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**Master's Thesis in New Media & Digital Culture  
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***Sky: Children of the Light* – the capitalization  
of compassion**

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## Abstract

*Sky: Children of the Light* is a game from Thatgamecompany that focuses its design on promoting higher values such as compassion and cooperation among players while basing itself on the free to play revenue model. The choice of the revenue model stands in opposition to the previous releases from this developer, but also calls into question how a system known for its self-serving, consumerism-oriented practices plays into the ideas of compassion that the game strives to represent and reinforce. The main point of this research is to answer the question of whether the underlying revenue model of the game *Sky: Children of the Light* comes at a cost to the “meaningful experience” of compassion represented by the text of the game, and how it does that. The research is performed through a textual analysis of in game elements such as the narrative, world design, character representation, interactivity, social mechanics, reward system and microtransactions. The findings show that while the game’s narrative, world design and social mechanics work in favor of guiding players towards cooperative actions and facilitate positive feelings of compassion, the underlying system of cosmetics-based rewards and slow progression tied to microtransactions overshadow the feelings of compassion in later stages of the game, instead conflating the meaning of compassionate actions with in-game currency and detaching them from any emotional involvement of the players.

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## Introduction

Online multiplayer games can bring amazing experiences of social support, teamwork and camaraderie between players striving to achieve a common goal, however, the online aspect of it has also become recognized for exposing people to negative, and “toxic” behaviors of other players.<sup>1</sup> Be it through negative comments, trolling or cheating, an online game by its design connects different types of people and can often put them at risk of having a ruined evening instead of relaxing and socializing with fellow gamers. Acknowledging this phenomenon, the game producers from Thatgamecompany decided to go against this status quo and designed an online multiplayer game of their own. *Sky: Children of the Light* focuses on promoting compassion within the socializing aspects of the game and emphasizing shared experiences.<sup>2</sup> Even more so, the developers made this move in a direction of free to play games, lifting the monetary entry threshold through replacing it with a freemium model.

According to Jenova Chen, the game’s creative director, “At its core, *Sky* is a game about compassion and generosity.<sup>3</sup> It’s about connecting people and nudging them to do good for each other. It tries to evoke the bright side of humanity over the dark or the gray in an online game.”<sup>4</sup> The relaxing and captivating theme of the game builds on the characteristic to this developer artistic and immersive approach to representing the game world, expanding it with a plethora of new functions. As the game aims to take the players to the sky in an atmosphere of shared values of unity, positivity, and compassion, the developers state the intention of goodwill and solidarity with the players which is very compelling and implies the presence of higher values driving the design of this game. However, the use of the infamous freemium model as its base and the introduction of microtransactions seem to stand in stark contrast not only to the previous releases from this developer, but they also raise questions of how a game striving to go against online toxicity and promote compassion can be combined with the revenue model known for its self-serving practices. While the narrative and social mechanics can promote compassion, if the game’s compassionate meaning is distorted by commodifying mechanisms tied to its revenue model, it may achieve the exact opposite results than what the game designers indicate and risk turning compassion into yet another in-game currency.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole A. Beres, Julian Frommel, Elizabeth Reid, Regan L. Mandryk, and Madison Klarkowski, "Don't You Know That You're Toxic: Normalization of Toxicity in Online Gaming," *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 1-15. 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “Behind the Design: Sky: Children of the Light,” Developer, Apple, last modified July 17, 2020, <https://developer.apple.com/news/?id=zm47it7t>.

<sup>3</sup> Apple, “Behind the Design,” 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Apple, “Behind the Design,” 2020.

*Sky: Children of Light* is the first freemium mobile game coming from video game developer Thatgamecompany, the makers of critically acclaimed and awarded games, *Flow* released in 2006, *Flower* (2009), and by far their most notable game *Journey* (2012). *Sky* is in many ways similar to its famous precursor *Journey*, which according to Mikhail Aristov was designed to create a meaningful experience of friendship and cooperation between players in a multiplayer landscape that is often characterized by meanness and competition between players.<sup>5</sup> *Journey* provided a cooperative, two player experience between randomly selected players, which was fully detached from any textual forms of communication, was using gender and age neutral avatars and rather used cooperative level design to provide a sense of shared experience of the gameplay with another person.

The game designers emphasized the distinctive qualities of *Sky* by drawing attention to compassionate interactions that are offered within the game's mechanics. This particular approach to the emphasis of game rules as the creators of meaning connects to what Johan Huizinga referred to as "magic circle" in his famous *Homo Ludens*, in which he describes the act of play as an activity that presents an alternative reality for the players, operating on rules different from what we know from our daily lives.<sup>6</sup> Huizinga argues that: "The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."<sup>7</sup> The actions done within the magic circle have a performative character and once within it, the player is not affected by daily issues, power struggles or real-world social status. Instead, the magic circle is in a sense a sacred ritual within the designated space and time, where different rules apply that require certain types of actions to fulfill a predetermined goal, which in the case of *Sky* would mean being compassionate to other players to contribute to the shared experience of the cloudy realms.

Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig De Peuter point out in *Games of Empire*, that Huizinga was also aware of a gap within this sacred circle of play, namely its close connection to the power struggles of the political entities of their times, reaching as far as the feudal system and establishment of supremacy of chivalrous elite through the use of jousts.<sup>8</sup> According to Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, "virtual games are deeply embedded within global capital" as they are inherently economic and political within their production chains and distribution in the

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<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Aristov, "Journey and the Semiotics of Meaningful Play," (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens* (Routledge, 1980), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Dyer-Witthford, Greig De Peuter, *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 34.

global markets.<sup>9</sup> This means that to fully grasp and analyse video games it is crucial to see them as an element of a larger net of agents and decisions embedded within the sociopolitical and economic structures that they originate from. The modern production of video games is backed by hierarchical structures of production chains, distributors, international platforms, and copyright laws behind each game. All these agents need to be paid and the presence of a revenue model that makes the game sustainable on the market is necessary and does not inherently imply the greed of its producers, but the way of its implementation is a matter of choice, and it differs between games. In the case of freemium model, invasive monetization of in-game mechanics has the potential of influencing the reception of the meaning represented by the game. Because of this, video games nowadays also cannot be fully analysed without positioning them within the social, political, and economical contexts of their historical time of emergence, particularly in cases like *Sky*, where the meanings and rules established by a compassion-oriented gameplay are juxtaposed with the commodifying mechanics and rules of its underlying revenue model.

In *Sky* players become the children of light, assisting each other in fighting the shadows and carrying their flames across the realms. However idyllic this vision sounds, its execution within *Sky* does not come without its drawbacks particularly in a way that the meaning of compassion can be altered by the underlying revenue model and the additional rules and mechanics originating from it. The effects of the freemium mechanics would depend on their implementation, for example they could enhance the compassionate experience by allowing sharing the premium aspects with other players or conversely, replacing interactions between players with microtransactions could lead to not only trivializing the cooperative aspect of the game but also contradicting the meaning of the values that the game's narrative attempts to represent. The freemium model is primarily focused on commodification and monetary gain through the ability of skipping in-game actions with money or purchasing fancy customizations, which represents values that seem to be at odds with the narrative of compassion, as it can position money as a valid alternative to progress or a replacement to compassionate actions and social interactions with other players.

In this paper, I will perform a textual analysis of the game *Sky: Children of the Light*, outlining how the game constructs the narrative of compassion and how it accounts for it within its interactivity and social mechanics as per Clara Fernandez-Vara's book *Introduction to game analysis*. Her process focuses on analyzing the game through playing it and deconstructing it into building blocks of the design, representations, and rules that the game establishes which are important elements in analyzing in how the game represents its meaning

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<sup>9</sup> Dyer-Witthford, De Peuter, Peuter *Games of Empire*, 34.

on the surface. However, within my analysis I also wish to include aspects tied to the game's revenue model. To outline the various levels of meaning, be it explicitly stated by the game, implied or symptomatic of its revenue model, I will concentrate on the four layers of meaning as outlined by David Bordwell.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, I will focus on different levels of how the game represents compassion and how, in turn, the game positions the compassionate actions of players within its revenue model. I will analyse the referential, explicit, and implicit levels within the storytelling and interactive layers of the game and connect them to how these meanings coexist with the underlying symptomatic meaning of the dubious processes in the consumerism oriented freemium revenue model. The distinction between different layers of meaning is important, as the overtly stated meaning of compassionate actions can be affected or even go against the meanings brought by the underlying the revenue model, such as ways of progressing in the game or gaining in-game currency.<sup>11</sup>

In the first part of the thesis, I will outline the present academic discourse surrounding the idea of compassion within video games as well as discuss the freemium model in connection to its time of origin, the era of information capitalism and its way of commodifying culture. I will also discuss the aspects of how games can bolster ideologies, enforce control, and train the players to promote desired behaviors. This will allow me to reflect on the potential opportunities and influence that compassionate narratives and design can have on promoting compassion among players. In the second chapter, I will describe the methodology I will be using when performing my analysis of *Sky* as well as address the different steps that need to be taken within the analysis. The following chapter will focus on an analysis of the game to answer the three outlined sub questions. The first part of the analysis will be concerned with identification of the way the narrative of the game's tutorial, world building, and character representation introduce the rhetoric of compassion and cooperation between players. The second part will focus on the application of compassion within the levels of interactivity as well as the implementation of the microtransactions within the existing mechanics and processes of the game, and how they combine with the meanings represented by the text of the game. In the last section of the thesis, I will summarize my findings and provide outlooks for future research.

My aim is to relate the game to the existing academic discourse and theories on compassion, information capitalism and the ideological function of video games to distill how the game incorporates the idea of compassion within its design, ruleset, and how it combines

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<sup>10</sup> David Bordwell, *Making meaning: Inference and rhetoric in the interpretation of cinema*, Vol. 7 (Harvard University Press, 1991), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Bordwell, *Making meaning*, 9.

it with its revenue model. I will use these theories as an investigative lens to answer the question:

Does the game's *Sky: Children of the Light* underlying revenue model come at a cost to the "meaningful experience" of compassion represented by the text of the game, and if so, how?

To answer my inquiry, I will address the following sub questions:

1. How does the game *Sky: Children of the Light* use its world design, storytelling, and character representation to portray compassion and incentivize it among players? These elements provide an insight into how the game introduces and represents compassion on the narrative level and how the world design pushes players to consider other players as an important part of their journey.
2. How are the elements of compassion accounted for within the level of interactivity among players, communication, rewards, and player's agency within the game? These elements outline how the game facilitates the communication and social connections among players, to what extent players are encouraged to be compassionate to one another and in what way these behaviors are rewarded.
3. How does the game implement and justify the use of microtransactions within the gameplay?  
Since the game uses a system of microtransactions connecting to monetary values that are non-diegetic to the game world, it is important to distinguish how the game introduces them to the players and what effect they can have for the gaming experience and the overall meaning of the narrative and player's actions.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Compassion in multiplayer games**

It is important to outline what is understood by compassion, given its definition is often blurred with other terms, such as kindness, empathy etc. In the article "Developing and Empathy Spectrum for Games," Jerrett et al., position compassion as the top of their empathy spectrum, drawing lines between other terms that are often used interchangeably like sympathy or empathy, they define it as "Compassion, as actioned empathy, is similar to parallel empathy when considering affect theory: the affect will initially be dictated by the practitioner's empathetic response. However, as compassion aims to help, the end result of compassionate



action would likely be a positive affect like joy.”<sup>12</sup> By this definition, compassion does not only concentrate on being attuned to the suffering of others but rather is accompanied with an action that aims to assist them and turn it into a positive outcome. This distinction is important also for the analysis of *Sky*, as to identify the compassion aspect within the game the crucial part is not only the way the game tells stories that could incite empathetic emotions among the players but also how the empathy can be translated into compassionate actions within the game.

Compassion is categorized by Ortony et al. as a “sorry-for” emotion, which reflects the persons displeasure about something they presume to be undesirable for someone else, varying in intensity based on whether they would find it undesirable for oneself, undesirable for the other person, the degree to which the person did not deserve it, and the degree to which the other person is liked.<sup>13</sup> This means that the closer the ties are between the people, the stronger the feeling of compassion can be experienced. Facilitating and maintaining close connections within a video game can allow for a higher impact of the experienced emotions and be more influential on how the players act towards each other. According to Isbister, game designers oversee setting up situations that cause actions and impulses from the players creating emotional and social situations that they want players to experience with each other, some taking an active ethical stance to promote certain social situations and behaviors that reflect their values.<sup>14</sup> *Sky*'s designers claim to be taking that approach by trying to cultivate compassion within the game, so the design of the levels and possibilities of social interactions that the game offers require conscious decisions on how to facilitate these goals. Already within the core principle of *Sky* players are not made to fight each other and rather follow the same journey and encounter the same obstacles, which has the potential of allowing them to relate to each other's struggles and work together in achieving a common goal but the compassionate aspect lies primarily in the social interactions and how they are designed to happen.

Video games can be designed to provide their players with various emotions like empathy, anger, or pity, invoke emotional responses that differ for players based on their personal experiences as well as experiences gained throughout the gameplay.<sup>15</sup> According to Jerrett et al., in recent years the discourse surrounding compassion and cooperative gameplay has resulted in a focus on values-driven design and in consequence the development of

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Jerrett, Peter Howell, and Neil Dansey, "Developing an empathy spectrum for games," *Games and Culture* 16, no. 6 (2021): 639.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins, *The cognitive structure of emotions* (Cambridge university press, 1990), 93.

<sup>14</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Jerrett, Howell, and Dansey, "Empathy spectrum," 641.

different frameworks in which human values can be implemented into video games.<sup>16</sup> Katherine Isbister in *How games move us: Emotion by design* argues that within multiplayer games, when people play and overcome challenges together it transforms the act of play “from a private, personal journey into real social interaction.”<sup>17</sup> Multiplayer games allow for communication within the game through different gestures or reactions to events on screen or one another. As Isbister puts it, “These choices also set the emotional tone by delimiting which actions are possible. Simple, comical avatars with controls that make physical antics and comedic interaction easy help lead players into a friendly and silly shared emotional experience as they work together.”<sup>18</sup> Social functions draw player’s attention to their own role within the team and how it affects the gameplay of other players leading to meaningful social interactions. *Sky* allows for communication with other players, be it by using in-game notes, sets of gestures which translate the emotions that players feel despite the physical distance. The game designers choose how to facilitate social connections through selecting which elements they wish to include within the communication to set the tone for the in-game interactions and invoke desired emotions, such as leading another player by the hand as a sign of compassion.

## Capitalization and freemium

Freemium games make for majority of income coming from mobile app stores and are becoming at this point a widespread practice in gameplay design. The model of the gameplay is tailored to incentivize the players to pay to be able to fully experience the initially free service. This affects the gameplay, where playing the freemium games provides a different type of experience than paid games and there are many analyses of the business model of freemium games and how they capitalize on their player bases.

Elisabeth Evans discusses how the freemium games capitalize on the impatience of the players. As she describes, the freemium games design play as consisting of short bursts of gameplay that reward certain predetermined behaviors and enforce glass ceilings which can be omitted with microtransactions.<sup>19</sup> The model intentionally positions players between

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<sup>16</sup> Jerrett, Howell, and Dansey, "Empathy spectrum," 636.

<sup>17</sup> Katherine Isbister, *How games move us: Emotion by design* (Mit Press, 2016), 52.

<sup>18</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth Evans, "The Economics of Free: Freemium Games, Branding and the Impatience Economy," *Convergence* 22, no. 6 (December 2016): 563-80.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856514567052>.

the choice of spending a lot of money on a free game or committing hours of grinding various tasks to fully access and experience all that the game has to offer, favoring spending money as an easy fix for fast progress. By its design freemium goes against the idea of compassion that *Sky* claims to stand behind, as its revenue model positions real-world currency as a way of skipping the grind that lead to progress in games, which in the case of *Sky* would be devaluing the compassionate actions towards other players.

Montag et al, position social media and freemium design within psychologically addictive mechanisms that in combination with each other aim to prolong the usage time of the apps.<sup>20</sup> This point expands on Evans' claim by providing a wider, long-term perspective on the usage time of the apps. They are made to be used in short bursts and be addictive enough to incentivize players returning regularly to the app while keeping the gameplay intentionally slow to be able to induce impatience and monetize the promise of faster progress. Furthermore, Gainsbury et al, approach the freemium design from the angle of their design being much akin to casinos, as they aim to blur the difference between spending real money through implementing in-game casino chips-like currencies, which uphold the freemium system. The free access guarantees expansion to new players and capitalizes on the ones that spend their money in game to fund the experience for the free players, all this while bringing large profits to the game producers.<sup>21</sup> *Sky* also shows signs of this strategy offering not one but five different currencies within the game, with one of them being directly purchasable for real money. These authors among others describe the mechanisms behind the freemium system and discuss its potential implications on the players and the market. In relation to this contextual positioning of the freemium model, it is then important to analyse how the meaning of practices associated with this type of consumerism-based revenue model can affect or contradict meanings represented by the text of *Sky*, a game attempting to reclaim the freemium multiplayer genre by reinforcing positive values such as unity and generosity and compassion among players.

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Montag, Bernd Lachmann, Marc Herrlich, and Katharina Zweig, "Addictive features of social media/messenger platforms and freemium games against the background of psychological and economic theories," *International journal of environmental research and public health* 16, no. 14 (2019): 2612.

<sup>21</sup> Sally, M. Gainsbury, Daniel L. King, Alex MT Russell, and Paul Delfabbro. "Who pays to play freemium games? The profiles and motivations of players who make purchases within social casino games." *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 5, no. 2 (2016): 221-230.

## Information capitalism and hyperreality

Given the time of emergence of *Sky* as well as its revenue model, the game can be considered as reflective of the era of information capitalism which is, as Kline et al, argue, a political economy system that supersedes the era of industrial capitalism.<sup>22</sup> While industrial capitalism was characteristic of being based on profit, commodification, wage labor, commercial media and consumerism, information capitalism builds on these values and combines them with the dramatically increasing speed of technological innovation, marketing, and commodification of culture.<sup>23</sup> This system embraces digital technology, globalization and postmodern culture that tends to blur the separation between virtuality and reality.<sup>24</sup> As per Kline et al, “Everything is surface and nothing depth.”<sup>25</sup> In a world in which every commodity is marketed as essential to one’s fulfillment, the needs imposed on people are ephemeral and ultimately virtual. By their design the products are never to be fully satisfactory as the fulfillment they promise becomes outdated as quickly as when the new next big thing hits the shelves, deeming each previous generation as lacking or inferior to the new standards. Online video games like *Sky* follow this logic, constantly updating their contents, with new seasonal objects, holiday skins, better and cooler looking equipment that render the previous generations obsolete. This theory provides an important angle within the analysis of video games, since much like other products of their time, video games aim to always surpass its predecessors and competitors, but also use this mechanic of constant improvement to impose the constant chase after the new things onto the players. Be it through new features, upgraded graphics, bigger game worlds, the new additions have the potential of both contributing to the gaming experience or detracting from its meaning.

This is where the concept of “hyperreality” comes into play. As Kline et al point out, within this information capitalist postmodern world, reality becomes disconnected from its real-world grounding values presented by history, needs, social roles and rationality.<sup>26</sup> “Reality disintegrates into an ever-shifting, recursive, and cross-referencing kaleidoscope world of lifestyles, language games, and entertainment. Identities and meaning are ceaselessly subverted by the apprehension – corrosively nihilistic or whimsical and playful – not so much that nothing is as it seems as that seeming is all there is.”<sup>27</sup> This detachment from reality can

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing* (McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2003), 61.

<sup>23</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 69.

be further explained with Jean Baudrillard's writings on the effects of the omnipresence of electronic media confusing our ability to distinguish reality from fiction.<sup>28</sup> Freemium games make conscious use of this relation also through the mechanics of converting real world currency into in-game currencies, the more currencies and conversions take place, the harder it is for players to assess the real-world value of the objects in the game to the point where what seems valuable, actually becomes valuable to the players. This theory can help with analyzing how *Sky* embeds the dominant ideologies surrounding it, how it implements a variety of purchasable customizations, add-ons to the in-game avatars and how it uses them for representing the player's own virtual social status.

## Games and control

Video games offer virtual worlds with many possibilities for players to behave and interact with them, but their design relies not only on creating new possibilities but also enforcing rules and limitations on the players. Matt Garite in "The Ideology of Interactivity (or Video Games and Taylorization of Leisure)" discusses that the general structure of video games is made to "play the player" from the angle of interactive narratives. As he points out, games are designed to provide an illusion of freedom and control over the experience, while exposing the players to routine, self-replicating commands and instructions that manipulate the players between the roles of a participant and a spectator and discipline them rather than fulfilling the promise of freedom.<sup>29</sup> The gameplay of *Sky* as the title suggests takes place in the sky, which is an open unobstructed area bringing to mind an idea of freedom of movement and direction of our actions, however, much like other video games, *Sky's* gameplay depends on these designated pathways and expected behaviors of players to function. Similarly, as Alexander Galloway explains, the new computerized systems are moving away from centralized hierarchical bureaucracies towards wide networks of self-governing social actors making it so that movement within the designated pathways is free but still remains controlled.<sup>30</sup> As Garite argues, video games train the players by repeatedly demanding, punishing, or rewarding inputs based on a designated set of rules.<sup>31</sup> The ruleset of *Sky* like other video games aims to effectively execute control and teach the players new values based on which they evaluate

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<sup>28</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Matt Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity (or Video Games and Taylorization of Leisure)," *DiGRA Conference*, 2003, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, "Essays on Algorithmic Culture," (2006), 87.

<sup>31</sup> Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity", 2.

their own behavior, and despite the promise of freedom and control over their in-game character's actions, the players are disciplined to perform their designated interactive and socializing tasks within the encoded in-game environment. This disciplining quality of video games can be used twofold, on one hand the game designers can use the guise of freedom to inconspicuously exhibit control over players and capitalize on them, but they are also able to train willful players new, positive values and behaviors such as compassion.

A way of restricting player freedom and enforcing discipline that Garite discusses is repetitiveness within games, often referred to as gameplay loops, which are sets of instructions that guide the way the 'free movement' can be used productively. However, Garite expands on it by bringing to the discussion the aspect of manipulation through changing the position of the player throughout the gameplay, for example through switching between the interactive aspects and cut scenes. These two aspects of implied free interactivity and enforced inactivity impose on the player identification with the in-game character (or in Althusser's terms 'interpellation') in which they position the player as both controlling an avatar within a set of designated instructions and identify with them within the cut-scene actions that are outside of their control, putting them in position of the subjects of the embodied ideology.<sup>32</sup> Given that games have a way of making the players relate to their in-game character in as much as to accept the ideologies that they represent, has then a potential of positive or negative use of control depending on the ideology embedded within the game and the meanings understood by the player.

Garite also connects these processes to the concept of auto surveillance, which draws from Michel Foucault's idea of panopticism, that is a disciplinary mechanism that enforces its subjects to monitor their own behavior based on the omnipresence of the disciplinary mechanisms of power.<sup>33</sup> The sets of rules within games are upheld by testing mechanisms that reward or punish certain behaviors. While the players subject themselves freely to this system to engage in entertainment, these same mechanisms can be used to train the individual and to alter their behavior and to become 'productive' to the system, after which the individual performs the surveillance on themselves without any further outside input as he becomes both the subject of ideology and its executor. A video game like *Sky*, which focuses on positive interactions and compassion between players according to this theory has the potential to train players to positively perceive others, get rid of the need to compete with them and be more inclined to perform compassionate actions in game and, by extension, in their daily life.

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<sup>32</sup> Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity", 5.

<sup>33</sup> Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity", 10.

## Research method

To answer the question of how the freemium revenue model affects the meaning of compassion in the game *Sky: The Children of the Light*, I will perform a textual analysis of the game's most recent release, at the time of writing, version 0.16.5 on iOS. I will base my analysis on the guidelines outlined by Clara Fernandez-Vara in *Introduction to game analysis*.<sup>34</sup> Since her method of analysis focuses primarily on the building blocks of games, I need to expand it by combining it with different levels of meaning that include the application of the freemium revenue model within the game design. To do so, within my analysis I will include David Bordwell's theory on four types of meanings as described in *Making meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* which will allow me to analyse the overtly stated meanings as well as the underlying meanings in the game. Bordwell's book focuses in on making meaning of films, and his theory can be used to associate meanings to the different levels of the text. This allows for identifying and interpretation of contradictions between the repressed meanings and the explicit or implicit ones, unmasking the underlying ideologies within the text and the revenue model.<sup>35</sup> Bordwell identifies four levels of meaning: the referential meaning, that is meaning derived from their own knowledge of existing representational conventions, causality, and concrete pieces of information provided in the text; the explicit meaning denoting the more abstract and conceptual understanding of the meanings that are indicated by the text itself; the implicit meaning such as the identification of themes, issues or questions posed by the text; and the symptomatic meaning, which can be disguised or even stand in contrast to the other three types, it's a meaning reflective of the underlying of a social, political or ideological processes.<sup>36</sup> In the case of *Sky* the symptomatic meaning I will discuss will relate to how the underlying revenue freemium revenue model and the game's implementation of microtransactions establish their own meaning in relation to the compassionate narrative and actions that the game represents. I will interpret the game not as a text in a vacuum, but rather as an object imbued within its origin ideology of information capitalism and reflect on its interactive functions from the angle of systems training behaviors and designing the compassionate interactions between the players.

I will use this framework to identify the various levels of meanings in my textual analysis of *Sky: Children of the Light* based on my own experiences of playing the game, exploring of all seven realms available within the game, participating in the interactive and social activities

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<sup>34</sup> Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to game analysis* (Routledge, 2019), 87.

<sup>35</sup> Bordwell, *Making meaning*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Bordwell, *Making meaning*, 9.

available along the gameplay and completing a large portion of the freely available challenges that grant access to the main unlockable items, worlds, customization, etc.

To answer the question of how the game uses its world design, storytelling, and character representation to portray compassion within the freemium model I will analyse how the game represents compassion within its referential, explicit, and implicit meanings represented by the in-game world through its tutorials, storytelling cut scenes and the control the game world has over the role of the player within the game world. I will also focus on the directly purchasable options available in the game shop beyond the gameplay, particularly, how the game implements its microtransactions and justifies their presence.

The second part of my analysis will be concerning the level of interactivity among players and player agency within the game. I will analyse how the game design sets up interactivity within the quests in-game world, in what way it allows for communication between the players, how it facilitates and rewards their cooperation, while noting microtransactions play into it. I will discuss how the symptomatic level of meaning within the game's implementation of the revenue model and reward system relates to the meanings of compassion represented by the other levels of meaning.

## **Analysis**

*Sky: Children of the Light* is a mobile multiplayer game that is often compared to its predecessor released in 2012 on Playstation 3 *Journey*, which is a critically acclaimed game that has accumulated many awards: BAFTA 2013 Games Award for Best Game Design and Artistic Achievement, Annie Awards 2013 for Best Animated Video Game or Game Developers Choice Awards for the Game of the Year 2013 among others. It goes without saying then that there is a high bar of what is expected of *Sky* when it comes to living up to the previous achievements of Thatgamecompany. Much like its predecessors, *Sky* puts a heavy emphasis on the shared experience of the atmosphere in traversed realms combined with storytelling based on artistic portrayals of the environment and civilizations living within it. The narrative positions the player as a "child of light", with their main goal to search for fallen stars that represent ancestral spirits carrying memories of the peaceful society living in the sky realms. While it can be played solo, the gameplay consists of the players flying across the cloudy spaces to search for these fallen stars while socializing with other players and cooperatively solving puzzles. Game's developers emphasize the aspect of compassion which is reflected



within its design through enhanced possibilities for cooperation within a variety of in-game mechanics, for example, connecting with others by “sharing a flame” with them, holding the other player by the hand when solving puzzles, being able to request assistance from other players when stuck, and with the help of others, gaining access to areas that are otherwise locked away. *Sky* aims to immerse players within a world that is based on compassion and cooperation, distinguishing it as a much different experience from other multiplayer games and as a getaway from their daily experiences. However, unlike the previous releases from Thatgamecompany, the game introduces a lot of changes to the way it involves the players within the game, focusing them not only on the exploration of the world and cooperation as a means to an end but also fostering compassion towards one another, and this exact focus on compassion and the way it is executed in combination with the freemium model lies at the heart of this analysis.

## **Game world, the player and spending money**

### Compassion and the game world

*Sky*'s tutorial begins by explaining the backstory of the world, presenting the players with a cut scene which explains that all stars were once united, the people of the world lived in harmony and created a prosperous, awakened civilization that later became covered by darkness, causing the stars to fall and the light to fade away from the world. Since then, a long time has passed and now the awaited player has appeared to bring their own light and return spirits to the stars. The referential meaning of this introduction positions the player as a savior of the sky realm, and they are given a candle with which they can bring their light across the dark world and bring it back to its bright glory. The implicit themes that establish the setting of the world reference the values of unity and progress achieved by collective effort and compassionate actions towards one another as values that allow the shared world to thrive.

On the explicit level of *Sky*, compassion and cooperation can be seen in many stories of ancestral spirits, they create ships help each other reunite with their loved ones around the floating islands, they work together in building their cities and help each other carry heavy objects. As Jerrett et al. point out, compassion consists of both the aspect of empathy for others as well as a helpful action that follows it.<sup>37</sup> The narrative of *Sky* relies on compassionate

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<sup>37</sup> Jerrett, Howell, and Dansey, "Empathy spectrum," 639.

actions that arise from many parties working together to build a better world and helping each other to easier achieve goals that would otherwise be very difficult for an individual. As Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter point out, video games are embedded within the sociopolitical and economic structures among which they arise.<sup>38</sup> Connecting the themes outlined within the referential and explicit meanings of *Sky's* narrative with the modern society can provide a wider outlook on the references drawn to the current sociopolitical situation and what implicit meaning of these connections can be derived. The fast progression of cooperation and unity of efforts can be associated with the historical industrial era. Kline et al point out that the industrial capitalism was primarily focused on values such as profit, commodification, wage labor, commercial media, and consumerism.<sup>39</sup> The initial introduction of machines within workforce amplified the potential profits for the companies by allowing for creating objects on a much larger scale than ever before, this also made items such as cars much more available to a wider group of people, driving their costs down and allowing people from different social classes to afford them. Much like within the game, the cooperative effort was rewarded within the wider society, freeing up their time and, allowing for connecting people with each other and faster progress of society.

However, much like industrial era became superseded by the era of information capitalism, the dark side follows this evolution also in *Sky*, the thriving world becomes surrounded by darkness and the light that oversees the prosperity of the society starts to diminish.<sup>40</sup> The origins of the darkness are not explained explicitly in *Sky's* story but its effects are implied in the cut scenes at beginning of the game as well as the representation within the design of the world at the later stages of the game. As the game continues, from the colorful, idyllic Daylight Prairie the design of the world maps becomes progressively darker and more dangerous, it is filled with corrupted water that damages the players, fast winds that toss shrapnel at the character, and dark creatures that oversee the corrupted regions attacking on sight. On the implicit level, the theme of darkness and destruction can be connected to the idea of cooperative efforts of workforce in building up the civilization becoming corrupt and lost in the pressuring focus on profit and production, that effectively damages the environment and brings living in its society into desperate times that are devoid of compassion and focused primarily on gain for themselves rather than building up the collective. Within the referential level of meaning there are no specific villains or enemies that need to be tackled, rather the game states that after light followed dark times which turned the sky realms into a desolate space. This points out the contrast between light and dark and values they represent, the

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<sup>38</sup> Dyer-Witthford, De Peuter, Peuter *Games of Empire*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witthford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witthford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 61.

game positions light as an explicit representation of compassion and unity, and the darkness implies its opposite side, indifference, and division.

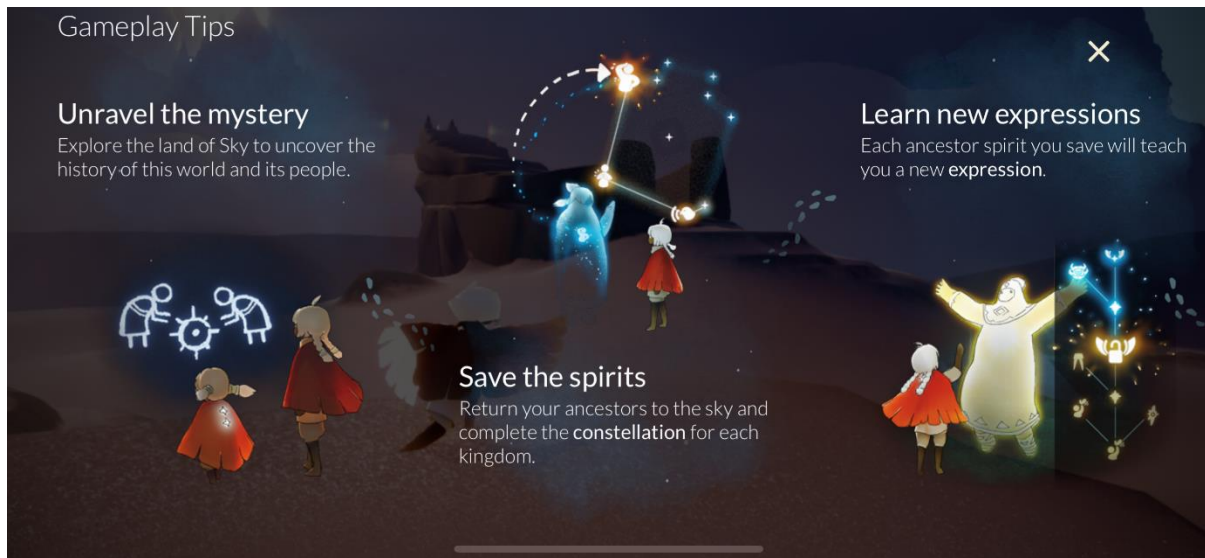


Figure 1. Gameplay Tips screen part 1.

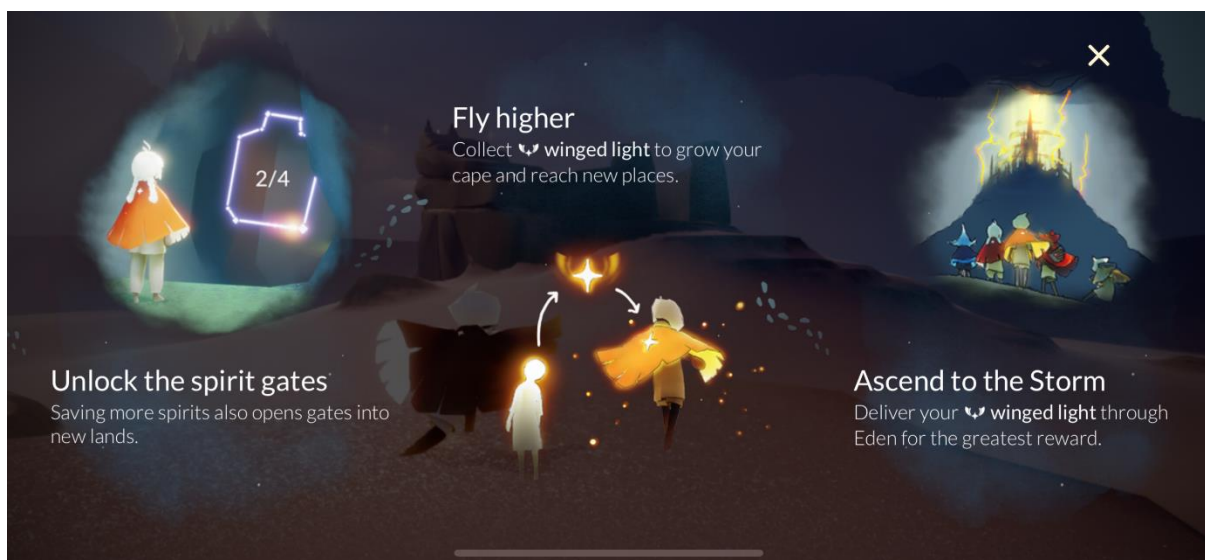


Figure 2. Gameplay Tips screen part 2.

The main purpose of the player in the game world is to explore the various maps and aid ancestral spirits scattered throughout them and the world design explicitly encourages in depth, cooperative exploration. With many pathways straying away from the main road and some of the available spirits are hidden behind doors, the game requires having collected a certain number of spirits already or need cooperation from other players to access locked gates. The figures 1 and 2 portray the gameplay tips shown to the players describing the core gameplay and reward mechanics. The design of the activities within the game is very much in

line with Garite's argument on games providing the illusion of freedom and instead presenting players with routine actions and self-replicating commands that the gameplay primarily consists of.<sup>41</sup> *Sky's* gameplay design explicitly encourages running around the maps, flying between clouds, and using the cape to access higher areas and being compassionate towards the NPC-spirits by saving them through lighting their dark statues. The position of lost spirits is not indicated anywhere, thus missing one spirit to unlock a spirit gate can end up with an hour of searching for it throughout the already discovered territories. This intentionally confusing world design on an implicit level suggests that thorough exploration is highly rewarded which disciplines players to perform, in Garite's terms, auto surveillance, training them to continuously stay on top of how diligently they are searching throughout the world for spirits that need help and guiding them towards interactions with other players who may know the map better.<sup>42</sup> The game provides a mechanic that facilitates exploring together with the option to request assistance and be guided by the hand by other players. As Isbister puts it, the actions made possible in game establish a certain emotional tone, which in the case of guiding players by the hand, rather than pointing them where they need to go, creates a feeling of connection and compassion between the players.<sup>43</sup> The world design establishes a ruleset in which to be productive to the system, the players will often have to return to the already completed stages and cooperate with other players, if they wish to unlock all the available areas. The design of the game guides players into cooperating with each other and the interaction of hand holding portrays an emotional response between players, training them to be compassionate to one another as it is beneficial to their own progression in the game and invokes positive feelings.

## Compassion and currencies

Although the gameplay and narrative of *Sky* position the players as the force fighting the shadow and make them side with the cooperative and compassionate forces, the game's revenue model provides it with another level of symptomatic meaning that seems to contradict the compassionate and unifying actions with a commodifying approach to the in-game interactions. The game features five different types of currencies which are introduced to the players at the beginning of the game. After accessing the in-game shop and pressing on a

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<sup>41</sup> Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity", 2.

<sup>42</sup> Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity", 10.

<sup>43</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 52.

question mark a short overview of the currencies is explained within the figure 3, “Currency Tips” screen.

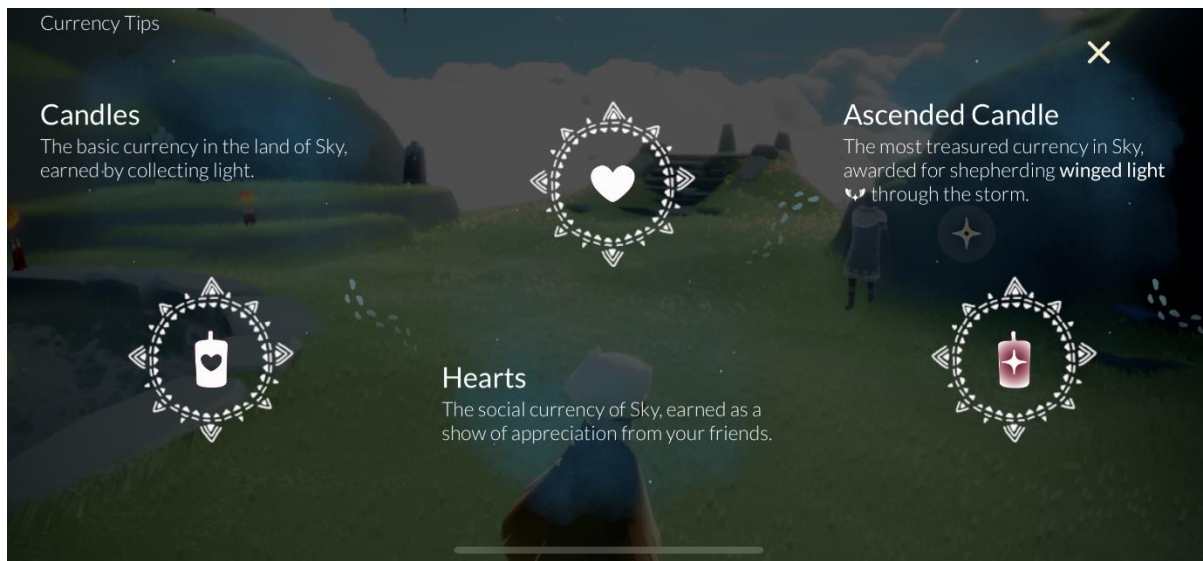


Figure 3. Currency Tips screen part 1.

The most common currency attained throughout the game are candles, which are gained through collecting wax by lighting up red candles scattered around the map, exchanging light with other players, completing daily quests and burning dark spots. Candles are the only purchasable currency with real money, but they can be converted into hearts. Hearts are a social currency used to unlock most of the cosmetics within the game. Most of them relate to compassionate actions with other players such as receiving them as gift from the in-game friend or earning likes on helpful notes left throughout the map. The use of the heart symbol on the implicit level suggests feelings of love or closeness with others and positions them as a reward for positive and compassionate interactions between players.

However, hearts can also be purchased within spirit trees for candles and since candles can be purchased with real money, the mechanic of exchanging money for social, compassion-based currency particularly stands out. When encountering other players within the game, at first, everyone looks the same, as dark, bald gender-neutral silhouettes wearing simple capes. The game provides a way of using the candle to share light with them, making the characters colorful and showing their customized in-game characters to each other, while rewarding both players with a small number of points which can be turned in for additional candles. The symptomatic meaning of the way the revenue model is embedded in *Sky* is reminiscent of what Kline et al. discuss as information capitalism and hyperreality, with the characteristic increasingly fast progression and focus on getting new goods that in effect draws a wide gap between the traditional values of cooperation and grounds itself primarily in

widespread commodification.<sup>44</sup> The hearts allow for unlocking cosmetics for the in-game avatar and the game mainly reflects the player progression by unlocking various spirit trees with in-game currency.

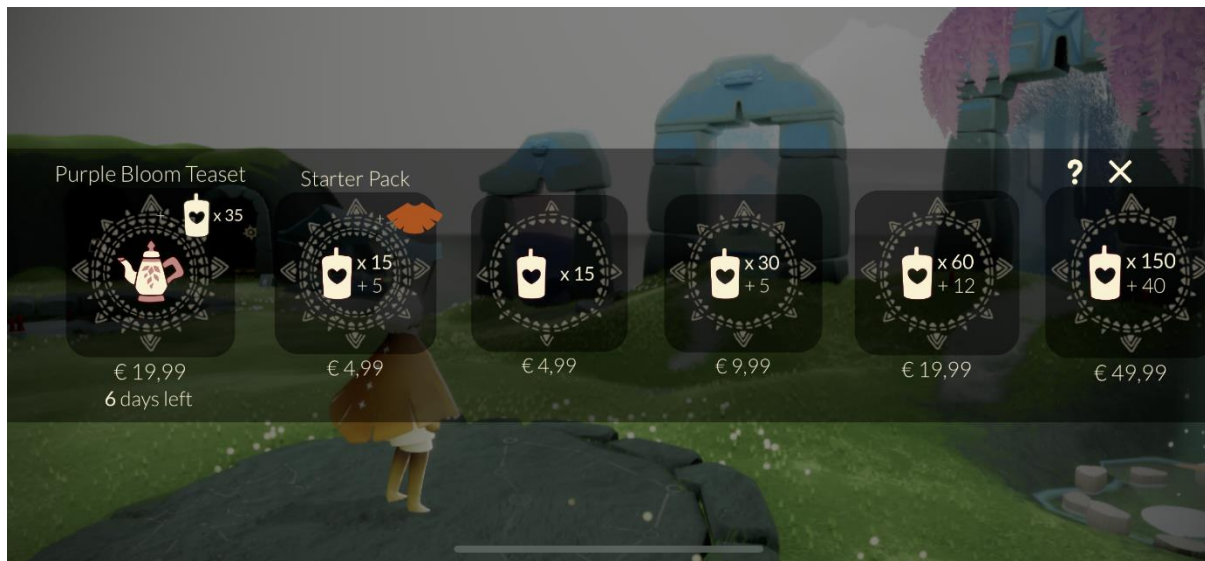


Figure 4. In-game microtransactions.

To unlock most of the game for free, the players need to commit to a daily grind of candles and hearts, through collecting wax throughout maps and participating in compassionate interactions which results in a very slow progression. This is the way the game establishes its glass ceiling that much like other games within the freemium model is, as Evans explains, put in place to encourage players to spend real money on the game.<sup>45</sup> As shown in figure 4, the game by default offers five different options to purchase candles as well as an additional seasonal option, such as an adventure pass or in the case of the spring season, a Purple Bloom Teaset bundle. The game attempts to drive the forward progress with the incentive of gaining more of the various currencies or buying them for real money. As a symptom of the conversion between candles and hearts, compassionate actions become directly attached to the in-game currency, which is also where the revenue model commodifies compassion by positioning it on a par with real-world currencies.

According to Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter's argument in *Games of empire*, video games are integral in propagating the industrial capitalist era from which they originate from but equally, they have the potential of exposing its dark sides, simulating the possible results of it and present players with alternatives.<sup>46</sup> Within the referential and explicit levels of meaning of *Sky's* narrative and in-game world, the developers position the player as a force that has

<sup>44</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witthford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Evans, "The Economics of Free," 563.

<sup>46</sup> Dyer-Witthford, De Peuter, Peuter *Games of Empire*, 29.

the main goal of dispersing the shadow side and bring back the spirit of cooperation and compassion. However, as Bordwell points out, the symptomatic meaning that is reflective of the underlying social, political or ideological processes can stand in contrast to the other three types of meaning.<sup>47</sup> This contradiction also takes place in the case of *Sky*, as the symptomatic meaning behind the underlying game's revenue model establishes compassionate actions as commodities that can be replaced with real money, and positions them as free, slower, and less effective alternatives to paying for game progress. In effect the symptomatic meaning of the game's economy rather than going towards cooperation and compassion, trivializes them by proposing alternatives that allow the players to circumvent the designed slow, compassion-based progression with instant, real-world money solutions and end up closely resembling the self-serving attitudes that the game's text attempts to go against.

## **Interactivity, friends and making money**

### Compassion and interactivity

*Sky* includes a variety of mechanics which encourage social interactions and reward players for them. The game features doors that require multiple players to open and access new areas, this establishes an explicit meaning that some parts of the game are inaccessible when playing alone and more players are needed to get the full experience of the game. Besides that, the game world comes with its hurdles, particularly with how tricky it can be to locate some spirits or access areas without having all the flight boosters unlocked in the cape. As Isbister points out, game design requires creating social situations which are guiding the way interactions between players are meant to happen, which in the case of *Sky* can mean being lost or unable to access various areas and having to rely on others for help.<sup>48</sup> A way of designing social interactions relies on the players having an option to request assistance from other players on the map. Enabling this function creates an eye marker visible to everyone within a certain distance of our character which shows other players where someone needs help and allows them then to come to them, grab them by the hand and drag them around with them. This ability to drag others is also possible when flying, allowing less experienced players to access areas that otherwise would be tricky or inaccessible for them. On an implicit level this mechanic shows that asking others for help is normal, and even encouraged to

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<sup>47</sup> Bordwell, *Making meaning*, 9

<sup>48</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 64.



progress. This is very reminiscent of what Jerrett et al. described as compassionate actions, through communicating to the fellow players needing help, the game allows the players who empathize with the struggle to come and assist them with what they know and can do to make the gameplay experience better.<sup>49</sup>

Helping other players is explicitly facilitated also in terms of rewards, as the players in their gratitude may choose to offer one of their candles to become friends, which allows for strengthening the social connection and becomes crucial in later stages of the game as a way of sourcing the heart currency. Friendship within *Sky* provides a variety of options and a skill tree which requires the investment of candles as well as ascended candles to unlock different abilities for both players which on an implicit level suggests that investing player's own resources can help strengthening the social connection. The basic abilities include giving a custom name to the friend, following them by grabbing their hand instead of waiting for them to offer it. More abilities require an investment of additional candles, and they include giving each other a high five, gifting the friend with the heart currency in exchange for three candles, hugging them, piggybacking, warping to join them at their current position on the map and textual communication. As Isbister puts it, the possibility to overcome issues together turns the journey from private to a social interaction.<sup>50</sup> Becoming friends with other players allows for building social connections and maintaining them through traversing the in-game world together. According to Ortony et al., the intensity of the feeling of compassion depends partially on the degree to which the other person is liked.<sup>51</sup> The possibility to communicate and teleport to the other player unlocked upon befriending them not only set the emotional tone of the interactions through more interactive gestures, but they also facilitate the players getting to know each other better and in effect strengthening the connection and the feelings of compassion.<sup>52</sup>

Another kind of textual communication closely tied to the friendship mechanic are message candle spots that are scattered across the maps and allow leaving notes for other players to see if they interact with them. The notes left behind are initially visible only to the player and their friends but after receiving 3 likes, they become public to all players passing through the region. Accumulating fifty likes on the note rewards the player with one heart and the note remains in place for 24 or 48 hours, depending on which spot it was left at. On an explicit level, the notes should be in some way helpful as the friends need to green-light them to the wider public. However, the short duration for which the notes stay up implies that the

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<sup>49</sup> Jerrett, Howell, and Dansey, "Empathy spectrum," 639.

<sup>50</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 52.

<sup>51</sup> Ortony, Clore, and Collins, *The cognitive structure of emotions*, 93.

<sup>52</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 52.



players need to regularly add them and make a lot of active friends to make use of this mechanic. As Garite argues, video games can train players through repeatedly demanding or rewarding inputs based on the desired rules of the game.<sup>53</sup> The compassionate assistance to other players and the friendship mechanic are very beneficial to the players in the long run, rewarding them with hearts that can be spent on customization options for their characters. This ruleset of the game disciplines the players to regularly leaving notes behind, learning the position of spirits and gameplay loops to to increase their chance of getting more friends, and in effect also gain more hearts that they can spend to unlock customizations.

## Compassion and rewards

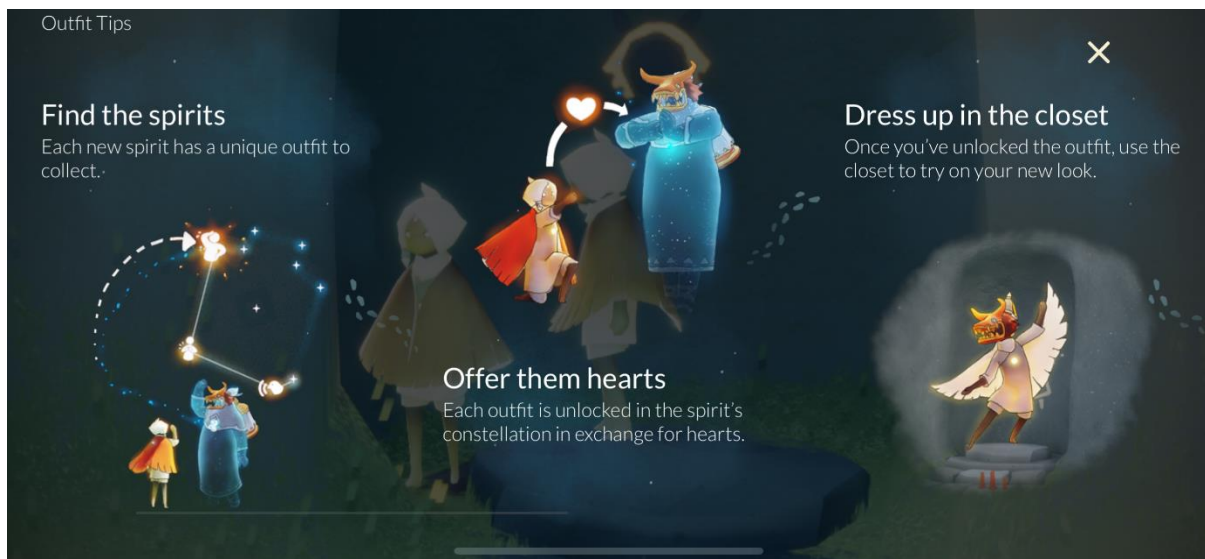


Figure 5. Outfit Tips screen.

The character customizations described in figure 5 are made visible to friends and other players after sharing light with them. They can be unlocked within the spirit trees by using hearts making them one of the most prominent aspects of the reward system and are the driving force for further progress. This is particularly enhanced by continuing the game after completing the main story line, the player's character "ascends" by losing most of their progress besides the accumulated avatar customizations and currency. On an implicit level these are the main rewards that the players should focus on accumulating, rather than just bringing light across the sky realms that the narrative positions as the main goal and which gets reset upon ascension. A large variety of customization for the player's avatar in the game

<sup>53</sup> Garite, "The Ideology of Interactivity", 2.

is not only reflective of how much of the game has been explored or how much money has been spent on it but also requires the player to make and maintain connections with many other players to make more hearts. This provides a close resemblance to the gap within Huizinga's magic circle discussed by Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, which as they claim has an additional, hierarchical dimension tied to its results.<sup>54</sup> As through playing the game and following its ruleset the players are not only engaging in it for the mere narrative, compassionate interactions or the world of the game and rather participate in a type of hierarchy operates within it. Avatar customizations and custom gestures can be then shown off to other players and infiltrate the compassionate landscape with a social hierarchy, a lot of which can be bought with real money. On a symptomatic level, the fancy, customized avatar becomes a sign of a higher social status of the player within the game and shifts the focus of the compassionate actions, from building social connections and emotional investment in helping other players to using these connections for self-serving purposes. The exchange of compassionate actions for rewards that position players within the social hierarchy are a double-edged sword, as on one hand the game attempts to break away the convention of competition within multiplayer games towards compassion and unifying players all the while setting the fancy, surface level avatar upgrades that differentiate players from one another as a reward that players should strive for.

The focus of the game on sharing experiences and being compassionate towards others shifts in later stages of the game towards the rewards that await players for their actions, which is symptomatic of the reward system and revenue model that focus purely on cosmetic upgrades to the player's own avatars and increasing of own social position within the game. As Jerrett et al. put it, compassion consists of both the empathetic aspect as well as the action that follows it.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Ortony et al., agree that compassion is a "sorry-for" emotion, in which the actions to assist others originate from our own perceived displeasure with their struggle.<sup>56</sup> Due to the reward system focusing on using compassion and friendship as ways of getting more currency, the idea of connecting, cooperation and helping other players becomes reframed as an endless need for grinding or buying more. The compassionate actions become a large part of that grind, which in effect detaches the 'sorry-for' emotional aspect from the actions performed by the players. The players are incentivized to act compassionately towards others not because they feel sorry for them but to obtain more currency, rendering their compassion-like actions emotionally hollow. At that point the actions of holding players by the hand to help them are actions that, although through the design of

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<sup>54</sup> Dyer-Witthford, De Peuter, Peuter *Games of Empire*, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Jerrett, Howell, and Dansey, "Empathy spectrum," 639.

<sup>56</sup> Ortony, Clore, and Collins, *The cognitive structure of emotions*, 93.

the gestures appear compassionate, are missing the key component of compassion which is the emotional investment in helping another player. The constant social competition overturns the values of unity, overshadowing the aspect of compassion, instead turning compassion into a means to an end rather than the main goal.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed the game *Sky: Children of the Light* to answer if and how the game's underlying revenue model comes at a cost to the experience of compassion represented by the text of the game. According to my findings, the game's narrative and world design succeed at disciplining the players in cooperation with one another through presenting players with various compassionate narratives, challenges and interactive functions which make the gameplay experience more social and position compassionate actions as beneficial to the players, however the underlying reward system and revenue model undermine the idea of compassion and capitalize on social interactions. The story and world design present a realm filled with examples of unifying and compassionate actions that aim to benefit the society of the sky realms and position the player as the main positive force to overturn the shadows of it with light and compassion. The gestures and mechanics included within the game, such as holding other players by the hand or gates that require many players, incentivize cooperation between players as well as assist in establishing positive emotions and the feeling of compassion. The interactive layer introduces mechanics that facilitate social interactions, friendships and require social connections between players to access various areas, progress the game and their skill own trees. However, this is where the contradiction within this design primarily lays, the focus on self-centered benefits which, in later stages of the game, drive the compassionate actions that reward players with avatar customizations to establish them higher within the social hierarchy of the game.

The game's text provides players with an explicitly stated idea of unity and compassion as a solution to a collective better world, all the while the underlying freemium revenue model commodifies compassion by converting it into a currency purchasable with real money and the reward system presents the surface-level cosmetic unlocks as the main drive for compassionate actions. Isbister points out, that the choice of gestures and types of interaction in the game can set the emotional tone and lead players towards friendly and shared

experience.<sup>57</sup> The case of *Sky* shows that, although in the beginning stages of the game the option of holding hands and other gestures can invoke such positive emotions, the game's symptomatic meanings behind the reward system and revenue model eventually overshadow these feelings, instead distancing the players from emotional involvement and directing their focus onto gaining more currency to unlock more fancy cosmetics.

The game features many social options, such as guiding other players, leaving helpful notes, and making friends which allow for meaningful interactions and are positive in the initial experience of the game, but as the game progresses it introduces the mechanic of ascension which removes most of the attained upgrades, putting a heavy emphasis on currency and cosmetic unlocks as the main measure of progress. This causes the meanings of compassion represented on the referential, explicit, and implicit levels to stand in contrast to the symptomatic need for grinding more currency through social interactions or directly buying them for real money. As Jerrett et al. argue, compassion is actioned empathy, meaning that for compassion to take place, there must be a feeling of empathy followed by an action that aims to help the other person.<sup>58</sup> Within *Sky* the incentive to cooperate with others becomes based on the game equating compassionate actions with in-game currency and cosmetics. The slow progression incentivizes grind through using compassionate actions, detaching player's actions from any emotional involvement, which goes against of what compassion is.

The meaning behind using the compassionate actions becomes symptomatic of the reward system and the revenue model which frame compassion as means to gain more friends and further increase the player's own virtual social status, rather than unifying them and, for example, sharing the benefits of their actions with other players. This is reflective of what Kline et al. refer to as information capitalism and its focus on surface level while forgoing the meaningful depth and values.<sup>59</sup> The main reward system focuses on surface-level cosmetic upgrades to the player's avatar, which is also directly tied to the social currency. Besides performing compassionate actions, the social currency can also be unlocked through buying the in-game currency with real money, which conflates compassionate actions with money and commodifies it. In doing so, the game positions spending real world money as a faster way to unlocking the cosmetics that the player wants while avoiding compassionate actions towards other players.

*Sky* does a great job at explaining what compassionate and unified game world could theoretically look like, but the cosmetics-oriented reward system and the underlying revenue

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<sup>57</sup> Isbister, *How games move us*, 52.

<sup>58</sup> Jerrett, Howell, and Dansey, "Empathy spectrum," 639.

<sup>59</sup> Kline, Dyer-Witthford, and De Peuter, *Digital play*, 69.

model effectively undermine its compassionate ideas and bring the gameplay back to the competitive landscape that multiplayer games have been known for. Although with a limited amount of textual communication and expanded cooperation mechanics, the game manages to encourage cooperation and avoid the toxic pitfalls that other online multiplayer games are vulnerable to, the game's reward system and microtransactions focus heavily on self-gain and surface-level competition, turning compassion into a currency with extra steps.

This textual analysis is focused primarily on how the meaning of compassion is reflected in the game design, social interactions, and the revenue model. This also limits the possibility to include other observations relating to the social dynamics within the community that the game creates, the aesthetic and immersive qualities of the game design or the experience of playing the game limiting only to single player, which could provide interesting focus points for future research of the game. Furthermore, this analysis was done based on my personal in-game experiences and encounters with other players that I met during the gameplay sessions. Keeping in mind that while the narrative, cut scenes and other game elements are consistent for everyone, the types of encounters with other online players greatly affect the experience of compassion within the game and may differ between players as well as can be affected by other circumstances, such as time of play, number of players on the server etc. For future research it would be beneficial to perform playtests on a larger sample size to discern what is an average online experience with compassion among *Sky's* player base and how the different experiences with interactions from online players can affect the reception of compassion within the gameplay.

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