

A rubric on Core Game Mechanics

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Abstract.

Game development education in Norwegian higher education has expanded significantly in recent decades yet lacks a unified framework for assessing the quality of games and their development processes. Current assessment practices vary across institutions and often rely on subjective interpretations or inconsistent theoretical foundations. This paper addresses the need for a shared evaluation framework by focusing on the concept of Core Game Mechanics (CGM) and the development of a rubric to assess their quality. The study identifies five key dimensions of CGM: Primary Force, Mastery, Fun Factor, Feedback, and Purpose, through an iterative, design-based research approach. These dimensions were derived from both qualitative analysis of survey responses from industry professionals and educators, and students' evaluations. The resulting rubric aims to support both formative and summative assessment, offering a more objective and pedagogically aligned tool for evaluating student game projects. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on standardizing assessment in game development education and highlights the potential of heuristics-informed rubrics to enhance learning, teaching, and curriculum development.

Keywords: Core Game Mechanics, Rubric, Heuristics, Assessment, Game development Projects.

1 Introduction

Higher education (HE) game development studies have grown in Norway over the last few decades. It does not, however, seem like there are common frameworks of what makes a game or its development process high quality. While several institutions offer game development programs, the approach and requirements of assessing games' quality and processes remain diverse. The assessment criteria also tend to rely on subjective thoughts and/or on varied theoretical frameworks. Based on this, we see a need for a joint measure for assessing students' competence.

Heuristics may play a crucial role for both educators and professionals and can work as a tool to evaluate games more objectively, thus also shape our understanding of how a game should be evaluated.

However, are these rules of thumb consistently applied across institutions? Do educators and professionals agree on these heuristics? Or do these generalizations vary? More importantly, can these heuristics be gathered and synthesized into an educational tool?

To address the topic of assessing quality, the development of rubrics may be a solution. Rubrics are commonly used in education for evaluation and formative assessment. This might give an opportunity to develop structured and more objective measures to evaluate game development projects.

This paper focuses on the topic of Core Game Mechanics (CGM) and the development of a rubric to measure CGM quality, based on how educators and professionals perceive CGM.

This paper is structured as follows: The first part introduces the topic and gives an overview of related work (chapter 2). Chapter 3 addresses the methodological approach, describing the gathering of empirical data, including the steps taken to ensure the reliability of the study. Findings are presented in chapter 4, including the definition of CGM and a presentation of the final rubric. In chapter 5, results are discussed addressing key findings. Lastly, chapters 6 and 7 discuss limitations and conclude the work, including thoughts on future directions.

2 Related Work

Assessing game development projects within Higher Education Games Studies can be challenging, as the requirements for the assessment of game development projects differs between Universities in Norway, and it is hard to find previous relevant research when it comes to assessing game development projects. Through the Centre for Excellent IT-education (Excited), several workshops have been organized, where teachers and researchers from games educations in Norway and representatives from industry have participated. One topic (out of several) that participants have found interesting is how to find a common ground on assessing students' game development projects, when developing a digital game / artefact. The workshops have given many ideas and input to possible criteria for assessing a game development project, producing a digital game. Some of the categories discussed were Gameplay; Playability; Enjoyability; UX; Robustness; Design documents; Teamwork; Critical thinking, and more. Most of the categories are well defined on an overall level. But how do we differ between high quality, mediocre quality and poor quality when it comes to assessing these categories?

Using rubrics for formative and summative assessment is a possible way of approaching the topic. Rubrics can be regarded as an assessment tool, specifying criteria on how to evaluate / assess an assignment or whatever artifact is produced. It is often arranged as a matrix with detailed descriptions of how one can differ the levels of quality (Muhammad, Lebar, & Mokshein, 2018). It can be used for many purposes: giving clear guidelines, consistent and objective assessment, giving feedback and the possibility of improvements, self- and peer assessment and making the grading process more efficient (Malini Reddy & Heidi Andrade, 2010). Wolf & Stevens (2007) emphasizes how rubrics can serve as multi-purpose assessment guides enhancing student learning, improving teaching and help improving study programs whilst Olson and Krysiak (2021) point to the importance of aligning rubrics with a course's learning outcomes and how rubrics can be used as a tool for both formative and summative assessment.

Note that rubrics, as other standardized assessment tools, may stifle creativity (Rawlings & Cutting, 2024).

For this research, the term Core Game Mechanics is further investigated with the aim of developing a rubric to be used both as formative and summative assessment. According to Adams (2013), CGMs are the core driver and creator of the gameplay, defining challenges, affordability, impact on the game world and impact of player actions. Core Game Mechanics can also be seen as a sub-category of Game Mechanics. Mitchell & McCoy (2023) discuss how Core Mechanics and Supporting Mechanics, as subdisciplines, can build the foundation for Game Mechanics. They further address how CGM can be defined as the primary player interactions. Sedig, K., Parsons, P., & Haworth, R. (2017) expands CGM into additional subcategories: Repetitive actions, Primary Goals and Player Interaction.

A heuristic approach was chosen to develop the understanding of CGM, gathering perspectives from professional game developers and HE teachers on the term CGM. Heuristics can be seen as design guidelines on a given topic (Desurvire et al., 2004; Gordon et.al 2016).

To further develop the assessment rubric, a specification of the qualitative level (scoring guide) of the given category to assess the product or the artefact was needed. The rubric was hence developed based on definitions and different understandings of the term, given by professional game developers, teachers and students.

3 Method

The research aims to develop a definition and a rubric on Core Game Mechanics. The study was designed as an intensive iterative design-based study, developing the given term and assessment criteria based on heuristics and a case study. Heuristics were defined as design guidelines on a given topic (Desurvire et al. (2004) and Gordon et.al (2016))

The case study approach was chosen because it allows for qualitative design on a single, in-depth concept (Creswell, 2014 & Feagin, J. et.al., 1991). While also allowing for the option to generalize broadly based on the results (Feagin, J. et.al, 2019 & Gerring, J., 2004).

The iterative process was important to give the respondents the opportunity to explore the suggested rubric and give feedback on their understanding of it. It would thus help improve the quality of the tool and how to measure the quality of CGM.

The rubric design method is largely based on Introduction to Rubrics by Danielle D. Stevens (2012). The rubric was designed to facilitate an understanding of core game mechanics and support data collection. The final version would be an assessment tool based on the synthesized definition of CGM and adjusted to fit game design students.

3.1 Procedure and Design

The case study employed a qualitative research approach where the definition of core game mechanics and assessment criteria was developed, based on the open-ended

survey with industry professionals and educators. This resulted in the design of a rubric that was tested during workshops with students studying game design. The participating students provided feedback on their understanding of the rubric and its content, which again resulted in an improved version of the rubric. The whole process is illustrated in figure 1 below.

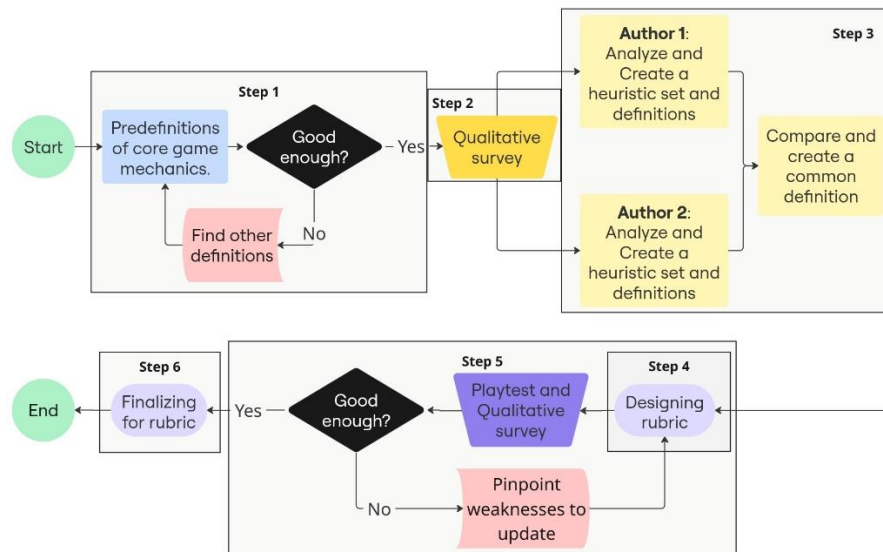


Fig. 1. Research process

The first step was researching previous definitions on Core Game Mechanics (Adams 2013, Björk et al. 2003, Salen & Zimmerman 2003, Sedig et al. 2017, Sicart 2008), as this was to be included as part of the survey instrument. Adam’s definition was more focused on core game mechanics and is more often used as literature in education. This definition was used as a reference point for the survey that was sent to industry professionals and HE educators. Based on the results of the qualitative survey each author did an iterative inductive approach to develop each their version on a definition of CGM. They further discussed these definitions and created a definition on CGM. Based on this definition, each author developed their separate version of the rubric, compared these and together designed a first version of the rubric. We then had a UX designer helping us make good visual versions of the rubric. The following step(s) was to do workshop sessions with students studying game design. Based on these iterations, a final version of the rubric was developed.

3.2 Participants and Data Gathering

A total of three surveys were conducted to gather empirical data for the project. The first survey had industry professionals and educators as its target audience. Participants were chosen based on the network that has been built during several years of

collaboration with other universities and professional game development companies. The goal of this survey was to find a common ground on the definition of CGM and its main items. The survey was distributed to 33 participants. 10 answered the survey, 4 from HE and 6 from industry.

Workshops were designed to gather feedback from game design students of higher education. 20 students attended the workshops. The participants were chosen based on access to a weekly playtest event (first- and third-year Game Design students and Media Art Innovation Lab students at Kristiania University College). The focus of the workshops was to gather data about their understanding of and experience with using these rubrics to measure CGM quality. One of the authors acted as a participatory observer during the test sessions.

4 Findings

The understanding of Core Game Mechanics was based on the analysis of keywords from the participants' understanding of the concept. Each of the two authors did an individual walkthrough of what they found to be the essential keywords, then compared these to find a common understanding of the concept. The questions and keyword samples can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. Keywords extraction for a definition of Core Game Mechanic.

Questions	Keyword samples
Using your own words, how would you define the concept Core Game Mechanic?	main verbs; interaction; repetitive action; rules; most important; necessary for playing; cannot be removed; progression; mastery.
Do you use any rules of thumb (heuristics) to evaluate game mechanics? If so, what are they?	make sense; hinder or enhance the gameplay; result in progression; one more time, badass; smooth; intuitive; necessary; challenging enough; meaningful impact; serves the intended gameplay.

The evaluation of Core Game Mechanics was based on keywords sampling from three different questions. Questions and keyword samples are presented in table 2:

Table 2. Keywords extraction for badly and well-designed core game mechanics.

Questions	Keyword samples
How do you evaluate if the Core Game Mechanic enables a positive or negative player experience?	Engaging, intuitive, fun, makes sense, isn't unnecessary, deeply integrated, a clear goal, supports progression, mastery, different skill levels, meaningful actions, get feedback, clearly communicates, aligned, serves the intended gameplay and experience, playtesting, unclear, unfair, discouraging, clunky, uninspiring, shallow, needlessly complex, not meaningful, frustrating, unpredictable, confusing, boring, fails to communicate, wouldn't be missed if it was removed.
How would you define a well-designed Core Game Mechanic, based on the above definition?	Deeply Integrated, clear goal and feedback, intuitive, engaging, room for mastery, clear communication, needed, meaningful impact, central, serves intended gameplay and experience, integrated with progression, natural, consequences, meaningful impact, fit the theme, systems feed into it, serves intended gameplay.
How would you define a badly designed Core Game Mechanic, based on the above definition?	Unclear, unfair and/or doesn't offer good direction, confuses or bores, a chore, fails to communicate, bad design, wouldn't be missed if removed, doesn't serve the intended gameplay experience, causes unwanted frustration, uninspiring, needlessly complex, ineffective, unpredictable, wouldn't be missed, doesn't serve the intended gameplay

Based on these keywords, five dimensions were identified to measure Core Game Mechanic, namely Primary force, Mastery, The Fun Factor, Feedback and Purpose, also presented in the table below.

Table 3. The five dimensions of a Core Game Mechanic.

Dimension	Definitions
Primary force	The primary force of the game that adapts to meet new challenges in the game and can easily interact with other mechanics in the game.
Mastery	The mechanic must allow for meaningful problem solving and for players to showcase exceptional skill.
Fun factor	Demands the mechanic to create layered fun that deepens over time and that motivates the player to continue playing.
Feedback	Immediately intuitive, providing instant, clear feedback through multiple channels (visual and audio) and that is easy for beginner level players to understand.
Purpose	Demands the mechanic being essential to the gameplay loop and experience and that it cannot be removed without breaking the gameplay experience.

Based on the abovementioned dimensions and their descriptions, Core Game Mechanic was defined as:

“The primary force of a game that adapts to the changing environment of the game giving the player a feeling of mastery through meaningful problem solving and the possibility of showcasing their exceptional skills, facilitating layered fun to motivate the player to continue playing, giving quick and intuitive feedback, having a clear purpose and an element that cannot be removed without breaking the gameplay.”

This further resulted in suggesting assessment criteria on Core Game Mechanics, based on the following questions:

1. How do you evaluate if the Core Game Mechanic enables a positive or negative player experience?
2. How would you define a well-designed Core Game Mechanic, based on the above definition?
3. How would you define a badly designed Core Game Mechanic, based on the above definition?

From the results of the above set of questions, keywords were further allocated into dimensions identified, described in table 4.

Table 4. Keyword extraction for badly and well-designed core game mechanics.

Dimension	Badly designed	Well-designed
Primary force	not central, poor interaction with other mechanics, hinders progression	deeply integrated, central/most repeated action, drives other systems, supports progression
Mastery	limited improvement, random/trial-and-error, progression hindered	room for mastery, meaningful problem-solving, fair/rewarding challenges, options for growth
Fun Factor	boring, frustrating, discouraging, un-inspiring	engaging, layered fun, keeps you playing
Feedback	unclear, confusing/missing feedback, players unsure what actions are possible	immediately intuitive, clear goals, consequences communicated, multi-channel feedback
Purpose	not adapted to main gameplay, poor thematic fit, removable with little impact	essential to loop, fits theme/vision, serves intended gameplay

Keywords were further analyzed, and their contents described, making ground for the contents of a well-designed and a poorly designed Core Game Mechanic:

Well-designed CGM:

*The **primary force** of the game, giving the player an **opportunity of being exceptional** and precise, making the player **feel awesome**, with a high level of **responsiveness** and fidelity and that is **essential** for the game to be finished.*

Poorly designed CGM:

*If the game is **not centered around the most important mechanic** and if the mechanic is **not adapted to the main gameplay**. This means a mechanic **that interrupts the game(flow)**, that does **not interact well** with the other mechanics or elements of the game / that **hinders progression** – **not adapted to the different challenges** met in the game, that only works sometimes, is not a great fit for the vision of the game and that is **hard to master**.*

Based on the above findings, the final rubric was developed, illustrated in the table below (or Appendix 1).

Table 5. A game design rubric to evaluate core game mechanics.

Dimensions	Beginner	Intermediate	Expert
Primary force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic implementation works as intended to play the game. • It is the most repeated interaction/mechanic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic clearly impacts gameplay progression. • Integrated with other systems and supports the core loop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic changes to meet new challenges. • Interacts with multiple other mechanics as the main force of gameplay.
Mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to use the mechanic in a challenging way. • Limited room for improvement. • Success feels random or based on trial-and-error. • Usable with some practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic is used to solve new and/or several challenges. • It involves a basic level of skill, but the depth for improvement or advanced techniques (combinations, creative use etc.) is limited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic allows players to showcase exceptional skill. • Allows meaningful problem-solving with fair, rewarding challenges.
The Fun Factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic lacks engaging elements. • Players feel frustrated or discouraged and may want to stop playing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic provides consistent enjoyment with clear feedback and meaningful choices during play. • But not particularly exciting or compelling for repeated use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The player wants to consistently play more or continue playing. • The mechanic creates layered fun that deepens over time - strategies, combinations, or nuances that keep it fresh and increasingly rewarding.
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Player is unsure what actions are possible or what they achieve. • Visual or audio feedback is missing or confusing. • May lack timing, detail, be confusing, clunky, inconsistent or unresponsive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic provides timely feedback on outcomes with easily understood success/failure states. • The mechanic can be understood and used, perhaps with some initial confusion or practice. • Clearly indicates how it effects the gameplay and progression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic is immediately intuitive with smooth, responsive controls. • Provides instant, clear feedback through multiple channels (visual and audio). • The mechanic is easy for a new player to grasp.
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The core game mechanic is in the game but not clearly connected to main gameplay purpose. • Making use of the basics of the mechanic to support the game experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic serves an essential function with moderate impact on overall experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mechanic is essential to gameplay loop and experience. • Fits theme and connects with other systems perfectly. • No part can be taken out without breaking the gameplay experience.

5 Discussion

The definition of CGM and how to assess them are based upon selected literature and input from people regularly working with game development, either as developers or educators (or both). The point of this was to see if the understanding of CGM and how it previously is defined matched how it is understood by our target group. Whilst the definition within previous literature does not vary a lot, the understanding of CGM varied within the respondents of the survey. This supports the need for addressing the topic and providing clearer measures on how to define it. To come up with the definition and the measures a heuristic approach was used. Another possible approach could have been to have participants play a chosen number of games and then have them identify what they see as the core game mechanic and what criteria they use to assess the given mechanic. This could have led to a different result.

During the design of the rubric, the keyword extraction worked as a starting point for defining the dimensions. These were further changed during the process, both from the iterative pre-analysis and the testing. From this, the dimensions can be said to be valid and well defined. Compared to previous work, the new definition is more concrete and measurable. We see this as an advantage when assessing core game mechanics. At the same time, it may constrain alternative perspectives by narrowing the scope for creative exploration.

As part of the testing of the rubric, students reported that some of the measures were hard to understand and not easy to differ from one another. The measures were changed based on the feedback given, but if participants were struggling to understand the concept in the first round it could also affect the feedback given in the second round.

In addition, the rubric divides the assessment criteria into three dimensions (good, mediocre and bad). The survey asked for feedback on badly- and well-designed assessment criteria. For the assessment criteria of the mediocre dimension, the authors tried finding a middle way which also could have affected the students' assessment.

The developed rubric can work as a good starting point for both formative and summative assessment of the core game mechanic for game development projects within higher education. It can give both students and teachers, across institutions, a common understanding and make it easier to assess and compare between institutions. It can also act as a framework for the development of learning outcomes on the given topic.

6 Limitations

A key limitation of the study is that there were few participants in the first survey. (10). As this was a totally anonymous survey, there was no overview of those who answered the survey and who didn't. Having this information would have made it easier to follow up, making sure we had a bigger number of respondents.

Although this research project has been thoroughly tested with students at one University College, it has not been tested with students at other game development studies (neither nationally nor internationally). The reliability of the study would have

benefited from testing the rubric with students from different Universities and with a more varied group of students with different levels of competencies.

Though based on teachers' and industry professionals' input from the first survey, an additional round of feedback on the suggested definition and the rubric could have affected the final result. This was not possible due to time restrictions.

7 Conclusion

The work has resulted in a definition of a Core Game Mechanic and a rubric (Table 5 and Appendix 1) that can be used for assessing CGM in Game Development Projects within HE Games Development Studies.

The rubric should be shared with institutions educating game developers, with the aim of them taking ownership of the rubric and using it actively within their studies.

A good follow-up to this research would be to send a quantitative survey to the original survey participants to learn of their views of the rubric. The rubric should also be shared and tested with other relevant parties within higher education, both to find the common ground on how to define and assess CGM and to further improve it.

The development of new rubrics should always happen in dialogue with industry and higher education game development studies. We would like to continue the work defining several rubrics. The focus could for example be on the central parts of assessing a game development project.

Acknowledgement


This research work was performed with the support of the Excited Centre for Excellent IT Education, funded by HK-dir under the SFU scheme and is a result from many years of Excited facilitating activities on workshops to develop network and collaboration between teachers and professionals within the field of games development. We would also like to give special thanks to Jeanne Irina Knudsen for doing the UX design for the rubric.

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Appendix 1



Dimensions	Beginner	Intermediate	Expert
Primary force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic implementation works as intended to play the game. It is the most repeated interaction/mechanic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic clearly impacts gameplay progression. Integrated with other systems and supports the core loop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic changes to meet new challenges. Interacts with multiple other mechanics as the main force of gameplay.
Mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being able to use the mechanic in a challenging way. Limited room for improvement. Success feels random or based on trial-and-error. Usable with some practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic is used to solve new and/or several challenges. It involves a basic level of skill, but the depth for improvement or advanced techniques (combinations, creative use etc) is limited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic allows players to showcase exceptional skill. Allows meaningful problem-solving with fair, rewarding challenges.
The fun factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic lacks engaging elements. Players feel frustrated or discouraged and may want to stop playing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic provides consistent enjoyment with clear feedback and meaningful choices during play. But not particularly exciting or compelling for repeated use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The player wants to consistently play more or continue playing. The mechanic creates layered fun that deepens over time - strategies, combinations, or nuances that keep it fresh and increasingly rewarding.
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Player is unsure what actions are possible or what they achieve. Visual or audio feedback is missing or confusing. May lack timing, detail, be confusing, clunky, inconsistent or unresponsive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic provides timely feedback on outcomes with easily understood success/failure states. The mechanic can be understood and used, perhaps with some initial confusion or practice. Clearly indicates how it effects the gameplay and progression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic is immediately intuitive with smooth, responsive controls. Provides instant, clear feedback through multiple channels (visual and audio) The mechanic is easy for a new player to grasp.
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The core game mechanic is in the game but not clearly connected to main gameplay purpose. Making use of the basics of the mechanic to support the game experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic serves an essential function with moderate impact on overall experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mechanic is essential to gameplay loop and experience. Fits theme and connects with other systems perfectly. No part can be taken out without breaking the gameplay experience.