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"Balatro Madness" Exploring Addictive Game Elements in Indie Hit Through Octalysis Framework and Flow Theory

Diah Mayang Sari[1], Palupi Argani[2], Randy Arya Mahardi[3]
[1,2,3] Visual Communication Design, Faculty of Art and Design Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia
Jl. Dr. Setiabudi No. 229, Isola, Sukasari, Bandung City, West Java 40154, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: This study explores the addictive elements of the hit indie game Balatro using the Octalysis Framework and Flow Theory. This study employed an explanatory mixed-method approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses. The questionnaire was answered by 59 players from the Balatro Game community on Facebook and Discord. Data were collected through a questionnaire structured based on the Octalysis Framework and the Flow model. The findings indicate that Balatro scored 66.78 out of 80 on the Octalysis scale, indicating strong addictive potential. The average Flow score was 28.5 out of 35, indicating high player engagement and an optimal FLOW state. Key addictive elements include: a balanced challenge-skill progression, objectives that adapt to players' skill levels, collecting Joker cards, unpredictable strategy combinations, and a collectible card system. These elements are effective because Balatro gradually increases in difficulty as players' skills increase, with eight Stake levels and an unlimited score cap (Naneinf). Players are rewarded with rare cards and encouraged to share achievements socially, which strengthens a sense of ownership and social influence. This research shows that the addictive mechanics in Balatro, developed by a single indie developer, can serve as a replicable model for designing educational and commercial games with high engagement potential.

KEYWORDS: Balatro Madness, addictive game, Octalysis framework, FLOW method, Indie.

INTRODUCTION

Balatro is an indie game developed by solo developer Localthunk on 20 February 2024. Balatro is a poker-themed Deck-Builder Roguelike game, but it has its own unique features. By August 2026, Balatro had sold 6.9 million copies, with 494.000 active players on Steam (PlayTracker, 2026). Balatro was nominated for Game of the Year in 2024. Balatro also won the 'Game of the Year' (GOTY) award at the 2025 Game Developers Choice Awards (Elderkin, 2025). Additionally, Balatro won several other awards at GDCA 2025, including Best Debut, Best Design, and Innovation Award.

The Balatro Madness phenomenon emerged in 2024 due to a combination of factors: the Steam annual discount, the influence of famous YouTuber Markiplier uploading a video of himself playing Balatro titled 'My New Crippling Addiction,' and Balatro being nominated for Game of the Year 2024. Many players shared their moments of addiction to the game on social media. Balatro's simple yet addictive gameplay innovation managed to gain 96% Overwhelmingly Positive rating on Steam.

As much acclaim as this game has received, what sets its structure apart from standard AAA games is that it relies solely on a polished game experience. Instead of relying on high graphical fidelity or a marketing team, giving impactful experience and satisfaction via a well-structured game loop to its players is what grants Balatro its fame. The roguelike genre features procedurally generated levels, permanent death (permadeath) that ends each run, and resource-constrained decision-making (Alvin, 2026). The roguelike genre has grown significantly in the indie gaming market due to its high game design flexibility, making it ideal for small teams or solo developers with limited resources (Behrens, 2025). As the sole developer, Localthunk's interpretation of the roguelike genre should be studied to enable developers in the education and commercial sectors to replicate it. As to how they achieved such success, we might be able to identify them by understanding how video game addiction works.

When discussing the main topic of addictive game elements exploration, an understanding of how a video game is structured first needs to be acquired before we proceed. According to Marc Prensky (2001), games are one of the most interesting ways to spend time in human history because they combine 12 elements: fun, play, rules, goals, interactivity, adaptability, outcomes and feedback, win states, conflict/competition/challenge/opposition, problem solving, interaction, and representation and story. When such a product can guarantee engagement, it means that it has successfully engineered the player's habit. Cognitive psychologists

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define habits as something that we unconsciously do, and a designer engineered our habit to rely on products and services that we use (Eyal & Hoover, 2014). It's the same for the game industry. It is the task of a game developer to guarantee players' motivation by tweaking those 12 elements, which, according to him, would then qualify a game as "engaging".

Engaging games may lead to video game addiction, which, based on the research conducted by Guan and Chen (2023) regarding video game addiction, is a term to describe a video game that dominates their own player. While video game addiction varies between different types of games, the research that they have conducted has been able to define the main causes of video game addiction: dopamine, operant conditioning, and feeling-state theory. Dopamine, or the biochemical receptor of the human brain, motivates the person to satisfy their own desire and to feel "rewarded". The brain easily secretes dopamine and ultimately supports video game addictions, with the entire game mechanism working around a constant "reward system". Games offer rewards that motivate players to continue playing, as well as playing games as a source of self-confidence and social recognition (Li, 2024). This "reward system" supports the second cause of video game addiction, which is operating conditions. Operating conditions work around punishments and reinforcements, which instinctively motivate players to keep repeating their gameplay walkthrough, to avoid as many punishments received and to be influenced by positive reinforcements as a reward. This biological response of satisfaction gained from both positive reinforcement and biochemical reaction then causes the trigger event of such a phenomenon called "feeling-state", which refers to the entire psycho-physiological arousal of a human connected to a particular positive memory. Another study by Razi and Putra (2020) on Hooked Model implementation on a mobile application suggests that when an experience cycle based solely on rewarding users' actions and long-term investment was implemented in software, it admittedly motivates user engagement and long-term user habits.

Player psychological manipulation in gaming wasn't new, as multiple studies have successfully proven that intentional game design decisions may also be involved to trigger the "feeling-state" phenomenon mentioned earlier. A study conducted by Prasad et al. (2020) focuses on understanding the main factor of addiction in mobile games specifically, to ultimately implement a general user flow framework to support addiction in educational video games. Based on their findings, mobile game addiction is primarily driven by the player's flow state, where player skill matches difficulty, and intentional game design that encourages habitual play. Another study by Liu and Jiang (Liu and Jang, 2021) focuses on the detriment of game addiction to teenagers and the causes of game addiction, and suggests that game addiction that was affecting its users was mainly driven by intentional game design mechanisms, such as instant reward systems, competitive rankings, and variable feedback. This structurally crafted core game design allows users to keep engaged in each part of the game, ultimately resulting in entering flow state. Another study was done by Sachu et al. (2024) on an in-depth analysis of online game design elements through the player's engagement. The results of this study indicate that players with low levels of addiction are fully engaged in aspects of video game design such as immersion, game mechanics, motivation, and social interaction. Understanding the impact of design elements on game addiction can provide players with information to reduce game addiction. Last, a study by Vieira et al. (2019) on heuristic evaluation of usability of educational games suggests that educational games and software were required to go through heuristic procedures to engineer user experience on their products. It also reveals that at least one rule of thumb meets the usability evaluation and can be used in the development of educational software: Game User Experience Satisfaction Scale (GUESS).

By looking at previous discussions, video game addiction may also take part in this Balatro obsession phenomenon. The usage of positive reinforcements was proven to be the leading cause of Balatro's addictive gameplay in a study conducted by Raki´c and Stoll (2025) on a deeper look into the usage of "juice" in Balatro. They define the "juice" as the "game feel", or the abundant feedback to a player's action. They discovered that the concept of the player's feeling state in Balatro is being satisfied strictly via visual and auditory feedback from such positive reinforcements. But to dig further into determining this phenomenon, this research is conducted to study Balatro's core mechanics through the Octalysis Framework and Flow Theory, to determine whether or not it was intentionally designed to be addictive to its players.

Our objective is to understand why Balatro games are so appealing that they have sparked the "Balatro Gila" phenomenon. One way to analyse these elements is by using the gamification framework and FLOW theory. This chapter will present the foundation of this research, including all theories used and previous studies related to the current discussion. Not only using the combined Octalysis and Flow Theory framework, to be able to study the addictive elements in Balatro, but we must first understand the concept in its entirety.

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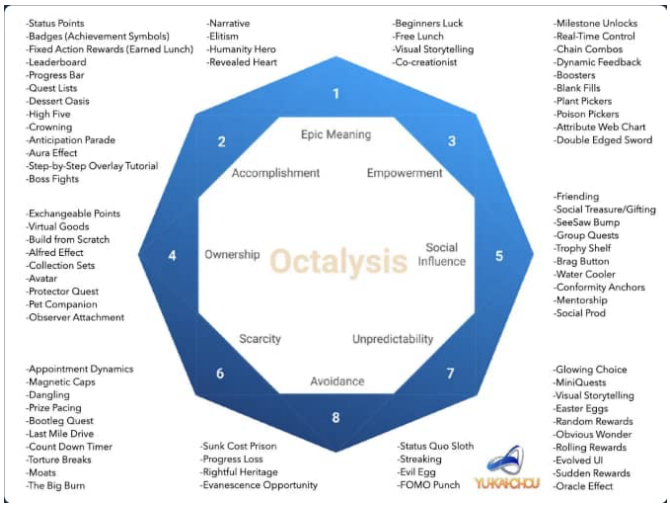

Fig 1. The Octalysis Framework for Gamification & Behavioural Design by Yu-Kai Chou

Figure 1 shows the Octalysis Framework. The Octalysis Framework is a framework created by Yu-Kai Chou (2015) that emphasises "Human-Focused Design", which optimises human motivation and engagement in a system. This framework was primarily created for gamification design. The Octalysis Framework consists of 8 Core Drives represented by an octagon shape, including: 1) Epic Meaning and Calling, where players believe they are chosen to do something; 2) Development & Accomplishment, which is the internal drive to make progress, develop skills, and overcome challenges. 3) Empowerment of creativity and feedback, where players are involved in the creative process, repeatedly trying to solve problems and experimenting with different combinations. 4) Ownership and possession, where players are motivated because they feel they own something. 5) Social Influence & Relatedness, which combines all the social elements that can motivate people, such as guidance, acceptance, friendship, competition, and envy. 6) Scarcity and Impatience, which is the drive to obtain something because it is difficult to acquire. 7) Unpredictability and Curiosity, which is the drive to know what will happen next. 8) Loss and Avoidance, which is the drive to avoid something negative from happening. An important element to note in Octalysis is that the Core Drives at the top of the Octagon are considered positive motivators, while the Core Drives at the bottom are considered negative motivators.

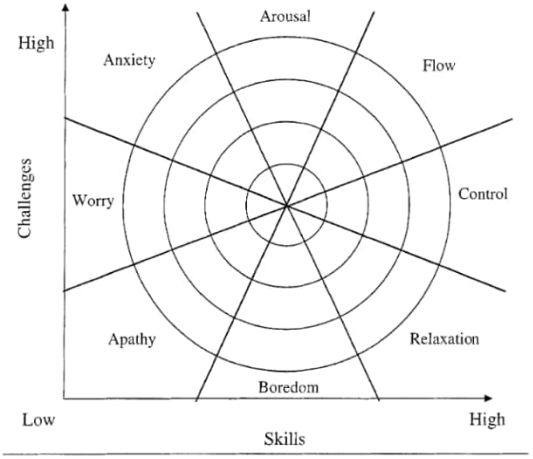

Fig 2. The Octalysis Framework for Gamification & Behavioural Design by Yu-Kai Chou

Figure 2 shows Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's new Flow model. The flow state model illustrates the relationship between skill and challenge in individual gaming experiences. The flow state is experienced when both challenge and skill are above the average player's level. The individual is deeply engaged in the activity, full of energy, fully immersed, and deriving pleasure from it. If the

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player's skill is high and the challenge is low, the player will feel apathy and boredom. Conversely, if the player's skills are low and the challenges are high, the player will feel anxiety and worry.

Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory focuses on the state of optimal experience, where a person is so focused on an activity that nothing else feels important. In game design, achieving the Flow state is crucial for player engagement. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), enjoyment has major components, namely: tasks with reasonable completion opportunities, Clear objectives, Immediate feedback, Deep engagement that eliminates daily frustration and anxiety, a sense of control over our actions, no self-focus, and a change in the concept of time, where hours feel like minutes and minutes feel like hours.

When paired with gaming activity, flow state shows significant improvement due to its nature. A study conducted by Gao and Lu (2021) on the influence of flow in entertainment activities suggests that video games scored significantly higher in terms of flow conditions than other activities such as TV shows, due to immersive experiences that require manual engagement from its user, such as clear goals and a balance between challenge and skills. According to Acland (2020), in his findings in an investigation of Flow Theory in online games, "In brief, Flow Theory postulates that the relationship between an individual's current skill level at whatever activity they are engaged in relative to their average skill in that activity and the challenge the individual is currently facing".

Previous studies have examined game addiction from psychological and behavioural perspectives. However, limited studies have challenged such theories towards a simpler, roguelike format such as Balatro. Hence, this article was made with the sole purpose of identifying the main factors that cause players to enjoy and continuously play the Balatro game, as well as to determine whether or not Balatro players experience the FLOW (Optimised Enjoyment) condition. The addictive elements in this indie game are expected to be replicated by other developers who wish to develop their games independently. This study employed a mixed-method approach as the research methods, combining both quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses collected from the same questionnaire as its research instrument, while developed using both the Octalysis Framework and the Flow Method as its rhetorical foundation. The novelty of this research lies in the fact that no previous studies have combined the Octalysis Framework and the Flow Method to identify addictive elements in games. Additionally, no previous research has been conducted on the addictive elements in the Balatro game.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used was a mixed quantitative and qualitative method. The questionnaire was distributed to the Balatro Indonesia group on Facebook. The demographics of the participants were aged 18-35 years, with a total of 59 participants. The questionnaire questions were developed based on the Octalysis and FLOW Method frameworks. The Core Drive components of the Octalysis Framework consist of eight main core drives, each with two sub-drives. Based on the Octalysis Framework, 16 questions representing each Core Drive were developed to gather data on the primary motivations driving players to continue playing the Balatro game. The participants were then guided to do self-assessments by evaluating all seven characteristics of FLOW state as suggested by Csikszentmihalyi's FLOW Theory. This includes: A challenging activity that requires skills, Clear goals, feedback, Concentration on the task at hand, A sense of control, Loss of self-consciousness, and Transformation of time. Participants were asked to weigh the intensity of each experience on a form of likert scale. In addition to quantitative data, the findings were reinforced by short essay-style responses addressing the elements that make players addicted to playing the Balatro game.

RESULTS

The research, intended to challenge both the Octalysis framework and FLOW Method theory towards addictive game elements that drive players' engagement on Balatro, has yielded positive results. With the participation of 59 Balatro players with varied demographics. While the gender sector is dominated by males at 88.1%, followed by female participants with 11.9%, the age range has a more dynamic distribution. The single largest group is 22-year-olds, who make up about 15% of all participants. There is also a noticeable secondary spike in the late teens, with 17- to 18-year-olds accounting for roughly 12% of the group. Beyond these two main peaks, the remaining responses are spread out in smaller, relatively even clusters across the mid-twenties and early thirties. Ultimately, the data clearly shows that the core audience leans heavily toward late teens and young adults in their early twenties.

And to test the consistency of this observation, a section of qualitative questions confirms that participants have varied starting dates, ranging from an hour up to knowing the game since the day it was released. Additionally, players report their playtime sessions on average of one hour, as well as extended periods lasting between four and nine hours. Most mentioned that their play sessions

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were adapted into their lifestyles, mostly to not interrupt their employment status and daily routines. With this, all the participants of this survey may simulate the main demographic of Balatro. First, they were asked to go through a self-assessment on their experience, referencing the Octalysis Framework for each question. It has resulted in favor of the hypothesis that Balatro is driving player engagement through its own game elements.

Table 1. Octalysis Framework-Based Scoring Result

No.	*Core Drives*	*Average Likert Score*
1.	Epic Meaning	3.75
2.	Calling	4.64
3.	Accomplishment	4.66
4.	Development	4.36
5.	Empowerment of Creativity	4.53
6.	Feedback	4.25
7.	Ownership	4.20
8.	Possession	4.39
9.	Social Influence	3.22
10.	Relatedness	3.47
11.	Scarcity	4.12
12.	Impatience	4.37
13.	Unpredictability	4.47
14.	Curiosity	4.46
15.	Loss	4.14
16.	Avoidance	3.75
Total Score		66.78

[a.]Interpretation
64-80 = The game is highly addictive
48-64 = The addictive element is quite strong
<48 = Not really addictive

Table 2. Flow Theory-Based Scoring Result

No.	*Core Drives*	*Average Likert Score*
1.	4.32	4.32
2.	4.07	4.07
3.	3.75	3.75
4.	3.88	3.88
5.	4.41	4.41
6.	4.22	4.22
7.	3.86	3.86
Total Score		28.5

[b.]Interpretation
24-35 = The game is very capable of bringing players to a state of FLOW.
18-24 = The game is quite capable of bringing players to a state of FLOW.
<18 = The game is unable to bring players to a state of FLOW.

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DISCUSSION

It has been proven that Balatro's success in creating addictive game elements is inevitable. Based on the data alone, the questionnaire participants claimed that they had experienced addiction in Balatro by letting themselves do self-assessment through the Octalysis Framework. And not only that, but which elements from the game "Balatro" that enhance the addicting effect may also be identified.

The highest Likert score value of the Octalysis Framework analysis shows which key elements Balatro excels at in terms of keeping the player engaged. The majority of participants agreed that Balatro had the highest impact when experiencing accomplishment and calling, shown by average Likert scores of 4.66 and 4.64 from the questionnaire, respectively. This supported the core design philosophy of the roguelike game genre, where it is intentionally designed to let the player experience internal progression and slowly develop skills to overcome each challenge given. In Balatro, this design philosophy was translated as the gradually scaling challenges, such as blinds and stakes. The "blinds" in Balatro refer to randomly chosen score goals and challenges that must be beaten by the player each level, whereas the "stakes" act as the run modifiers that can be stacked cumulatively to increase difficulty and replayability. These systems, which guaranteed different conditions each time, grant replayability, challenging players to beat each layer of it through self-development of understanding the game mechanics and composing better strategy, which ultimately grants accomplishment in beating the run.

Fig 3. Deck and Stake Selection Menu

To look at how addictiveness was driven through Octalysis Framework onto Balatro players, we also must discuss one key element of Balatro's core philosophy, which is randomization via deck-building mechanics. Replayability doesn't come from implementing secondary features, but instead is intentionally implemented from the core mechanic itself (Behren, 2025). Each run was guaranteed to be different from each other, with the existence of special cards. Players hit a score not only by dealing poker hands, but also by modifying those scores with joker, tarot, and planet cards, all of which can be bought from the in-game shop that can be visited between rounds. Joker cards act as the score modifiers by providing score bonuses and multipliers when the provided requirements are met. Tarot cards act as active cards that can be played mid-game to gain instantaneous benefits. Lastly, planet cards are cards that can be bought to increase the score given by specific poker hand combinations. These three special types of cards grant players a sandbox, testing the limits of their creativity in picking the best combination to beat each round. This aligns well with the core concept of randomness, thus driving player engagement through the core drives of "Empowerment of Creativity" and "Unpredictability" (Both scored at 4.53 and 4.47, respectively). Furthermore, this also encourages players to be curious (As defined by the core drive "Curiosity", scored at 4.46), curious about new special cards that they could encounter and how to utilize them well.

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Fig 4. The Shop in Balatro

There are also supporting core drives that follow the main addicting elements of Balatro. For instance, Octalysis core drives "Scarcity" and "Impatience" (both scored at 4.12 and 4.37 respectively) can be shown by how this game cannot be beaten in a single run. Players gradually build up their knowledge and resources. This process is not instantaneous and is intentionally designed to keep players engaged due to their impatience. Another thing that built into the core mechanic of the game is the player's ability to manage their own possession (as defined by Core Drive "Possession", "Development", and "Ownership" which scored "4.39", "4.36", and "4.20" respectively), from previously-explained special cards and currencies that can be gained and can be managed during their play session, which transforms a standard 52-card game into a more personalized playstyle. Lastly, the concept of "Loss" (scored "4.14" on the data) is highly embedded into the core concept of roguelike itself, as failing to beat the winning condition would lead to deletion of all the player's progress. The threat of losing an incredible run itself would put each run at stake, and enhance the player's engagement towards the game. All the mentioned elements above then got enhanced by the feedback given from audio and visual aspects (i.e., burning visual effects, cashing-out sound, etc.), which is explained by the concept of Core Drive "Feedback" (scored at 4.25 on the data).

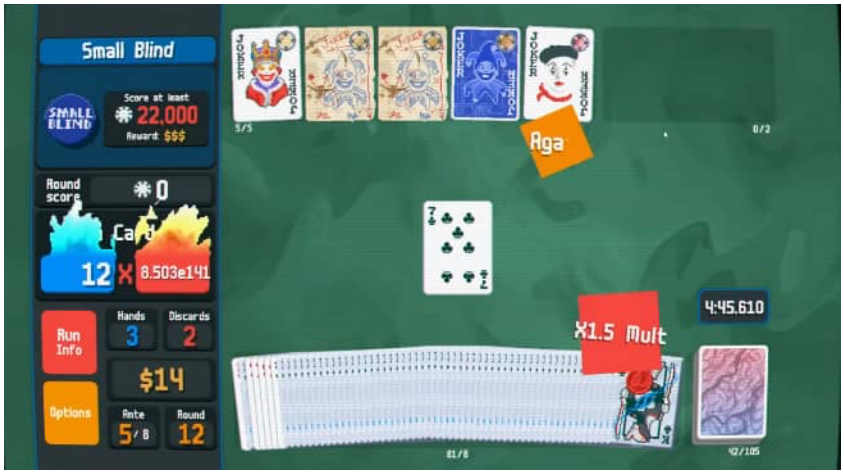

Fig 5. Feedback Shown by Visual Elements

Lastly, to discuss the least supporting drivers of addictive game elements, the drivers with the least connection to the core philosophy of Balatro can be identified. As Balatro was made as a single-player roguelike game that focuses on gameplay itself, core drives such as "Epic Meaning" and "Avoidance" (Both scored at 3.75) would have less impact on the players, since the game wasn't meant to be enjoyed narratively and each part must be faced subsequently. Whereas social-related Core Drives like "Relatedness" and "Social Influence" (Both scored at 3.47 and 3.22) failed to be the main element of engagement, since both Core Drives happened externally outside of this single-player game.

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To dive further into the topic of addictive game elements, the same respondent was then given the chance to self-assess whether or not they experience flow state during their gameplay. This would then confirm the previously determined elements of addictive game elements actually let the player go into flow state.

With the interpretation of the score exceeding the threshold, this study confirms the existence of addictive game elements within the game Balatro, enhancing players' engagement intentionally throughout the core mechanics, and ultimately letting them experience the FLOW state. Although the values between each flow characteristic vary, depending on their correlation with the Balatro game loop experience. The highest average score values, such as player control (4.41), clear goals (4.22), transformation of time (4.32), and Concentration on the Task at Hand (4.07), almost aligned with the core design of Balatro's game mechanic, to keep concentrated in solving each challenge. Whereas FLOW components of Loss of Self-Consciousness (3.88) and Feedback (3.86) act as a subjective experience, with their Likert score scaling has a more varied values. Last, the lowest score came from the component "Balance between skills and challenge" (3.75), which contradicts the designed mechanic of randomization embedded into Balatro.

These claims were also supported by another section of a qualitative questionnaire to describe their experience in written form. In summary, there are four main factors that motivated them to keep getting engaged. First, the concept of a high score kept the respondent feeling challenged. Multiple responses mentioned the urge to chase the maximum high score that can be reached in Balatro, "Naneinf", which is an abbreviation of NaN (Not a Number), e (exponent), and inf (infinite). That leads to the second factor, in which these players are challenged to explore and optimize their strategy with their collected deck and cards. Next, they mentioned the gradually elevating difficulty introduced in the concept of "stake" and "blinds" mentioned earlier. They mentioned the urge to explore and unlock all content offered in Balatro. Lastly, beyond these competitive goals, they treat this game as a reliable source of entertainment. It's an effective way to fill free time due to its structure of short playtime on each round, letting the player feel free to quit and continue any time.

The last question form given to the participants brings up the main reason for Balatro addiction that they've had, in which most mentioned the core mechanics themselves that felt expressive and challenging their creativity. They appraised the combination of deckbuilding and roguelike aspects of this game as something that was worth exploring. Not only that, the visual and audio aspects of this game have been credited for successfully giving satisfying feedback to its players, as if they were being stimulatingly rewarded for making a good play. Externally, they felt that Balatro is easy to access, with no internet connection required and demanding a small performance cost.

CONCLUSION

This research on analyzing addictive game elements in the indie game "Balatro" was conducted due to the phenomenon of its explosion of popularity, shown by high sales count and its nomination as Game of the Year in The Game Awards 2025. By this phenomenon alone, multiple literature reviews were conducted and resulted in a conclusion that Balatro may have intentionally designed its structure to apply the video game addiction theory. This study then successfully proved the existence of intentional game design to drive player engagement that would lead to addiction and a flow state. By using the Octalysis Framework, this research has succeeded in identifying which game components contribute the most to driving the player's desire to continue playing, and can be generally categorized based on whether or not it was aligned with the core principles of roguelike games. This was then proven by the high occurrence of FLOW state experienced by the players. This study was concluded with the hope that aspiring game developers may use this result as a replicable game model to be able to produce commercial or educational games with high engagement potential. A suggested approach is to also implement heuristics to approach such a goal, like one suggested by Vieira et al. (2019) with the Game User Experience Satisfaction Scale (GUESS), that meets the usability evaluation needs of educational software, or one suggested by Desurvire and Wiberg [6] with PLAY or the Heuristics of Playability.

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