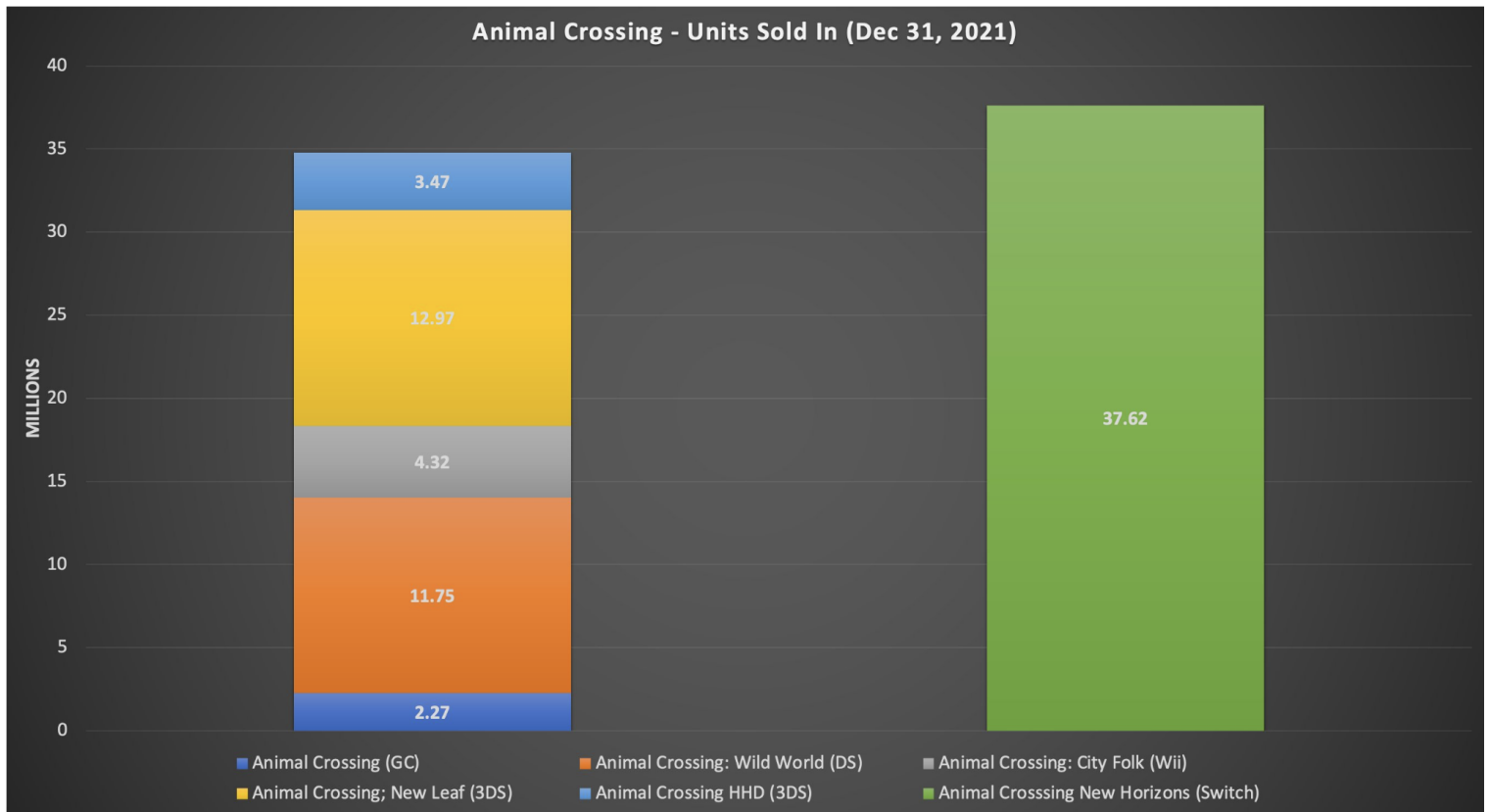
- **Retention is vital to success:** In markets where games as a service ([GaaS](#)) business models dominate in terms of revenue and market share, there is a growing consensus that strong long-term retention drives superior business outcomes. For titles that prioritize LTV (lifetime value), retention is a multiplier on all monetization efforts. For subscription services, retention of subscribers yields reduced churn and increased profitability.
- **Toxicity drives churn:** Games with high amounts of toxicity causes players to leave. [33% of players quit a game in 2022](#) because of harassment. In *League of Legends*, players who experience toxicity in their first session are [32 times more likely to churn](#).
- **Friendship drives retention:** On games we have worked on, when gamers have multiple friends playing a game together, retention skyrockets.
- **Community increases organic acquisition:** Strong active communities full of players who have positive experiences (like those generated by kind games) bring in new players through word of mouth. Word of mouth remains a major driver of new player acquisition in most genres and markets.⁶ Communities also act as strong multipliers on any marketing efforts including streamer and social media campaigns.
- **Brand sets the stage:** A strong brand makes the entertainment business easier. It attracts fans to current and future projects. Games may last years, but brands can last decades. Kind games can be hits at launch, but they are also a long term play. We know that humans [accumulate trust slowly](#), often over years

⁵ Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is an examination of the decline of social spaces and their impact on opportunities for social interaction: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowling_Alone

⁶ 21% of players found mobile games via word of mouth. While 21% found them by social media channels, which are a digital version of word of mouth.

<https://midiareserach.com/blog/quick-take-word-of-mouth-is-no-longer-the-single-most-powerful-games-discovery-tool>

of positive experiences.⁷ Kind games are ultimately a strategy of steadily, intentionally building community trust. This can create [flywheel](#) brands that [pick up momentum](#) as they go.



Animal Crossing as a flywheel brand. Image credit: [Animal Crossing - Units Sold](#) / Daniel Ahmad

Though there are many games that solve one or two of these factors, a kind game makes the following business bet: **By building systems that reduce toxicity, foster friendships and cultivate a positive, trusting, highly engaged community, we lift key business metrics.** Retention improves. Organic reach improves. Marketing efforts are more effective and lower cost. We build a valuable long term brand.

We want to make art that makes the world a better place, but we are also clear-eyed about the realities of surviving and thriving within the commercial game industry. The good news is that kind games align these two desires: we can make games with strong initial player appeal by building kind communities based on kind values. And in the process, we can build highly profitable and sustainable long term businesses.

Chapter 3: Defining Prosociality

When we talk about ‘kindness’ we are largely talking about prosociality from psychological literature. **Prosocial behavior is the broad category of actions where a person helps another person** (independent of intent or reward that might be involved).⁸

⁷ A study by Towers Watson found that it takes approximately seven months to build trust with people (and half that time to lose it). However, trust also requires maintenance, so that a trusting relationship will take years to establish: <https://www.wtco.com/en-US/Insights/2017/12/Video-Embracing-change-A-leaders-role-in-an-uncertain-world-Part-five>

⁸ See for example, definitions at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4CfyLe0IIQ> and <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-prosocial-behavior-2795479>

Prosocial behavior's place in the space of social play

Prosociality is defined by two factors.

- **Self-orientation vs Other-orientation:** Prosocial activities are those that target others.
- **Helping vs harming:** Prosocial activities must also be those that help.

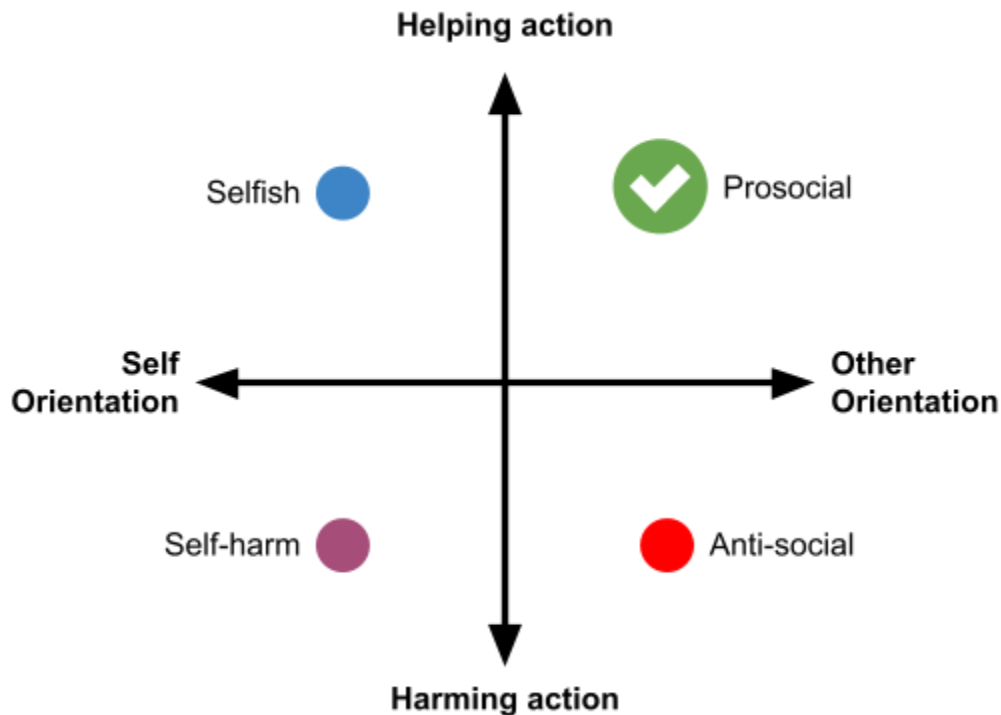


Diagram: In the space of social actions, we are focusing on the upper right quadrant.

The role of intention

Humans are constantly judging the intention behind a positive interaction. Why someone acted in a particular way is as important to humans as the specific action.

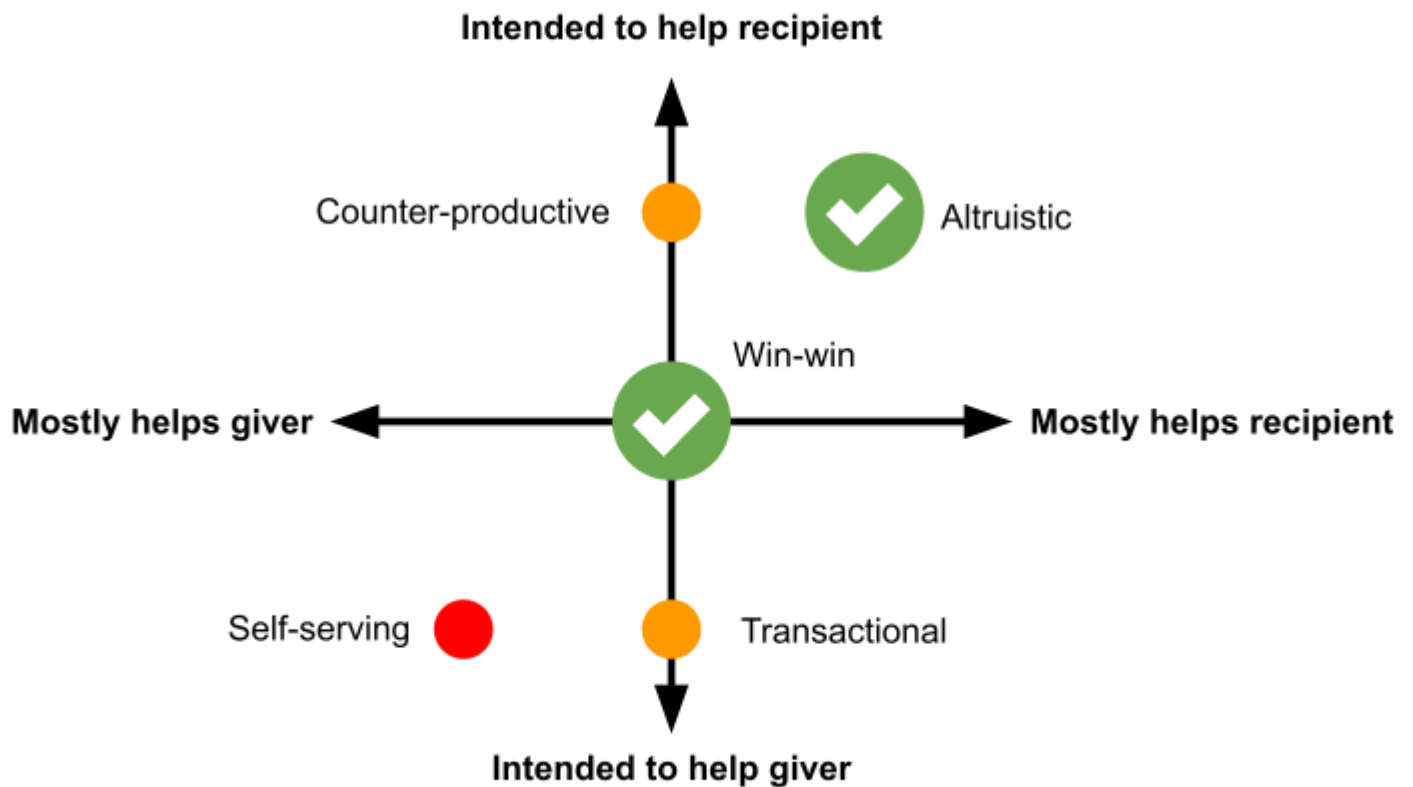


Diagram: In the space of intentionality, kind games are mostly concerned with encouraging altruist and win-win behaviors

Intention comes in a variety of flavors. Kind games are interested in facilitating altruistic and win-win intentions.

- **Altruistic:** Intended to be helpful only to the recipient. This is an ideal behavior in kind games, but tends to be rare.
- **Win-win:** Intended to be helpful to both helper and recipient. This is the most common behavior found in kind games.
- **Self-serving:** Intended to be helpful to the helper and neutral or harmful to the recipient (such as predatory loans).
- **Cheater:** Actors can also hide their intent and signal that they are altruistic when in fact, they are self-serving.
- **Counter-productive:** Intended to be helpful to the recipient, but is actually harmful (e.g. helicopter parenting) or neutral (e.g. prayer)
- **Transactional:** Is intended to help the recipient with the implicit or explicit expectation that the recipient will return that help in the future.

Costs of prosocial actions

We also care about the perceived cost of any prosocial action. The higher the perceived cost, the more likely we'll treat an overture as authentic since social cheaters are less likely to invest expensive resources in a deception.

- **Sacrifice:** Has a high cost for the helper.
- **Mutually beneficial:** Has an external or internal reward to the help.
- **Selfish:** Has a reward primarily for the helper.

Scope of prosocial judgment

Like most social behavior, prosociality is often in the eye of the beholder. Players care *who receives* the welfare. And it matters *who judges* an act to be helpful or unhelpful.

- **Individual:** Helpful to the individual
- **Group:** Considered helpful by the helper's social group
- **Society:** Considered helpful by the broader society. Often with a moral component.

What is helpful in one context may not be seen as helpful in another. For example, in *Les Miserables*, the character Jean Valjean steals a loaf of bread for his starving family. Jean considers stealing in this specific context a prosocial action—it is helpful to him and his family, and there might be a broader moral claim to not be hungry. However, society does not consider his behavior to be prosocial, and sentences him to five years of hard labor for theft.

Why not altruism?

Taking all this together, we can put together a strong [definition](#) of altruism as acts that satisfy the following:

- High costs to the helper
- High benefits to the receiver
- Benefits are broadly recognized by the individual, group and society.
- Clear perceived intention by the helper to only benefit the receiver and not themselves. Acts are freely chosen and not coerced.

So [altruism](#) is a *subset* of prosocial behavior. This is the true altruism found in stories of saints and grand selfless sacrifices. In our dream designs, we can hope to encourage authentic altruism, but it is worth recognizing that it is a high bar, one that is valued in society in part because it is rare and expensive. The realities of life make opportunities for altruism limited, and also undesired in most cases. Altruism can be considered a 'boss level' prosocial design problem because it cannot be incentivized in the way we generally incentivize behavior in games, because as soon as the player is rewarded for it, it is no longer altruism.

This is why we mostly talk about *prosocial* behavior throughout much of this paper and not altruism. Altruism is a great goal, but sometimes we'll need to be satisfied with making games that deliver mere win-win situations⁹ where players are motivated by a very human mix of external and internal rewards. When making kind games, it helps to be pragmatic idealists.

Chapter 4: Game design patterns for prosocial mechanics

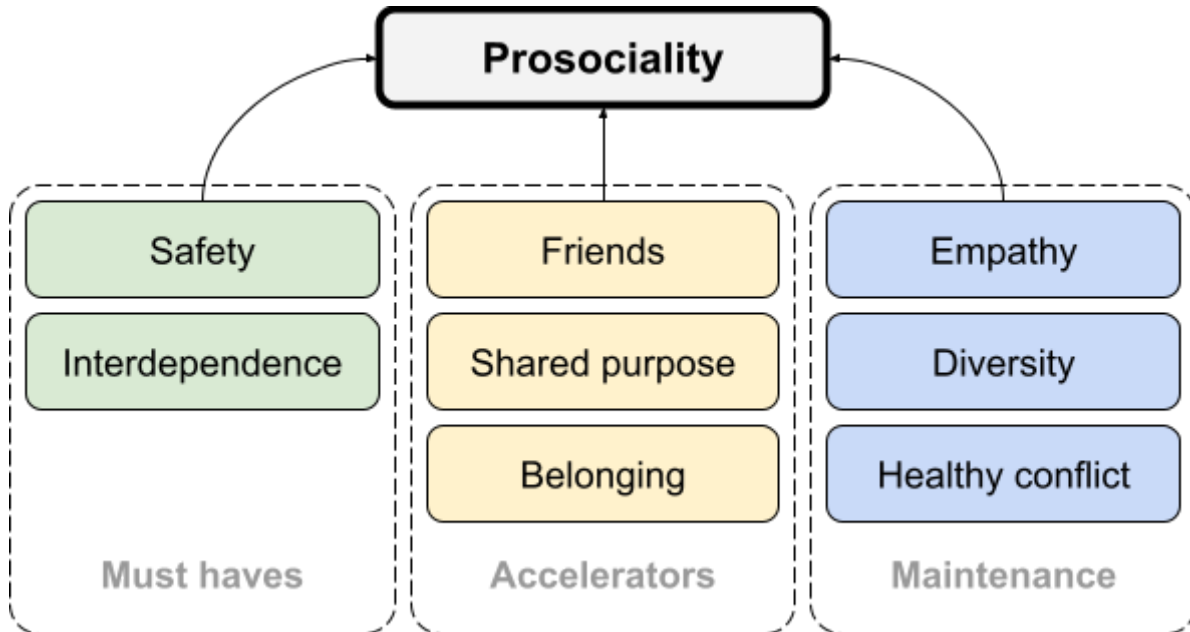
Social theory helps us understand first principles, but there also exist proven prosocial design patterns. Patterns and anti-patterns suggest a path forward when you are facing a tricky design problem, but be aware that they are not blueprints. You still need to figure out how they apply to your specific challenge and then iterate towards your desired experience.

⁹ Prosocial intervention in games.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347175478_Prosocial_digital_games_for_youth_A_systematic_review_of_interventions

One metaphor is to think of design patterns as expressive musical instruments, like a violin or a trumpet. It is certainly a capable tool for making music, but you need to practice how to use it. And you need to adapt your performance to each and every new song.

Organization of kindness patterns



We split kind values roughly into the following buckets:

- **Must haves:** If values like Safety and Interdependence are not present, it will be impossible for your game to frequently produce prosocial behavior.
- **Accelerators:** The more of these values you have present in your social system, the more frequent you'll witness prosocial behavior.
- **Maintenance:** Long term systems benefit greatly from support values. They help reduce toxicity and prevent the community from falling into degenerate states.

Value: Prosociality

Pattern: Make win-win interactions easy (within limits)

Build win-win situations, where it is easy and rewarding to help others. This is where many games build toxicity generators into their core loops. They make it expensive to help others and easy to be selfish.

Example: Overwatch 2



Image credit: Overwatch / Blizzard Entertainment

The ability design for Lucio from *Overwatch 1 & 2* is an example of win-win interactions. As a Support, his abilities are an area of effect that boosts the health regeneration or speed of his teammates while using it for his own benefits. This makes it easy for players who pick this character to help others without the cost of making zero sum sacrifice.

Pattern: Upfront player promise and code of conduct

The game theory of cooperation

The majority of players use a [tit-for-tat copying strategy](#) where they only behave in a prosocial cooperative fashion when they expect others to also behave in cooperative fashion. This has been extensively studied in the social sciences through experiments such as the [Prisoners Dilemma](#) and the [Ultimatum Game](#). This strategy is inherently reactive: if someone signals they are going to act in a selfish fashion, other players will respond by acting selfishly in turn.

A developer can gain an upper hand by loudly declaring a player promise and code of conduct that signals the game is a cooperative space where players are expected to behave nicely. When you set up a positive initial expectation, players who engage in tit-for-tat strategies will find that they mostly engage with the community as cooperative players. You still have to manage downstream toxicity, but official kind community values are a great base to build upon.

You'll need to reinforce this promise periodically with reminders and public demonstration of actions taken to reform those who fall into selfish behavior.

Example: Rift Trails



Image credit: Rift Trails / Red Dead Redemption 2

One of our favorite examples of an upfront player promise that shaped communal behavior was a [horse riding community](#) that sprung up inside *Red Dead Redemption 2*. The game, about grizzled outlaws in the Wild West, has almost no in-game affordances for kind behavior. However, it does have an amazing horse riding simulation. In this environment, players [organized](#) outside the game and scheduled group rides together.

- The group had a clear shared identity: They all loved riding horses in an inclusive environment.
- The group promoted a clear expectation of what the event would entail. They are going to peacefully ride horses together in support of their [mission](#).
- The group had enforcement policies. If someone didn't act appropriately they could be kicked from the ride.

By advertising who they were and what they valued, Rift Trails attracted like-minded players and set the standard for how the group would interact. Impressively, this was enough to overcome all the gritty individualist dogma of the setting.

Pattern: Sacrifice

In zero sum exchanges, one party's gain results in the other party's loss. Often this is a breeding ground for toxicity as players steal from one another. However with proper framing, zero sum is also an opportunity for altruism through visible sacrifice.

You need to engineer situations where players are primed to making costly sacrifices without the guarantee of being reciprocated.

- **Displaying need:** Another player should signal a need via an in-game affordance. For example, a player in an FPS might be lying on the ground wounded with a giant flashing medical sign over their head.
- **Shareable resources:** There exists a limited shareable resource like a health kit. It has clear value to both parties in the interaction.
- **Displaying sacrifice:** The helper should show that they have the resources available to help and that they are giving up the resource to the person in need. In our FPS example, you should show that they have a healthkit (that players know they could have used selfishly) and are giving it up to the wounded player.

- **Acknowledging sacrifice:** To ensure the sacrifice seems altruistic, it is bad form to extrinsically reward the sacrificing player. Don't publicly give them bonus XP. However, you can mark the player with visible signs that they are a generous member of the community. At the end of your FPS match you could note players who helped others. Or you could label them temporarily with a visual effect that they just helped a teammate. This has no economic or gameplay utility, but it has immense social utility. First, the helper can feel proud of their new identity as someone who sacrifices for others. Second, other players take note that helping is a social norm in this community, which in turn makes them more likely to help.
- **Audience:** Be aware that players are more likely to behave altruistically towards trusted friends or members of an in-group. Strangers or members of out-groups are less likely to trigger altruism in most cases (though we celebrate when it happens) and more likely to trigger toxicity or apathy. For the highest likelihood of an altruistic overture, needs should come from friends or members of in-groups.

Pattern: Highlight altruism by contrasting kindness in the face of cruelty

One of the more useful tools when creating strong aesthetics is engineering contrast between a desired value and its opposite. This throws the desired value into sharp relief. So if you want to make an act of altruism stand out, pair it with a background of cruelty. This multiplies the impact of the prosocial signaling.

Example: Elden Ring



Image credit: Let Me Solo Her / FromSoftware

In *Elden Ring*, there's a very difficult boss named Malenia who slaughters most players. *Elden Ring* is a world drenched in cruelty, full of characters who represent the worst of human greed and suffering. There exists multiplayer, but other players are as likely to kill you as help you. Enter a player named [Let Me Solo Her](#). If you open up your server to helping players, you may be visited by Let Me Solo Her, an iconic naked character who wears a pot as a helmet. They will single handedly take on Malenia and beat her for you.

There are some excellent prosocial systems that help bring about this moment.

- **Helping during an intense moment of need:** Players have often died multiple times in this fight and tend to experience despair. Any help at this moment is immensely appreciated.
- **Double opt-in to signal authentic intent:** There's a specific [affordance](#), a gold summon sign explicitly created by the use of the Tarnished Furling Finger, that lets players signal they want to help other players. It states up front "Yes, I'm here for prosocial reasons". Then players in need can opt-in to allowing a player to help them.
- **Removal of transactional relationships:** The character that helps you is random, so there's almost no chance of the help being a transactional overture. So when a savior randomly shows up, it feels authentic.
- **Exemplar of communal values:** Let Me Solo Her defeats the boss solo with minimal armor in an impressive display of skill. In a game known to be brutally difficult, this performance showcases a level of mastery that the whole community can appreciate.

This is the formula to create a video game saint and it wouldn't be possible without the backdrop of cruelty and failure. Notice how the design of the Furling Finger uses carefully limited affordances to set the context for a subsequent display of prosociality. A downside to the *Elden Ring* approach is that the impact of true altruism comes largely from its rarity. It can be all too easy to accidentally foreground the selfish aspects of the dark world and pollute the game's community norms.

Pattern: Gifting economies

In many traditional incentive structures we see players hoard resources for themselves, but in kind games, we prefer players to give resources more freely to others.

Example: Gifting in hunter gatherer economies

One way of encouraging this behavior is to mimic the economics of historical [gifting economies](#), a topic that has been well studied by ethnologists.

The basic economic setup goes something like so:

- Players are long term members of a small, persistent group of upwards of 50 other players.
- Single players or small groups of players engage in hunting or harvesting activities.
- Most hunts either fail or succeed at a below sustenance level.
- Some hunts, however, are wildly successful. This success is not repeatable by skill alone. There's a large element of luck.
- The resource that you get from the hunt is valuable to all other members of your group.
- It is public knowledge across all your group when someone has had a successful hunt. You can't hide a mammoth.
- However the resource gained in a hunt decays rapidly. An individual can't use it fast enough to consume it all. Nor can they hoard it without most of it going to waste.

What happens at this point is an exercise in [game theory](#). Selfish behavior simply results in the loss of resources due to decay. Valuable resources being let go to waste signals to others that you acted in a selfish fashion. Also due to the [sunk cost](#) of effort and energy necessary to complete a successful hunt, you likely broke some community norms around avoiding waste.

With a small enough group with persistent member reputation, the smart strategy is to therefore gift large amounts of the resource to other members of the group. You appear very generous! But also, you've created an implied reciprocation contract with others. If they are lucky in a future hunt, they will likely return the favor and share with you.

This pattern requires some initial setup with both your game economy and player group sizes, persistence and reputational tracking. It is however a scenario that was common across humanity for tens of thousands of years. Perhaps there's something here worth exploring.

Example: Farmville



Image credit: [Game Brief](#) / Farmville

In various mobile and social games like *Farmville*, you could give a gift to a player on your friend list. This doesn't cost you anything and often you get an immediate private reward for simply performing the action. The game makes being generous easy and rewarding.

There were downsides to making gifting too easy. Gifting is a reciprocal loop in which you give something as an overture and the other player responds by sending something back. All reciprocal loops carry a social energy cost, in addition to any economic costs. If you send out too many gifts to too many other players, you are essentially spamming them with low value overtures. This is exhausting and quickly turns into a low social energy transactional exchange.

Pattern: Perceived generosity

We know from psychological research that recipients of help care about *perceived* intent, not actual intent. If your design can encourage the *perception* of selflessness, you'll increase the rate of social capital formation, even if behind the scenes the game is slyly using more extrinsic motivators or UX nudges to encourage prosocial behavior.

Here are some tools for enhancing the perception of altruistic intent.

- **New relationships:** A new player arriving in the game has no idea what incentives are in play when someone is nice to them. MMOs use this to their advantage by blatantly incentivizing high level players to help out new players. Eventually the new players figure out why they were helped, but short term the game

appears incredibly welcoming. By the time the illusion is lifted, new players are more established and have had a chance to establish real relationships, so usually all is forgiven.

- **Plausible deniability:** Design mechanisms that encourage player helping but hide the incentives and make it possible or beneficial to perform the helpful action without incentives. Now when a helpful action is done, the recipient may not know why; intent is left ambiguous enough that there is room to assume goodwill. In the MMO *Steambirds*, players could drop unwanted items on the ground to free up inventory space. They could also drop items to gift them to other players. Receivers of nice items still felt gratitude even when they were aware of the incentives.
- **Asymmetric balancing of value:** If you give a player an item that they either have a lot of or don't need (the value to them is low) and then allow them to give that item to another person who wants the item (the value to the recipient is high), the giver appears altruistic. When a billionaire gives away a million dollars to a charity, everyone assumes the billionaire is quite generous since the charity places a high value on a million dollars. But to the billionaire that's barely two weeks of passive interest. Resource specialization can create value asymmetry: what's ordinary to one player can be scarce to another. When there are low-cost ways for players to be charitable to others, donation behavior increases.
- **Obscure asymmetries:** You can also obscure wealth. If the recipient thinks a giver is poor (but they are secretly a billionaire), that million dollar gift feels a lot more impressive.

Anti-pattern: Toxic altruism

There is always a cost to authentic prosocial behavior. At the very least, it drains our social energy and in extreme cases can consume time spent on necessary self-care. When social demands are too high, some players give too much of themselves.¹⁰ We see this in non-profit and healthcare professions in the real world, and the same can exist in support roles in games. Over time, toxic altruism leads to burnout and churn.

Prevention of supporter burnout is a fascinating but largely unexplored prosocial design space. We can imagine some improvements:

- **Alignment of values so the work becomes energizing.** If a person can recontextualize their actions in terms of life purpose or personal mastery, any prosocial activities will be less draining. In a game sense, facilitating the articulation of group values can make support more fulfilling.
- **Encourage distributed support:** When others provide mutual support, a single person does not bear the burden all by themselves. Instead of one guild leader, why not require three? What if roles supporting the leader were formalized? What about "vice" roles for support and backup? What if healers also needed to be healed? Opportunities abound.
- **Appropriate boundaries:** Let players opt-out of prosocial activities, or systematically encourage rest from them. Make deliberate periods of solitude or self-care appealing. This helps prevent burnout and additionally can increase a sense of authentic intent when they do engage. Think about setting hard boundaries on extreme engagement. Systems that incentivize 'more at any cost' are likely to harm your more dedicated givers.

Anti-pattern: Scarcity and abundance

Scarcity is a particularly powerful [economic](#) motivator. When a player perceives that a resource has limited availability, they'll often hoard it for their own needs.

¹⁰ This is related to the [Happiness Pump](#) critique of utilitarianism in moral philosophy. The theory of utilitarianism suggests that we ought to maximize the most happiness for the greatest number of people. If one person's suffering created immense amounts of happiness for others, then according to utilitarianism we ought to make them suffer so as to create the most happiness. But this is clearly objectionable. Likewise, even if someone can perform prosocial acts that benefit their community—even if they can perform them much better than anyone else—we should still restrict opportunities for them to do so for their own well being.

Scarcity is an explicit choice in game design, since it is trivial to spawn near infinite amounts of any given resource. Toxic scarcity tends to show up in your designs under the following conditions.

- **Limited zero sum sources:** There are limited sources of a resource. When one player harvests the resource, another is denied the resource. This implicitly puts players into competition with one another. One solution is to convert these to positive sum harvestables where multiple people can harvest the same resource. This eliminates source scarcity.
- **Common utility combined with jealousy:** The limited resource is useful to many different people. In *Realm of the Mad God*, we had rare equipment that would drop from various bosses. As such they were highly desirable and led to toxic feelings of inequality when some players had more than others. One solution was to soulbind the rarest items to an account. It was more difficult to be jealous of a scarce resource if there was no chance of you ever getting it. Instead it became a badge of honor. Another solution was trade where players who were rich in an alternate resource could trade for the scarce resource. This actively reduced feelings of jealousy in the community.
- **Expectation of sharing:** When there's a norm around sharing and coordination and players instead act in a selfish fashion, toxicity emerges. Other players will often attempt to crudely enforce the norm via insulting, ostracizing or harassing those who don't follow community norms. Equally damaging, the selfish players can set the standard behavior and there's a new social norm where everyone acts like a jerk. The solution here is to only encourage an expectation of sharing in high trust relationships that have open enough communication channels to safely negotiate conflicts.
- **Strangers:** All these situations are exacerbated by stranger-to-stranger interactions. Without a shared language or established expectations and goals, players will resort to degenerate toxic communication tactics. If you must use scarcity with strangers, make sure you're deploying [closed affordances](#) that direct players towards low friction, guided resolutions of any conflict.

When these scarcity factors are present, the window for altruism narrows and the community shifts towards something similar to the [hypothesis of dark forest](#): Other beings (and in our case, players) are inevitable threats who are both equally silent and paranoid.

However, it is worth noting that the opposite of scarcity—that is, abundance—is also undesirable. When every individual has overflowing amounts of required resources, they stop needing others, which limits interactivity and opportunities for prosocial behavior such as sharing and cooperation. The right amount of stuff is always a balancing act.

Anti-pattern: Selfishness

Broadly speaking, a selfish person is concerned only for their own welfare or advantage at the expense or disregard of others. The following factors need to exist for selfishness to be present:

- **Situation where selfish/altruistic behavior is possible:** Given the context and all possible choices possible, a selfish person is one who chooses the option that benefitted themselves *instead* of behaving altruistically.
- **Evidence of selfish desire:** Others around must be able to detect the wants/motivation of others in that situation. Any desire for a shared, limited resource is always a catalyst for selfishness. In games, we control the channels of player expressions and we can design to amplify or dampen or obscure a player's signaling of selfish behavior.
- **Opportunity and ability to understand the mindstate of others:** Being able to empathize and imagine what another person's potential desires are. Those without this capacity (babies, animals, etc.) are incapable of perceiving themselves/others as selfish. In games, it is often difficult to feel selfish towards NPCs because they don't have a strong internal mindstate that we can observe.

- **Expectation of altruism/selfishness:** Represents what is anticipated/expected in a situation, and its deviation from actual reality. Social expectations are impacted by trust levels between parties, if both are in a communal or exchange based relationship, and if the party's personal norm is to care about others (individualism vs collectivism).

Humans are constantly trying to detect selfishness. It helps us prevent potential exploitation or mistreatment, promotes group coordination, and allows for moral signaling. Yet selfishness (like altruistic intent) is ultimately a [perceptual construct](#); where one person sees a behavior as selfish and another person may not. Never underestimate the awesome power of self-justification; surprisingly few selfish people imagine there was even the slightest opportunity for generosity.

Anti-pattern - Individual competition in communal contexts

Individual competition, in this framing, is defined as a desire to maximize one's personal outcomes relative to others'. By over-indexing on the game systems that favor competitiveness and individual benefits we incentivize selfishness in players. Celebrating or glorifying only one player's contribution over a team's collective effort reduces the incentive for teammates to cooperate for the greater good of the group. We see the weaker teammates get blamed for poor outcomes as players focus on individual output, especially in a scenario of loss.

(Please note there will always be plenty of games that celebrate individual competition. No one is going to take competitive individual sports away from players! However, our argument is that this type of design rarely leads to kind games focused on prosocial behavior.)

Example: Sportsmanship

One hack for making these systems kinder is to create an overarching communal identity that emphasizes fair play and shared identity between competitors. You often see intense levels of friendly sportsmanship exhibited within Olympic gymnastic or skating teams even though they are arguably competing against one another. The key factors to achieving this deep bonding include:

- Inside the competitive space, there is limited zero sum resource competition.
- Outside the competitive space, there is a shared identity and rituals. For example, "We are gymnasts who must support one another."
- There is often shared training and time spent together. The culture is one of mastery and mutual support.
- There are healing rituals that emphasize friendship in the face of loss: in curling, it is tradition for the winning team to buy the losing team a beer.

Anti-Pattern: Dark Triad behaviors

The [Dark Triad](#) is a set of toxic personality traits that are rooted in an inability and unwillingness to consider the needs of others above their own. On this common base of selfishness and disagreeableness, anti-social players can be split into three common variants.

- **Narcissism:** The grandiose belief that they are the best and deserve all praise, status and resources independent of the needs of others. Games systems that create celebrity or status attract narcissists.
- **Machiavelliansim:** The belief the end justifies the means. Game systems that reward the game outcomes over the safety and health of other players attract Machiavellian tendencies.
- **Sociopathy:** Characterized by remorselessness and anti-social tendencies. Game systems that accrue benefits to those who react cruelly or without consideration of others.

A big challenge with Dark Triad personality traits is that they persist in a small but meaningful percentage of your player population (less than 5%). Most of the systems we've talked about actively help increase kindness in [95%](#)

players where griefing is just a momentary lapse. But certain anti-social players will always choose the selfish option even in the face of extreme incentives and social pressure. That's who they are and you, as the game designer, can't provide the decades of therapy necessary to alter their behavior.

Some design surfaces worth exploring

- **Pre-testing:** Testing for these personalities ahead of time is tricky. Machevellians and Sociopaths are excellent at masking. On the other hand, Narcissists are easier to detect. You can ask them and they will tell you they are totally awesome.
- **Power:** All types of dark personalities are attracted to positions of power. Consider designing for [anti-corruption](#).
- **Retroactive moderation:** The current state of the art remains retroactive moderation. Track patterns of bad behavior and recidivism. Progressive, cumulative bans for those who cannot help acting in antisocial ways help weed out those who merely had a bad day and those who will always attempt to poison your community.

Anti-Pattern: Social hostility / Trolling / Griefing

[Social hostility](#) is equated to the tendency to limit another person's options purely as a signal of hostility or spite. Trolling, as an example of social hostility, is specifically one-sided in nature. The troll has full control of the situation, their actions, and if they want to take things seriously without those same choices extended to their targets. The nature of being anonymous absolves them of ownership and the consequences of their words.

Trolling or griefing behavior is difficult to pin down and define in online worlds because the rulesets employed differ from game to game. Stealing or looting a player is unacceptable in the *Animal Crossing* community but is par for the course in an extraction shooter like *Escape from Tarkov* or *Rust*.

Regardless, players who engage in socially hostile play ultimately inflict social, cultural, and economic consequences on the game they play.

Example: Alliance banners in *Sea of Thieves*



Image credit: Sea of Thieves / Xbox Games Studio

Griefing often coopts systems that were designed to create positive outcomes. In *Sea of Thieves*, [Alliances](#) were added as a cooperative mechanic.

- You could put up an Alliance Banner
- If two people have a banner up in the session, they can see one another on the map.
- If they complete a task, all players in the alliance get gold. So the system has positive sum outcomes which should encourage players to cooperate.

However, what happened is that griefers would use the alliance as a means of tracking other players. They could see exactly where they were on the map and engage in a prolonged stalking session. As a result, players would avoid the Alliance system completely.

Lessons for mitigating griefing

- **Don't be a naive designer.** The vast majority of failed social systems in games stem from someone naively building a structure based on [open affordances](#) and optimistically hoping no one would be mean. A small percentage of people are going to be complete nightmare fuel. They are going to work in groups and turn 100% of their intelligence towards harming others.
- **Ask how your prosocial feature will be used for evil.** You need to preemptively wargame out negative consequences and patch them. For example, Rare could have spotted the exploit and adjusted the Alliance system so you manually opt-in to a relationship or could explicitly ban a griefer.
- **Griefers need easy access to non-griefers to thrive.** If you can starve griefers of victims, griefing falls off. When the cost of the griefing gets high enough or the reward is low enough, griefers will find other pursuits.

Value: Safety

Players need to be able to share their points of view and authentic self without risk of damaging their reputation or getting blowback from others. Players will watch for psychological safety and if they don't feel safe, they'll often fail to engage socially. [Studies](#) have also found that when people experience psychological safety in groups, the groups tend to perform better on coordination and problem solving tasks.

We should note that the concept of "safety" is enormously contextual and subjective based on a person's personal values. It is also a complex topic and [a technology field unto itself](#). However, safety is a critical part of kindness, and many problems in games arise from "throw strangers together too fast" approaches to social system design. When this happens, players don't have a chance to establish shared values, or to understand the boundaries and values held by others. In this environment of high stakes social ignorance, kindness is virtually impossible, and negative interaction virtually guaranteed.

Pattern: Clear signaling when two people engage in positive behavior

Your affordances can highlight positive interactions.

- Identify positive interactions where players build trust.
- Elevate the frequency that players use such verbs through incentives or reducing costs.
- Give automated feedback / signaling when those interactions succeed.
- Show the feedback publicly so others realize that this is a space and community where positive feedback dominates. Consider a kudos system that gives credit for being helpful.

Often these systems rely on closed affordances, not more open affordances like chat.

- In *Sky*, two of the primary interaction verbs are [gifting](#) and [following](#). Both are useful actions that show a positive interaction between players and are publicly visible to others.
- In *Destiny 2*, many emotes are [multiplayer emotes](#) where for example, one person can suggest a high five and another person can complete it. This is a low cost, shared visual that players are coordinating with one another.
- Also in *Destiny 2*, the [Commendation system](#) provides clear UX choices for players to acknowledge leadership, allyship, social fun, and mastery in other players after completing activities with each other. Earning these commendations feeds into the player's core progression, signaling that one's social standing is equally as important as their knowledge and mastery of the game.

Pattern: Scaffold open affordances

When a player starts interacting with the community, allow the most minimal set of interactions that still result in them feeling they are playing a multiplayer game. And then, once they've gained trust, give them the option to opt-in to richer methods of communication and coordination.

Example: Sky



Image credit: Sky: Children of Light / thatgamecompany

- First, players start out only being able to play next to one another as anonymous shadows.
- Next, they can 'exchange light' with one another that reveals their persistent identity.
- This in turn unlocks the ability to gift one another candles, which unlocks access to a friend list entry and goals for unlocking future friend-related abilities like follow and teleport.
- Eventually, by opting in to further friendship levels they can talk freely with one another via open chat.

UPDATED

FRIENDSHIP TREE

BY CLEMENT

UPDATED ON
19TH NOVEMBER 2021

INTRODUCTION

When you make a new friend in Sky, you can unlock additional interactions with that friend by accessing their friendship tree. You can also modify the way this player can interact with you.



IMPORTANT NOTES

1. You will need to be friends for **at least 3 days** before you can gift a gift pass.
2. You will need to be friends for **at least 3 days** before you can gift an IAP. Tapping on this node brings up the IAP menu for you to select the IAP you would like to gift your friend.
3. Nodes that resemble Wing Buffs in the friendship trees **do not** grant extra wings.
4. Upgraded versions of these interactions will need to be acquired from past seasonal spirits when they return as Traveling Spirits.

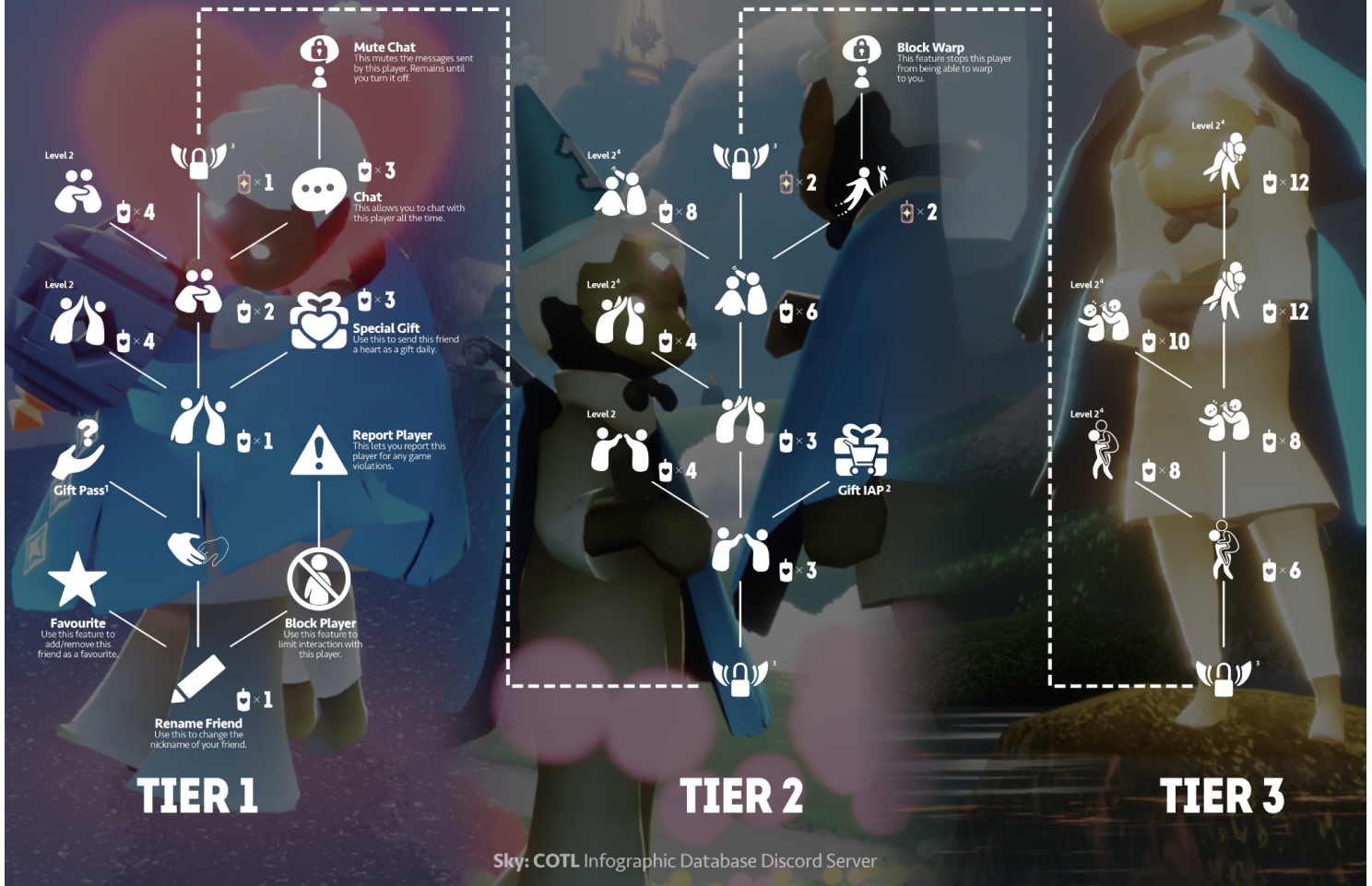


Image credit: Clement / Sky: COTL Infographic Database Discord Server

By making more open social affordances opt-in, you let players engage at their own pace. They never feel rushed in forming relationships with others; they always feel safe.

Pattern: Opt-out and fall back to safer closed affordances

Many games have block systems in place for removing contact with those who have become noisy or toxic in some fashion. This is a great system because it lets players engage in more open discourse with someone and then opt-out if they find it wasn't all they hoped.

However, relationships are rarely so black and white. A social media site like Twitter allows you to turn off some permissions piecemeal. If you don't like the constant retweets from an otherwise good friend, there's a toggle to just block that aspect of your relationship.

Likewise, providing multiple levers of consent and control allows the game to cater to different player needs. Looking at safety through the lens of the most marginalized groups of people helps inform which levers can support control over personal boundaries. Providing safety options to the most vulnerable players benefits the rest of the community at large.

Example: Apex Legends

Apex Legends has a ping system and a voice chat system. At some point players may have opted in to voice chat only to find it not to their liking. If they can mute voice chat and still fall back to using the safer ping system, they are able to continue playing and communicate with others, but at a level of social safety they find more appropriate.

Anti-pattern: Need generation via fostering negative emotions

A game's naive social systems often actively promote negative emotions and lack of safety in order to drive business metrics. Consider:

- MMORTS games like *Game of War* that create intense social comparison between competing guilds, then use that emotion to extract cash from big spenders.
- [Twitter](#), [Youtube](#) and [Facebook](#) algorithms which tend to promote emotionally charged content because it leads to greater "engagement", where sentiment is missing and only attention, response, and virality is measured.
- Survival games that create emotional highs by temporarily alleviating artificially generated anxiety and stress.

Negative emotions are often highly "engaging". Where it gets tricky is when games shift from *satisfaction of existing needs* to *generation of new needs* by putting players in harmful situations. Think carefully about just pasting safety systems on top of a core that is actively and intentionally generating your lack of safety in the first place for the sake of "engagement" – clicks and time-on-site without awareness of emotional valence.

Value: Interdependence

Interdependent players must rely on one another in order to achieve more than an individual can accomplish alone. Kind systems provide underlying incentives for players to cooperate and coordinate with one another in a positive manner.

Anti-pattern: Individual power

One of the greatest challenges to the growth of kind games is the video game industry's historical reliance on western individualist power fantasies. The player promise is one of independence and individual power. Players level up, they gain personal god-like abilities and ultimately don't need anyone in order to effect change in the world. This is very appealing particularly to poorly socialized young males, a group that tends to see a spike in selfish motivations around age [16 to 25](#), though a small sub-group doggedly maintains these motivations into their late 40s.¹¹ It is also compelling broadly to people who lack power in real life – which might be everyone to some

¹¹ Adults become more prosocial as they age, going from roughly 25% prosocial on one test before age 35 to 75% at age 60. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0963721420910811>

extent. Video games have historically provided relief from powerlessness, which can be a great good – but too much of it, especially once games started to directly involve real other humans, turns socially toxic.

A classic example of this type of multiplayer game is *DayZ* where the world wanted to kill you, players wanted to kill you, and only by accumulating power and resources did you gain independence (and, by extension, safety) from others.

These kinds of games result from the extrapolation of historical game design patterns into contexts in which they no longer help us. In order to innovate into a future of kind games, we must scrutinize some of game design's most tried-and-true value propositions – including the myth of the solo hero.

Pattern: Specialization of skills

Give players complementary skills and weaknesses so that they need to cooperate with others to reach their goals.

For example, in MMOs, players specialize by adopting three interlocking roles known as the Holy Trinity.

- DPS characters do large amounts of damage to enemies, but can't take much damage themselves.
- Tank characters can take a large amount of damage and 'aggro' enemies to prevent the enemies from attacking their more fragile team mates.
- Support characters can heal Tanks and DPS units.

The overlap in skills means that a group with full DPS, Tank and Support can handle much more difficult enemies than any one player alone. Each individual player earns better loot and progresses faster, but must rely on others.

There are many forms of skill specialization. In *Mario Party*, one person stands on a button so that another player may walk through a locked gate. In *DOTA*, players specialize in Carry, Midlaner, Offlaner, Roamer and Hard Support. Look for the skills necessary to complete a multiplayer coordination task. Then split those skills across multiple player types.

Pattern: Specialization of resources

Another form of specialization is when one player has access to unique resources that another player needs. In turn, the other player also has resources that the first player needs but cannot access on their own. This sets the stage for mutually beneficial trade or gifting.

- In a trade economy like in *Star Wars Galaxy*, a player might have access to a specific type of ore in great quantities. Others need the ore in order to craft their gear and so they are willing to trade money for that item.
- In *Animal Crossing*, each island only produced certain types of fruit, so that players had to work together for mutually beneficial trades to have access to all types of fruit.

Pattern: Soft coop “Better together”

You can also set up your interactions so the mere presence of other players gives superior results than if you play alone.

In the bullet hell MMO *Realm of the Mad God*, the health of an enemy was a global property impacted by all players. The more players you have shooting at the enemy, the faster it dies and the less risk that any one player

has of dying from the enemy attacks. Additionally all loot was shared with those who did damage to the enemy so there was no downside to others helping out.

There's no specialization involved here, merely a focusing of communal action. But the numerical benefits of playing together in parallel creates an economic incentive to stay together and help one another.

Pattern: Knowledge sharing

One positive sum resource we often overlook is information. Information may be shared freely, often no clear loss to the sharer. To set up positive sum information sharing, ensure the following:

- The information is valuable. It helps someone accomplish their goals.
- There is little or no cost to sharing the information.
- The outcome of sharing the information does not result in a competitive zero sum scenario where one person or group takes away the opportunity from another.

A small sampling of different flavors of knowledge sharing worth building into your game:

- **Economic production information:** Consider a player who knows the location of a rare ore spawn. As long as the resource can be harvested freely by any player, it is an unmitigated good to share the location with others.
- **Institutional knowledge:** The same holds for institutional knowledge, like the best method of organizing a raiding party. Sharing this information with your teammates costs you nothing and may help everyone by increasing the success of your group. If they in turn share it with another group, it still costs you nothing. Thus complex systems that generate *success stories* in turn facilitating sharing, coordination and interdependence.
- **Training knowledge:** Institutional knowledge can also be transferred from experts to newbies. Providing surface areas for more experienced players to be able to reach out and coach newer players is key to elevate and promote knowledge sharing. As designers, consider what tools are available to players to output their knowledge? Are there recruitment opportunities that exist in virtual spaces where players collide with each other?
- **High dimensional commodities:** Basic commodities such as crafting materials that have varying quality and varying opaque spawn rules also constitute shareable social knowledge.
- **Asynchronous knowledge sharing:** We often think of knowledge sharing as talking to a player in voice or text chat about something, but there are also powerful asynchronous methods. In *Dark Souls* or *Elden Ring*, players can leave notes in key areas to alert players of dangers or treasures. Players can then interact with those artifacts at their leisure. Persistent messaging lets players see conversations when they log back in at a later date.

Pattern: The rarity and delight of human contact

If you've set up your systems of interdependence correctly, the presence of other people becomes a delightful opportunity.

Example: *Journey*

In *Journey*, players rarely encounter another player in the vast desolate landscape. But then they do spot another person, there's an immense sense of joy and appreciation. This is further enhanced by:

- A closed communication system, a single chirp, that limits toxicity.
- No collisions between players, which limits griefing.

- Players could also pick up powerups. These were instanced per player so that when a player acted selfishly and grabbed a powerup, it merely looked like they were altruistically pointing out the location of the powerup (information sharing).
- [Chirping](#) also recharges another player's scarf if they are close enough. This allows for collaborative travel where the presence of another player can help you reach locations that were otherwise difficult or impossible.

Note the lack of competitive mechanics and the emphasis on safe interdependence.

Anti-pattern: An overabundance of filler people

The flip side of this pattern is flooding the player with too many people whose limited utility does not justify the cost needed to jumpstart a relationship.

In many exploitative Web3 pitches, dilettantes gush over the possibility of having “A million concurrent players” in a shared virtual space. This flooding of a human's Dunbar layers merely results in alienation and a devaluing of human life.¹² Our limited brains turn to rule-of-law, transaction-based simplification, apathy, stereotypes and toxic othering in order to deal with the overwhelming quantity of commodified people.

Value: Shared purpose

Players work towards something bigger than themselves. This helps players put aside selfish perspectives. In its most expansive form, life purpose is associated with [human thriving](#) and lower overall [mortality](#).

Having purpose can be improved by several [factors](#):

- **Social support:** Others in your community support your pursuit of your purpose, and you support their pursuit. Oftentimes, those purposes are aligned.
- **Personal growth:** You feel you are improving as a person by pursuing your purpose.
- **Self-efficacy:** You believe that it is within your capacity to make progress towards your purpose.

Pattern: Shared communal objectives

By orienting a gaming community towards a shared goal, players begin acting like one another's social support. Players feel that they are helping one another when they see others contribute to the same goal.

One example of this is large scale building communities in *Minecraft* servers. The entire community works together towards the goal of creating some grand work. There are more individually focused building servers, but by creating communal goals you gain the feeling of accomplishing something immense together.

Pattern: Focus on helping others

Altruistic goals, especially long term ones that involve helping or providing for others, are naturally resonant with life purpose.

¹² According to Robin Dunbar, humans have [limited social budgets for different types of relationships](#), where the number of close (“kin”) relationships is quite low, but with an upper limit of about 1500 (for a “tribe”). A million relationships is outside the scope of any known Dunbar layers.

Example: *Destiny 2* Player Guides

Player guides in *Destiny 2* are an example of how the most altruistic members of a community self-organize around a structured service of teaching players how to navigate the most challenging content in the game. [r/DestinySherpa](#) is a 90,000 member strong subreddit group where guides are connected with players who specifically need help through raids. Moderators of the community have strict rules prohibiting self-promotion or elitist behavior in an attempt to sustain a prosocial and welcoming environment.

Value: Belonging

Belonging is when players feel a strong sense of membership in a community. It is a fundamental social need and provides a source of intrinsic motivation to drive further kind behavior.¹³ Belonging often comes with a sense of shared group identity.

Dimensions of belonging:

- **Invitation:** Intentional request to have an individual (or group) join a community
- **Welcoming:** Active hospitality - Actions that allow individuals to bring themselves and find their place in the community, and accepts individuals as they are.
- **Participating and contributing** - Individuals feel enough psychological safety to participate and contribute to the group's shared goals and objectives
- **Growing** - By being able to contribute, the individual is able to foster their own growth within the community.

Anti-pattern: Othering

The idea of stoking anxiety, resentment, or fear of the “other” is not a new strategy in [real world politics](#). Real world influences seep into online interactions and can create biases that designers need to look out for. Self-expression is one axis that, if unmoderated, can unintentionally create a sense of othering, preventing connections between players from forming.

As humans, we are cognitively wired to form heuristics around the world which we perceive and this rings true socially too. The categories we create (especially in a virtual world): the content, definition, and meaning of those categories is not automatic - they are socially constructed rather than natural. The more cohesion in a group, the less anti-social behavior and higher generalized trust.¹⁴

Pattern: Joining rituals

We are trained by slick social media sites to treat joining a digital group as a utilitarian act facilitated by well-greased UX flows. But human groups often invest in elaborate rituals to signpost when someone becomes a member. Consider the following design surfaces:

- **Challenges a new member must overcome.** The greater the intensity of the challenges the more quickly a player is to commit. In the MMO *EVE Online*, players who make it through the first loss of their hardwon spaceship and then commit to a supportive player guild are more likely to stick with the game. Be aware, this can turn into [hazing](#) or trauma bonding if taken to extremes. This looks like it increases bonds in your metrics, but in reality it merely is filtering out less aligned inductees.
- **Emphasizing values:** The new member pledges to uphold key communal values. They commit to being a good member of the community. Games often use the most basic shadow of this element by asking people

¹³ See, for example, *Design for Belonging*: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/design-for-belonging>

¹⁴ Giovanni Ponti (ed.), “Social network cohesion in school classes promotes prosocial behavior”, PLoS One, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5884510/>

to read a dull wall of text in the form of a terms of service agreement (which many may not, and merely select the “I agree” button). Consider having players perform group values. Or verbally read the values back to their peers. There’s a lot of room for improvement here in game onboarding.

- **Public acknowledgement of membership by the community.** When someone joins, key figures ceremoniously mark and celebrate the moment. This is also often poorly done in games.

Pattern: Marking membership

Provide aesthetic items whose purpose is to loudly and proudly display social identity to others. Membership items let other players see in a glance which group they belong to. And they also make it easy to pick out allies in a crowded space.

For example, guilds in MMORPGs long made a practice of including abbreviations for their guild in their character name. Some also dye their clothing with special guild colors.

Pattern: Investment and ownership

A common mistake made by planned communities is to give players a templated community space and assume that is enough for them to feel a sense of belonging. This approach tends to fail—it is the difference between inheriting a community that is presumed to fit, rather than creating something custom and specific to the needs of the community.

The plan and structure of the community needs to be driven by player investment and a sense of ownership. If you can encourage the player to invest their time, planning and hard work in bringing a community to life, they’ll feel a stronger sense of belonging. Give them opportunities to set the direction of the community. Give them problems to overcome. This pattern ties in nicely to shared goals.

Examples

- **Valheim:** Players take care of a shared base that they’ve co-created. Players often share tending to the space (expanding, tidying, stocking, organizing) as prosocial activities. This yields a stronger level of belonging than what you see in games like *Monster Hunter* that have developer-authored hubs.
- **Sea of Thieves:** Players can choose to gather together and [play a song](#). When they cluster in large groups to put on a concert, there’s a sense of ownership of the experience. Players who are viewing can also participate. This is stronger than if an NPC was playing a song during a pre-authored event and players were just there to watch.

Value: Empathy

When players seek to understand the perspective of others, they start to break out of self-centered behaviors and can take into account the needs of others. Empathy is a skill that is practiced through intentional listening and repeated perspective taking.

Pattern: Embodiment

VR titles have done very intriguing experiments around trying on different bodies and identities. This can provide a certain lived perspective that is otherwise impossible to achieve in other mediums.

Pattern: Creating space for reflection

Consider adding systems that encourage active listening. In the game *Kind Words*, players send out thoughts into the digital ocean and players are encouraged to read the messages, reflect upon them and react in an honest fashion.¹⁵ The game creates a space for thoughtful pondering and composing of a response. This pattern is in direct opposition to attention hogging UIs that present the user with an infinite scrolling landscape of immediate, ephemeral stimuli.

Value: Diversity

Encouraging diversity and tolerance of diversity is a rather pragmatic tool for social systems designers. We want players to value diverse identities and perspectives not only because they inoculate them against stereotypes and groupthink, but also because they more accurately reflect the player base and an opportunity for players to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.

- Stereotyping results in players being treated in inauthentic, transactional ways. Negative stereotyping can lead directly to abuse of new players and leaves less space to organically build up healthy relationships.
- Groupthink leads to severely toxic behaviors at scale such as intense outgroup policing and mobbing tactics.

Pattern: Hub connections linking small world social networks

Left alone, players naturally cluster into similarity-based groups. These small world networks have lots of *strong ties* between individuals in the group, but very few outside the group. This is your classic breeding ground for groupthink. If such a small world network is seeded with toxic norms, it has very little ability to correct and recover.

What you want to do is deputize highly connected hub individuals (super connectors) to build relationships with other outside groups. These *weak, bridging ties* bring members of a group into contact with others who are not like each other. Personal relationships with diverse people mitigates reliance on stereotypes and seed fresh new ideas.

In *Star Wars Galaxy*, there was a rich trade system between groups. Even though a player might have a home base within a player city, there was a constant cycling of traders between groups. This creates interactions between groups that might not otherwise have happened.

Value: Friendship formation

Friendship formation is the process by which players form strong, meaningful bonds with others. Friendships occur along a spectrum of trust. They start with positive interactions between strangers in spaces that enable repeat, serendipitous encounters. They use reciprocity over time to build stronger connections of trust, sympathy and support. Friendships are mostly likely to form in situations where there is strong similarity or group affiliation between two people. They grow in depth if there are opportunities for safe disclosure of weaknesses or needs.

¹⁵ Interestingly, data from *Kind Words* also indicates that “the average player makes four requests but writes eighteen letters to other people”, suggesting that people are giving their time to read and listen to other players:

<https://www.eurogamer.net/trolls-need-kind-words-the-most>

Pattern: Reciprocal relationships

Prosocial goals, especially long term ones, that involve helping or providing for others are naturally resonant with life purpose.

Example: Social Strand System



Image credit: Death Stranding / Kojima Productions/Sony Interactive Entertainment via [Polygon](#)

In *Death Stranding*'s [Social Strand System](#), players build physical and social connections across a vast, challenging landscape. This is a great example of a modern friendship progression system based on reciprocal actions.

- **Selfishly motivated action:** You could build bridges and pathways that make your personal life easier.
- **Automated sharing with others:** But there was also a system where your creations could spawn on other player's maps, which makes their lives easier as well.
- **Low cost reciprocity:** These other players could give likes if they found your work useful.
- **Friendship leveling:** This in turn feeds into a friendship system where you could see more of another player's work and in turn reciprocate by giving them more likes.
- **Further reciprocity:** As you see more of your new friend's labor, there are more opportunities to be helped and help in return. You begin to feel a strong sense of mutual support.

Patterns: Playful ribbing between friends

Not all deviant behavior is toxic. One way humans establish strong relationship boundaries is by playfully acting in a fashion that breaks or pushes typical social norms. The critical ingredient here is trust. When a player insults another player and they are friends, the correct interpretation is “I am doing something that isn’t allowed. But I know that you know that I know my intentions are friendly.”

The typical response here is laughter. A social boundary has been pushed; the relationship tested. But it emerges from the test more secure.

However, this same insult between strangers is often treated as a direct attack. Trust is lacking. There’s no established understanding that the other player is friendly. Any budding relationship is damaged, often irreparably. The typical response is a counter attack or defensive silence.

Example: Subversive play in *Sea of Thieves*

Consider subversive mechanics in *Sea of Thieves*. Players can abandon one another, blow each other up, steal and other actions that are usually considered griefing. However,

- Gameplay occurs in small groups of 2 to 4 players. This is smaller enough of a group for real communication.
- Players are more often than not real-life friends.
- Even egregious actions are usually relatively trivial to recover from.

In this context, “griefing” is actually bonding. Hilarious bonding. If you were to change the context by increasing the number of players, adding more strangers or making the cost of actions more permanent, you’d rapidly see toxicity emerge.

Value: Healthy conflict

Conflict between players is inevitable. We are political creatures with diverse needs, communication styles and expectations. A world with fuzzy feelings of permanent peace is a utopian fantasy. As social systems designers we need to be clear-eyed about the reality that conflict management needs to be part of our designs.

In kind games, the goal is to help players handle interpersonal conflicts in a healthy, productive manner. They should use conflicts as an opportunity for growth, either personal or communal.

Pattern: Digitally mediate conflicts with closed affordances

Since players come from diverse backgrounds, they often have very different organically learned conflict management techniques. For example, in some cultures, you yell at people if there is a problem. In other cultures, you passively ignore them. It is rare that you find people who can execute thoughtful mediation.

With digital games, we can identify common conflicts (around resources, power, group formation, etc) and wrap them in a set of UI affordances. We create a standardized process for managing the conflict that offers fewer opportunities for toxicity.

For example, MMOs often have issues with [trade](#) where players cheat and scam one another. By funneling all trade through secure trading windows, most of these problems are removed. Players can offer up specific goods (verified automatically so there can be no lying) and set prices. These prices are then locked in with a double

opt-in mechanism (which resets if any part of the deal is changed so there can be no last minute replacements.) Internally, we've seen complaints go from 5-10% of all transactions to substantially less than 1%.

Pattern: Decision making systems

Sometimes there is no right answer to a values-based choice, only community buy-in. Decision making systems (such as voting) help players reach consensus.

Decision making systems design is a deep field that is rarely studied by game developers. Such a system needs to cover the following areas to be effective:

- **Analysis:** What data (facts, opinion) feed into framing the decisions?
- **Authority:** Who has power over each part of the decision making process? How are those parts related to each other?
- **Decision mechanism:** How are the decisions reached? Common examples include Random chance, Voting, Consensus discussion, Market mechanisms or Authoritarian mandate. Each one of these has numerous subtle variations.
- **Communication channels:** Each decision or analysis mechanism requires different social communication channels. A discussion-based system benefits greatly from some form of open chat. A market mechanism requires a market with communication via prices.
- **Implementation:** How is the decision executed? In closed, digitally mediated systems, this is also the job of the game code.
- **Review or Feedback:** How do you know the decision accomplished what it set out to do? Are there ways of assenting or dissenting to the decision? Is it assumed that everyone has to abide by the outcome?
- **Anti-corruption mechanisms:** How do you ensure that the intent of decision making mechanisms is not subverted? Selfish, harmful people actively seek positions of power. And once a person gains power, they are likely to experience reduced empathy and overreach. Some common solutions include term limits, oversight roles (that can remove power if corruption occurs) and semi-random selection of candidates.

Developers often take control of many of the above steps. When a guild decides who to elevate to a position of authority, the game developer has already set up the permissions for what each stage of authority means. The implementation of the new roles is taken care of by code.

In kind games, decision making systems should bend towards minimizing toxicity and maximizing player buy-in.

- **Empower players to feel ownership of their decisions:** Authoritarian systems are often cheaper to build and balance. Yet if you lean too heavily on mechanisms that preference the power of the individual, we often seed corruption.
- **Open systems require trust:** Limit open discussion and analysis to people who either trust one another already or have been given a mandate by the broader population.
- **Get everyone involved in the decision.** Even if it is just authentically affirming it. This helps generate a sense of ownership and shared purpose where we are all striving towards the same goal.

Chapter 6: The process of making a kind game

Now that you've made it to this point, how do you make a kind game? Making a kind game, much like making any game, is an iterative process: you build, you test, you improve.

Gardening

Multiplayer games are built in a sort of co-authoring iterative loop between the developer and the game's community. Who makes a kind game? It is hard to say. Much like a garden, the developer may seed the basic structures, but then the social norms grow and flourish in their own unexpected ways. Memes and rituals blossom and fade seemingly independently of the systems they are built upon. As soon as a kind game is live, serving a real community, the role of the developer changes to that of gardener who prunes the undesirable growths and helps along the interesting developments.

If you follow the gardening metaphor, you'll likely see the following phases of development

- **Social architecture**: The developers implement the fundamentals of the game's social systems. If this is incorrect, the game may wither before the community even takes hold.
- **Seeding the community**: The developer attracts an initial community. The player promises and code of conduct are critical to a good set of social norms taking root.
- **Measuring kindness**: The developer measures metrics that go beyond retention and monetization. They look at social network structures and how social capital is building across various player bonds.
- **Pest control**: If there are extreme antisocial behaviors, they try to get rid of them. A developer of kind games must always be on the lookout for underlying structural causes that are weakening the community and making it susceptible to toxicity.
- **Pruning**: Sometimes there are aspects of the design that are poor. Can you eliminate them or transform them into something less damaging?
- **Fertilizing**: Equally important is watching player behavior and spotting resonance. Maybe it is time to amplify a player-created store with an event or adjust the balance of a system to enhance the probability to kind outcomes.

Metrics

Measuring kindness is a new topic for game analytics. Much toxicity results not so much from what we measure, but what we *fail to measure* because we don't know how. Sometimes the most complex and important dynamics – such as warm sentiment, player attachment, positive player ROI sentiment – are the hardest to measure.

Prosocial metrics largely represent breaking new ground. Some potential directions worth investigating are:

- **Measuring core value**: For each of your game's key values, find proxy metrics that represent them. For prosociality, are there critical actions that represent providing help to other players? Track that! Do this same exercise for each of the supporting values.
- **Social network analysis**: Understand the shape of your networks. How are friendship and groups distributed? Who are the hub players? What are their patterns of engagement? Can you detect churn or burnout? How does generosity [spread](#) through the network?
- **Psychological survey instruments**: There are numerous rubrics for measuring motivations, well-being and more. Are some of these instruments applicable to your game? Don't be afraid of subjective sentiment measurement.

Something to keep in mind is that each social architecture and its associated community is unique. Your game likely has very different systems and metrics derived from those systems than another multiplayer game. It is unlikely you'll find a common metric like retention or ARPU that is strictly comparable across different games, especially if you are interested in making targeted adjustments that improve kindness.

So be willing to use custom metrics as a means of thinking deeply and holistically about how to grow kindness. Create hypotheses specific to your game and validate them using speculative metrics connected to more concrete

and known ones. Metrics are more of a soft tool that confirm suspicions or disprove wild ideas. The larger goal of kindness remains the ultimate guide.

Conclusion: A Vision for Kind Games

Kind games represent a rich opportunity for passionate game developers to make the world a better place. We can lift up our players by providing them with safe, supportive spaces to build healthy friendships and communities.

The time is right for kind games

Kind games are a timely solution for our current market and cultural trends. They fit elegantly within the intricate puzzle space of commercial game development. They promise immense value to players (ethics, joy, belonging, friendship, purpose) while still satisfying hard capitalist constraints (market fit, product differentiation, high engagement, long term value, low churn).

The field for kind games is vast

There are opportunities to extend kind mechanics to almost every aspect of human psychology. We have only been able to touch the surface in this paper. So much of this territory is unexplored! An individual game could dig more into any of the specific facets that we have outlined here, such as friendship and social network formation, ideal group sizes, social norms and reciprocity, trust building, and prosocial economics, to name a few.

The world desperately needs digital thriving

Kind games are also part of a bigger project. How do we, as developers who impact the lives of millions, help humans thrive in this increasingly digital world? There are certain ugly examples where digital spaces cause harm. We need to lead a new charge to build better experiences that intentionally foster well-being, empathy, and joy.

Game developers have the power

Game developers are uniquely situated to meet this big challenge. We have both personal skills and capable teams. We have the design tools and knowledge of past mistakes. We directly shape the environments where people gather online and their experiences in our spaces. And, unlike most academics or theorists, we have the funding engines to iterate with real audiences towards a better end.

An invitation

Take a moment, get yourself some tea. Think about what you want to do with your life and how you can contribute meaningfully to the world. As you ponder, we invite you to dedicate yourself to building kind games. It feels good to put something positive out into the world.

Appendix: Additional materials

Coziness vs Kindness

For folks who have followed [previous papers](#), you may be confused at the difference between cozy games and kind games.

Coziness is about intimacy and reflection. Some attributes of coziness:

- Deeply concerned with creating space for dealing with unmet long term needs, either personal needs or the needs of an intimate friendship.
- Present in individual or small group settings. In practice, cozy games are largely single-player or are played with close friends.
- Usually appear in small spaces.
- Makes use of contrast to differentiate a safer, warm space from an harsher, colder space.
- Avoids direct stressors in the safe environment.

Kind games are about encouraging kind, altruistic, prosocial behavior in a community. Some attributes of kind games:

- Deeply concerned with how we all get along in a positive fashion.
- Present in multiplayer games. Kindness requires another person or personified object.
- Works with group settings that range from dyads to groups of up to 150 players. Has law-based analogues in larger tribes of 500 to 1500.
- Provides mechanisms for healthy mediation of social stressors in a kind environment. Does not eliminate the stressors since people negotiating new relationships will always be a little stressful.
- Seeks to build trust, friendships and the associated social capital.

There's certainly overlap between these two aesthetics. It is possible to have cozy spaces in a kind game. And it is possible to have kind moments in a cozy game.

However, while a large multiplayer game can be built for kindness, it likely will never fully be a cozy space (as we've defined cozy.) Kindness is about proactively mediating the harms of social scale, while cozy is about creating safe spaces by removing scale.

Opportunity

- **Cozy kindness:** Can we build small scale multiplayer games that include both elements of coziness and kindness?
- **Kind analogues in single player:** Can we create parasocial relationships in single player games that help players model kindness?

Further reading

- *Coziness in Games: An Exploration of Safety, Softness, and Satisfied Needs*, Project Horseshoe 2017, <https://projecthorseshoe.com/reports/featured/ph17r3.htm>

Social architectures

As discussed above, there exist hard design constraints that stem from friendship formation, group sizes and social networks. Social design is ultimately a highly technical engineering exercise that requires us to develop functional [social architectures](#).

Humans from a similar culture exhibit a predictable spectrum of behaviors based on the contextual structure in which they are placed. As game developers, we can design, iterate on and balance these structures to achieve our designed aesthetic outcomes.

Contexts that influence a social architecture

The following is a list of basic social variables that impact your social architecture. Change one and you are suddenly dealing with a different social system that may or may not work the same as your test environment.

Group Size

- Individual
- Dyads
- Small groups
- Large groups
- Communities
- Societies

Traditional Controls and Independent Variables

- Psychological profile
- Motivations
- Demographics
- Communications medium
- Network-level variables

Contextual and Social Architectural Factors

- World size
- Persistence
- Competitive versus collaborative
- Role play
- Sandbox versus linear
- Representation
- Interaction affordances
- Costs of a behavior
- Local culture

Opportunities

- **Kind structuralism:** Can we Intentionally build social architectures that facilitate prosociality?
- **Context aware:** Can we measure and track the cultural context players bring into our game and how it impacts outcomes?

Further reading

- *For Better or Worse: Game Structure and Mechanics Driving Social Interactions and Isolation* Dmitri Williams https://www.dropbox.com/s/jh1n3nuijx9apg8/Structure_DmitriWilliams.pdf?dl=0
- *The Mapping Principle, and a Research Framework for Virtual Worlds* Dmitri Williams <https://www.dropbox.com/s/wijsxd2y73108pu/Mapping.pdf?dl=0>
- *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives -- How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do:* <https://www.amazon.com/Connected-Surprising-Networks-Friends-Everything/dp/0316036137>
- *Intentional Communities*. List of intentional communities in the real world <https://www.ic.org/>
- *Buy Nothing Group Community Guidelines*. An example of values and rules that help create a long lived social structure. <https://buynothingproject.org/guidelines>

Additional frames that impact prosocial behaviors

There are a variety of contextual factors that shape if a player will engage in prosocial behavior. These are all frames you can design into your game.

Strength of ties

The strongest factor for determining if someone acts in a prosocial action is whether or not we feel a connection with the person in need.

- Is the recipient a close friend or relative? Givers are more likely to help strong tie relationships.
- Is the recipient a general group or a specific person? Givers are more likely to help specific individuals.
- Is this your ingroup or an outgroup? Givers are more likely to give to members of their ingroup. In particular, similarity drives generosity.
- Was there recent reciprocity? If someone has given something to a player, they are more likely to act prosocially in return.

Group Size

One of the contributing factors to the strength of ties for prosocial action is the size of the group or community to which the prosocial behavior is directed. While Dunbar's number posits that [a person can maintain about 150 relationships](#), the number for intimate, high trust relationships—such as those required for friendship— is actually considerably smaller.

These are hard constraints for most humans and need to be designed around.¹⁶ Flooding players with too many people results in them feeling alienated by strangers they don't trust. Not providing enough friends can result in feelings of loneliness.

Judgment of value

- How were resources earned? If the resource took a lot of effort to earn, it is less likely to be given to weaker relationships.
- Is the resource scarce? If the resource is difficult to gain again, it is less likely to be given to weaker relationships.

¹⁶ See, for example, [Social Design Practices for Human Scale Online Games](#) for a further examination of the application of Dunbar layers.

Judgment of need

- Is the recipient a charity? If the need of the recipient is strong and valid, givers are more likely to help.
- Are the bad circumstances you are alleviating due to bad luck or poor choices? Givers are more likely to help those who have experienced bad luck.

Presence of social norms

- Did you form an agreement with the other party? Even if the agreement has no binding value, people rarely break them. In social environments, there is generally an expectation of reciprocity even if it is implied. For example, if your group of friends are at the bar and one of them orders a round for the group, there is a general expectation that you will also buy the others a round.
- Can you observe and replicate the actions of others? Givers are more likely to help if they see others helping.

Free riding

[Free riding](#) is behavior where a player benefits from the prosocial acts of others without contributing anything themselves. It occurs when expectations of reciprocity exist, but are not acted upon. Specifically, free riders consider themselves the exception to the rule to gain their advantage.

Free riding has the smallest effect of all these factors, so be careful of developing too many systems around it. Most social systems can actually withstand a small amount of free riding, but will collapse when there are too many free riders.¹⁷ American moralistic society is often overly obsessed with the impact of free riding.

- Do you have knowledge of free riding by others? If free riding is spotted, players will behave less generously towards those players.
- Do free riders know they are being observed and by whom? If free riders know they are being observed, they are less likely to free ride.
- Can you punish free riders? If yes, free riding is less common.
- How strongly can you punish free riders? The stronger the punishment, the less likely free riding will occur.

Reward from prosocial actions

Players who help others feel rewarded. When designing your prosocial loops, the following types of rewards act as your creative palette for providing feedback.

Intrinsicness of the reward

- **Internal:** A player is intrinsically motivated by acting prosocially. For example, a player feels an emotional 'warm glow' for helping another person.
- **External:** A player gains some external resource or reward.

Publicness of the reward

- **Private reward:** Only the helper sees the reward.
- **Dyadic reward:** Both parties, the helper and the recipient of help see the reward.
- **Public reward:** Everyone sees the reward. Tends to activate social comparison and community norm formation.

¹⁷ See, for example, the [Tragedy of the Commons](#), which is a consequence of too many free riders in an unmanaged system of shared resources.

Time horizon of the reward

- **Short term reward:** There is an immediate, highly visible reward.
- **Long term reward:** There is a reward at some future indeterminate date.

Context of the reward

- **One time reward:** The interaction will happen once and there is no future relationship.
- **Reciprocal reward:** A player gets a future direct payback in return for helping a targeted individual. These create sequences of reciprocity and are at the heart of most relationships.

Types of relationship

The types of rewards ultimately influence the type of relationships that result from prosocial behavior.

- **Authentic friendships:** Involve long-term internal rewards with no intent on the part of either party to benefit.
- **Transactional relationships:** Involve short-term external rewards with clear intent on the part of each actor to benefit themselves.