The Elements of a Good and Widely Appealing Game

https://gerolds.github.io/textbook/textbook/posts/wide-appeal/

Contents

The Elements of a Good and Widely Appealing Game

1. TL;DR

- Wide appeal is cultural transmissibility—games that recruit love across player types and survive retelling across cohorts.
- Ten design axes diagnose transmissibility: coherence, legible promise, signature primitive, mood, conversion mechanism, low friction, cadence, stakes clarity, recontextualization, and handles.
- The key split: “played a lot” vs. “reorganized me.” Enduring favorites produce durable conversion *and* easy recommendation.

2. Premise

Ask someone for their favorite game of all time. The answer is rarely the game they played the most, or the one from their favorite genre. It is usually the game that *reorganized* them: a first encounter with competence they did not know they could earn, grief they did not expect to feel, wonder that refused to fade, or a world that became a place to live rather than a product to finish.

That pattern is structural, not mystical.

Some games become widely loved and then repeatedly nominated, remade, cited, and inherited. Others are respected but rarely finished. Others are intensely played but seldom called “favorite.” Others are privately adored yet never become shared reference points. These outcomes are not random. They are shaped by a small set of design-facing properties that make games legible to players, stable in memory, and transmissible through culture.

This essay names ten such properties. Call them *axes*: not genres, not themes, not “polish,” but dimensions of fit. They are not a scorecard, and they do not fully explain canon by themselves (distribution, cohort timing, platform defaultness, streaming, and network effects matter). But once a game is seen, these axes explain why it travels, why it converts, and why it stays.

A second purpose runs underneath the first. Some of the most culturally dominant games are divisive and hard to explain. People argue about them because the felt object is larger than what a neat framework can capture. Skyrim and Fallout are the obvious cases: technically messy, mechanically uneven, yet beloved with a gravity that can outlast “better-designed” peers. These are not embarrassments for a model; they are the boundary tests that make a model honest. We will use them that way.

3. 0. Definitions, and why “polish” is not an axis

Before defining the axes, we need a few terms to stop sliding around.

Widely appealing does not mean “highest sales” or “highest review score.” It means a game that can recruit love across multiple kinds of players (different skill levels, tolerances, and life circumstances) without requiring unusually niche literacy.

Canonical does not mean “morally best” or “committee-approved.” It means a game that survives retelling across time and cohorts: the shortlist people reach for when they explain games to non-players, teach design, justify budgets, or argue about what the medium can do.

Axis in this essay means a property of the shipped experience that a designer can reasonably influence. Culture changes how many people reach the experience and what story gets attached to it, but the axes describe what the experience offers once encountered.

Now the trap word: **polish**.

People reach for “polish” because it is socially safe. It can mean bug-free, responsive, consistent, professional. Those things matter, but they are not an axis of greatness. They are table stakes plus taste, and they often reflect production conditions as much as design insight. A highly polished game can be empty of meaning, indistinct in play, and culturally disposable. A rough game can become permanent if it nails deeper structures and the roughness does not sabotage them. “Polish” is better treated as execution

quality distributed across the axes (friction, legibility, feedback, cadence).

The second trap is treating “good” as a single number. Games are multi-object systems. Players are multi-object evaluators. Culture is a selection engine with biases. When we collapse all of that into a single adjective, we lose the ability to diagnose *why* something is widely loved, narrowly beloved, respected but rarely finished, or intensely played but rarely nominated.

The ten axes:

1. Coherence
2. Legible promise
3. Signature primitive
4. Mood that invites lingering
5. Conversion mechanism
6. Low unintended friction
7. Sustained cadence
8. Stakes clarity
9. Recontextualization moments
10. Handles (named entities and symbols)

These dimensions are partly independent in practice. A game can excel on one while failing another, and the failure often caps its reach. They are not perfectly orthogonal (coherence, mood, and friction often interact, and a single design decision can affect several axes at once), but they are separable enough that diagnosing one does not automatically diagnose the others. The point is diagnosis: what makes a game legible, lovable, and retellable, and what breaks those pathways.

4. 1. Coherence: the governing intent that makes choices feel inevitable

Coherence is the sense that someone is steering toward a central intent, not just toward “more content.” In a coherent game, mechanics, rewards, aesthetics, and pacing all point the same way,

like tools laid out for a specific job. The player may not be able to name the intent, but they feel it. The game feels inevitable.

Papers, Please is coherent because every surface serves bureaucratic moral compromise. The UI is oppressive, repetition wears down the conscience, and the “fun” is inseparable from the ethical deformation the player participates in.

Into the Breach is coherent because it is a readable tactical puzzle about perfect information and consequence management. Almost no fluff. Everything is built to make the next choice clearer and more consequential.

Shadow of the Colossus is coherent because it commits to negative space. Long traversal, sparse dialogue, singular fights: the design insists on grandeur, loneliness, and ambiguity. It refuses the comfort of chatter and side systems that would dissolve that mood.

Coherence is not mere consistency of art style. A game can have a unified aesthetic and still be incoherent in incentives. Coherence is alignment of meaning-making machinery: what you do, why you do it, what the game praises, and what it makes you feel doing it.

How coherence is created: Write a governing sentence that survives hostile paraphrase: “This is a game about ____.” Not a marketing pitch, but an intent you can test against every system. When you add or change something, ask whether it strengthens that sentence or dilutes it. Then practice subtraction, because coherence is usually lost through accumulation.

When coherence is weak: Players remember “cool parts” rather than a whole. They describe the game as a pile of modules: “It has crafting, and a skill tree, and a base, and some story.” That description predicts fragility. It predicts that love will be narrower and transmission harder, because the game has no single shape to carry.

One caveat: Coherence operates differently in habitat games. A game whose governing intent is “be a place to live” can tolerate looser system alignment than a game whose intent is “deliver a tight authored arc.” Skyrim’s coherence is not in the elegance of its combat or the consistency of its quest writing; it is in the reliable

production of wandering, discovery, and self-authored story. That is a valid governing intent, even if it looks like incoherence when measured against tighter forms.

A blunt test: Imagine deleting a system. If nothing meaningful changes in how the game feels, that system was likely ornament. Ornament can be fine, but ornament is also how contradictions breed.

5. 2. Legible promise: making the contract visible early and keeping it

Players do not approach games like museum patrons. They approach them like people with limited time and many alternatives. They sample, decide quickly whether the path to competence is visible, whether the experience respects their time, and whether the game knows what it is asking of them.

Legible promise is the ability to teach the contract early and honestly: what the game will demand, what it will reward, and what kind of satisfaction it offers.

Portal is legible because within minutes you understand the verb, the humor, and the escalation pattern. You can see the ladder. You feel the game inviting you to become clever.

Hades is legible because it quickly reframes repetition. Dying is not failure; it is structure. Progress is woven into the loop, and the game signals that the run is not a wasted attempt but a unit of narrative and growth.

Animal Crossing is legible because it refuses the “beat it” contract. The cadence, interface, and daily rituals tell you what it is: a habitat and a routine. It does not pretend to be something else and reveal the truth later.

How legibility is built: Design the first hour to demonstrate the mature loop, not a tutorial parody. The early game should show what “good play” looks like and what improvement buys. Difficulty should be framed through clear feedback. Above all, the game should not hide its real genre contract behind chores, menus, or delayed permission.

When legible promise is weak: You get the “masterpiece behind a door.” Communities develop initiation rituals: “Push past the first ten hours.” That can create mystique, but it narrows appeal and changes who the game is for, because the door selects for stubbornness, spare time, or prior literacy.

Promise violations are worse. If the early contract implies one kind of satisfaction and the midgame delivers another, players don’t merely bounce; they leave with mistrust. In a medium already haunted by backlogs and free-to-play suspicion, trust is a scarce resource.

Legible promise is also recommendation leverage. Games that are honest early are easy to recommend because you can tell a friend what it is without apologizing.

6. 3. Signature primitive: the identity molecule of play

Some games are easy to remember but hard to describe. Others are easy to describe because they have a single interaction that anchors everything else. Canonical games tend to have a *signature primitive*: an irreducible loop or verb that is unmistakably itself and deep under repetition.

Tetris: rotate, place, clear. Pure spatial optimization with endless depth.

Rocket League: physics-based car control to strike a ball. A single primitive with a high ceiling, readable in a second and difficult for years.

Dark Souls, Bloodborne, Sekiro: commitment-based timing and risk management. You choose moments, you commit, you pay. The primitive is not “difficulty”; it is consequence.

Slay the Spire: draft, evaluate, and exploit synergies under uncertainty. A primitive that turns every small choice into a strategic statement.

A signature primitive is the thing people mime when describing the game. It is the handle for skill discourse: what you practice, what you compare, what you get better at.

How primitives are created: Find the smallest unit of meaningful choice and ensure it has layers (execution, tactical adaptation, strategic expression). Provide fast, truthful feedback so players learn by doing. Protect the primitive from competition; if the game spreads identity across too many micro-loops, nothing becomes a handle.

When the primitive is weak: The game can be competent yet indistinct. Everything works, nothing anchors. Players struggle to describe why it is special. Discourse slides toward generalities (“solid,” “pretty good”), which is a polite way of predicting cultural decay.

A warning sign: Autopilot. If players can play for long stretches without making meaningful decisions, the primitive is not doing enough work. Numeric progression may keep the skin of progress moving, but it cannot replace the feeling of choice.

7. 4. Mood that invites lingering: when presence is itself a reward

Mood is not “pretty graphics.” Mood is the aesthetic-cognitive climate that makes a game *a place* in memory. Mood invites lingering when being in the world is valuable even without progress.

Journey is mostly mood: movement, music, and encounter design create reverence and companionship. You remember how it felt to move through it.

Disco Elysium turns thinking into weather. Language, portraiture, and sound design produce a mental climate where even reading feels embodied.

Breath of the Wild builds a world meant to be wandered. Quiet, soundscape, and physics support curiosity. The game makes loitering feel like play.

Silent Hill 2 uses oppressive mood as a narrative engine. The atmosphere is not decoration; it is the vehicle for meaning.

Mood matters for transmission because it compresses well. Screenshots, music, and short clips carry mood across platforms.

Even when mechanics are niche, mood can recruit attention and set expectations.

How mood is created: Consistency of sensory grammar (recurring sound motifs, animation cadence, UI tone, color logic, environmental semantics). It also requires negative space: permission for silence, slowness, and unoptimized moments. A world becomes a place when the game allows you to *be* there.

When mood is weak: The world becomes a menu. Players sprint, fast travel, skip dialogue, mute audio, and reduce the game to tasks. That behavior is not just impatience; it is the game teaching them that presence is not rewarded.

Mood killers: Checklist design, constant reward popups, UI noise, and pacing that contradicts tone. If a game wants melancholy but showers the player with fireworks every ten seconds, it is asking the player to feel something it refuses to support.

8. 5. Conversion mechanisms: how a game becomes “favorite,” not just “good”

Many games are enjoyable. Fewer *convert* the player: produce a durable change in how they see themselves, how they see games, or what they believe play can do. Conversion is the residue that turns a good experience into a “life object.”

Conversion comes in recognizable forms:

Mastery conversion (“I became capable”): Celeste and Sekiro demand precision, but they also teach. Failure feels like information, not humiliation. The player changes, and that change is the point.

Rupture conversion (“I didn’t know a game could do that”): Outer Wilds turns knowledge into progression so completely that the player’s mind becomes the save file. BioShock’s famous reframe lands because it forces reconsideration of agency in a medium built on doing what you’re told.

Mythic conversion (“I lived an archetype”): Ocarina of Time and Shadow of the Colossus rely on restraint and symbolic weight. They are remembered as myths more than plots.

Identity conversion (“This named my taste”): World of Warcraft, Counter-Strike, League of Legends, Final Fantasy XIV become social languages. Fans use them to signal belonging, competence, and values. The game becomes part of the self-description.

Habitat conversion (“This became home”): Minecraft, Stardew Valley, Terraria, RimWorld are not finished so much as lived in. The conversion is not a climax; it is a settling-in.

Conversion mechanisms explain why favorites cluster around certain titles. They also explain divisiveness: a game that converts through mastery may repel players who interpret its demands as disrespect; a game that converts through habitat may look mechanically thin to players who want a tight loop. Divisiveness is often a sign that the game is delivering one kind of conversion strongly while failing others.

9. 6. Low unintended friction: pain must purchase meaning

Players will endure brutal difficulty, long runs, and complex systems if the pain purchases meaning. They will not endure waste.

Unintended friction is any repeated pain that does not pay into the promised experience: UI clutter that slows decisions without adding depth, inconsistent inputs, camera fights, inventory micromanagement that adds no strategic texture, traversal that pads time without mood, gates that exist only to delay.

The key distinction is not “easy vs. hard.” It is “meaningful vs. wasteful.” A survival game can demand labor if the labor is the point. A tactical game can demand careful planning if the planning is the point. But when friction teaches nothing, expresses nothing, and tests nothing, it becomes pure tax.

How to reduce unintended friction: Audit repeated interactions. Each repeated action should either teach, test, or express. If it does none of those, cut it, automate it, or compress it. Failure should be instructive. Controls and feedback should align

with expectation. Randomness should be interpretable, not merely surprising.

When friction is high and unintended: Players develop avoidance behaviors: they alt-tab to guides, exploit systems, skip content, or listen to podcasts to survive downtime. Discourse shifts toward “quality of life” instead of play. That shift is diagnostic; it means the game is spending player attention on chores.

This axis is a strong predictor of broad appeal because it determines how many players can reach the deeper layers. Many games are loved by the people who tolerate their friction. Fewer are loved widely.

10. 7. Sustained cadence: the pulse that keeps the middle alive

Cadence is temporal architecture. It is not constant stimulation, but the alternation of novelty, mastery consolidation, payoff, rest, and escalation.

Super Mario World is an obvious cadence master. New ideas arrive steadily, iterate quickly, and exit before they overstay. The game respects fatigue.

Resident Evil 4 controls intensity with pressure and release. It recombines threats and tools so you feel both learning and surprise.

Hades uses a reliable run rhythm while the meta-layer ensures that most runs produce some forward motion. Even when you fail, the session has shape.

How cadence is created: Measure plateau length. Introduce a wrinkle, let the player stabilize, then introduce the next. Manage recovery time so peaks can feel like peaks. Avoid padding that looks like content but feels like delay.

When cadence fails: The midgame rots. The learning curve stalls. Rewards become predictable. The game starts to feel like work. Players who were enthusiastic stop recommending it because they cannot describe why someone should spend another ten hours to reach a payoff the game should have earned earlier.

Length is not cadence. Length is inert. A long game with good cadence feels short. A short game with bad cadence feels endless.

11. 8. Stakes clarity: what matters right now and why

Stakes clarity is the difference between tension and noise. Players need to know what is valuable, what is at risk, and what “good decisions” look like in the current moment.

Chess makes stakes legible through immediate, visible hierarchies: material, tempo, king safety. Even when the position is complex, the categories of value are clear.

Horror games like Alien: Isolation rely on consistent threat logic. The stakes are vulnerability and survival; if the threat rules feel arbitrary, fear collapses into irritation.

Stardew Valley has gentle but structuring stakes: time in a day, seasons, friendships, energy. You always know what you are trading.

How stakes clarity is created: Make resources and consequences visible without turning the game into accounting. Players should be able to predict the type of consequence even if they cannot predict magnitude. Stakes should align with the game’s promise: a cozy game should not punish with opaque loss; a mastery game should not reward with random lottery outcomes that ignore skill.

When stakes are unclear: Players disengage into grind or meta-goals. Choices feel arbitrary. Difficulty feels random. The player stops inhabiting decisions and starts managing the system as an external object.

Stakes clarity is also a spectator property. It determines whether a game is readable to watch and discuss. If viewers cannot tell what matters, clips don’t land and discourse doesn’t stick.

12. 9. Recontextualization moments: hinges

that reweight memory

Human memory compresses long games into peaks, transitions, and endings. *Recontextualization moments* are hinges that change how earlier play is interpreted. They are not mere twists; they reweight meaning.

Outer Wilds is the cleanest demonstration: knowledge changes the world so completely that the player's model becomes the progression system. What you learn rewrites what the game is.

Nier: Automata uses repetition as argument, reframing previous structures so the player's prior patience becomes part of the meaning.

A Link to the Past recontextualizes space and tone, turning what you thought was the world into only half of it, and making the shift retellable.

How recontextualization is created: Plant seeds early, let the player settle into a coherent understanding, then disrupt it at a meaningful moment. The disruption should change behavior, not just knowledge. The player should play differently afterward, not merely know a fact.

When recontextualization is weak: The experience becomes smooth but forgettable. There is no retellable hinge, no anchor that the mind uses to organize the whole.

A common failure is mistaking lore for hinge. Lore can deepen, but it rarely reweights. A hinge is a structural change in meaning.

13. 10. Handles: named entities and symbols that let players talk about what they felt

Experience is messy (fear, relief, competence, sadness, awe). To talk about it, players need handles: names, faces, places, objects, motifs. Handles allow attribution. "It was Midgar." "It was the bonfire." "It was GLaDOS." "It was the Creeper."

Handles are how experiences become discussable and inheritable. We remember people and symbols more readily than systems. We also pass them on more easily. A handle is a compression tool: it

lets a player carry a whole emotional and mechanical bundle in one word.

Final Fantasy VII has Midgar, Sephiroth, Aerith. **Portal** has GLaDOS and the cake. **Dark Souls** has bonfires, Anor Londo, Sif. **Minecraft** has the Nether, the End, the Creeper. **Disco Elysium** turns the city and the internal voices into named presences.

How handles are created: Not by lore volume, but by repetition with variation, ritual, consequence, and integration with play. A symbol becomes sticky when it participates in decisions. A place becomes memorable when it changes how you behave. A character becomes a handle when your relationship to them is tested by action, not just dialogue.

When handles are weak: Even mechanically strong games become culturally mute. Players talk in generalities and struggle to reference the experience. The game may still be loved, but it exports poorly.

At this point we have covered the ten axes. The next sections address how they interact, where they meet their limits, and how to use them practically.

14. 11. How the axes interact without collapsing into one

It is tempting to treat these axes like a checklist, but that is not how games work. Games do not need to maximize everything. They need to be decisively strong on a subset, adequately competent on the rest, and not catastrophically weak anywhere.

Some quick interactions worth noting:

- **Coherence** cannot be bought with more features; features often buy contradiction.
- **Legible promise** cannot be deferred to later excellence; a lost player is gone.
- **Signature primitive** cannot be replaced with spectacle; spectacle without a loop is passive.

- **Mood** is continuous and cannot be substituted by episodic plot.
- **Conversion** requires demand; polish alone does not convert.
- **Low friction** is not “casualization”; it is respect for meaning.
- **Cadence** is not length.
- **Stakes** are value hierarchies, not currency spam.
- **Recontextualization** is not lore.
- **Handles** are not spreadsheets.

This is the design-facing layer. It explains why some games, once reached, are easy to love and easy to pass on. But it does not explain what gets reached in the first place.

15. 12. Culture as editor: why design axes are not the whole story

The axes describe what a game offers once encountered. They do not describe whether the game gets encountered, how it gets framed, or what parts of it become the public meaning.

Culture acts as a selection layer on top of design:

- Attention scarcity punishes weak legible promise.
- Discourse compression favors signature primitives and handles.
- Community scaffolding can repair friction or flatten expressive play into optimization dogma.
- Streaming selects for readable stakes and clip-worthy moments.
- The meta-narrative around a product (whether it respects time, whether it extracts or converts) shapes adoption before the axes are evaluated at all.

These pressures are covered in depth in *When the Funnel Eats the Work* *(https://gerolds.github.io/posts/when-the-funnel-eats-the-work/)*. The short version: culture edits the funnel. It changes how many people reach the core experience, and it changes which parts of that experience become the canonical “meaning” of the game. A model of wide appeal that ignores this layer will be surprised too often.

16. 13. Boundary tests: the divisive giants that don’t fit cleanly

If the axes were a total explanation, we could predict cultural dominance from design fit alone. Reality includes canonical counter-examples: games with obvious weaknesses that nonetheless become enduring reference points. Skyrim and several Fallout entries sit here in a way that is both frustrating and instructive.

These games are hard to explain cleanly because the loved object is not any single system. Combat can be clumsy. Systems can be inconsistent. Bugs and jank are real. And yet the gravitational pull is undeniable.

What explains this without resorting to “people are irrational”?

Start with a phenomenon that behaves like an override: one or two high-salience satisfactions can dominate perceived value even when other parts are uneven. In these divisive giants, the satisfactions are not usually a single parry window or a single combat verb. They are more ecological.

Anecdote engines: The loop of wandering into trouble and emerging with story. You walk in a direction, the world interrupts you, you improvise, you survive, you loot, you improve, and then you continue. The pleasure is not the mechanical elegance of any single encounter; it is the steady production of personal anecdotes: “I went to do one thing and ended up somewhere else entirely.” That is a kind of signature primitive, but it is not a clean verb. It is a world behavior.

Permissive self-authorship: You can roleplay in the loose sense: choose which rules to care about, which systems to lean on, which quests to treat as canon, which to ignore. Mods intensify this, but the core permissiveness often exists even without them. The player’s favorite version of the game is partially self-authored. That self-authorship creates a private inside the public one.

Handle density: Even when quests are uneven, the games provide places, factions, artifacts, and rituals that become landmarks. Cities become handles. Guilds become handles. Iconic items become handles. Handles are not only for discourse; they are

for navigation of memory. They let players keep a long, messy experience coherent enough to retain.

Put together, these games succeed through *habitat dominance*. The world becomes infrastructure: a place to return to, not a puzzle to solve. When a game becomes infrastructure, other weaknesses can be reinterpreted as texture rather than disqualifier. “It’s janky” becomes folk character. Players route around failures, and the routed-around version becomes the remembered version.

The key boundary lesson: The axis model is design-facing, but canon formation is not only about design purity. It is about what a game allows people to do with it over time. A habitat can become canonical even when coherence is loose and mechanics are uneven, because it produces a durable form of personal meaning: home, story production, identity play, and returnability.

That does not refute the axes; it clarifies their limits. The axes predict cleanly in domains where the game’s primary value is the loop itself (mastery games, puzzle games, tightly-authored adventures). They predict less cleanly when the primary value is a permissive world that players use as a narrative and identity generator. In that terrain, the model must share explanatory power with other forces: modability, cohort imprint, distribution, and the sheer utility of “a place to be.”

The most important move here is not to treat divisive giants as exceptions to ignore. They are the reason to keep the framework humble and useful. They show that “structural fit for transmission” can come from different kinds of structure than designers tend to valorize.

17. 14. A diagnostic baseline that stays practical

If you want to use the axes without turning them into a textbook, treat them as questions you ask while reading a game, not a checklist you fill out.

- What is the governing intent, and where does the game contradict it?

- What contract does the first hour teach, and where is it violated later?
- What is the signature primitive, and what competes with it?
- Does mood reward presence, or does it get flattened into a menu?
- What transformation does the game reliably produce, and what demands make that transformation possible?
- Where does the game waste attention without paying meaning?
- Where does the middle die?
- What matters right now, and are consequences readable?
- What hinges reweight memory?
- What handles will players use to name what they felt?

Then ask one more question that protects you from being smug: if the game is widely loved and your framework says it “shouldn’t be,” what is the actual object of love? Is it a habitat? Identity? An anecdote engine? Distribution and cohort timing? Network density? Do not solve the discomfort by calling the audience wrong. Use the discomfort to locate the boundary.

18. **15. The quiet implication: why the canon converges anyway**

Once you see these pressures, canon formation looks less like pure taste and more like selection.

To become widely appealing and enduring, a game must survive adoption under attention scarcity, cultural compression, personal meaning-making, and revisitability. The design axes explain much of what helps a game survive those pressures once encountered. Culture explains which games get encountered, how they are framed, and which parts of them become the public meaning.

That combination produces convergence. Not inevitability, not moral certainty, but a strong bias toward games that are easy to recommend, easy to describe, easy to retell, and capable of converting players into evangelists. The winners tend to be mastery crucibles, rupture narratives, mythic adventures, habitats,

identity games, and a few pure-design objects whose primitives are universally legible.

The point is not to bow to the canon. The point is to stop being surprised by it, and to design, critique, and teach games with language that respects both craft and cultural reality.

19. **16. Coda**

Canon will exist whether we acknowledge it or not. The choice is whether we treat it as superstition and tribal badge, or as a map of forces that decide what the medium becomes.

If this essay did its job, the axes are now less like doctrine and more like instruments: ways to see what a game is asking of a player, what it rewards, what it wastes, what it teaches, what it makes memorable, and why some messy, divisive worlds still become homes that millions cannot stop returning to.

---

20. **Quick Reference**

For readers returning to review the framework:

Axis	Core Question
1. Coherence	Does every system serve a governing intent?
2. Legible promise	Does the first hour teach the real contract?
3. Signature primitive	Is there one irreducible loop that anchors identity?
4. Mood	Is presence rewarded even without progress?
5. Conversion mechanism	What durable change does the game produce in the player?
6. Low friction	Does every repeated pain purchase meaning?
7. Cadence	Does the middle stay alive through novelty and rest?
8. Stakes clarity	Can the player always tell what matters right now?
9. Recontextualization	Are there hinges that reweight earlier play?
10. Handles	What names will players use to talk about what they felt?

Key distinctions:

- “Played a lot” ≠ “reorganized me”
- Polish is not an axis; it is execution quality distributed across axes
- Divisive giants often succeed through *habitat dominance* (anecdote engines, self-authorship, handle density)
- The axes explain why games convert once reached; culture explains what gets reached

---

21. **Related essays**

This essay is analytic: it names properties you can look for in finished work. Its flipside is generative:

- *Making the Thing* *(https://gerolds.github.io/posts/making-the-thing/)*: How to start from a governing commitment and let everything

else follow. The same axes reframed as diagnostic checkpoints for production, not post-hoc analysis.

- *When the Funnel Eats the Work (https://gerolds.github.io/posts/when-the-funnel-eats-the-work/)*: On cultural selection pressures that shape what gets seen, and what gets converted before it can convert.

Drafting assistance: Claude Opus. All claims mine; errors my responsibility.