

# Imbalanced Pleasures? System Design and Social Rules in the Survivors-like Game *Megabonk*

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## Keywords

system design, game balance, social rules, bullet heaven, survivors-like, *Megabonk*

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### Introduction

This paper investigates system design from the perspective of game balance, social rules, and uncertainty, taking a closer look at the very popular indie survivors-like game *Megabonk* (Vedinad 2025). This game belongs to the subgenre of “bullet heaven” or “survivors-like” games; the latter term was coined based on the title *Vampire Survivors* (Poncle 2022), which popularized a specific variation of roguelite mechanics (Cartlidge, 2025). The main goal of bullet heaven games, and *Megabonk* in particular, is to survive as long as possible within a set time limit, traversing a three-dimensional environment and surviving increasingly fierce enemy attacks, as well as occasional boss encounters. Map layouts, periodically spawning upgrades, items and power-ups are largely dependent on unpredictability.

### Basic rationale

The system design in this study is assessed from the perspective claiming that “a system is a rhetorical construction for analysis and discussion” (Schreiber & Romero, 2021) within player communities. The analysis of social rules in *Megabonk* will focus on “communicating how a game should be played” (Stenros & Montola, 2024, 88) and on what is considered the “right way” (see Nguyen, 2019) to play a game. Even before the game’s release, *Megabonk*’s sole developer used social media channels to encourage players to share their “broken” builds and openly addressed game balance issues on their YouTube channel, stating that “basically, my game is about breaking the game.”<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this statement may resemble Brian Sutton-Smith’s view on the purpose of rules (Smith, 2001), and on the other hand, it also highlights the deliberate design efforts to account for common player practices in the game development process. Effective promotional materials and word-of-mouth marketing eventually attracted the attention of some of the most popular content creators and helped *Megabonk* achieve a steady growth of concurrent players in the weeks following its release. Thus, it can be argued that analyzing the *Megabonk*’s pre-launch

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development and communication from the system design perspective could provide valuable insights into the interconnectedness of social rules, online discourse about games and their intrinsic formal properties.

## Methods

The research presented in this study follows the premises of constructionist ludology, which considers games as “social institutions constituted by their rules” (Montola & Stenros, 15). Out of seven types of game balance listed by Schreiber & Romero (2022) in their influential book on the subject, this paper focuses on three: initial conditions, difficulty curve, and progression. In order to identify and analyze instances in which key factors affecting game balance manifest, *Megabonk* will be analyzed according to the “three temporal forms” (Johnson, 2019, 102) of unpredictability. Data related to these different types of unpredictability will be collected, particularly concerning the initial starting conditions (*randomness*), ongoing gameplay instances (*chance*), and the final outcome of the game (*luck*) (Johnson, 2019). These concepts, drawn from the work of Mark Johnson, may be modified to better suit the diverse performative challenges (see Costikyan, 2013) posed by the bullet heaven roguelike genre.

The results of the application of this framework will be used to compare factors such as item spawn rate, tiered progression systems, and temporality, with online data on socially constructed norms of play, including guides, streamed footage, and written accounts of gameplay in *Megabonk*. The hypothesis to be verified in this study is that the particular elements of game balance implemented in the analyzed game are perceived as more satisfying, pleasurable and simply fun and that the “right way” to engage with *Megabonk* has been deliberately constructed to address the (perceived) shortcomings of the current AAA game market culture.

## Contribution

In addition to presenting an in-depth case study of a surprising indie hit in the seemingly overly saturated survivor-like / bullet heaven roguelike subgenre, this paper wishes to contribute to the ongoing debate on fun and emergent playful experiences in games (Fizek, 2014) from the rarely explored perspective of system design and social rules. An analysis of the systemic underpinnings of a highly successful yet low-cost and simple indie game in the context of its socially constructed, rule-based frames of reference may also provide insight into the player-customer dynamics and the discussion of rules as “voluntary constraints and social contracts” (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017, 8), as well as rules as conditions associated with “playable artifacts” (Leino, 2012).

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/hDr3kCja6Sc>. Date of access: 01.12.2025.