

Communication through Intuitiveness, Outreach, and Style

by

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Leading up to the Fall 2021 semester, I had different thoughts for where I wanted to take my Senior Project. I knew I was leaning toward doing something with animation; part of me wanted to create something akin to a music video, with notable emphasis on the relationship between visuals and audio. Another part wanted to really dive into the fundamentals of character design and learn to make lively cartoons. When push came to shove, however, and I had to choose what I was going to spend the next nine months doing, I ended up wanting to explore Experience Design

Taking “Design for Web and Screens” with Danny Nanni during the Spring 2021 semester ended up leaving a bigger impression on me than I initially thought it would. Previously, I had felt an interest in understanding what makes computer software enjoyable to use, but I didn’t expect to become so enthralled with the theory behind user control. I would end up modeling this project based on my final project for his class. In “Web and Screens,” I created a mockup of a single interface for an existing video game (Rivals of Aether) in Photoshop and brought it to life with animation in After Effects⁴. That project left its mark on me, and it got me thinking about other problems in the world of Experience Design. Now, after spending my Senior Project jumping into what this field can truly offer, I truly hope this where my career ends up taking me.

To begin, I’d like to introduce what exactly my project has enabled me to learn about. Experience Design refers to the, ideally, invisible link between humans and the software they work. This “invisible link” could mean everything from visual appearance of software, down to the nitty-gritty of how any interaction happens, whether that be in the real world or on-screen. It’s a level of comfort that shouldn’t even be felt by the user. To inexperienced users of any given program, they should feel at ease as they begin to feel their way around, with inputs

coming naturally and expected results happening on screen that facilitates learning in the back of their mind. For experienced users, anything the program offers should be able to be accomplished with minimal effort on their part. This level of comfort can come with any designed interface, good or bad; but the difference is a good interface will never leave a user wanting. If the conscious mind comes to “wish” for something to happen, the designer has failed. In this way, there will always be an ongoing relationship between users and designers, as designers continue to understand increasingly what exactly is required out of any given interface. That impossible beauty is exactly what draws me to this line of work; I have a knack for working out what exactly feels wrong with any given thing and working out what can be improved comes naturally.

To learn more about what Experience Design could be, I wanted to rework an interface that existed. I ended up choosing VALORANT, a video game that I play quite frequently. Not only was I intimately familiar with this interface, but I had already noticed many flaws by simply playing the game in my own time, and I felt I could learn more about Experience Design by exploring what I was feeling regarding these problems. I feel I’ve received some (silent) criticism for this pick of interface, as if using a video game as a base was more of a waste of time than, say, reworking Instagram’s desktop experience, which was another candidate of mine for this project. To that, I simply must give the perspective that I feel my own learnings and takeaways from this project are infinitely more valuable than anyone else’s. As someone who has spent their entire life around video games, I understand what they exactly have to offer that has aided me in the broader contexts of Experience Design. That’s not to say I have a desire to shut my learnings off to the world; but, given the options of me learning more about what I expect to become my career, or someone else noticing a message of mine that may briefly

interest them, the choice seemed clear. I try not to be a selfish person, but then again, in this case, it felt pertinent to be so.

With the idea of my project in my sight, I set it upon myself to start to uncover what was bothering me about VALORANT's interface. A major issue that immediately jumped out to me was the design of an interface that encouraged a strange learning curve. There were scrollable boxes of content that moved from left to right. I found this confusing, as the primary method of controlling these menus to be the mouse. Sure, clicking through the menus made enough sense, but what about the scroll wheel? That moves up to down. Why would you design an interface that messes with that very straightforward concept? This made me consider that the input, the method of control, should be a large factor in how you choose to design digital interfaces.

My redesign for this concept included completely reworking those boxes of content to fit on a vertical axis, which helped not only make control more obvious, but also more of the screen to display the content those boxes contained⁵.

Speaking of presentation of content, which was another area that I tried to improve. The current layout seems to take up too much real estate, and not letting the things users wanted to interact with shine. I attempted to fix this by moving an existing element, featuring much of the navigation of the games' interfaces, towards the right side of the screen, which also mirrored an existing element in functionality. Not only did this help center content and give it the users' full attention, but it also cut down on a learning curve for inexperienced users, as functionality being repeated helps to ingrain itself in our minds. This change of the navigation element's position was also a net benefit; the positioning of the two adjacent menus on the left and right sides of the screen allows for more overall horizontal mouse movements, as opposed to the previous layout's

emphasis on both major horizontal and vertical movements. In the context of navigation, less overall movement is better to get you where you need to go⁶.

In the same sense, it doesn't make sense to have multiple submenus for related information when they could be located on the same screen. Earlier in VALORANT's lifespan, two previously conjoined pieces of information were moved to two different tabs, resulting in a strange separation that never really made sense to me. I decided to look more into the theory of why this decision could have been made, and I only found information discouraging the practice. The most popular theory relating to this decision is called the "3-Click Rule"¹, which stated that no information you ever need should be more than three clicks away from where you are at that moment. While this theory has been debated by Experience Designers and even called outright false, there's a good lesson to be found there; less is more. I don't have a problem with information being buried if it must; but if there's not a good reason, why not include it where it could be more visible? I included this ideology in several instances in my work. One example was louder, where I re-merged those two submenus together to create one screen with both panels of information.⁷ More subtly, I included titles for unlockable items in my previously mentioned boxes of content, which gave further context to the user on what they'd be unlocking without them seeking it out⁸. These changes are about lessening workloads for users to achieve the same, desired outcomes.

I also gave more attention to the animation present in the interfaces. On the surface, this might come off as a superfluous change that doesn't make much of a difference to overall user experience. However, when you consider how anything works, digitally or in the real world, notable visual feedback is a strong indicator for just how responsive a layout feels. When you

make an input, a request, any sort of decision, you naturally expect noticeable visual feedback that your commands *did* something, and that the input made was exactly what you wanted. That is the true value of animation in interfaces; to make the user feel more in control. This is a large component of Don Norman's theories on the usability of everyday things. He notes that doors often aren't visually designed to operate as they appear; some doors that appear to require a push to open need a pull, and vice versa. In the design world, this observation has earned bad doors the title of "Norman Doors."² Norman-esque usability certainly doesn't cease to exist in the digital space, and a large component of preventing that problem is through proper animation. It doesn't always need to be a marvel to look at; even a small slide-in instead of a fade-in can make a major difference to how in-control a user feels. This is a major component of what Experience Design is truly about; empowering the user.

One more major lesson I learned was to optimize designs for future expansion. This certainly makes sense in the context of a video game that regularly receives new content, but this also makes sense in the context of any interface that regularly sees updates (for instance, a social media app on your phone). Designed interfaces should absolutely be ready for what's next to come. We never know what tomorrow holds for us, how our favorite apps are going to change. Ideally, an interface should be able to support expansion where it can. More space for new navigation buttons, for content to replace old content, for added content to be added in⁹. If a design can't support added content, it needs to be thrown out. Period. This is the world we live in; our programs will always continue to receive new functionality, and it's up to the interface to provide space for them, and make the transition of adding something new comfortable for users.

I took plenty information from redesigning VALORANT's Experience, but even now, there are things I could have implemented or experimented with more. I ponder if there's a limit to animation; does too much eventually become bothersome? I know a long animation can certainly be tedious, but I'm curious to where that limit is. I also didn't consider alternate inputs as much as I could have. I think, given the scope of the project, this was okay, as well over 99% of VALORANT players will use mouse and keyboard, but how would someone using a normal video game controller fair in my solution? Furthermore, I don't know that my solution is even good. I certainly have theory to support my ideas, and I do believe they would help the current VALORANT design; but I created mockups in After Effects to visualize my ideas. I don't know how they feel. I'm not aware of any straightforward way to create usable mockups to test my ideas, but I feel that would be a natural next step for me to take- to create something usable. My project certainly wasn't perfect, but I took a lot of lessons from it, which is exactly what I was looking for.

With the mockups complete, the next major step of my project was to communicate my ideas to the wider VALORANT community. Design feedback from design staff was no doubt valuable but getting feedback from people who have experience using the real interface was what I was really interested in hearing. This was where I my designs would truly be put to the test, to hear if I had scratched the itch of people who regularly encountered these problems, even if they didn't know it.

I considered multiple ways for this outreach to happen. A blog post, uploads to Behance, maybe a reddit post. At the end of the day, though, I went the way of a YouTube video¹⁰. I felt it important for this outreach to happen in a way that could reach lots of viewers in a way that would suit their own sensibilities. I've since had the realization that I think consistently learning new skills to communicate your ideas is important. If the VALORANT community were drawn to podcasts, this video could have been made in that form. I just found this to be a particularly effective way of communicating my ideas in this context, so I decided to learn how to make a well-thought-out video essay. In the future, should another opportunity arise for me to learn a new skill of communication, I now feel I wouldn't hesitate to learn what I can about that skill.

Let me discuss some of the skills I learned from this process now. A major lesson I pulled from this experience was how to speak to an audience about a topic they may not understand or even initially care about. For most nonprofessionals, design just doesn't matter to them. Things are how they are, and that's okay. I think it's important to lay out how issues they don't know about affect them using relevant analogies that can expand their ways of thinking, hopefully without boring them to tears. This is where visuals are especially important; using, for instance, flashy gameplay of VALORANT to match my commentary about the importance of animation in

interfaces really spelt out what the issues of stiff animation are. It's these moments of relation that can really help bring a newcomer to understand your ideas.

Developing a visual language to tie communication together also became a big focal point of the creation of the video. I was encouraged to offset the (comparatively) boring UI/UX designs with something else that really spoke to my own sensibilities as a designer, to make it clearer where I was offering my own commentary versus when I was making comments over the work of others. I'll talk about the development of my own stylistic choices in the next section of this paper, but I ended up gravitating towards flashy, constantly moving visual features that made looking at the video consistently interesting. I was happy with this push from my senior advisor; it felt like a major step forward for my own voice that I noticed I had been missing during my time at Purchase.

One more design lesson that stuck out to me from the creation of this video was the delicate balance of audio and visual stimuli. As it turns out, a video essay necessitates clear audio just as much as graphical elements, so I learned a lot about how to balance not only multiple audio tracks at once, but also how it related to the on-screen content. It was important for me to know how to balance commentary, music, and video game noise together in a way that didn't overwhelm the points I was trying to convey. I also found it enticing to hush up when necessary; to allow the on-screen elements to have their space to exist within the viewers mind. This felt like the relationship between word and image to me; there's a delicate balance to reach that satisfies both. I'm now curious as to what other forms of media can be connected in these ways.

Overall, I was pleased with the response to my YouTube video. In the two-ish weeks since it launched, I've received 900 views on YouTube, several comments over the reddit posts I created for it, as well as 9 different responses to a survey I created to help gain insight into what

players like and dislike about the current Experience solution in the game, on top of my own interpretation of that solution. I was happy to receive actual design criticism and discussion about the game in response to my video, instead of criticism regarding the video itself. Not that I think it's a perfect interpretation of my content, as people are more likely to say nothing than something negative; but it speaks volumes that I received over twenty different comments in relation to my work and the game's current solution rather than about my ability to communicate. Some comments were less nice; I got a couple of criticisms that my work came off as "student work," which, okay, fair enough, it is student work. But others felt more receptive to my ideas. A consistent thread between viewers was that they vibed with one of my ideas but felt less sure about others (there seemed to be no clear consensus on a weak link, either!). One person talked about the game's conservative use of color, and how they'd like to see a more dynamic range of hues. Another person suggested they'd prefer horizontal designs over vertical ones because of their aesthetic appearance, over the benefits of better Experience. Some people shared some thoughts of usability features they'd like to see implemented, for instance, a Dark Mode. These kinds of comments were exactly what I wanted out of this video; to encourage laypeople to really think about design and consider what it could do for them.

I've gotten the impression there were some critiques of my decision to pursue this facet of my project, but the learnings I've generated here have my confident in saying this was the biggest success of the whole project. If I'm being honest, I spent longer on this video than I thought I would; I originally had other plans past for expanding upon my initial designs. But that time spent was worth it. I feel like I've inspired a few others to broaden their horizons and consider what proper design can mean. It may not have been a lot of people- I still haven't made

any money off my video- but damnit, I did an excellent job here. After school, I can say I'll look back proudly on this part of the project.

The development of a unique visual style certainly wasn't on my list of outcomes for this project, but I'm sure glad it ended up being one. This topic had been on my radar for a while. In Tim Samara's "Junior Seminar" class, one of his assignments was to create something- anything- that represented my visual style. At the time, I didn't really have an answer for this. I created a strange looking landscape in Photoshop that looked cool, but I wasn't sure if it represented who I was. I struggled with this idea a bit for around a year, and it wasn't until I had that conversation with my Senior Advisor, Benjamin, about identifying my own voice within my video. He had taken notice of one animated visual element (a smear on a word) and encouraged me to experiment more with stuff like that. Ben pointed me towards "Perlin noise,"³ which was a programming term for creating randomly generated gradient noise that helped with procedural content generation. As someone who spends lots of time listening to psychedelic, trippy jam-band music, this instantly spoke to me, so I set to work creating a couple of variations of my own view of this idea. I then incorporated my favorite of these designs into my YouTube video to offset the Experience work with my own voice. I was curious as to how these opposing visual styles would offset each other, and I was really pleased with the outcome of that experiment. It felt unique, like when the interesting bit of real content wasn't on screen, there was still something to look at. Perlin noise has served as a great leaping off point for my own brand of visual identity.

This work has only just begun, though. In my free time, I've made a couple experiments on further exploring this style. I've made it a point to have fun with these experiments, to not particularly care where they lead me; just to make something that looks cool but doesn't say a whole lot. I made a crude looking face that was meticulously detailed with thousands of tiny marks. I listened to four songs in a row and used their run times to (digitally) paint something,

anything, that related to how I was feeling about those songs. I've continued creating more Perlin noise-related work. I have ideas for future experiments, too; I'd like to create Perlin noise concepts featuring weird Photoshopped creations. I feel I'm pulling this from what I did in Professor Samara's class, like I have an idea to take what I did there even further still.

This part of my Senior Project has only just begun, but I'm excited for where it will take me. This feels like a more personal experience; I won't be able to take a lot of this into Experience Design, as I don't think confusing-yet-exciting visuals match well with easily working functionality, but there's no telling where it will be relevant. It also has renewed some lost excitement in creating art for me. I feel more enthused about creating than ever now.

Briefly, I'd like to touch on the least successful element of my Senior Project, and that was the Senior Show. I was dissatisfied with my showing amongst my peers. Not in terms of the work I provided, no, but certainly in how I went about displaying my ideas. Let's get the excuses out of the way right now; I did order a quality display that I ended up not being able to use for both financial and practical reasons, that I felt would have made the connections I was trying to make clearer. I also maintain that Experience Design, in the context of an art show, isn't the most exciting thing on the floor. It certainly didn't help that video games just aren't going to grip a lot of people, so I feel some dismissed it for that reason alone. There are certainly aspects surrounding my showing that were out of my control...

...But other aspects certainly were not. I undoubtedly could have spent more time planning what the show was to highlight in my work. The show was a week after my video had launched, and I had spent most the semester working exclusively on that. As proud as I am of my video, it did assume a bit too much of my time. I should have spent more time planning the layout of my show, and even how the content was displayed. Were the posters necessary? I think the bigger one could have been, had I focused a bit more on what exactly I wanted to accomplish with it. The smaller posters, however; most likely not, no. If I wanted the posters, I should have spent more time designing a multi-faceted, truly experiencing-enhancing purpose for them to be there. Benjamin and I had discussed creating visuals that helped equivocate my digital Interaction learnings with real life movement and analogies, and these would have been right at home on the bright, graphically interesting posters. No doubt was this a great idea; it just never came together for me. I also think I could have created more connections from the posters to the content displayed on screen instead of relying on a single element (color) that would end up being tossed out in the wake of having to use a worse, less color-accurate monitor than I initially

planned for. On a slightly unrelated matter, this made me wonder; how many graphic connections are necessary for people to notice an idea? It feels like my brain is hard wired to just think “one”, but the obvious answer feels like “as many as necessary.” How can I better understand when I’ve made that connection? This concept will be something I explore more in the future.

Was there something wrong with the video I created for the show? I feel the pacing could have been improved a touch, but I thought the basic gist of it made sense. The biggest failure I felt from this showing was that I failed to connect to non-gamer laypeople. I really tried to make it clear that the ideas here were bigger than video games, that these lessons applied even to real life (therefore I tried to make real life analogies to the problems I was trying to solve), but I failed in this department. If I succeeded anywhere, it was that the few players of VALORANT I showed my show to responded positively to it. That’s cool, but I still wonder what I could have done better to speak to the public. Could I? What would have made video games interesting for non-gamers? This was a tall order for which I was woefully unprepared.

I’m certainly not overall disappointed with my project. The work is good and does stand on its own two feet. I only wish I better understood how to make that relevant for people who don’t already care about the main topic at hand. Regardless, I’m still happy I was able to have a showing in a public place. The few positive reactions I received made the whole experience worth it and has motivated me further to further consider how to connect with others silently in the future.

I'd like to thank Benjamin Santiago for his challenging work in helping me bring my ideas to life. He has been a consistent source of well-thought-out ideas, of second opinions, of resources of inspiration, and as a contrast to my inexperience that has served me well. As awkward as our Discord meeting goodbyes can be, I genuinely enjoyed every single one of them, and feel comfortable exposing my work to you in my efforts to improve. All the best to you, and, once again, thank you.

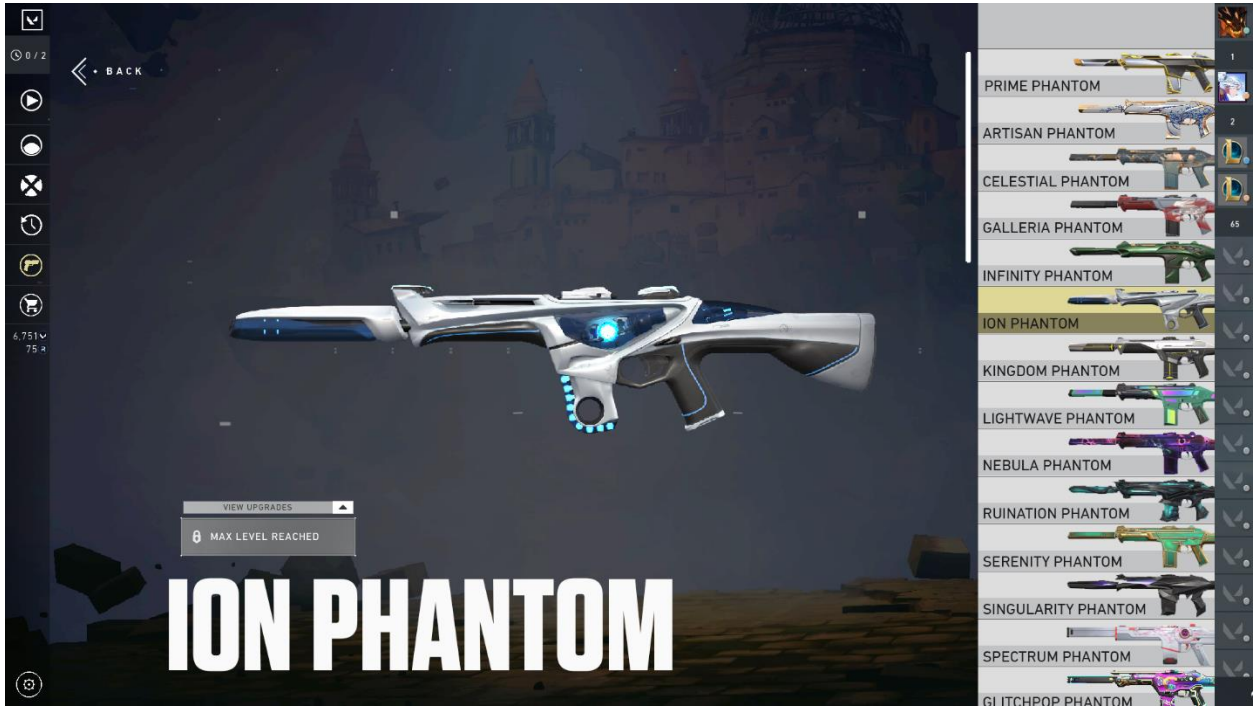
This project has been a favorite among my time here at Purchase. I've pursued something I really care about, and it's made me excited for the future. Overall, I'm taking away new insights into how humans and software respond to one another. I'm realizing that expanding how you communicate will always be important, and that you should be open to trying new ways of opening the minds of yourself and others. I've opened myself up to new discoveries about how I make my own art, and how I want the things that escape my mind to look. I've accepted defeat and pulled lessons on how I can improve. And I've claimed victory, knowing that some of the long nights this project has spawned for me will pay dividends for my future.

Citations

- 1) Laubheimer, P. (2019, August 11). *The 3-click rule for navigation is false*. Nielsen Norman Group. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/3-click-rule/>
- 2) 99pi. (1970, January 1). *Norman Doors: Don't know whether to push or pull? blame design*. 99% Invisible. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from <https://99percentinvisible.org/article/norman-doors-dont-know-whether-push-pull-blame-design/>
- 3) (2014, August 9). *Adrian's soapbox*. Understanding Perlin Noise. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from <https://adrianb.io/2014/08/09/perlinnoise.html>

Related Visual Content

4) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcaweKEJMrM>



5)



6)

ACT RANK

EPISODE 3 / III / ACT 2

111 REMAINING

IMMORTAL 3 #1,742

312

ALL MODES

	KDA 40 18 3	SCORE 12,261	1ST PLACE	40 - 32
	KDA 39 26 1	SCORE 11,289	2ND PLACE (TIED)	39 - 40
	KDA 30 21 0	SCORE 8,791	4TH PLACE (TIED)	30 - 40
	KDA 18 8 5	SCORE 4,433	VICTORY	13 - 7
	KDA 13 16 3	SCORE 3,781	DEFEAT	6 - 13
	KDA 40 21 1	SCORE 11,649	1ST PLACE	40 - 35
	KDA 17 23 19	SCORE 4,448	VICTORY	17 - 15

BORDER LVL 2

3 WINS TO GO

LVL 3

TOTAL COMPETITIVE WINS 47

7)

REFLECTION: ACT 2

ENDS IN 4 DAYS

BATTLE PASS XP BOOST ENABLED

10 RADINITE POINTS

THIS IS NOT FINE SPRAY 26

10 RADINITE POINTS 27

ARTISAN SPRAY 28

ARTISAN CARD 29

ARTISAN BUCKY 30

ARTISAN BUDDY *

100% AIMBOT CARD 31

10 RADINITE POINTS 32

KNG MERIDIAN BUDDY 33

TRUST IN MY HEALING SPRAY 34

NITRO VANDAL 35

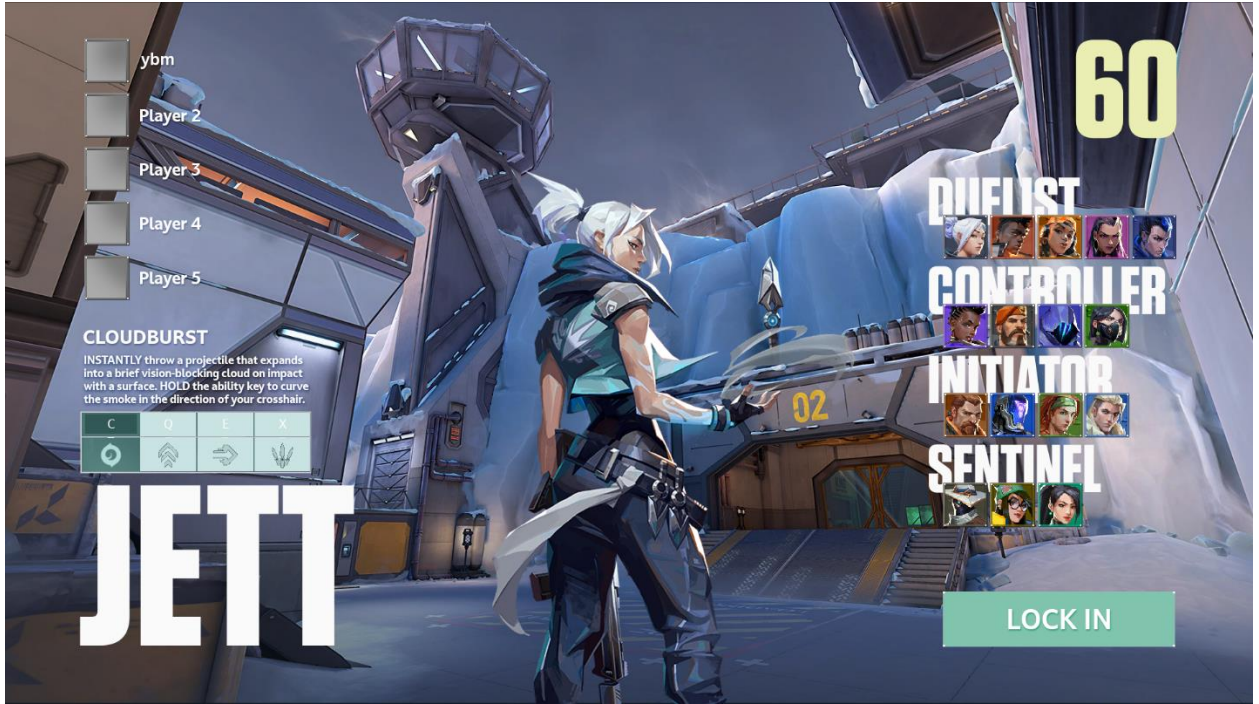
10 RADINITE POINTS + AIMBOT TITLE *

CRISPY SPRAY 36

VLT/R BUDDY 37

TEKNIKA FIREARMS CARD 38

8)



9)

10) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI8z9N_n38g