

Destiny 2: Carefall: Analyzing Bungie's Lack of Care for its Players in the Lightfall Expansion

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction

On October 30th, 2023, news was released about a series of layoffs occurring at the video game company responsible for the popular online game *Destiny 2*, Bungie (Carpenter, 2023). These layoffs, however, were foreseeable, as they coincided with *Destiny 2*'s all-time low frequent player count during the year after the game's *Lightfall* expansion ("Destiny 2 Steam Charts," 2024). Such actions taken by players are typically known to arise in response to an increase in aggressive anti-consumer practices being implemented throughout a game that are, for the most part, detrimental to the player's enjoyment. This, according to the player base of *Destiny 2*, did in fact play a part in the recent discontent (Aztecross, 2023).

However, placing the blame fully on the aggressive anti-consumer methods can somewhat divert the responsibility for the game's failure towards the practices themselves. In these methods taking the brunt of the hit for the game's failure, Bungie is absolved from some of the anger that should be more correctly directed towards the company itself. This line of thinking, then, fails to examine the degree to which Bungie itself is responsible for the downfall of its game. Furthermore, it fails to properly analyze the correlations between Bungie's intentional decisions and the effects those decisions had on its consumers.

Bungie's loss of the *Destiny 2* player base and the subsequent need to lay off its staff comes as a result of the improper care provided by Bungie in aspects of attentiveness, responsibility, and competence to fit its consumers' desires. In this paper, I will analyze how exactly this occurred through the lens of care ethics, an ethical framework focused on the appropriate interactions between parties in relationships, evaluating to what degree Bungie was able to provide attentiveness to its consumers, take responsibility for its consumers' care, and how competent Bungie was at providing said care. I will draw on a series of statements directly

from Bungie regarding its approach to the development of *Destiny 2* along with posts on social media from consumers expressing their discontent regarding the state of the game in order to analyze Bungie's role in its failure to provide care in these three areas.

Literature Review

A large amount of research already exists analyzing why players grow frustrated with games and choose to abandon them. This research, however, tends to only focus on the aspects of anti-consumer methods that led to player discontent, and often fails to consider responsibility for the implementation of such methods within the games. Analyses then shape anti-consumer methods as the leading actors, causing the anti-consumer methods themselves to become the bearer of responsibility, not the company behind their implementation. These works do not consider any duty of care a game company implementing these methods has towards its player base.

In Predatory Monetisation? A Categorisation of Unfair, Misleading and Aggressive Monetisation Techniques in Digital Games from the Player Perspective, Elena Petrovskaya and David Zendle (2022) provide a detailed list of the effects that several different means of in-game monetization have on the consumer. Petrovskaya and Zendle (2022) found that a list of “35 monetisation issues were reported by players as being either misleading, unfair, or aggressive.” They then further categorize the unique issues found into eight sub-categories based on the aspects of the game they affect (p. 1068-1074). Many of these practices can be found strewn throughout *Destiny 2*. However, while Petrovskaya and Zendle (2022) notify us of the breadth of known issues present within the games industry, they primarily only consider player reactions to them and fail to take it further by qualifying the ethicality of both the practices being conducted and, more importantly, the ones conducting them.

Matthew McCaffrey (2019) provides an analysis of loot boxes, citing an instance with Electronic Arts' (EA) *Star Wars: Battlefront II* wherein EA's specific implementation of microtransactions led to a massive consumer backlash. This event resulted in an incident where "In response, EA and other companies have been revising their microtransaction systems or removing them altogether." While this analysis hints at the repercussions that EA as a company faced, the purpose of the article is primarily an analysis of the loot boxes themselves and the effect that they have on the legal regulations regarding them (p. 484-493). This, again, places all of the blame on loot boxes as an anti-consumer technique and fails to properly evaluate the responsibility that EA has as a game developer towards its consumers.

Research analyzing the unethicity of the anti-consumer methods game companies use is plentiful, but failing to analyze the responsibility of those who designed such methods to begin with allows for their continued implementation. In refusing to analyze the company's duty of care towards its consumers, we allow for its continued disregard of it. The rest of this paper will recognize Bungie's usage of anti-consumer methods in *Destiny 2* and then analyze these methods further through the use of a care ethics framework to consider Bungie's ability to abide by its duty of care towards its player base.

Conceptual Framework

My analysis of the actions of Bungie leading up to the massive drop in its player base draws on the ethical framework of care ethics. Care ethics, derived from the works of Carol Gilligan, is an ethical framework that "focuses attention on the living and experienced reality of people in which mutual relationships can be viewed from different perspectives" (van de Poel & Royakkers, 2011). Given any mutual relationship, there is an expected level of actions that each party is capable of taking in good ethical faith. An example of such being the interaction between

parent and child. It is acceptable for a child to act selfishly with their desires from their parent. But for the parent, given their inherent position as caregiver, it is an expectation of them that they partially relinquish their own similar desires to act selfishly in order to support said child.

What “care” is exactly defined as may seem somewhat ambiguous. Care can be looked at both through actions and as attitudes. The former may be defined as “all typically human activities that we carry out to maintain, continue, and repair our world, so that we can live in it as best as we can” (Tronto, 1998). The latter, then, defines a proper attitude as one that “involves compassion, attention, and being caring.” Furthermore, “Roles determine to what degree we can expect care from each other and they also determine whether we should take the other into account in our actions.” Thus, for any given relationship, it is necessary to identify the degree to which each party is responsible for their duty of care towards the other party. In the relationships of care ethics “The recognition of vulnerability and dependence play an important role, especially if the relationships are asymmetrical” (van de Poel & Royakkers, 2011). An asymmetrical relationship would be defined as any relationship wherein one party holds a position of power that limits that of the other party in some significant way, and in Bungie’s case, its relationship towards its player base is a significantly asymmetrical one in which Bungie holds most power over its consumers.

Care can then further be broken down into the individual stages of care of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and reception. Of these stages, only attentiveness, responsibility, and competence are used as a metric to evaluate the actions regarding the duty of care of a caregiver. Attentiveness refers to one’s ability to be “Able to perceive needs in self and others” and is used to recognize that a caregiver is aware of opportunities to care. Responsibility refers to one’s ability to “Assume responsibility to meet a need that has been identified” and is used to identify

whether a caregiver demonstrates the intent to care. Finally, competence refers to when “Individuals and organizations perform the necessary caring tasks” and is used to evaluate the degree to which a caregiver’s actions demonstrated care (Tronto, 1998).

Drawing on care ethics in the analysis that follows, I will examine the level at which Bungie contributes efforts towards abiding by the following three factors: Its attentiveness and awareness of the opportunities it had to demonstrate care to its community, the degree to which it took responsibility to care for its community, and, finally, its competence in attempting to practice successful care towards its community. In analyzing these factors, I will be able to determine whether or not Bungie attempted to abide by its expected duty of care towards its player base as the sole developer of *Destiny 2*.

Analysis

Bungie’s treatment of its consumers, as the company responsible for the development of *Destiny 2*, fails to abide by its expected duty of care through aspects such as its lack of dedication for its attentiveness towards its player base, its refusal to take responsibility for the development of a game that demonstrates it cares for its consumers’ standards, and its incompetence in its attempts to practice care towards its consumers. Bungie’s lack of commitment to such aspects of said duty of care is made evident through a variety of declarations made both by public company statements and multiple well-respected sources of external consumer feedback on social media. A failure to practice care in each of these aspects demonstrates extreme ignorance towards one’s role in a relationship of care. Not abiding by all three aspects as Bungie does demonstrates Bungie’s unethical callousness, according to care ethics, towards its expected duty of care for its player base. The following sub-sections each take

one of the three aforementioned stages of care and analyze Bungie's continuous failure to perform in accordance with a reasonable standard of care towards its consumers.

Attentiveness

Bungie's attentiveness towards its player base, despite initially being quite high, decreased with time resulting in harm towards its players. Attentiveness in the context of care ethics means to be "Able to perceive needs in self and others" (Tronto, 1998). In order to fully understand the context surrounding the *Destiny 2* community's backlash against Bungie, we need to first understand Bungie's monetization structure regarding *Destiny 2*. For the most part, the game generates money through three avenues: Annual expansions, seasonal expansions, and a cosmetic-only in game microtransaction store. Of these means of monetization, the annual expansions are the most successful at causing players to return to the game after hiatuses. This is evidenced by the Steam Charts of *Destiny 2* wherein large peaks can be seen approximately once per year ("Destiny 2 Steam Charts," 2024). This is primarily because the player base has come to expect the annual expansions to bring the largest amounts of playable expansion to the game, and this fact is typically true regarding the content delivered with each expansion. As *Destiny 2* is a game that functions as a live service, this recurring influx of players is what maintains the stability of the game's monetization scheme.

In June of 2020, *Destiny 2* Game Director, Luke Smith, and General Manager at the time, Mark Noseworthy, went live on Bungie's official YouTube channel to reveal the game's next expansion, *Destiny 2: Beyond Light*. After showing the initial reveal trailer for *Beyond Light*, the pair goes on to comment on Bungie's plans for future expansions, making the claim that after *Beyond Light*, *Destiny 2* was "Going to continue with the next major expansion, *The Witch Queen*, and *Lightfall* is going to drive this all to a moment" (Bungie, 2020). It could be

reasonably inferred from this reveal that Bungie initially planned *Lightfall* to be *Destiny 2*'s climax expansion wherein the story that had been built up for nearly the last decade would finally be concluded. This initial plan shows attentiveness for the consumer's desire to plan ahead for the game, allowing them to better predict the game's future along with the story's future. It was later revealed in a future announcement by Bungie just over half a year later that this announcement was premature, and that instead it was going to "Add an additional unannounced chapter after *Lightfall* to fully complete our first *Destiny* saga" (Destiny Dev Team, 2021). This additional expansion would later be known as *Destiny 2: The Final Shape*, and it, rather than *Lightfall*, would be where the story would be concluded.

The decision by Bungie to increase the number of annual expansions it would make until *Destiny 2*'s story concluded can be examined as an instance where Bungie failed to maintain its attentiveness towards its care for its player base. While the decision to increase the number of expansions is not seemingly a malicious one, it does bring about new actions between Bungie and its consumers that are inherently disadvantageous for the player base. For one, it demonstrates a lack of respect for the player base's time. One must understand that this time is not restricted to the time the player base spent playing the expansion, but rather it extends to the entire duration of the year that followed *Lightfall*. As the annual expansions are, by definition, annual releases, players would have to wait an extra year to experience the story they had desired to play in the first place. Secondly, from a monetary perspective, adding another full price (\$40) expansion shows a lack of care by Bungie for its customers' wallets. With Bungie's initial plan, players would not have had to pay the additional forty dollars just to finish the story that they had already dedicated so much of their own time towards. This additional expansion, to many, was recognized to be filler material that they initially believed to be a necessary barrier for the story

they actually desired to experience (Darth_Onaga, 2023). Adding an additional year to the game's lifespan, in effect ceasing to care for their player base's time and money, demonstrates that Bungie failed to respect the attentiveness present in its initial announcement.

I have just shown that the addition of the *Lightfall* expansion served as a barrier to players in aspects of both time and money, and thus demonstrates Bungie's lack of attentiveness to its player base. However, many would argue that the actions of Bungie in this instance would fit within its expected role in a relationship between a for-profit game development company and its consumers. A video game company should be able to produce and sell its product as it sees fit as it is the one that puts in the work to develop. But this concept is also dependent on the fact that the consumers buying the product feel as though what they bought was worth their money. In Bungie's case, the addition of this expansion would likely have been ethically fine despite the alterations to initial plans, but when *Lightfall* came out in early 2023, players began to make observations that suggested foul play. Specifically, players found it possible to combine the introductory and ending cutscenes together without feeling as though much story relevant context would be lost from it. This led to players feeling as though the entirety of the *Lightfall* expansion was simply "6+ hours just to end right back where we started" (Killomainiac, 2023). It would be one thing if the player base felt that *Lightfall* had brought something new to the table that completely revolutionized the story of the game, but players did not feel this way. Instead, they felt robbed of their time. They realized that the story was essentially unnecessary. This only further emphasizes Bungie's reduced attentiveness towards caring for its players. Had players known beforehand that *Lightfall*'s story was not necessary to understand the story's finale, they may have chosen to save their money in wait for the true conclusion of the story. And had

Lightfall not been received as poorly as it was, the time that players considered wasted simply would not have been considered so.

Responsibility

Bungie's actions and statements demonstrate an almost outright rejection of any sense of responsibility it had towards its player base. Responsibility in the context of care ethics means to "Assume responsibility to meet a need that has been identified" (Tronto, 1998). In a Game Developers Conference from 2022, *Destiny 2* Game Manager Justin Truman gave a talk regarding Bungie's experience in developing *Destiny 2*. Within this talk, Truman presents a few particular statements that, for the *Destiny 2* player base, seem to directly contradict with any duty of responsibility Bungie would have towards providing for its consumers.

There is a portion of Truman's talk that discusses Bungie's philosophy regarding the over delivery of content for a game. Truman makes the statement that "Over delivery is actually dangerous" for *Destiny 2*, going so far as to insinuate that Bungie has had to tell its employees that content that could be really cool for the game should not be shipped "Because it's an over delivery that is going to set us up for failure" (GDC, 2023). Truman's statement here serves as an insight into how Bungie decides what does and does not make it into each expansion for *Destiny 2*. However, what it also does is declare a sort of internal glass ceiling that holds the game back from reaching baseline levels of quality that the players may desire of it. If it is the case that there is a strict ceiling on over delivery, then the quality of each release is only possible to reach levels equal to or below that of Bungie's definition of expected deliveries. Regardless of how Bungie may actually qualify its standards of delivery, the publicization of this statement serves to insinuate to the player base that what they desire of the game will never likely be what Bungie delivers in the game.

At another point in his talk, Truman makes a statement analyzing player engagement and anger. Truman makes the claim that “Anger is not the opposite of loving a game. Anger is like two degrees off from loving a game, and they both come from passion.” He goes on to claim that “The opposite of loving a game — the thing that could kill [the game] — is apathy” (GDC, 2023). These quotes demonstrate a lack of care on Bungie’s part towards its players’ discontent, showing that it does not actually care if its players are angry, only if they do not care for the game. This shows a level of disconnect in Bungie’s thought process, turning genuine, feeling human beings playing the game into analytics for Bungie to evaluate independent of emotions. In terms of responsibility, these statements seem to be Bungie fully rejecting any sense of duty consumers may believe the company has. To Bungie, it is not its responsibility to produce an enjoyable game, only one that supports its monetary metrics.

Competence

Bungie’s increased microtransaction efforts failed to produce content up to the standards of care expected by its consumers. Competence in the context of care ethics means when “Individuals and organizations perform the necessary caring tasks” (Tronto, 1998). *Lightfall* released to much criticism, but one of the most pertinent pieces of criticism regarding the expansion relates to its story. In response to the state of the game post *Lightfall*, well-regarded Youtuber Aztecross (2023) posted a video addressing the presence of microtransactions within *Destiny 2*. In his video, he presents to the *Destiny 2* community a list of actions Bungie has taken regarding microtransactions that had progressively grown larger with each passing year.

Aztecross (2023) begins by stating that “Over the last several years, and increasingly this past year, we’ve seen a dramatic increase in monetization.” Aztecross (2023) then continues by providing a list of the monetization methods Bungie implemented that includes “Raising prices,

creating new avenues for spending, double dipping into the existing player base, and giving players blatant pay-to-win benefits.” Many of the practices presented in Aztecross’ (2023) list find a place in Petrovskaya and Zendle’s (2022) list of predatory monetization techniques (p. 1068-1074). With the release of this video, it became clear that many of the changes Bungie was implanting into *Destiny 2* were strictly based on monetary considerations. Bungie did not, with any of these actions, perform any task that sufficed its duty of care towards its player base. Rather, Bungie consistently opted to take actions that were expressly monetarily detrimental to its consumers.

Again, however, one might make the claim that such monetarily focused actions are acceptable for Bungie to make in order for *Destiny 2* to stay afloat. The issue with such a conclusion, however, is that it became growingly apparent that the money Bungie made from said microtransactions was likely not being prioritized for *Destiny 2* itself. Rather, the player base speculated that the money *Destiny 2* was producing was going to Bungie’s new game *Marathon*. Later in the video, Aztecross (2023) makes the claim that “Bungie abandoned *Destiny 2* PVP for their new PVP game. Not only that, but *Marathon* is also getting all the bells and whistles *Destiny* players have been asking for for a very long time.” In abandoning a significant portion of *Destiny 2* core gameplay in favor of a game that *Destiny 2* players did not necessarily ask for, Bungie failed to demonstrate care. Bungie refused to show even a base level of respect for its existing consumers, not even using their money to support the very thing that they had paid chosen to support. Therefore, Bungie was not competent in providing care for its players, choosing rather to outright harm them in many cases instead.

Conclusion

Bungie failed to care for its consumers in aspects of attentiveness, responsibility, and competence, and as a result lost a large portion of the *Destiny 2* player base forcing it to have to lay off a significant amount of its staff. In terms of attentiveness, Bungie was initially aware of a chance to care for its consumers, but over time came to ignore said chance, wasting player time and money. In terms of responsibility, Bungie acknowledged player discontent and desires, but rather than attempting to provide for it, chose instead to treat its players more like statistics than people. Finally, in terms of competence, Bungie chose to implement multiple forms of predatory monetization practices into *Destiny 2* while also effectively abandoning said game in favor of a game its players did not support. And as a result, we are able to see that it is not solely the anti-consumer practices that Bungie conducted that caused players to abandon *Destiny 2*, but rather its failure to care for its players in an acceptable way. In focusing on Bungie's lack of care, we place responsibility upon the company, and, in turn, we clarify the results that such a lack of care brings about for a company. Players of *Destiny 2* elected to stop supporting the game in a desperate attempt to bring about change. They chose to counter a lack of care with their own lack of care. Players became apathetic. Numbers dropped. Bungie lost money. And now Bungie reaps the consequences of its failure to care.

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