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ANTI-DESIGN MOVEMENT IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the presence and significance of anti-design within the context of video games, a medium where aesthetics, narrative, and player experience are deeply intertwined. While anti-design has been examined in other creative disciplines, its application in video games remains underexplored.

Drawing from both academic and non-academic sources, it constructs a theoretical and visual framework for recognizing anti-design. This research argues that anti-design not only exists within games but also functions as a meaningful design philosophy that challenges conventional expectations and thus, can be used to leave a lasting impact on the player.

Through detailed case studies of *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, *The Beginner's Guide*, and *Cruelty Squad*, the thesis identifies recurring anti-design traits—such as visual chaos, friction in gameplay, subversion of user expectations, and often, a prioritization of something other than function. The findings suggest that anti-design in games can be both intentional and emergent, offering a valuable space for creative resistance and critical engagement. This work contributes to broader discussions about design norms in interactive media and invites reconsideration of discomfort, ambiguity, and disruption as powerful tools for digital expression.

Keywords: Anti-design, design thinking, video games, game design, aesthetics,

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1 INTRODUCTION

As design conventions have become increasingly standardized and widely accepted (Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016), the examination of anti-design presents a critical opportunity to question and redefine the boundaries of what is considered "good" design. This thesis explores the anti-design movement, positioning it within the context of video games—a medium where design is not only functional but deeply intertwined with player experience, aesthetics, and narrative (Brown 2012). While anti-design has been discussed in relation to various fields, its presence and implications in video games remain largely under-examined in academic discourse.

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to argue that Anti-design as a movement is indeed present within video games, and second, to contribute to a clearer understanding of what Anti-design represents—its philosophy, visual traits, and core approaches. Given the limited academic material directly addressing Anti-design, this thesis also seeks to bridge that gap by analyzing sources both academic and non-academic to form a more comprehensive overview.

This thesis acknowledges certain limitations. Anti-design spans multiple decades and disciplines (Amin 2024), and while it intersects with anti-modernism (e.g. Martinović 2025), art games, and conventional design, those areas fall outside the primary scope of this research and will only be discussed briefly. Additionally, although several artists contributed to the foundation of Anti-design (Moffat 2011), this paper narrows its focus to just one, in order to maintain clarity and depth within the given constraints.

Ultimately, this research aims to serve anyone seeking to better understand the Anti-design movement—particularly those interested in its relevance to video games. Whether for academic, creative, or critical purposes, this work hopes to provide a useful entry point into a field that defies traditional boundaries and invites reconsideration of what design can be.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis aims to explore and prove the presence of the anti-design movement in video games while fostering a broader discussion about the movement itself. Anti-design, often associated with rejecting traditional aesthetic and functional expectations, has been widely discussed in various art forms (e.g Amin 2024; Glover n.d.; Waterfall College 2014; Moffat 2011;) but remains semi-unexplored academically, especially in the context of video games. By analyzing its characteristics and applications within this medium, a deeper understanding of its artistic and conceptual significance can be gained.

The research follows a structured approach as seen in Figure 1, beginning with an exploration of what anti-design means. This involves examining academic and non-academic sources, as well as the works of a key figure considered one of the pioneers of the movement. Establishing an understanding of anti-design is crucial, as the term is often fluid and interpreted differently across artistic disciplines. Afterward, the thesis briefly outlines conventional design principles in video games, providing a foundation for understanding how anti-design disrupts these norms.

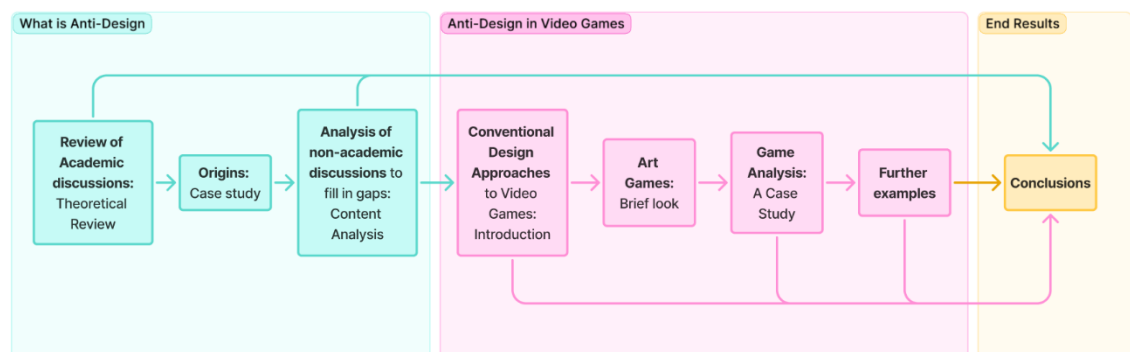


Figure 1. Flowchart of Thesis Framework

The findings from the literature review, content analysis, and case study conducted in the first half of the paper will serve as a basis for the later discussion on anti-design in video games. By reflecting on these findings, the thesis will analyze how anti-design manifests in-game aesthetics, mechanics, and user experience, questioning whether breaking established design conventions can lead to meaningful or innovative artistic expression.

By the end of this thesis, the goal is to present a perspective on anti-design in video games, demonstrating its presence and relevance in the medium while contributing to the broader discourse on unconventional artistic approaches.

2.1 Research Context and Questions

The selection of this thesis topic was driven by the author's interest in unconventional and challenging visual styles, as well as bold design choices that defy conventional norms. The study of good design practices often leads to the question: what happens when those practices are intentionally disregarded? Can such an approach yield insights just as valuable as those gained from following traditional design principles? This curiosity, along with a deep fascination for modern artistic approaches, motivated the focus on anti-design in video games. Given that video games are one of the youngest and most dynamic forms of art (Ilmuratov 2025), they provide an intriguing medium to explore this phenomenon.

As an artist specializing in 2D graphics and concept art, the author has chosen to emphasize the visual and aesthetic aspects of anti-design. However, this study also acknowledges and engages with other dimensions of the movement, as anti-design extends beyond mere visual choices to influence broader aspects of artistic expression and user experience.

While the term "anti-design" is not entirely obscure in contemporary discourse, it remains a niche concept. (see theoretical framework in chapter 3.1) A review of available literature revealed a lack of cohesive academic material on the movement, particularly in its relation to video games. This gap in research led to the formulation of the central research question: Is the anti-design movement present in video games? A related sub-question seeks to define the characteristics of anti-design, establishing a clearer understanding of its key elements.

Art movements are inherently fluid, constantly evolving, and open to interpretation (Tyagi 2025). The anti-design movement is no exception. As video games and

artistic trends continue to develop, the findings of this research remain interpretative in nature and subject to change over time. Nevertheless, this study aims to provide a valuable perspective on the role and potential benefits of adopting an anti-design approach in game development.

By addressing these questions, this thesis contributes to a broader understanding of the motivations behind rejecting well-established design conventions in video games. Furthermore, it seeks to offer a semi-comprehensive view of the anti-design movement as a whole. Given the complexity of the subject, which spans multiple fields and decades of artistic works, qualitative research methods (Bengtsson 2016; The Literature Review 2025) have been employed to construct a broader picture and gain deeper insights into this distinctive artistic approach.

2.2 Research Methods

The theoretical review, a type of literature review, examines the body of existing theories related to a specific issue, concept, or phenomenon. Its purpose is to analyze the relationships between established theories, determine the extent of their investigation, and identify gaps that warrant further research. This approach also helps assess whether current theories sufficiently explain emerging research problems or if new theoretical frameworks need to be developed. (The Literature Review 2025.)

This research employs a theoretical review to explore academic discourse on the concept of anti-design. A range of academic papers mentioning the term was analyzed to establish the prevailing consensus on the movement. This review also highlights the lack of precise discourse surrounding anti-design, demonstrating that academic discussions do not always align or offer clear definitions regarding its traits, conception, and ideas.

Establishing these gaps is crucial, as this study incorporates non-academic discourse to bridge these omissions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of anti-design. By integrating perspectives from non-academic

sources, this research aims to refine and expand existing discussions on the subject, particularly in relation to digital and interactive media.

To further clarify the understanding of anti-design, a content analysis was conducted. Content analysis organizes and derives meaning from collected data to draw realistic conclusions. This study employed a manifest analysis, a broad surface-level approach, to examine online articles discussing anti-design (Bengtsson 2016). These articles were compared both to each other and to the theoretical framework established through academic sources. The purpose of this analysis was to:

- Identify areas of consensus between academic and non-academic sources.
- Highlight discrepancies and gaps in academic discussions.
- Establish a foundation for exploring anti-design in digital and interactive media.

Case studies were conducted to provide an in-depth examination of anti-design through specific subjects. A case study method allows for a detailed analysis of individuals, groups, or events to discern patterns and causal relationships (Case Study Research Defined 2022). This approach is widely used across disciplines, including psychology, education, and design studies.

One case study focuses on Italian designer Ettore Sottsass Jr., a pivotal figure often cited in discussions of the anti-design movement. This analysis aimed to determine whether Sottsass' work aligns with claims made in online articles and with the traits of anti-design identified in the theoretical review. Through the lens of Sottsass' work, this study also examined theoretical and philosophical perspectives relevant to anti-design.

Another case study investigates the video game *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*. This game was selected because its creator, Bennett Foddy, explicitly mentioned anti-design when asked about his approach in an interview (Game Informer 2018). Analyzing this game within the anti-design framework helps contextualize how the movement influences interactive media, particularly video

game design. This case study explores how anti-design manifests in different aspects of game development, from mechanics to player experience.

The research question was addressed through a combination of findings from the theoretical review, content analysis, and case studies. By synthesizing academic and non-academic perspectives, this study provides a clearer understanding of anti-design and its impact on both traditional and digital design mediums.

2.3 Data Sampling

In conducting this research, careful attention was given to data sampling to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased examination of the anti-design movement. Since anti-design is an evolving artistic movement, a broad range of sources was selected to reflect its complexity. Both academic and non-academic materials were analyzed to establish a well-rounded perspective on the subject.

Academic sources were prioritized, including scholarly papers, official pamphlets, posters, and artworks directly associated with the movement. However, this study also engaged with sources that presented alternative or conflicting definitions of anti-design. Examining movements with conceptual similarities allowed for a broader understanding and ensured that the discussion was not limited to sources that solely reinforced the thesis. This approach provided a more objective and critical engagement with the topic.

When analyzing online discourse, articles written by industry professionals were prioritized. These sources offered valuable insights from individuals directly involved in design and interactive media, contributing to a more nuanced discussion of anti-design's real-world applications and interpretations.

The selection of video games for analysis was based on their alignment with the traits and approaches outlined in the theoretical review and content analysis, as well as the analysis of *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, as its creator has described their approach as anti-design (Game Informer 2018). This choice was

made to demonstrate the presence of the movement within the field of video games.

By incorporating diverse sources and perspectives, this study aims to provide a balanced and well-supported discussion of anti-design. This approach ensures that the research not only identifies areas of consensus but also acknowledges discrepancies and gaps in existing discourse, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the movement.

3 ANTI-DESIGN MOVEMENT

3.1 Defining and Understanding Anti-Design — A Theoretical Review

The term "anti-design" remains largely undefined in academic discourse, often used interchangeably with anti-modernism (e.g. Martinović 2025) despite their differing characteristics. There is no clear definition of the term to be found. Therefore, this theoretical review seeks to examine existing literature on anti-design, its historical origins, its relationship with anti-modernism and anti-solutionism, and its role in various design fields. The objective is to identify how anti-design has been framed academically and whether it has a consistent definition. This review also explores whether anti-capitalism is a core theme within anti-design. Through the exploration of seven distinct academic sources listed in Table 1, this paper aims to provide an understanding of how anti-design is commonly perceived and addressed.

Table 1. Sources used in the Theoretical review

Database	Author	Date	Theoretical Approach and Concepts	Publisher
Google Scholar	Amn, Rania Ezzat	2023	Anti-design in graphic design	<i>Journal of Design Sciences and Applied Arts</i>

EBSCO	Boddy, Trevor	2010	Anti-design regarding the Winter Olympics	<i>The Architectural Review</i>
EBSCO	Demby, Eric	2004	Analyses of the anti-design approach by company Lansing-Dreiden	<i>PRINTS</i>
Designmanifesto.org	Brody, Neville	2010	Anti-design manifesto	<i>Anti-Design Festival</i>
DIVA	Blythe, Mark Anderse, Kristina Clake, Rachel Wright, Peter	2016	Anti-Solutionism Anti-Design	<i>Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '16)</i>
DOAJ	Bhattacharya, Ritaban	2024	Anti-modernism in Japan	<i>Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry</i>
EBSCO	Waddell, Nathan	2012	Anti-modernism in the writing of Jhon Buchan	<i>University of Birmingham</i>

Relevant papers were selected through a systematic search across various databases for articles that discuss or mention anti-design. Articles found that directly addressed the topic were included, while those that were not explicitly focused on anti-design were prioritized if they mentioned the term in the title. Additionally, papers on anti-modernism and anti-solutionism were examined to provide a comparative perspective, refine the definition of anti-design, and assess whether these movements can be used interchangeably.

Anti-design is widely acknowledged as originating in 1960s Italy as a reaction against modernist aesthetics and consumer culture (Martinović 2025; Amin 2024;

Levanier 2022; Moffat 2011). In the article *Anti-Design Approach to Enhance Creativity in Design*, Amin (2024) states that anti-design challenges traditional aesthetics by embracing chaotic layouts, clashing colors, and asymmetry. Many of these characteristics can be seen in Figure 2. According to the same article, the movement opts for a deliberately provocative, often "ugly" aesthetic, as opposed to modernist principles of simplicity, functionality, and order. However, in this study, little academic work could be found to expand on the exact motivations and sociopolitical factors that led to its emergence beyond general critiques of modernist ideas.



Figure 2. Anti-design manifesto (Brody 2010.)

Amin (2024) argues that anti-design functions as a response to consumer desensitization to "well-designed" products. By defying standard design conventions, anti-design disrupts expectations and forces engagement. This aligns with Boddy's (2010) interpretation of anti-design as a critique of corporate-driven design choices, particularly in large-scale projects like the Vancouver Winter

Olympics, where commercial interests and budget cuts overshadow quality and creativity. This perspective suggests that anti-design is not just an aesthetic movement but an ideological stance against commercial influences in design.

While anti-modernism is often used interchangeably with anti-design and they both share opposition to mainstream artistic norms, they diverge in intent and execution. Buchan's (2012) "amicable anti-modernism" critiques modernist complexity and self-conscious experimentation, favoring clarity and balance. In contrast, anti-design embraces disorder and unpredictability. Additionally, Japanese anti-modernism, as discussed by Bhattacharya (2024), emphasizes resistance to industrialization and Western influences through traditional aesthetics, differing from the provocative and rebellious nature of anti-design.

The concept of "anti-solutionism" (Blythe et al. 2016) critiques design approaches that prioritize solutions for oversimplified problems. This aligns with anti-design's resistance to standardized, consumer-driven functionality. While conclusively not identical movements, both emphasize questioning the necessity of conventional design solutions rather than striving for refinement and efficiency.

While the traits listed below are not the only characteristics associated with anti-design, they are among the most commonly recurring ones. Across various works identified as part of the movement, these traits appear frequently and consistently. Notably, Amin's paper (2024), Levanier's article (2022), and Brody's manifesto (2010) each highlight specific aesthetic features that help define anti-design's visual and conceptual identity:

- Absence of clean grids or layouts
- Asymmetry and overlapping elements (as illustrated in Figure 3)
- Clashing, vibrant colors
- Distorted typography and text orientation
- Overcrowded or unbalanced compositions
- Rejection of traditional hierarchy in visual design
- Non-cohesive, seemingly random visual elements

These traits are reflected in both digital and physical design fields, from graphic design to architecture. Lansing-Dreiden's artistic approach (Demby 2004) as well

as Brody's manifesto exemplify these principles, rejecting conventional readability and coherence in favor of ambiguity and subversion.

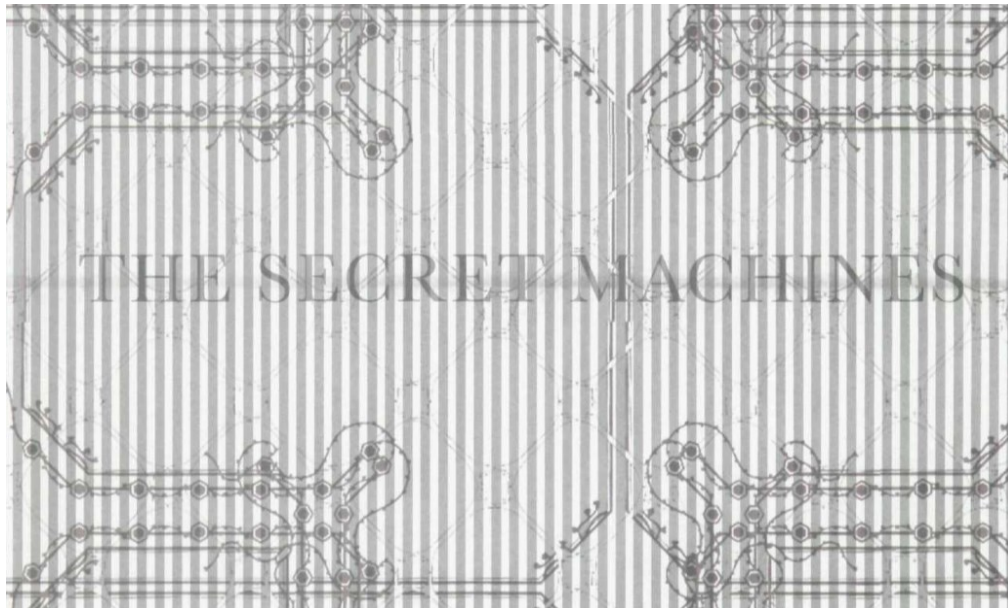


Figure 3. THE SECRET MACHINES (Demby 2004.)

The characteristics outlined in the articles listed in Table 1 are thematically organized to summarize the findings in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the anti-design findings

<p>Aesthetic traits (Brody 2010.; Levanier 2011.; Amin 2024)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Absence of grids or layouts ● Asymmetry and overlapping elements ● Clashing, vibrant colors ● Distorted typography and text orientation ● Non-cohesive, seemingly random visual elements ● Overcrowded or unbalanced compositions ● Rejection of traditional hierarchy in visual design
<p>Characteristics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The name and direction of the movement are not widely agreed upon. ● While many sources mention anti-design's 1960s origins few explore it in detail ● There is limited differentiation between anti-design's aesthetic and ideological aspects. Some sources view it purely as a stance against commercialization, while others incorporate a visual style as well. ● Anti-design's relationship with anti-capitalism is frequently implied but rarely analyzed in depth.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is little exploration of anti-design's development over time or its adaptation across different design disciplines. ● Some electronic sources suggest that the Anti-design movement declined by the 1980s. (e.g. Moffat 2011).
Theoretical framework results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-design originated in 1960s Italy (Amin 2024; Moffat 2011). ● It is both a visual rebellion and an ideological stance against traditional design expectations. ● Anti-design disregards conventional best practices to create unique, disruptive, or socially critical work. ● It shares similarities with anti-modernism and anti-solutionism but remains distinct in its aesthetic and application. ● Anti-capitalism appears to be a recurring theme but requires further investigation.
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Academic sources strictly focused on Anti-design are limited, often necessitating the use of internet articles that lack proper citations. ● Many academic papers that mention Anti-design do so only briefly, instead centering on more specific topics. ● No available academic papers directly address Anti-design in video games, though some discuss its presence in digital media (e.g. Amin 2024).

This theoretical review highlights the inconsistencies in defining anti-design and its overlapping relationships with anti-modernism and anti-solutionism. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to provide a clearer definition of anti-design and establish its relevance in contemporary design discourse, particularly in video games. Future research should explore how anti-design differs across various disciplines and how its ideological and aesthetic traits continue to evolve. This framework will help define anti-design in an academic context and explore its presence in video game design.

3.2 Origins of Anti-design: Case Study Of Ettore Sottsass Jr.

The movement many of the above sources refer to as Anti-design emerged as a reaction to the principles of modernism, which emphasized functionality, simplicity,

and mass production (Moffat 2011). While many sources attribute the origins of the movement to 1960s Italy, detailed academic documentation on its inception remains scarce. Most references to its beginnings mention the time period, location, and a few key figures associated with the movement. One of the most frequently cited individuals (Amin 2024; Moffat 2011; Martinović 2025) in this context is Ettore Sottsass Jr. (here after referred to as Ettore Sottsass or simply Sottsass), an Italian architect, designer, photographer, and artist. Despite his association with the movement, there are no known academic sources in which Sottsass explicitly acknowledges anti-design or his participation in it. Therefore, this paper conducts a case study to analyze his works and theoretical perspectives to further understand why his creations are frequently included within the anti-design framework.

In 1966, Sottsass introduced a series of cabinets, the Superboxes (a few of them can be seen in Figure 4), which defied the prevailing aesthetic of modernist appliances. Unlike the clean, functional forms of modernist furniture, these pieces were designed to dominate the space rather than blend into it. Sottsass' Superboxes serve as an early and notable example of anti-design principles in action. These wardrobes and cabinets first exhibited in Genoa in 1966, featured striking colors, geometric shapes, and laminated plastic surfaces. Unlike conventional furniture, they resembled columns rather than household storage units. The designer even incorporated bold bases that elevated them as if they were placed on pedestals, further detaching them from traditional functionality. (Thomé 2017, 190.)



Figure 4. Superboxes from Ettore Sottsass Jr. (Tiovivo Creativo n.d.; Thomé 2017)

Contemporary critics noted their disruptive nature. Tommaso Trini described them as "furniture as non-furniture," stating that they made the surrounding space feel irrelevant. (Thomé 2017, 190.) These pieces featured bold geometric shapes, vibrant colors, and exaggerated forms, making them appear more like sculptural objects than functional furniture. Sottsass himself stated that he wanted his creations to take control of their environment rather than simply exist within it, he deliberately challenged conventional expectations of design. (Thomé 2017.) The deliberate provocation of the consumer and audience is a concept later reflected in Bennett Foddy's game *Getting Over It* and frequently observed in works examined within the anti-design movement.

In the 1970s, Italy: *The New Domestic Landscape*, an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, showcased Ettore Sottsass' work. His furniture system, created for this exhibition, illustrated in Figure 5, exemplifies these ideas (Thomé 2017, 227).

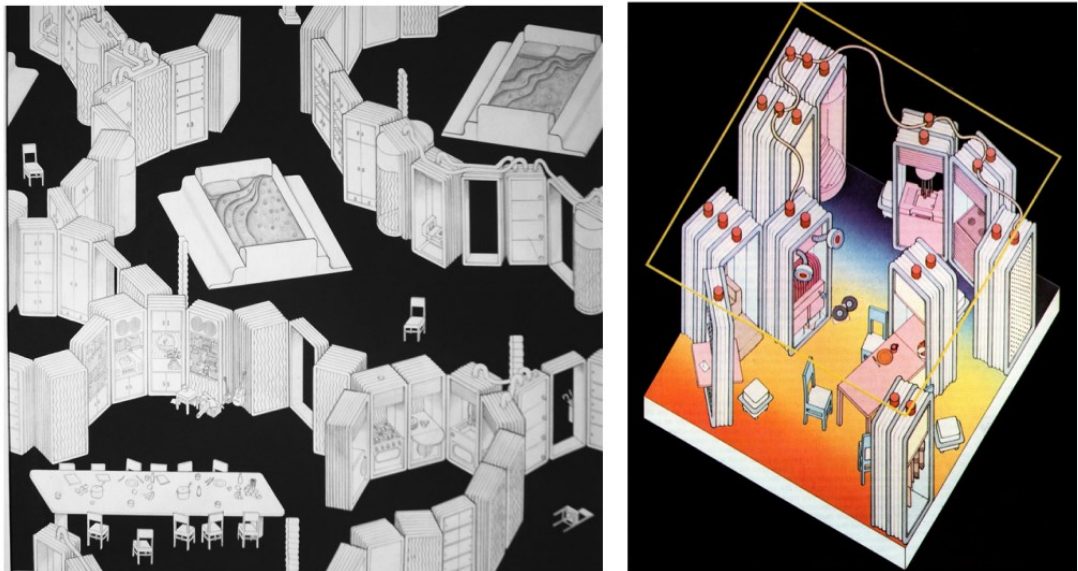


Figure. 5. Studies for 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' exhibition, MoMA, New York 1972 (Fosco 2013)

The book *SOTTASS* (Thomé 2017) refers to the pieces he created for this exhibition as examples of "radical design." Sottsass deliberately rejected traditional design approaches, embracing what he termed the "unattractive" and subverting

conventional norms. In an interview Sottsass himself described his approach as twofold: first, the obliteration of hierarchical spatial organization, and second, the creation of objects with a deliberately neutral and detached aesthetic. Despite being produced for the exhibition, Sottsass explicitly stated that these pieces were never intended for commercial sale. He emphasized that they did not conform to conventional aesthetic or functional design principles but instead served as explorations of alternative design philosophies. (Thomé 2017, 227-228.)

Beyond this, the only other reference Ettore Sottsass makes to consumption—and, by extension, consumerism—appears in an interview for IN Magazine (Thomé 2017, 228). He stated:

"The drawings published here are part of a series of possible projects I created as they were suggested to me over the phone by one of my architect friends who lives (...) in a society where we don't know the meaning of work. (...) That is, we don't really know what producing means, but, on the contrary, we only know the meaning of consumption..."

This passage highlights Sottsass' critical perspective on consumer culture, emphasizing a shift from production to consumption as a defining feature of contemporary society.

If modernism prioritized functionality, early anti-design sought to discard it in favor of provoking thought. Sottsass' work, particularly his *Superboxes* and experimental office furniture, exemplifies these principles, making him a key figure in the movement, even if he never explicitly identified with it.

Examining Ettore Sottsass' *Superboxes* and bookshelf alongside other objects frequently associated with the anti-design movement (see Martinovic 2025; Amin 2024 etc.)—such as the Lounge Chair by Gruppo Sturm (see object B in Figure 6.), the Panton Chair by Verner Panton, and Vico Magistretti's 1970s lamp (see object A in Figure 6.)—reveals several recurring characteristics that define the movement. (Moffat 2011; Waterfall College 2014.)

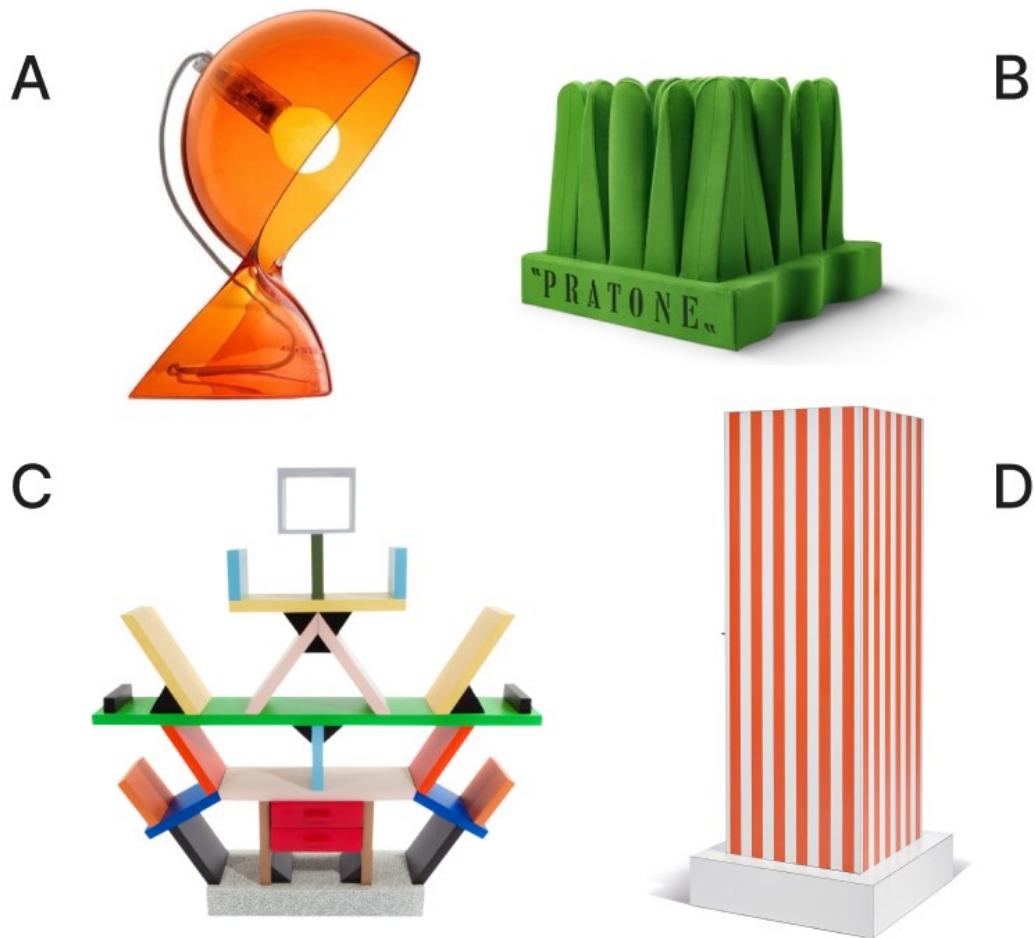


Figure 6. Objects associated with the Anti-design movement side by side. A) Vico Magistretti's lamp (Moffat 2011; Artemide 2025), B) Gufram "Pratone" Lounge chair 1971 (Ceretti et al. n.d.; Pratone Forever Gufram Sofa n.d.), C) Sottsass "Carlton" bookcase (Thomé 2017), D) Sottsass "Superbox" cabinet (Lot 1298 n.d.)

Anti-design objects intentionally challenge established design principles by subverting conventional practices and solutions. Sottsass, for instance, rejected the modularity typical of furniture design, while Gruppo Stur姆's Lounge Chair abandoned traditional chair forms entirely (Ceretti et al. n.d.). These objects often feel alien within their environments, resisting both visual and functional integration. Sottsass' *Superboxes* exemplify this disruption—human-sized, vividly colored cabinets elevated on pedestals, intentionally disturbing spatial harmony (Thomé 2017, 9, 190). Many anti-design pieces disregard their relationship to their surroundings or users, prioritizing conceptual provocation over practical application. (Thomé 2017, 9, 190.)

Based solely on the works of Ettore Sottsass, his design approaches, and the few other early examples referenced, a preliminary set of visual traits can be identified, which help characterize the early expressions of what would come to be recognized as anti-design:

- **Bold color palettes** – Bright, striking colors heighten the object’s visual impact.
- **Intricate pattern work** – Complex patterns or repetition reinforce their disruptive presence.
- **Defined geometric forms** – Strong, exaggerated shapes emphasize their sculptural and confrontational nature.
- **Unexpected proportions** – Oversized elements creating dominance within a space.
- **Unconventional materials** – Use of materials considered cheap or atypical, such as plastic, polyurethane or rubber. (Ceretti et al. n.d., Artemide 2025.)

Sottsass’ Carlton bookshelf (see object C in table 6) exemplifies this approach, rejecting the traditional modular, rectangular form in favor of an unconventional shape that asserts its presence. Its deliberately misaligned lines avoid guiding the viewer’s eye to a focal point, creating a sense of visual disorientation. The use of bold, varied colors further defies conventional design norms (Thomé 2017).

These shared characteristics underscore the anti-design movement’s fundamental rejection of traditional aesthetics, functionality, and consumer-oriented design, positioning these objects as conceptual statements rather than mere functional products.

3.3 Anti-Design Now

Anti-design is a movement that remains largely undefined within academic discourse but is frequently discussed in online spaces and popular media (Din Studio 2024; Miranda n.d.; Moffat 2011; Martinović 2025). This short content analysis examines how non-academic sources shape public understanding of anti-design and influence the movement itself. By analyzing online discussions, articles, and digital platforms, this study highlights the primary themes and characteristics that emerge from non-academic discussions and their divergence from or alignment with academic literature.

Non-academic sources—including online articles, design blogs, and discussion forums—are considered separately in this thesis due to their informal tone, lack of citations, and subjective perspectives. Despite these limitations, they serve as valuable repositories of information, documenting and disseminating ideas related to anti-design. Their influence is particularly significant in shaping contemporary interpretations of the movement beyond traditional disciplines such as architecture, interior design, and product design.

Similarly to the academic discussion, all sources (if they touch on it) agree on the movement's origins being in the 1960s (Design after Capitalism n.d.; Moffat 2011; Miranda n.d.; Martinović 2025). This is also the discourse where mentions of anti-capitalism and consumerism emerge more frequently (Moffat 2011). In her 2025 article, Martinović explains that while Modernism regarded objects as durable and permanent works of art, early anti-design challenged this notion by creating items meant to be temporary, easily replaced by newer, more functional designs as trends shift. This approach, she argues, draws attention to the overwhelming volume of consumption. Moffat suggests that anti-designers aimed to make consumers reflect on the objects they were purchasing, even if those items were eventually discarded. In this way, anti-design can be seen as a tool to provoke thought and encourage reflection, a perspective echoed by Ajirireloja (2023).

Many of these sources include a brief discussion relating to anti-design and their personal thoughts on it, along with some characteristics they attribute to it. A review of non-academic sources reveals a strong consensus on the defining visual characteristics of anti-design. Common themes include:

- Striking bold or vibrant colors (Martinović 2025; Moffat 2011; Waterfall College 2014.)
- Clashing colors (Din Studio 2024; Williams 2021.)
- Prioritization of form over function (Martinović 2025; Moffat 2011; Williams 2021; Waterfall College 2014.)
- Celebration of 'bad taste' (Williams 2021; Jamieson 2016; Ajirireloja 2023; Waterfall College 2014.)
- Excessive ornament and decoration (Martinović 2025; Waterfall College 2014.)
- Unusual or unexpected forms (Martinović 2025; Waterfall College 2014.)
- Use of kitsch (Waterfall College 2014.)
- Distortion of scale (Waterfall College 2014.)

- Mismatched elements (Martinović 2025; Din Studio 2024.)
- Asymmetry (Brody 2018; Din Studio 2024.)
- Chaotic typography (Din Studio 2024; Glover n.d.)
- Overlaid text and imagery (Din Studio 2024.)
- Embrace of “chaos” (Brody 2018.)
- Lack of grid structure (Din Studio 2024.)

These characteristics are discussed either in the context of the origins (Moffat, Martinović, Waterfall College 2014) of the movement, or reflecting on authors' personal fields or interests (e.g. Miranda n.d.; Jamieson 2016; Ajirireloja 2023; Williams 2021; Din Studio 2024). This helps further solidify the movements beginnings as well as bridge gaps and define further characteristics in the digital landscape. The widespread repetition of these elements suggests the emergence of a broadly accepted, albeit informally defined, visual language associated with anti-design.

In their 2024 paper, Amin briefly touches on anti-design in the context of websites, highlighting its key features. Like the traits outlined earlier, Amin echoes that anti-design websites often use irregular, overlapping shapes and varied typography to create eye-catching, unconventional designs that stand out to users (see Figure 7). This approach can capture attention, keep users engaged, and challenge typical design conventions, making it especially suitable for brands focused on creativity and the arts. Amin claims that successful anti-design requires a strong understanding of design principles to avoid chaos while ensuring the final result remains visually compelling and functional.



Figure 7. Visual examples of Anti-design in the digital space from Amin's (2024) paper

Amin (2024) states that Anti-design websites may feature confusing layouts, encouraging user exploration and engagement. This design style often aims to create memorable, unique experiences for users. However, they also claim that there are several challenges with anti-design, including potential accessibility issues, limited flexibility for large-scale websites, and the risk of appearing overly trendy or quickly outdated.

A compelling example of anti-design in a strictly non-physical medium can be found in the barnbrook.net website. Barnbrook, one of Britain's most well-known and highly regarded independent creative studios (Barnbrook n.d.), hosts a website for some pieces made for the Anti-Design festival. The website features an animated GIF and three posters created for the 2010 Anti-Design Festival, as seen in Figure 8.

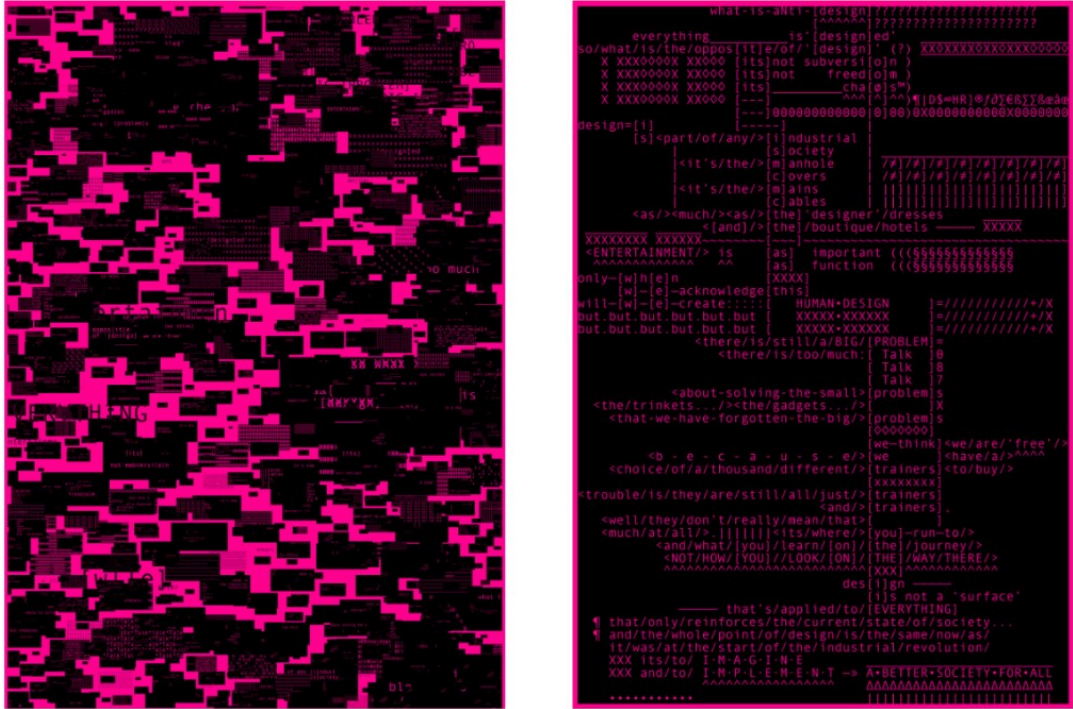


Figure 8. Posters for the 2010 Anti-Design festival in London by Barnbrook (Brody 2018)

The Anti-Design Festival in 2010 challenged the commercialism of the London Design Festival and the socio-political constraints on creativity. It focused on themes such as anarchy, revolution, and freedom. The festival showcased works created without market restrictions. Held in London, the festival attracted over 20,000 visitors and was supported by multiple Arts Councils. Major outlets reviewed the event, emphasizing its raw creative energy and community-focused design. (Brody 2018.)

The art pieces, especially the GIF, resemble a computer terminal with strange, choppy text transitions. It embodies anti-design through various characteristics, including flashing, quick transitions and hard-to-read text that create an uncomfortable experience for users. The design embraces digital spaces that often make users uncomfortable and addresses issues of consumerism through the use of primary shapes like squares, reminiscent of super boxes.

This example, along with others, provides a basis for examining further possible instances of anti-design in digital media, especially websites. One such example,

Cybergrunge.net, is not explicitly stated to be anti-design but exemplifies many of its key traits, as seen, for example, on the design of its home page shown in Figure 9.

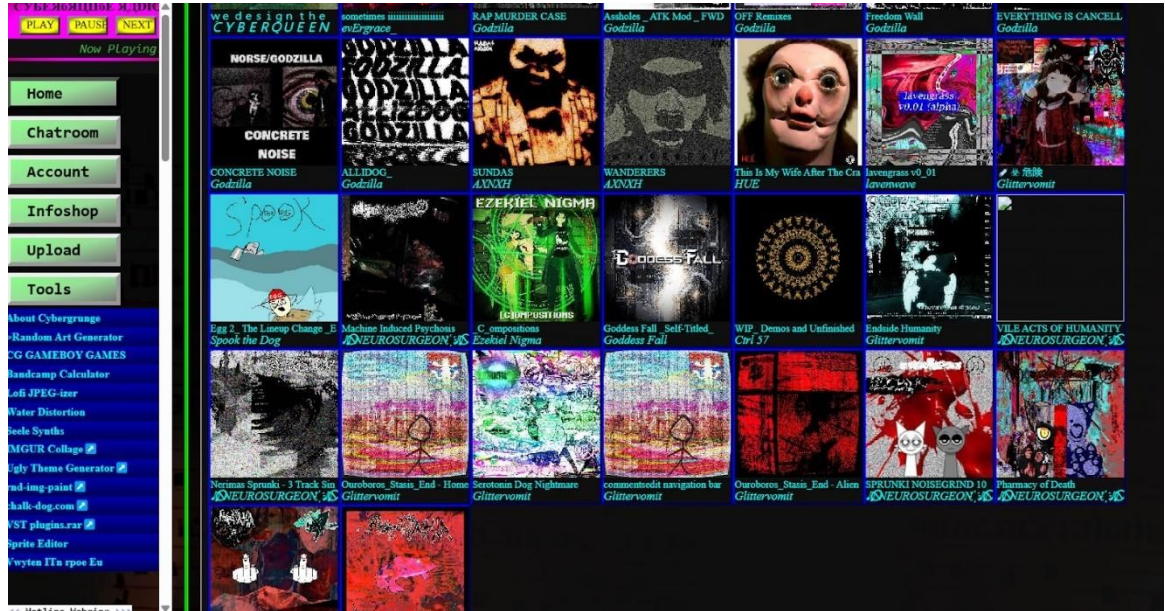


Figure 9. Cyber grunge homepage (Cybergrunge.net 2021)

Cybergrunge.net reflects the ethos of anti-design by rejecting mainstream web aesthetics and consumer-driven algorithms. Its characteristics include a deliberately unfriendly user experience, difficult-to-read text, and digital spaces designed to evoke discomfort. The site embraces anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist themes, and its visual characteristics include excessive ornamentation, clashing colors, and chaotic typography.

Additional traits that define Cybergrunge.net and its alignment with anti-design principles include:

- Prioritization of form over function
- Celebration of 'bad taste'
- Excessive ornamentation and decoration
- Use of unusual or unexpected forms
- Mismatched elements
- Emphasis on asymmetry
- Chaotic typography
- Overlaid text and imagery
- Overall embrace of "chaos"

Cybergrunge.net also reflects nostalgia for early internet culture, advocating for decentralized, DIY digital spaces. This ideological stance is evident in non-academic discussions of anti-design, where critiques often center on the corporate control of digital aesthetics and content.

At its core, anti-design is defined by the rejection of conventional norms (Miranda n.d.). Cybergrunge.net illustrates how this rejection manifests in digital media, serving as a visual and ideological statement against corporate-controlled online spaces.

Non-academic discussions are vital in shaping the public's perception of anti-design. These sources broaden its application to digital media, branding, and contemporary creative industries like video games. As a result, these discussions play an essential role in the ongoing development and evolution of the anti-design movement.

4 ANTI-DESIGN IN GAMES

4.1 Conventional Design in Games

When discussing anti-design in video games, it is crucial to first understand the prevailing design philosophies behind their creation and the role of design thinking in shaping them. Video game development traditionally is usually guided by a human-centered approach to innovation that integrates user needs, technological feasibility, and business viability. This methodology of design-thinking involves deep observation, iterative experimentation, and creative problem-solving to develop meaningful solutions. Tim Brown (2012), CEO of IDEO, has emphasized that design thinking extends beyond aesthetics into strategic business solutions, aligning user needs with feasible technologies and market opportunities through an iterative cycle of inspiration, ideation, and implementation.

Design thinking in video game development typically aims to ensure that games are desirable (compelling for players), feasible (technologically possible), and viable (commercially sustainable) (Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016).

Given that video games exist within a multi-billion dollar industry, they must balance artistic vision with market demands and technical constraints. Developers begin by understanding player psychology, studying behaviors, motivations, and expectations to craft experiences that not only entertain but also retain players. This makes game design a complex interplay between creativity and commercial strategy. (Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016.)

The iterative nature of design thinking is particularly crucial in game development, where the process is rarely linear. Developers often work in teams and refine mechanics, visuals, and narratives based on player feedback and testing. Prototyping plays a key role, allowing designers to experiment with core mechanics in low-cost, flexible ways before committing to large-scale production. This approach mirrors Thomas Edison's experimental philosophy, where rapid iterations and failures are embraced as part of the innovation process (Brown 2012).

One of the most significant challenges in game design is maintaining player engagement. Bennett Foddy, a game developer and game design instructor at New York University, argued in a 2018 interview with *Game Informer* that good game design aims to create a seamless experience where players stay engaged without excessive frustration or confusion. Games such as those developed by Nintendo exemplify this philosophy, with difficulty curves designed to gradually enhance player skill and maintain flow. Design thinking helps developers navigate these complexities by ensuring that game mechanics, story elements, and user interactions align with players' cognitive and emotional expectations, facilitating a state of flow.

Beyond entertainment, design thinking in video games extends to interface design, accessibility, and player inclusivity. A human-centered approach allows developers to create games that cater to diverse audiences by incorporating adaptive difficulty, customizable controls, and intuitive user interfaces. This enhances player experience while broadening a game's market reach, reinforcing the commercial advantages of design thinking (Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016).

By understanding these traditional design approaches, how anti-design challenges these conventions can be better explored (Glover n.d.). Design thinking, with its emphasis on usability, iteration, and player engagement, has driven much of the industry's success. However, questioning these principles opens new possibilities for subverting expectations, disrupting player experiences, and redefining the role of game design.

4.2 Art Games

Video games are often created and treated as commercial products (Brown 2012; Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016). However, not all game development follows this model. Another perspective is to view video games as pieces of art (Game Amos 2025). Some developers prioritize artistic expression over commercial success, breaking away from traditional design principles. A prominent example of this approach is *The Night Journey*, a game developed by renowned media artist Bill Viola in collaboration with the USC Game Innovation Lab. The creators explicitly describe it as one of the first experimental art games. (Game Innovation Lab 2018.)

Many consider all video games to be a form of art. However, in this context, the term "art game" refers specifically to video games designed with the intent of being artistic expressions rather than purely entertainment products. This perspective frees developers from adhering to a large audience and thus to established design conventions or best practices for ensuring accessibility. The primary focus can shift toward evoking emotions, impressions, and experiences rather than optimizing gameplay mechanics or commercial viability.

Two notable examples of art games, *The Night Journey* and *Proteus*, prioritize aesthetic experiences over traditional gameplay mechanics, as defined by the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework (Hunicke et al., n.d.). This framework provides a useful structure for analyzing video games academically, with aesthetics referring to the emotional responses a game evokes—not just through visuals, but also through elements like music and writing. In contrast,

mechanics encompass the core components of a game, such as rules, algorithms, and data structures, while dynamics describe how these mechanics interact with player input and evolve during gameplay. Both *The Night Journey* and *Proteus* fall under the category of walking simulators (Ballou 2019). Meaning they are not too concerned about engaging mechanics, interactions being largely limited to exploring the environment, allowing the aesthetics to take center stage in shaping the overall player experience.

The Night Journey (screenshots show cased in Figure 10), released in 2018, is an experimental art game and walking simulator. The game centers around movement through a 3D landscape, incorporating a unique visual technique that merges video footage with a digital environment. A key visual effect in the game is "reflecting," where overlapping images create a ghostly, layered aesthetic. The game's mainly black-and-white visuals evoke the feel of old video footage, frequently employing ghosting effects during movement and reflections. This use of real video footage gives *The Night Journey* a semi-realistic yet surreal look. Its UI (example seen in Figure 10) remains minimalistic, ensuring a clean and unobtrusive experience. (The Night Journey 2018; Game Innovation Lab 2018.)

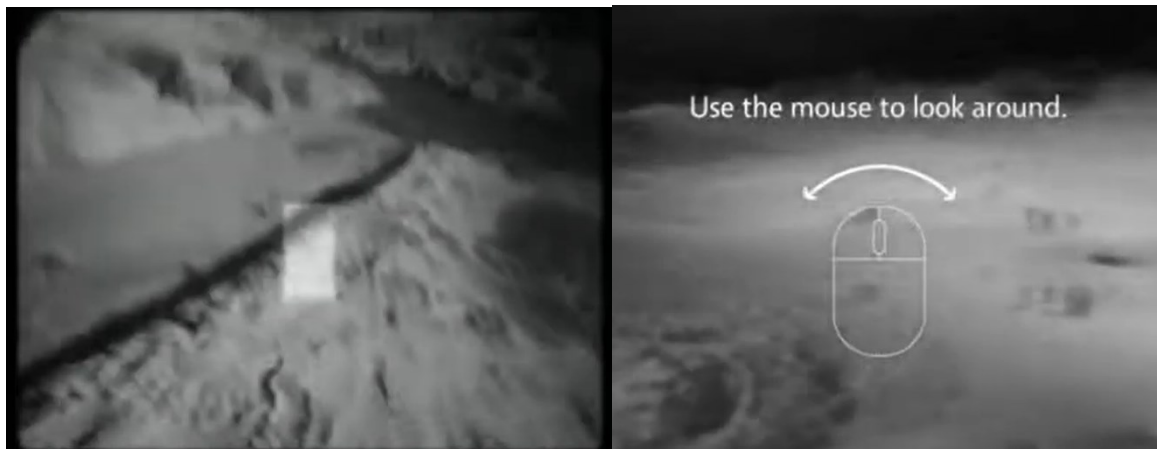


Figure 10. The night Journey: Gameplay screenshot and UI overlay (The Night Journey 2018)

Proteus (Figure 11), released on January 30, 2013, was developed by Ed Key and David Kanaga. It is an exploration-based walking simulator that immerses players in a dynamically generated world, where each island is unique. The game fosters a meditative form of play through its lack of text-based guidance, encouraging

curiosity and patience. A dynamic soundtrack, reacts to the player's exploration, creating a synesthetic experience reminiscent of experimental music. The game's visual style blends elements of early 8-bit video games with 20th-century modernist painting, producing a distinct aesthetic (Twisted Tree 2013). Additional mechanics include world generation and a built-in "postcard" function that encodes world data into screenshots, allowing players to save and share their discoveries (Proteus 2013; Twisted Tree 2013).



Figure 11. Screenshot from Proteus (Twisted Tree 2013.)

Although *Proteus* was not explicitly labeled as an art game by its creators, many in the gaming and art communities interpreted it as such (e.g. Rauch n.d.; Verdon n.d.). The game was nominated for the Nuovo Award at the 2012 Independent Games Festival (IGF). (Plante 2012.) The Nuovo Award, also known as the Innovation Award, is given to **games** that push the boundaries of the medium through abstract, unconventional, or experimental design. The award provides a space for art games to compete alongside more traditional indie titles. Notably, *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, (discussed in Chapter 4.3.1 Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy) was also nominated and even received this award. (Independent Games festival 2018.)

In conclusion, while many video games are created with commercial intent, the existence and recognition of titles like *The Night Journey* and *Proteus* demonstrate that games can also function as powerful vehicles for artistic expression. These art games prioritize mood, aesthetics, and experiential storytelling over conventional

gameplay mechanics (Game Innovation Lab 2018), aligning them in some ways with anti-design principles—particularly in their disregard for established norms. However, while overlaps exist, art games ultimately represent a different approach, one rooted more in intentional artistic exploration than in the rebellion or subversion that defines anti-design. Together, they reflect the growing diversity of creative voices within game design, and highlight how the medium can push beyond functional design into expressive, experimental territory.

4.3 Case Studies

4.3.1 Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy

Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy (in short: *Getting Over It*) is a 2017 indie game developed by Bennett Foddy, a game designer and professor at NYU. Built using the Unity engine, the game was released on multiple platforms, including Windows, macOS, iOS, Android, and Linux. It received the Nuovo Award at the Independent Games Festival in 2018, an award that recognizes abstract, short-form, and unconventional game development that pushes the boundaries of the medium and challenges conventional perceptions of games. The award was created to provide art games with a platform to compete alongside traditional indie games (Game Developers Conference 2018).

The game is a single-player experience centered around a deceptively simple yet highly challenging mechanic: the player controls a man in a cauldron (often compared to the philosopher Diogenes) who uses a hammer to climb a mountain of discarded objects (*Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* 2017). It gained widespread popularity, largely due to its unforgiving difficulty and its presence in Let's Play culture, with popular content creators showcasing its frustrating yet compelling gameplay (Game Informer 2018).

One of the primary inspirations for *Getting Over It* is *Sexy Hiking* (see Figure 12), an earlier indie game by Jazzuo. Both games share the same fundamental mechanic—using a hammer to climb obstacles—and a design philosophy that embraces imperfection, randomness, and difficulty for the sake of the experience

rather than commercial appeal. Foddy has described his approach to *Getting Over It* as one driven by the joy of creation rather than an attempt to produce a polished product. This perspective is key to understanding its connection to anti-design, a concept that rejects traditional principles of usability, aesthetic cohesion, and smooth player experience in favor of raw, challenging, and often disruptive gameplay. (*Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* 2017.)



Figure 12. A) Screenshot from *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017) and B) screenshot of *Sexy Hiking* from Jazzuo (2004) both showing man with hammer and a dead tree

Foddy's game design philosophy actively challenges established conventions of game design, which often emphasize accessibility, fairness, and player guidance to create a smooth and engaging experience. Many mainstream games, particularly those from companies like Nintendo, follow structured difficulty curves that ensure players feel a sense of progression and mastery without excessive frustration (Game Informer 2018). In contrast, *Getting Over It* is intentionally unforgiving. It disregards standard difficulty scaling, allowing players to lose hours of progress due to a single mistake. The game offers no hand-holding, traditional rewards, or guarantees of gradual improvement. Instead, it embraces unpredictability and frustration, forcing players to repeatedly confront failure.

Foddy has expressed dissatisfaction with the predictability of conventional game design, finding it uninspiring. He mentions anti-design as a term describing his approach and compares it to that of *Demon's Souls*, a game that gained a cult following due to its difficulty and unorthodox design choices. However, *Getting Over It* takes this philosophy further, stripping away nearly all conventional signifiers of progress and fairness. (Game Informer 2018.) There are no

checkpoints, no upgrades, and no safety nets—only the player, the hammer, and the consequences of their own actions. This rejection of traditional design values aligns closely with anti-design, which purposefully disrupts user expectations. *Getting Over It* takes mechanics that might typically be considered frustrating or broken and makes them the central experience. By forcing players to question their relationship with progress and success, the game reinforces the idea that perseverance itself is the ultimate reward.

Visually, *Getting Over It* does not immediately align with the bold, chaotic aesthetic often associated with anti-design. The anti-design movement frequently embraces exaggerated forms, bold colors, and chaotic layouts. In contrast, *Getting Over It* features a seemingly random collection of Unity asset store objects (Pre made 3D models sold to be used as building blocks for games) assembled without concern for artistic cohesion. Foddy acknowledges this approach in the game's narration, referring to the objects as digital “trash” and critiquing the ephemeral nature of digital culture. He suggests that as digital spaces become increasingly cluttered with discarded assets and forgotten creations, this “trash” itself becomes a new artistic medium. This aligns with the ethos of anti-design, which often subverts conventional aesthetic norms to make a broader statement. (Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy 2017.)



Figure 13. Screenshot from *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017): Box section

The game's landscape, constructed from discarded consumer goods, reflects the transient nature of digital culture. Rather than striving for traditional beauty or polish, it presents an experience built from the "waste" of the gaming industry. Additionally, *Getting Over It* employs scale and spatial composition in unconventional ways. The mountain of objects lacks logical structure, featuring precarious, floating platforms that defy physics and create a disorienting sense of verticality (See Figure 13 and Figure 14). This mirrors the anti-design tendency to distort proportions and challenge player expectations (Lee 2018), similar to the unconventional forms seen in anti-design furniture, such as the Super Boxes by Ettore Sottsass.



Figure 14. Screenshot from *Getting Over It with Bennet Foddy* (2017): Furniture mountain

However, *Getting Over It* diverges from extreme anti-design aesthetics in its use of color for example. Unlike *Cyber Grunge*, Sottsass' bookshelf or the later examined *Cruelty Squad* that all three of which embrace bold and exaggerated color schemes, *Getting Over It* employs a relatively tame, though definitely still colorful, palette as seen in Figure 14 above. Its individual elements even being rather mundain due to their nature of being assets created to fit into many scenarios.

Additionally, the game's sound design contrasts sharply with the heightened emotional state it induces. Rather than an intense, dramatic soundtrack, the game is largely silent, punctuated only by the protagonist's grunts and Foddy's calm narration. Occasionally traditional blues songs play in the background of the game. In her video essay, Lee (2018) highlights how many of these songs have been re-recorded so often that their original authors are now difficult to identify—a musical choice that aligns well with the game's core philosophy of repurposing. This contrast heightens the frustration, as players feel taunted by Foddy's philosophical musings while struggling with the mechanics.

Ultimately, *Getting Over It* exemplifies anti-design primarily through its mechanics rather than its visuals. While the game's aesthetics challenge conventional polish by repurposing digital "trash," its lack of bold and exaggerated design elements suggests that anti-design in video games does not require a strict visual identity. Instead, Foddy's rejection of mainstream game design principles—his willingness to create an intentionally frustrating, unbalanced, and unwelcoming experience—aligns most strongly with anti-design. The game defies traditional notions of progress, success, and fairness, forcing players to reevaluate their expectations of video game experiences.

As a result of these traits and of Foddy mentioning anti-design himself, *Getting Over It* serves as a key example of anti-design in game development, illustrating how a rejection of standard design norms can lead to an entirely new type of experience. It embraces failure, challenges ideas of usability, and transforms frustration into a core element—demonstrating that anti-design is not just about visuals but about disrupting the very foundations of how a game should play.

4.3.2 The Beginner's Guide

The Beginner's Guide was chosen for analysis based on the anti-design traits that were discussed in relation to *Getting Over It*.

The Beginner's Guide is a narrative-driven walking simulator developed by Davey Wreden (creator of *The Stanley Parabol*) and released in 2015 (Hudson 2015; Wreden 2015). The game presents itself as a collection of short, unfinished game projects created by a mysterious developer named Coda, with an in-game version of Wreden acting as the narrator and Coda's friend. Through the experience, Wreden guides the player through these games, explaining their mechanics, what he believes to be their intended purpose, and the changes he made to make them more accessible for himself and the player. As the narrative unfolds, the game raises profound questions about the nature of art, authorship, and the role of an audience and player in engaging with creative work. (The Beginner's Guide 2015.) Based on Foddy's approach Anti-design in games can be characterized by an intentional disregard for traditional player experience considerations, sometimes as an act of rebellion against conventional design principles (Game Informer 2018). *The Beginner's Guide* engages with anti-design in multiple ways—visually, narratively, and mechanically.

The most striking anti-design aspect of *The Beginner's Guide* are its narrative implications. The game explicitly explores the tension between a game's original intent and the way it is presented to the audience. This also mirrors the conversation brought up by Sotssass, regarding if a piece is made for production or if its meant more as thought experiment (Thomé 2017). Coda's games, as remembered by Wreden, included deliberately frustrating mechanics such as forcing the player to sit in a prison cell for an hour before the door opens. Wreden, in his role as the narrator, removes such elements, believing them to be unnecessary obstacles. (The Beginner's Guide 2015.) The theoretical original works of Coda seemed to have followed a similar approach to Foddy's *Getting Over It* (2017), where Coda prioritized something other than giving the player a smooth experience with his game, embracing difficulty and frustration and the rejection of conventionally expected usability.

In *The Beginner's Guide*, the player never truly engages with the raw versions of Coda's games, only with Wreden's modified versions. This makes the absence of friction a mechanic in itself—Wreden has stripped away the difficulty and

resistance, making the game paradoxically about the removal of challenge. Unlike *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, where difficulty is a core component of the experience. *The Beginner's Guide*, however, uses this approach to raise the question of whether a game can still be an authentic artistic expression if it is altered for accessibility.

While *The Beginner's Guide* does not fully embrace the jarring visual chaos of a game like our next example *Cruelty Squad*, it does employ anti-design elements in its aesthetic. The environments are often stark and abstract, with spaces that defy conventional game world logic. Mazes and star systems exist outside the play area revealed only by Wreden's tempering as seen in Figure 15. Certain environments contain scattered, nonsensical, and dauntingly vast objects, akin to the thrash mountain in *Getting Over It*.

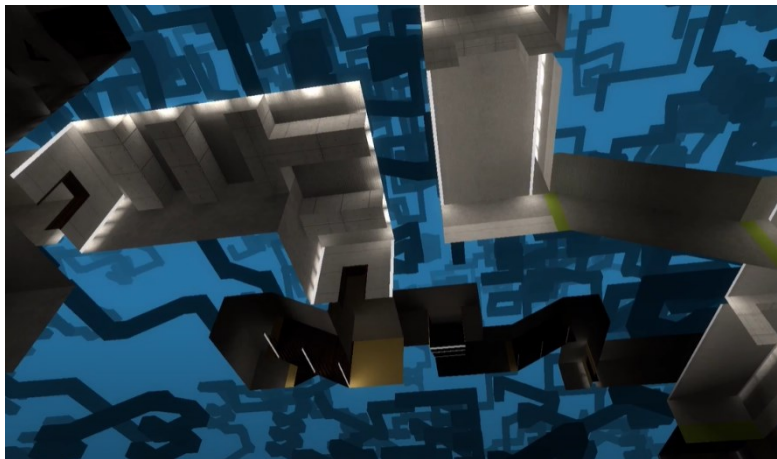


Figure 15. Screenshot from *The Beginner's Guide* (2015): Hidden maze section

At a certain point in the game, an unusual office space is gradually revealed as a wall retracts. The visuals closely resemble Ettore Sottsass' New York sketches (see Figure 16), previously analyzed. The scene features repeated, sleek objects composed of binary shapes like squares, with a muted color palette that emphasizes contrast between dark and light.

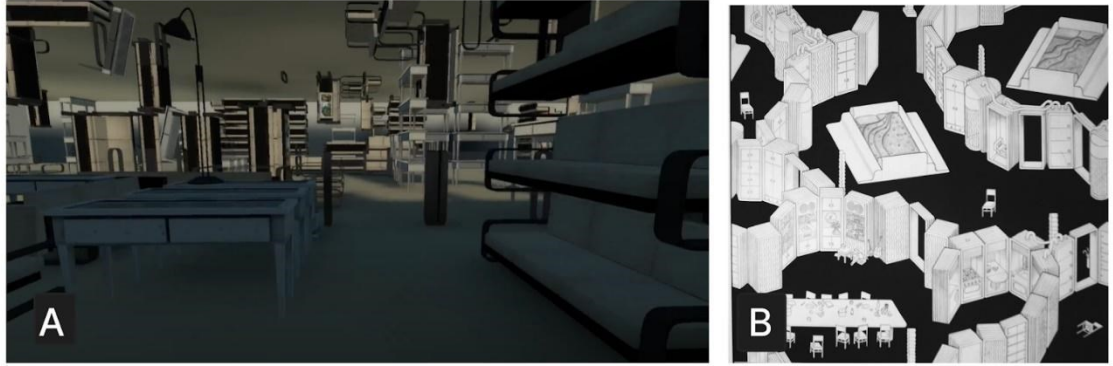


Figure 16. A) Screenshot from *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) side by side with B) Sottsass' sketch (Fosco 2013)

The game frequently incorporates text within its 3D environment, often layering it with other elements or additional text, making it difficult to read as seen in Figure 17. This liberal approach to text legibility is reminiscent of techniques seen in Brody's manifesto (2010) discussed in Chapter 3.2.



Figure 17. Screenshot from *The Beginner's Guide* (2015): showcasing overlapping text

Lee's (2020) video essay highlights how *The Beginner's Guide* feels deliberately alienating, making the player question their role as an observer. Rejecting mainstream design conventions, critiquing the idea that art must be made comprehensible or welcoming to an audience.

The Beginner's Guide aligns with anti-design in its rejection of player-centric principles, both in narrative and aesthetic design. It is not polished, intentionally

resembles hobbyist creations (similar to *Getting Over It*), and challenges the player's assumptions about game design and artistic intent. This is a core theme that seems to appear with the games examined in this paper.

4.3.3 Cruelty Squad

Cruelty Squad was selected for analysis in this paper due to its overt rejection of conventional design principles and its strong alignment with the visual characteristics of anti-design discussed previously. While the game's mechanics and narrative contribute significantly to its overall impact, this chapter will focus primarily on its visual elements, which are a particularly extreme expression of anti-design within video games.

Cruelty Squad is a first-person shooter and immersive sim developed by Finnish multimedia artist and game designer Kallio (Good 2021). Released in 2021, the game presents itself as an "immersive power fantasy simulator" set in the "hardcore gig economy of corporate liquidations." According to its Steam page, players take on the role of a chemically enhanced mercenary, working for a morally bankrupt corporation to carry out assassinations and other violent tasks. The game presents a dystopian, hyper-capitalist world saturated with grotesque imagery, chaotic mechanics, and deliberately antagonistic design choices. (Kallio 2021.)

Though Kallio has not explicitly labeled *Cruelty Squad* as an example of anti-design, it embodies many of the traits outlined earlier in this paper. The game systematically rejects best practices at every turn, making it an ideal case study in anti-design within the medium of video games.

One of the clearest examples of *Cruelty Squad's* alignment with anti-design is its approach to user interface (UI) and player interaction. Where traditional game design prioritizes clarity, accessibility, and smooth player experience (Ilmuratov 2025), *Cruelty Squad* deliberately subverts these expectations. In most first-person shooters, the reload function is mapped to a simple keypress (typically 'R', e.g.

Counter Strike: Global Offensive 2012.). However, in *Cruelty Squad*, reloading requires a series of mouse movements, forcing the player to engage in an additional layer of physical complexity (Cruelty Squad 2021). This disrupts the game's pacing and interrupts the flow of combat, making the act of shooting feel more cumbersome and unnatural.

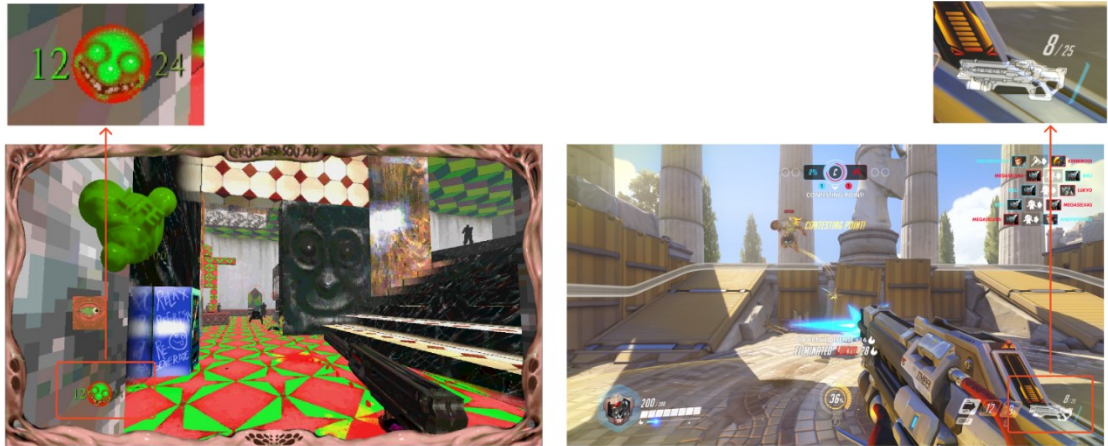


Figure 18. Comparison of Ammo counters on screen between *Cruelty Squad* (2021) and *Overwatch* (2016)

The game's UI further exemplifies its rejection of best practices. Traditional approaches provide clear, easily legible indicators for example for player health, ammunition, and enemy detection (GAME UI DATABASE 2011; Assassin's Creed Shadows 2025.). UI elements are typically anchored to the edges of the screen so as to not disturb the player's immersion. Best practices dictate that UI should be immediately readable and contrast effectively with the gameplay environment. Yet *Cruelty Squad* deliberately undermines this principle, making it difficult for players to process essential game information at a glance (Murphy 2023).

In *Cruelty Squad*, these elements are distorted beyond recognition. The detection marker—a UI element typically designed to inform the player of nearby threats—is a grotesque eye placed at an odd position on the screen and can persist on the screen for an entire mission, even after the immediate danger has passed. (see on Figure 19.) The health bar, instead of being a conventional bar, is a pulsating,

amorphous blob with a small number in its corner, requiring extra effort to interpret. (see on Figure 20.)

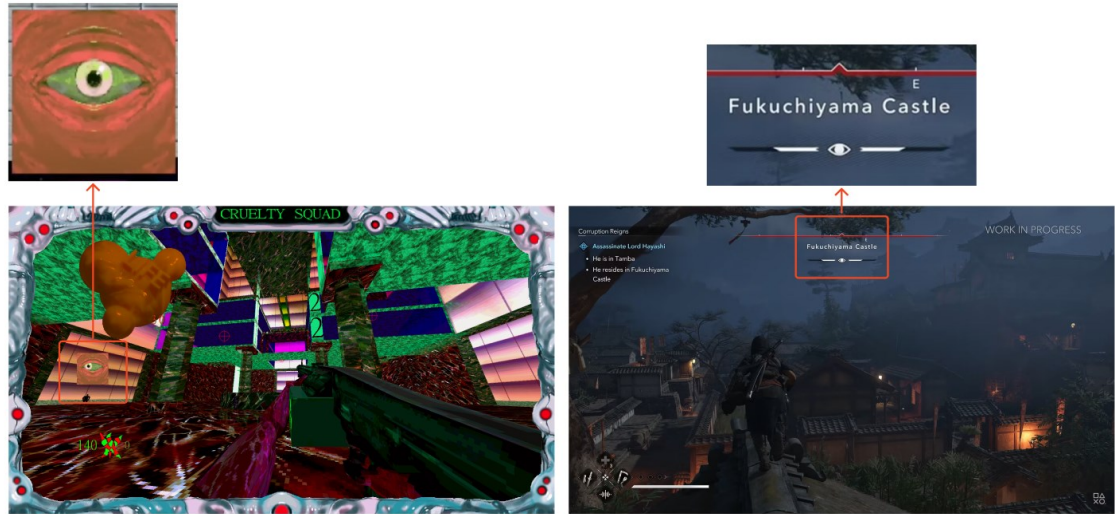


Figure 19. Comparison of detection indicator between Cruelty squad (2021) and Assassin's Creed Shadow (2025)



Figure 20. Comparison of player health UI between Cruelty squad (2021) and Elder Scroll's V: Skyrim (GAME UI DATABASE 2011)

The game's visual design is equally confrontational. Textures are chaotic, consisting of bright, clashing colors and erratic patterns that make it difficult to focus on any single element. (see Figure 21) Objects and faces appear in unnatural locations, further disorienting the player. *Cruelty Squad* also challenges traditional notions of aesthetic cohesion by mixing visual styles—cartoony 2D assets coexist alongside edited photographic textures, low-poly 3D models, and highly detailed

digital paintings. This collage-like approach has appeared already for example on the Album cover of Lansing-Dreiden (Demby 2004) or in Brodys Manifesto (2010), In the case of *Cruelty Squad* it creates a visual experience that feels alienating and abrasive, a stark contrast to the polished, immersive environments typically found in first-person shooters.



Figure 21. Screenshot of Cruelty Squad (2021)

When presenting text, *Cruelty Squad* closely aligns with the anti-design approaches previously discussed. (See Table 2) The game uses a variety of fonts, sizes, and colors, often overlapping text with itself or background elements, making it difficult to read. Rather than maintaining a consistent text style, it experiments with different placements, stylings, and visual effects. (see Figure 22.)



Figure 22. Examples of text styles in Cruelty Squad (2021)

Another notable anti-design element is the game's persistent screen border, (see Figure 21) which changes color based on the difficulty setting. This border constrains the player's field of view, which is a particularly unconventional choice for a shooter, a genre where spatial awareness is crucial (Murphy 2023). By limiting visibility, the game actively works against the player's ability to react efficiently to threats, introducing an additional layer of difficulty and discomfort.

Beyond its visuals and mechanics, *Cruelty Squad* incorporates anti-capitalist themes that further align it with anti-design philosophy (Kallio 2021). The game satirizes corporate greed and the gig economy, forcing players into a grotesque, exaggerated version of modern capitalism. One of its most bizarre mechanical choices is the inclusion of an in-game stock market, allowing players to engage in day trading between missions. This exaggerated take on the game's themes doubles as both a gameplay feature and a critique of capitalism's arbitrary and exploitative nature. Reflecting on this, Ville Kallio remarked that the game's success forced him into business, making him feel like he unknowingly struck a

Faustian bargain—sacrificing friendships for a CEO mindset and an almost godlike financial power. (Good 2021.)

This statement reflects the game’s thematic preoccupation with capitalism taken to its most absurd and extreme form, making it impossible to ignore the ideological underpinnings of *Cruelty Squad*'s design choices.

All in all, *Cruelty Squad* stands as one of the most striking examples of anti-design in video games. Its abrasive visuals, obtuse UI, unconventional mechanics, and thematic subversion of capitalism make it a prime case study in the rejection of conventional design principles. By deliberately frustrating and overwhelming the player, *Cruelty Squad* embodies the core tenets of anti-design, proving that rejecting best practices can serve as a powerful artistic statement.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The non-video game examples discussed earlier in the thesis were instrumental in developing the foundational framework used to analyse these games. Although academic sources and online articles did not always align, careful comparison and analysis allowed for the extraction of recurring characteristics. These traits—compiled in Table 3 and Table 4—alongside those identified through the early works of Ettore Sottsass and other key figures in the anti-design movement, helped establish a baseline for identifying both visual and conceptual traits, as seen in Table 5.

Table 3 presents the characteristics identified across the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 3.1. These specific traits were mentioned, utilized, or referenced by Brody (2010), Levanier (2011), and Amin (2024).

Table. 3. Summary of Anti-design traits and characteristics touched on during the Theoretical framework

Anti-design traits based on sections	Visual Characteristics	Other Characteristics
Academic sources <i>(Brody 2010; Levanier 2011; Amin 2024)</i>	Absence of grids or layouts Asymmetry and overlapping elements Clashing, vibrant colors Distorted typography and text orientation Overcrowded or unbalanced compositions Rejection of traditional hierarchy in visual design	<p>The name and direction of the movement are not widely agreed upon. While many sources mention anti-design's 1960s origins few explore it in detail</p> <p>There is limited differentiation between anti-design's aesthetic and ideological aspects. Some sources view it purely as a stance against commercialization, while others incorporate a visual style as well.</p> <p>Anti-design's relationship with anti-capitalism is frequently implied but rarely analysed in depth.</p> <p>There is little exploration of anti-design's development over time or its adaptation across different design disciplines.</p> <p>Some electronic sources suggest that the Anti-design movement declined by the 1980s. (<i>e.g. Moffat 2011.</i>)</p>

Table 4 presents the visual characteristics identified in the case study of Ettore Sottsass discussed in Chapter 3.2. These characteristics were either explicitly referenced by Thomé (2017), exemplified in Sottsass' examined works, or observed in other frequently cited early examples (see Martinović 2025; Amin 2024; Moffat 2011; Waterfall College 2014).

Table 4. Summary of Anti-design traits and characteristics touched on during chapter 3.2 On Anti-design origins

Anti-design traits based on sections	Visual Characteristics	Other Characteristics
Early Anti-Design (Thomé 2017.)	<p>Bold color palettes – Bright, striking colors heighten the object’s visual impact.</p> <p>Intricate pattern work – Complex patterns or repetition reinforce their disruptive presence.</p> <p>Defined geometric forms – Strong, exaggerated shapes emphasize their sculptural and confrontational nature.</p> <p>Unexpected proportions – Oversized elements creating dominance within a space.</p> <p>Unconventional materials – Use of materials considered cheap or atypical, such as plastic, polyurethane or rubber. (Ceretti et al. N.d., Artemide 2025.)</p>	No strong relation to anti-capitalism or consumerism found Prioritization of experimentation over function

Table 5 outlines the characteristics identified in Chapter 3.3, *Anti-Design Now*. These traits were mentioned, referenced, or exemplified by a range of non-academic sources, including Moffat (2011), Martinović (2025), Waterfall College (2014), Miranda (n.d.), Jamieson (2016), Ajireloja (2023), Williams (2021), Din Studio (2024), among others.

Table 5. Summary of Anti-design traits and characteristics touched on during the content analysis of non-academic online sources

Anti-design traits based on sections	Visual Characteristics	Other Characteristics
<p>Non-academic sources and Anti-Design today</p>	<p>Striking bold or vibrant colors (Martinović 2025; Moffat 2011; Waterfall College 2014)</p> <p>Clashing colors (Din Studio 2024; Williams 2021)</p> <p>Excessive ornament and decoration (Martinović 2025; Waterfall College 2014)</p> <p>Unusual or unexpected forms (Martinović 2025; Waterfall College 2014)</p> <p>Distortion of scale (Waterfall College 2014)</p> <p>Mismatched elements (Martinović 2025; Din Studio 2024)</p> <p>Asymmetry (Brody 2018; Din Studio 2024)</p> <p>Chaotic typography (Din Studio 2024; Glover n.d.)</p> <p>Overlaid text and imagery (Din Studio 2024)</p> <p>Lack of grid structure (Din Studio 2024)</p>	<p>Prioritization of form over function (Martinović 2025; Moffat 2011; Williams 2021; Waterfall College 2014)</p> <p>Celebration of ‘bad taste’ (Williams 2021; Jamieson 2016; Ajirireloja 2023; Waterfall College 2014)</p> <p>Embrace of “chaos” (Brody 2018)</p> <p>Un-friendly user experience or lack of concern with accessibility (Amin 2024.)</p>

Through the case studies and supporting research, anti-design emerges not as a fixed methodology but as a flexible movement defined by a rebellion against—or

disregard for—established design principles, often referred to as "best practices" (Thomé 2017, 9–230). Rather than pursuing clarity, consistency, or user-friendliness, anti-design frequently embraces chaos, friction, ambiguity, or even hostility.

Analysis of video game examples—such as *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017), *The Beginner’s Guide* (2015), and *Cruelty Squad* (2021)—allowed for the identification of anti-design traits specific to the medium. These were derived with reference to and support from the characteristics established in earlier chapters. The full list of anti-design traits associated with video games discussed in this paper can be found in Table 6.

Table 6 presents the characteristics discussed in Chapter 4. Anti-design in Games. These traits were identified through analysis of specific titles, including *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017), *The Beginner’s Guide* (2015), and *Sexy Hiking* (2004), where they were referenced, exemplified, or intentionally employed.

Table 6. Summary of Anti-Design related traits discussed in chapter 4. Anti-design in games

Anti-design traits based on sections	Visual Characteristics	Other Characteristics
Anti-Design in Video Games	<p>Unconventional materials – such as pre-made assets, textures that typically feel out of place</p> <p>Clashing/Vibrant colors</p> <p>Excessive “ornamentation”</p> <p>Intricate pattern work</p>	<p>Un-friendly user experience or lack of concern with accessibility</p> <p>Disregard for audience expectations and conventional engagement</p> <p>Rejection of traditional game progression</p>

	<p>Defined geometric forms</p> <p>Unexpected proportions</p> <p>Use of kitsch and "bad taste" aesthetics</p> <p>Overlaid and crowded text and imagery</p> <p>Chaotic typography</p> <p>Deliberate use of low-resolution or low-fidelity aesthetics, often to create an indie/unprofessional aesthetic</p> <p>Non-cohesive, seemingly random visual elements, such as use of unexpected or floating objects in 3D space</p> <p>Lack of clarity in visual and spatial composition</p> <p>Surreal or impossible game worlds</p>	<p>Extreme difficulty that defies fairness or conventional pacing</p> <p>Prioritization of something other than function</p> <p>Subversion of established design principles</p> <p>Emphasis on form over function</p> <p>Emphasis on process over the product, similar to the approach of form over function</p> <p>Commentary on capitalism or consumerism</p> <p>Commentary on digital culture</p> <p>Incorporation of philosophical ideas or questions</p> <p>Deliberate friction in mechanics</p> <p>Non-standard player-game relationship</p> <p>Subversive use of sound design (e.g., minimal sound design or intentional silence)</p>
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Using *The Night Journey* and *Proteus* as key examples, it becomes evident that art games and anti-design can overlap, but do not fully align. While both reject traditional design principles, their underlying motivations differ. In art games, this rejection often serves an aesthetic or experiential goal—emphasizing emotional, poetic, or reflective qualities of play (Game Innovation Lab 2018; Rauch, E., n.d.; Verdon, G., n.d.; Petit 2015). Anti-design, by contrast, is more deliberately oppositional—aiming to challenge players, critique industry norms, highlight creator intent, or offer social commentary. While these categories may intersect, they represent distinct design philosophies: anti-design’s subversion is rooted in defiance, whereas art games often strive toward alternative forms of harmony.

Though there is no unified manifesto, the themes and traits compiled throughout this research offer a theoretical and visual framework for identifying anti-design in both games and other media (see Table 3). It is important to note that some traits may appear contradictory—this reflects the evolving nature of the movement, its wide range of interpretations, and occasional disagreements among sources. Rather than a strict rulebook, anti-design functions as a fluid set of tendencies that challenge dominant design norms from multiple directions.

6 CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted in this thesis, it can be confidently concluded that anti-design is indeed present in video games. The three case studies—*Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy*, *The Beginner’s Guide*, and *Cruelty Squad*—demonstrate varying degrees of alignment with anti-design traits previously outlined in this research. While the presence of these elements may be intentional or unintentional, their impact on player experience and game structure is notable. In particular, *Getting Over It* (2017) serves as a strong reference point; Foddy himself has expressed views that echo anti-design philosophy (Game Informer 2018), suggesting a deliberate engagement with design ideas that challenge conventional user experience norms.

In contrast, *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) and *Cruelty Squad* (2020) are not explicitly framed by their creators as anti-design works. Nevertheless, their structural choices, visual presentation, and willingness to disrupt player expectations align with the anti-design principles identified through both academic sources and online commentary. This indicates that even without clear intention, the ethos of anti-design can emerge organically—especially through experimental or subversive development processes.

The current state of video game design tends to favor polish, accessibility, and intuitive systems (Brown 2012; Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016). However, the popularity and cultural impact of games that disrupt these norms suggest a meaningful counter-current. Anti-design, whether intentional or emergent, offers a valuable space for critique, exploration, and alternative expression. Designers may not always aim to create “anti-design” games, but the presence of anti-design traits in their work indicates a growing openness to design experimentation from creators and audiences alike. These findings point to a need for broader conversations in the game development community about the creative potential of discomfort, friction, and subversion.

Finally, this research suggests wider theoretical implications for design culture and digital creativity. Player expectations are heavily influenced by industry norms (Brown 2012; Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF 2016), but anti-design introduces a compelling counter-narrative—one in which rebellion, absurdity, and intentional imperfection have a place. While this thesis did not fully explore the extreme edge of anti-design (such as cybergrunge.net or the deeper layers of *Cruelty Squad*), these cases hint at the untapped potential of anti-design in digital spaces. The flexibility of the digital medium allows for exaggerated, surreal, or grotesque expressions of anti-design that exceed what was possible in its original physical context. This opens up exciting opportunities for future research and creative exploration.

In sum, this thesis affirms the presence of anti-design within video games and contributes to the theoretical framing of this underexplored movement. By

identifying its visual and philosophical characteristics and applying them to interactive media, a deeper understanding can be gained of how games can challenge, disrupt, and expand the boundaries of design.

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Figure 17. Screenshot from The Beginner's Guide: showcasing overlapping text. The Beginner's Guide 2015. Video game. Vancouver: Everything Unlimited Ltd.

Figure 18. Comparison of Ammo counters on screen between Cruelty squad. Cruelty Squad. 2021. Video game. Helsinki: Consumer Softproducts. and Overwatch. Overwatch. 2016. Irvine: Blizzard Entertainment

Figure 19. Comparison of detection indicator between Cruelty Squad. Cruelty Squad. 2021. Video game. Helsinki: Consumer Softproducts. and Assassin's Creed Shadows. Assassin's Creed Shadows. 2025. Video game. Saint Mandé: Ubisoft.

Figure 20. Comparison of player health UI between Cruelty squad. Cruelty Squad. 2021. Video game. Helsinki: Consumer Softproducts. and Elder Scroll's V: Skyrim. GAME UI DATABASE. 2011. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. Web page. Available at: <https://www.gameuidatabase.com/gameData.php?id=287> [Accessed 05 April 2025].

Figure 21. Screenshot of Cruelty Squad. Cruelty Squad. 2021. Video game. Helsinki: Consumer Softproducts.

Figure 22. Examples of text styles in Cruelty Squad. Cruelty Squad. 2021. Video game. Helsinki: Consumer Softproducts.

Table 1. Sources used in the Theoretical review. Show casing the variety of papers examined in the conducted theoretical framework/review

Table 2. Summary of the anti-design findings in the Theoretical review. Displaying the results of the chapter

Table. 3. Summary of Anti-design traits and characteristics touched on during the Theoretical framework

Table 4. Summary of Anti-design traits and characteristics touched on during chapter 3.2 On Anti-design origins

Table 5. Summary of Anti-design traits and characteristics touched on during the content analysis of non-academic online sources

Table 6. Summary of Anti-Design related traits discussed in chapter X.X Anti-design in games

