

Rules of the Game

Deep Techniques from Distinctive Designers

Your host

Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii

with

Jamie Cheng

Aleissia Laidacker @Aleissia

Beth LaPensée

Richard Lemarchand @rich_lem

Tanya X. Short @tanyaxshort



March 20-24, 2023 | San Francisco, CA #GDC23

GDC

Hello and welcome everyone, welcome to Rules 2023

my name's Richard Rouse, Creative Director at FarBridge

We get five designers to speak about a rule they use

This is a session about rules

So you could say this is a session about rules...

But I have some bad news for you

**This is a session
about rules,
but there are
no rules**

Rules of the Game 2015		Rules of the Game 2016			
With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii		With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii			
Laralyn McWilliams @laralyn	"Make Emotional Connections"	Lee Perry @MrLeePerry	"Pizzazz First, Polish Later"		
Chris Avellone @ChrisAvellone	"Look for the Silver Lining"	Emily Short @emshort	"Visualize Early"		
Dan Teasdale @deliciousbees	"Chunk in Threes"	George Fan @TheGeorgeFan	"Make Your Enemies Actually Different!"		
Kim McAuliffe @EnamelofKoi	"Fight for the Little Things"	Liz England @lizardengland	"Make Actionable Documentation"		
Nels Anderson @nelsormensch	"Don't Try to Evaluate Your Own Game" " But Only You Know What It Should Be	Michael de Plater	"Make Your Game Tell Real-World Stories"		
Rules of the Game 2017		Rules of the Game 2018		Rules of the Game 2019	
With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii		With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii		With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii	
Chelsea Howe @manojalpa	"Design by Fractal"	Raph Koster @RaphKoster	"Start with the Sim"	Deborah Hendersen	"Tell Players What Winning Is"
Damion Schubert @ZenOfDesign	"Free is the Default"	Erin Hoffman-John @gryphness	"Ask Players the Right Questions"	Daniel Cook @danctheduck	"Use Real Humans to Drive Your Experience"
Christina Norman @truffle	"Embrace Radical Constraints"	Soren Johnson @SorenJohnson	"Know Your Inheritance"	Brian Upton @bupton	"Design Moments of Stillness"
Hal Barwood www.finitarts.com	"Personify Problems"	Josh Sawyer @jesawyer	"Always Give 50%"	Lisa Brown @wertle	"Manage Your Gameplay Pie"
Luke Muscat @pgmuscat	"Forget Rules, Make Goals Your King"	Stone Librande @StoneLibrande	"Play It On Paper"	Jesse Schell @JesseSchell	"Obey the Story Stack"
Rules of the Game 2021		Rules of the Game 2022			
With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii		With your host Richard Rouse III @richardrouseiii			
Brenda Romero @br	"Set the Systems, Place the Player"	Eleanor Todd	"The Biggest Design Risk is No Risk at All"		
Lauren Scott @Lauren_E_Scott	"Derive Your Economy from the Fun"	Carrie Patel @Carrie_Patel	"Structure it Like Improv"		
Kate Compton @GalaxyKate	"Leave Room for Creativity"	Osama Dorias @OsamaDorias	"Atomize with the Puzzle Matrix"		
Celia Hodent @CeliaHodent	"Forget Your Opinion, It's Biased"	Frank Lantz @flatz	"Consider Your Framework"		
Brian Moriarty	"Find an Ending" or "Something Gives"				

We've had a lot of rules shared in this session

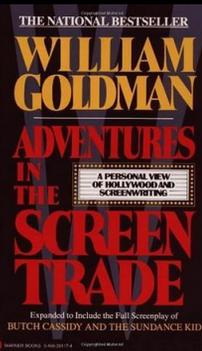
Check out previous sessions on the Vault or YouTube

About to have five more, which will mean 39 designers who have shared their rules

But they're just their personal opinions.

This reminds me of a favorite quote I like

“No one knows anything.”



**William Goldman
Screenwriter**



Screenwriter of the Princes Bride and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

From his book, which I recommend anyone in a creative field reads

And he meant that when pitching your game to a producer/studio

NO ONE really knows if it will work or not, they just are guessing.

Not so much

RULES about Games

Not so much
RULES about Games
instead
BELIEFS about Games

And if no one knows anything, maybe it's...

Because there are no sure things in a creative enterprise

Beliefs about Theory

Christina Norman “Embrace Radical Constraints”
@truffle

George Fan “Make Your Enemies Actually Different!”
@TheGeorgeFan

Jesse Schell “Obey the Story Stack”
@JesseSchell

We’ve had many talks about beliefs over the years

Like beliefs about raw game design theory

How you come up with the raw idea for a game or mechanic

Beliefs about Production

Lee Perry “Pizzazz First, Polish Later”
@MrLeePerry

Raph Koster “Start with the Sim”
@RaphKoster

Eleanor Todd “The Biggest Design Risk is No Risk at All”

We’ve had theories about HOW you then get that wo work in the game

Beliefs about Playtesting

Stone Librande “Play It On Paper”
@StoneLibrande

Deborah Hendersen “Tell Players What Winning Is”

Nels Anderson “Don’t Try to Evaluate Your Own Game**”
@nelsormensch * But Only You Know What It Should Be

And we’ve had theories about how you playtest it in different stages.

Beliefs about Games



Belief in Your Own Game Design

And I think it's OK that we're just talking about beliefs and not about rules

Because ultimately, game design is about belief, and specifically, believing in your own design

You are curating ideas about what could be fun, and then believing they will be

You may have good reasons, like many of reasons talked about here, but ultimately, it is an act of belief.

And then, you have to get others to believe in it.

No one rule is going to make your game good

But you, as a designer, have to believe in your own game.

In a way these rules are things the people we have speaking here today

Things that work for them

But maybe they don't fit you or your project, and that can be OK

You Owe it to your team to believe
They are taking a big bet on you.

You owe it to yourself

If you have trouble believing, keep working! Don't settle for something you don't believe in.

13 Ways Designers Screw Up Client Presentations



Mike Monteiro
Mule Design Studio



Mike is a graphical designer a designer on the web

Recommend his talk, find it on YouTube

Even though this isn't about games and he's talking about selling to clients, I think anyone here would get a lot out of this

Because he boils down the job of a designer into a key, two step process.

1. Do Good Work

2. Persuade People It's Good

Mike Monteiro
Mule Design Studio



First do good work, because if the work isn't good nothing matters

The designer has to do BOTH things – you CANT COUNT ON THE GENIUS OF YOUR DESIGN to stand on its own.

And second, get people to BELIEVE it is good.

You need to Persuade your TEAM, programmers, artists, audio people, producers, other designers,

You need to Persuade your publisher / bosses

Ultimately you need to Persuade the Public to give your game a

shot

Good Game Design is an act of Belief

Good game design is about believing in your design – asking everyone to take a shot on it

If find you don't believe in it yet – keep working – refine it, maybe using some of the beliefs you'll hear today, the ones you find useful

FIVE BELIEFS

We're going get talks about theory

Beth LaPensee is going to talk about how to bring your games to life

Jamie Cheng will talk about how to start your games

On the production side,

Richard Lemarchand will tell you how to construct your games

And Aleissia Laidacker will tell you how to take your beliefs about design into places they've never been before

BUT FIRST

TANYA X. SHORT

Lead Designer
Kitfox Games
@tanyaxshort

But our first speaker...

You may know her as one of the founders and Captain at Kitfox games where she was also the lead designer on games like Moon Hunters and Boyfriend Dungeon

She's also worked as a designer at Funcom and heads up the Pixelles, a feminist non-profit that helps folks get into game development

You may also know her from the books she has edited, Procedural Generation in Game Design and Procedural

Storytelling in Game Design, and I recommend the second one in particular (for no particular reason)

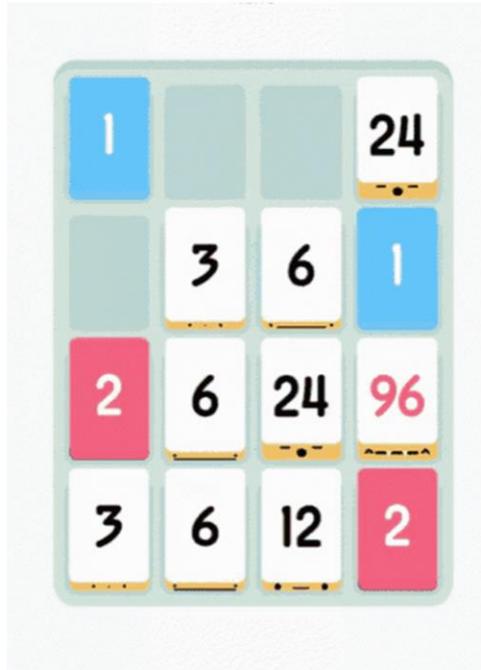
Tanya Short!

Make a (good) *Mess*

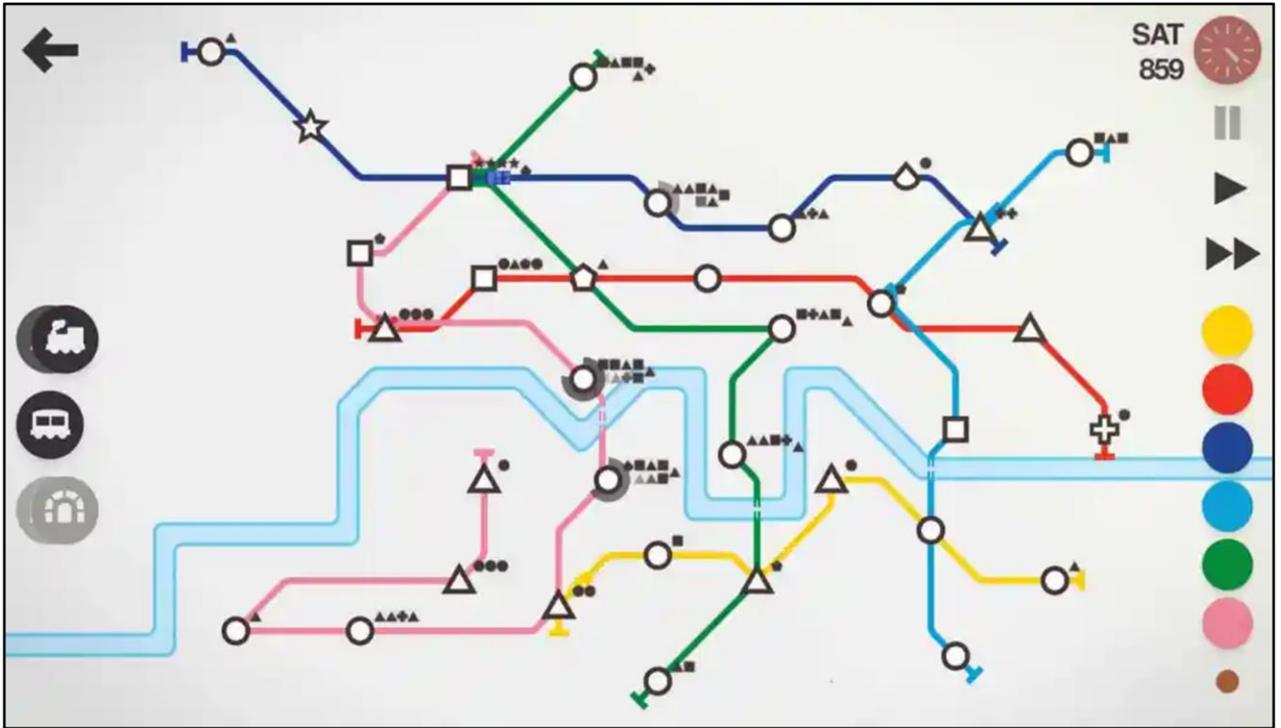
Tanya X. Short



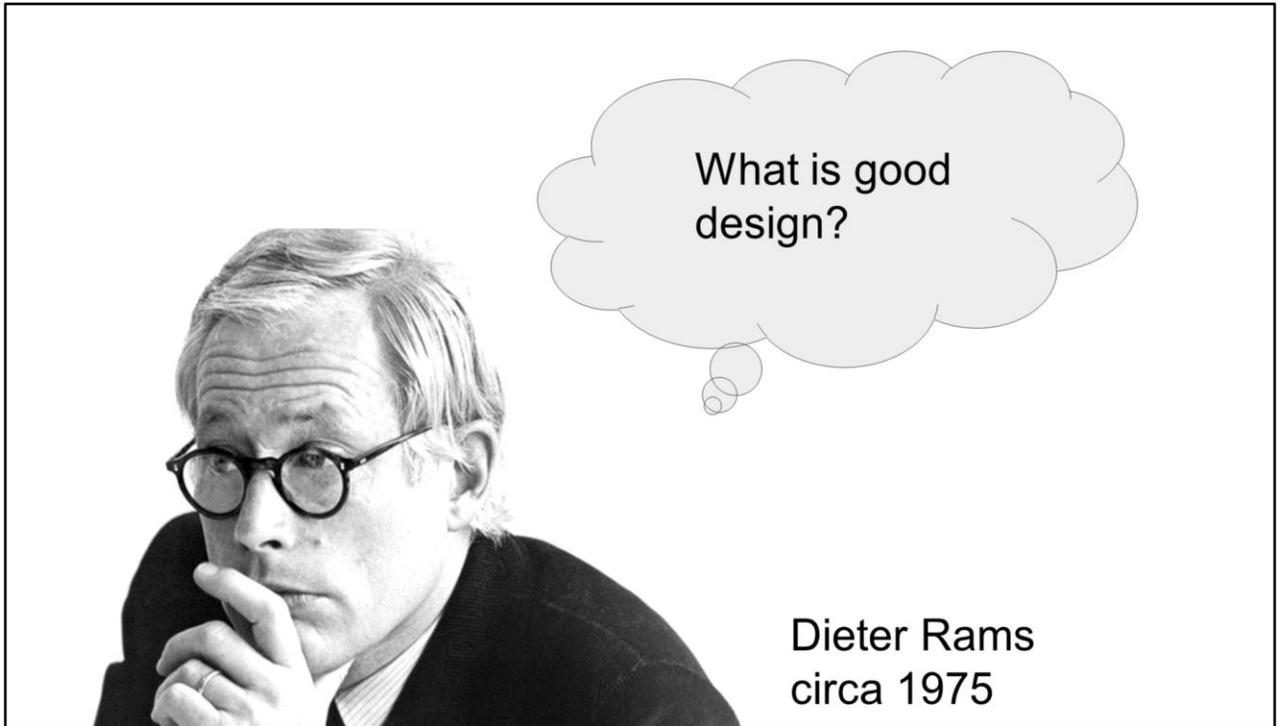
Many designers excel at minimalism, and see it as the purest, most successful kind of design.



Threes and Mini Metro are examples of amazing, minimalist works, which are industry-leading and visionary.



And the design & production benefits of elegance are well-understood across many industries.



Dieter Rams
circa 1975

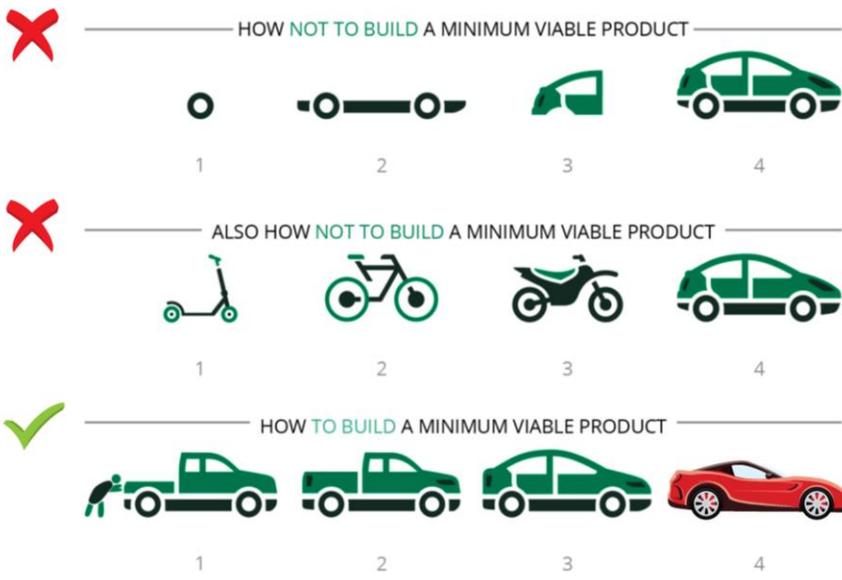
Dieter Rams is a product designer (still alive btw) who pointed out good products should be built to last and pleasurable to use, and innovated a new philosophy of design.

Dieter Rams' 10 Principles of Good Design

01. **Good Design is innovative.**
02. **Good Design makes a product useful.**
03. **Good Design is aesthetic.**
04. **Good Design makes a product understandable.**
05. **Good Design is unobtrusive.**
06. **Good Design is honest.**
07. **Good Design is long-lasting.**
08. **Good Design is thorough down to the last detail.**
09. **Good Design is environmentally friendly.**
10. **Good Design is as little design as possible.**



I enjoy the ideals and aesthetics of elegance, and appreciate its genius when it's well-executed, I admit.



Elegance often comes naturally out of well-developed Minimum Viable Product process, which refines existing strengths until they shine and gleam



But elegance and refinement lead us to something ultimately predictable, with only one possible foregone conclusion. What if we want to surprise our players, and catch them off guard? When everything is perfectly refined, there's nothing left to be curious about.

Dieter Rams' 10 Principles of Good Design

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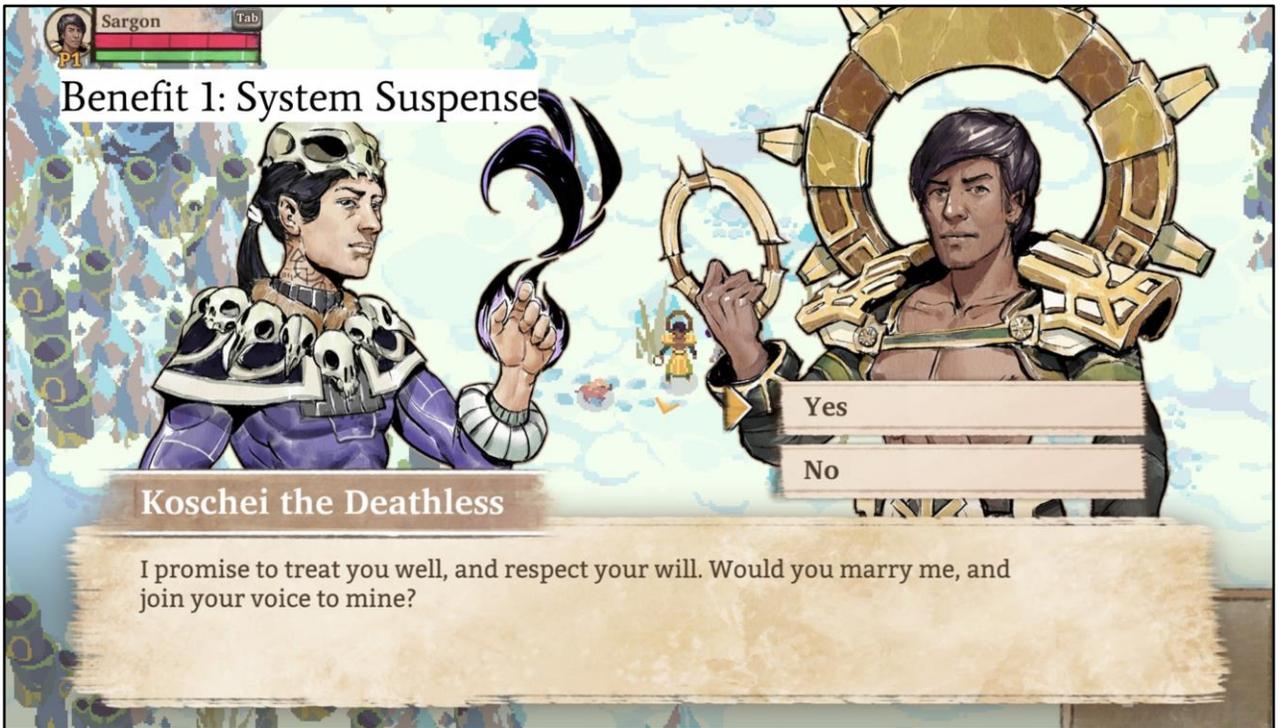
09. Good Design is environmentally friendly.



10. Good Design is as little design as possible.



But I believe we should sometimes intentionally embrace well-designed inelegance more intentionally in order to maximize those benefits, particularly in our medium, where players are interactively building a model of how the world works as they play. These 5 in particular feel counter-productive if we ever want to cultivate curiosity.



System Suspense is the emotional state when you're not sure what outcomes a decision might have, and what outputs the system might be capable of. It's a unique pleasure of anticipation, and worth taking the time to extend. (Example: NPC interactions can have very different results. most just give a stat point, but some have extensive multi-point plot lines, some appear in your camp, some create followers, one unlocks speaking to ghosts, etc)



Existential Wonder: extended even further, the player may be shocked at the lengths a game can go to offer experiences they never imagined could all be in the same game, such as the many genre-shifts of NieR and NieR Automata

Benefit 3: Unexpected Pleasures



Unexpected Pleasures: if your player started playing hoping for an RPG, and you gave them a fully-featured golf game (Dark Cloud 2), they might be surprised. But if the golf is deep and high-quality, maybe it's a lure they wouldn't have tried and can fall in love with, which they never would have tried if it hadn't been a surprise, like a mountainside crevasse you're happy to get lost in



Finally, the aforementioned surprise and wonder are deep emotions that can stick around long after intellectual interest or plot arcs end. Your game is more likely to develop a cult following if people have memories of fond bewilderment, when an invisible wall turns out to be a secret door to a previously unimaginable system or bit of content, especially if it continues deepening and exceeding expectations for hundreds of hours, like Dwarf Fortress or other complex simulations. Easier said than done, but a noble goal.

Benefit 4: Emotional Attachment



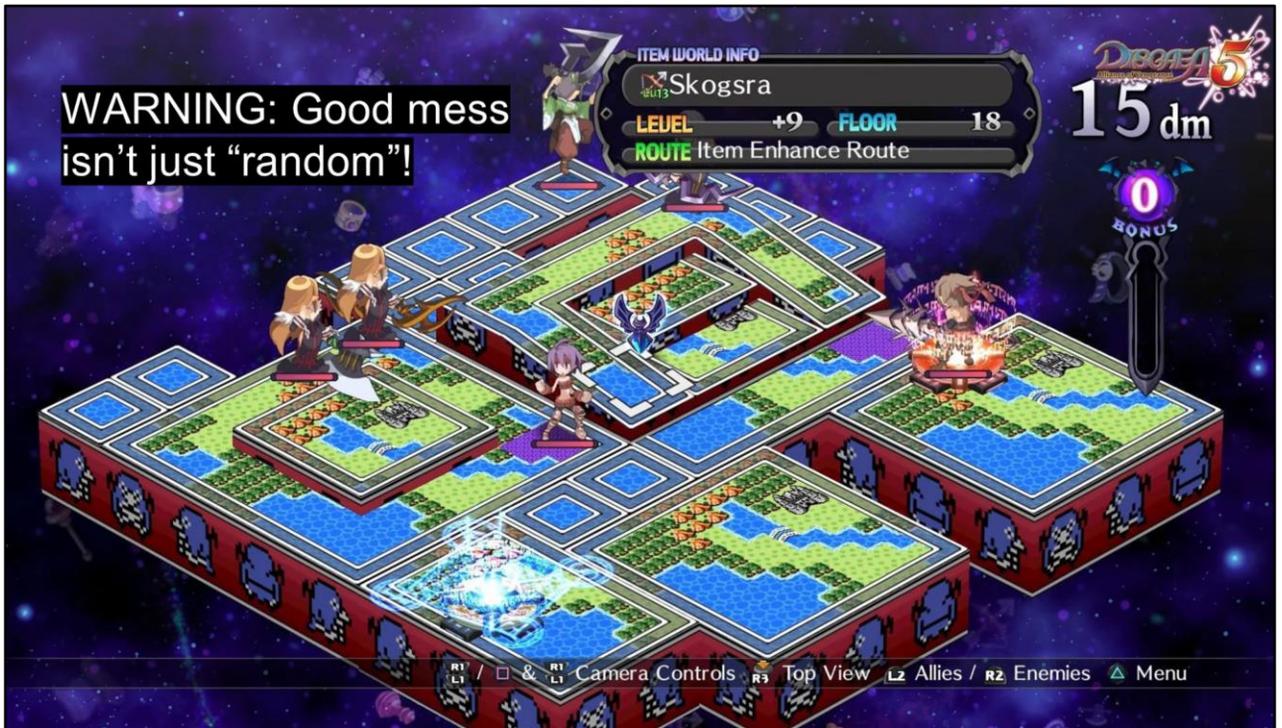
even is just an unexpected moment for player expression can also help build emotional attachment. Dancing was (mechanically) a completely meaningless activity in Moon Hunters -- the game never acknowledged its existence. But as a multiplayer game, players used this for various purposes and expressions, which statistics and classic feedback loops would undermine.



At this point you might be wondering what the downsides are. I'll admit this anti-elegance attitude has its dangers. First, not all bugs are features.



I don't just mean leave bugs in there! that's not good mess! I mean sure, some bugs ARE features, but please don't take this as permission to leave your game broken and gross.



many designers will create mess accidentally through inattention, impatience, or lack of self-control, which is unlikely to have a positive effect. don't use this rule as an excuse not to understand what you're doing, or not to finish something you start. DO follow your playful impulse and use intuition, but DON'T close your eyes and 'do something random' because you're restless. Example: if in the middle of Moon Hunters we cut to a first-person shooter, that might be memorable but it wouldn't be meaningful. Instead, Disgaea item worlds depicted here are a crevasse that fully complement the themes and pleasures of the main game.



WARNING: Underline, don't undermine

When mess is executed poorly or unintentionally it can create deep incoherence and actually undermine your themes and meaning in the rest of the game. what is your game trying to say? this is a new way to say it, not a way to talk over yourself. the bladder in Death Stranding for example is a completely unnecessary bit of non-gameplay, but it does add to the sense of life simulation AND gives me new, conflicted feelings about my relationship with the world I'm traveling across, which is entirely coherent.



Similarly, if in Boyfriend Dungeon you could have a date that lets you fight bare-fisted without any weapons, and that was a way to complete the game, it might be interesting and subvert player expectations, but it'd contradict the central themes of 'We're stronger together' emphasized in the rest of the game, unless very carefully resolved and handled.

WARNING: Beware mess creep



It's easy to overscope! Beware! Mess can be costly, especially if you don't re-use existing tech in smart ways. Sometimes even the smallest change can feel messy and surprising. Example: player attacks in Moon Hunters normally don't have friendly fire, but we just unchecked that flag for one unlockable character to emphasize his more selfish angle, and labeled him type Traitor. This type of character variety is so standard now that it no longer seems like mess, but maybe you can go even further, if you challenge your own assumptions and embroider on what is 'normal' in your game.

Make a (good) *Mess*

Tanya X. Short



Sorry Mr. Rams, but I personally am more attached to games I play that have some asymmetry, some surprises, and some loose ends. I prefer my games to be shaggy, and craggy, and baggy, not just smooth and efficient.

Thank you.

TANYA X. SHORT

**Lead Designer
Kitfox Games
@tanyaxshort**

BETH LAPENSEE

**Narrative Director
Twin Suns**

Our next speaker is a game designer, writer and artist who has worked on numerous award winning titles including When Rivers Were Trails, Thunderbird Strike, and Invaders

She has also written numerous comics and has worked extensively in education of all kinds.

She is now the Narrative Director working on a big new game with Twin Suns

Beth LaPensée!

RULES OF THE GAME - GDC 2023

APPROACH GAMES AS CHARACTERS

Beth LaPensée
Narrative Director, Twin Suns



Before I jump in, it's good for you all to know that I'm a writer, designer, narrative designer who comes from the school of "rules are meant to be broken." When I'm on the design end of development, I like to experiment with approaching games as characters. This is a breakdown of how to use this approach as a (very flexible) rule and what can happen when playing with it.

This is the part where I'm obligated to define what I mean when I say, "Gaaaaaaames!"

So, what am I actually talking about when I say "games"? This can be anything as broad as the entirety of a game, or more specific, like the player experience or even individual levels or maps.



And what do I mean when I say "characters"?

"Character" generally encompasses someone's (or something's) personality, perspectives, experiences, how they express themselves, or how they feel (which can both mean how the player feels about the character and also a character's tangible feelings internally).



When I dive into working on a game, this approach is also merged with an Anishinaabe worldview, which recognizes all forms of matter as beings with "character." This extends the idea of character from just people to anything from land to water to stars and more.

Rules are for breaking.

When you put all of this together, it means looking at a game from the lens of how you'd approach developing a character—thinking through their personality and imagining them in the way you might do with personas.

What can happen with this rule? I encourage you to find out on your own, and in the meantime, I'll share some examples with you.

**"The level is the most important character in your game."
— John Romero**

- Levels can:
 - Be responsive to players.
 - Have unique personalities.
 - Reflect those personalities in design, sound, art, VFX.



I'll hone in first on levels as characters.

As John Romero says: "The level is the most important character in your game." His design and code reflects his worldview as a Mexican and Yaqui developer who is self-taught. To Romero, levels can be responsive to players, have their own unique personalities, and reflect those personalities in design including level design and mechanics, as well as sound, art, VFX, and really all that makes up what a level is.

So how does this actually shake out?



In DOOM, levels were approached with the intention of being intimidating characters. These levels have their own personalities as they interact with the player, and especially when they reward (or punish) the player. For Romero, what he's getting at is the aim of seeing levels as animate characters instead of as inanimate assets.

Of course, it takes a team to support this goal, with art and sound as contributors. It also took Romero's unique worldview for our understanding of space in games to be expanded and lead us as players to the first person shooter and eventually DOOM.



Today, players respond to DOOM with a feeling of nostalgia. To elaborate on his earlier point, Romero also says, to quote, "Different environmental designs reveal unique personalities, and the flow through the level is a conversation between the player and the world." End quote. DOOM evokes nostalgia because its design was concerned with how players co-create their experience.



With players in mind, the "Approach Games as Characters" rule comes with a disclaimer!

It is in fact possible for experiments with this rule to result in a game that goes up against expectations, which is what happened with Daikatana. Romero set out with this approach for each individual level in Daikatana, which meant that he got to experiment with many different personalities and their resulting mechanics. It also meant that some players felt the game was too hard due to constantly changing gameplay.

Does this disclaimer mean don't take the risk of viewing each level as an individual character?

Experiment!

No! Just know your motivation and be comfortable to stand by it, whatever the outcome is.

Okay, rules can be helpful parameters.

Personally I don't go that far with this rule because I'd just go all over the place. I do want that tangible feeling of individuality in how levels express character though, so I approach levels as a family or community of characters, where they get to be individuals but they're also related.



I've also started with seeing a game as an individual character as a whole and then afterwards looked at the individual levels as their own characters. In Thunderbird Strike, you fly as a thunderbird striking lightning down at those big giant mining trucks and mining operations. You can also, by the way, strike lightning at the bones of animals to revive them.



When I first ran the game by one of my mentors Allen Turner, he pointed out a potential flaw in my design choices—there was nothing to actually stop you as the thunderbird, no opposing force. He didn't see it inherently as a flaw, he just wanted me to recognize that what I was choosing would be up against player expectations, much like Romero had experienced. I decided to leave it the way it was, like Romero, because I had landed there from looking at the game more broadly as its own character, reflecting a thunderbird. ... And like... A thunderbird would just win, that's just a fact.

**"Think in terms of experiences."
— Allen Turner**

- Games can:
 - Encapsulate a character.
 - Reflect that character's personality through design.



Thunderbird Strike as a character is bold, determined, and like a caretaker who gives you choices and then leaves it up to you to just go ahead and figure it out. Anything that can be destroyed or restored in all levels has the same point value, so there's no distinction of what's the "right" or "wrong" or even strategic choice. It's up to you, it's your journey. The difference in this game is that the outcome is a high score that you can strive to beat by replaying. For me, it works better to think of a game as a whole character and to break that down into how that influences tone, mechanics, sound, art, animation, and writing overall so that your game can encapsulate a character and reflect that character's personality.

"GRANDMOTHER" MECHANICS



This character approach for Thunderbird Strike was influenced by my work on the singing game Honour Water and the Anishinaabe language game Mikan, which were both designed with what Jessica Hammer, myself, and others call "grandmother mechanics." Like a grandmother (or at least a nice one), instead of giving negative feedback to the player when they aren't successful, they're told to try again. The win conditions are supportive, like a warm grandmother who encourages you to just keep going.



Thunderbird Strike, on the other hand, isn't quite like a grandmother. The mechanics feel more like an Auntie who's there for you when you need her but otherwise she's like... go figure it out yourself. (It's what's good for you.)

IN THE NAME OF EXPERIMENTS



Level 1 - Phase 1



Level 1 - Phase 2



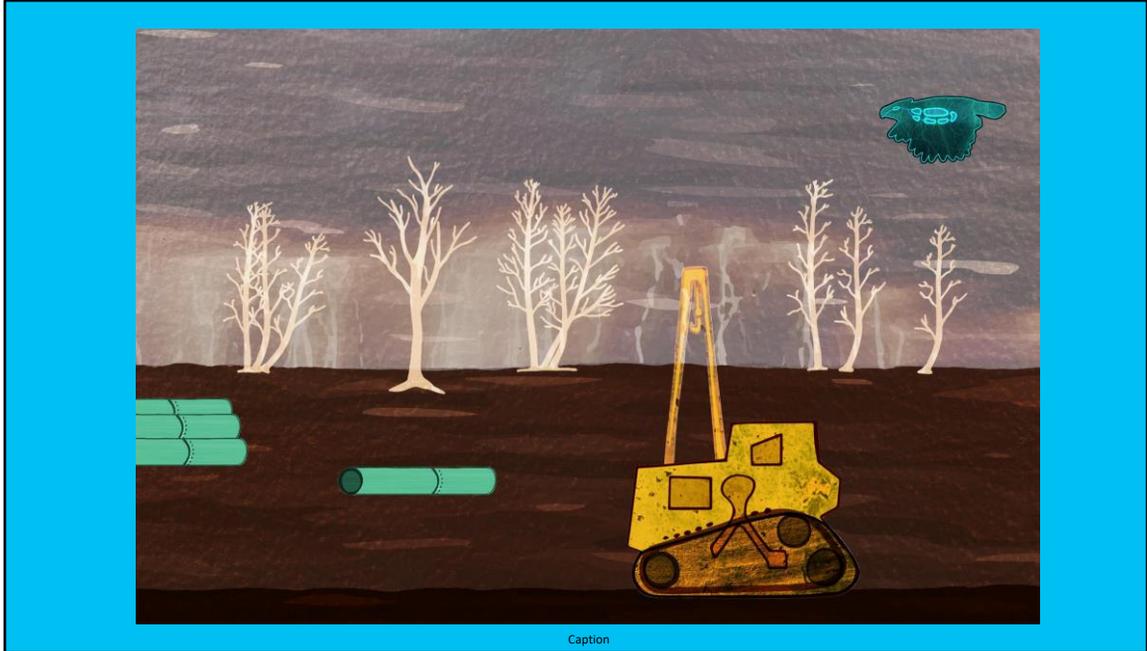
Level 1 - Phase 3



Level 1 - Phase 4

The levels in Thunderbird Strike relate to the lands that the game takes place on and the lived experiences of those lands as characters. The backgrounds are created from photos of real tires from mining trucks and water that has been harmed by oil extraction.

Of course, Thunderbird Strike has an advantage when it comes to being able to experiment with this rule since it was designed for Indigenous community members and not to sell, but that meant that some experiments went awry. Instead of tiled background art in a side scroller, which would make sense, each level's background has a sequence of up to 40 unique assets. I... wouldn't recommend that.



Caption

But it does support levels as characters to put that amount of attention into how they feel. These personalities are also influenced by the placement of mining structures, vehicles, animals, and people. Design included balancing the gameplay and the ultimate possible score while also reflecting the stories of these places.

Thank you for listening!

RELATED TALKS

"Extending Characters into Mechanics," Stephen Trinh, *Game Developer*, 2020

<https://www.gamedeveloper.com/disciplines/ffix---extending-characters-into-mechanics>

"Game Mechanics for Storytelling in *Monument Valley 2*," Lea Schonfelder, GDCVault, 2018

<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1025136/Game-Mechanics-for-Storytelling-in>

CONTACT

beth@twinsunscorp.net

What came out of the design process for Thunderbird Strike is a game that breaks rules, not for the sake of breaking rules, but out of the fun of experimenting with the rule to "approach games as characters."

You too can apply this rule, keeping in mind that it's flexible and open to interpretation with lots of different possibilities. I look forward to the ways in which you experiment with this rule and what you end up with.

BETH LAPENSEE

**Narrative Director
Twin Suns**

JAMIE CHENG

CEO
Klei Entertainment

Our next speaker likes to keep his bio short, but it is no less impressive –

He's the founder and CEO of Vancouver based Klei Entertainment,

There he's played a key role in important titles like Don't Starve, Invisible Inc, Mark of the Ninja, Oxygen Not Included and Griftlands.

Jamie Cheng!

Don't Smooth out the Beginning

I want to talk a bit about something I feel pretty strongly about, which is that the beginning of a game experience shouldn't be smooth and without friction.



Game developers get the most feedback from the first hour of play

And, it's very easy to end up focusing on the beginning of the game. Here's a graph of people who give you feedback, and how long they've played. Almost everyone is within the first 2 hrs.

Our friends are busy
We haven't finished the game
We hear more from players who bounce
By definition more people play the beginning
It's easier to give early UX feedback

There's tons of reasons for this! Here are a few

Our goal is NOT...

To get players to play as long as possible

To remove all complaints

To teach all the mechanics

but the question is, what's the purpose of the beginning of the game?

Our goal IS...

Keep players long enough...
To teach players what the game is about

If they bounce after that...
Let's stop wasting their time

The goal is to teach players what the game is about, and set you up for success for the rest of the game. Often, friction, frustration, and unanswered questions are EXACTLY what the player needs, it's a part of learning!

And least for me, I want to waste as little of your time as possible. If you're not going to enjoy this game, I'd rather you find out sooner.

One Failure Two Successes

So let's get into examples.



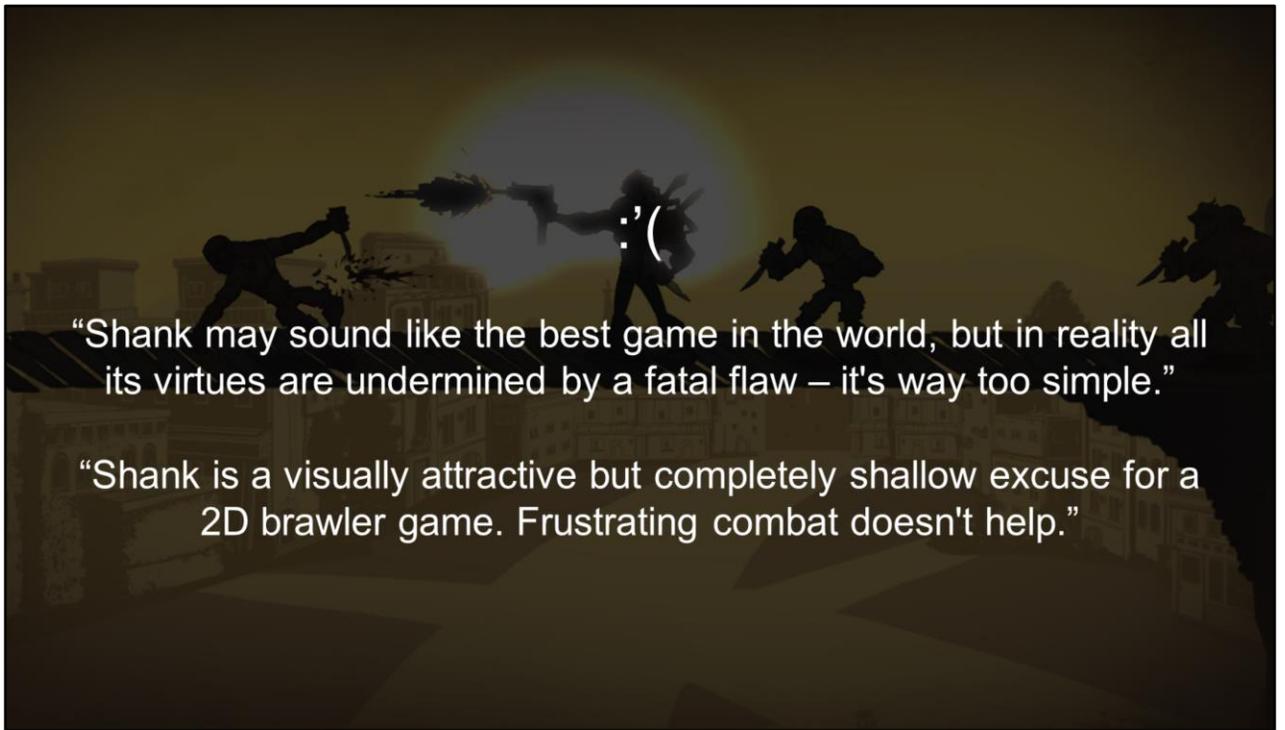
Shank is one of our earliest titles. It was many things, but to me what it was mostly is my own stark failure in game design. We tuned the CRAP out of the first 2 levels. We had all our friends play it, and whenever they had a problem doing a combo, we made it easier. By the end, you could press ANYTHING and it felt amazing.

The first level felt GREAT!
Mindless button mashing



But soon either...

It didn't matter what button you pressed OR
We had to reteach you how to play



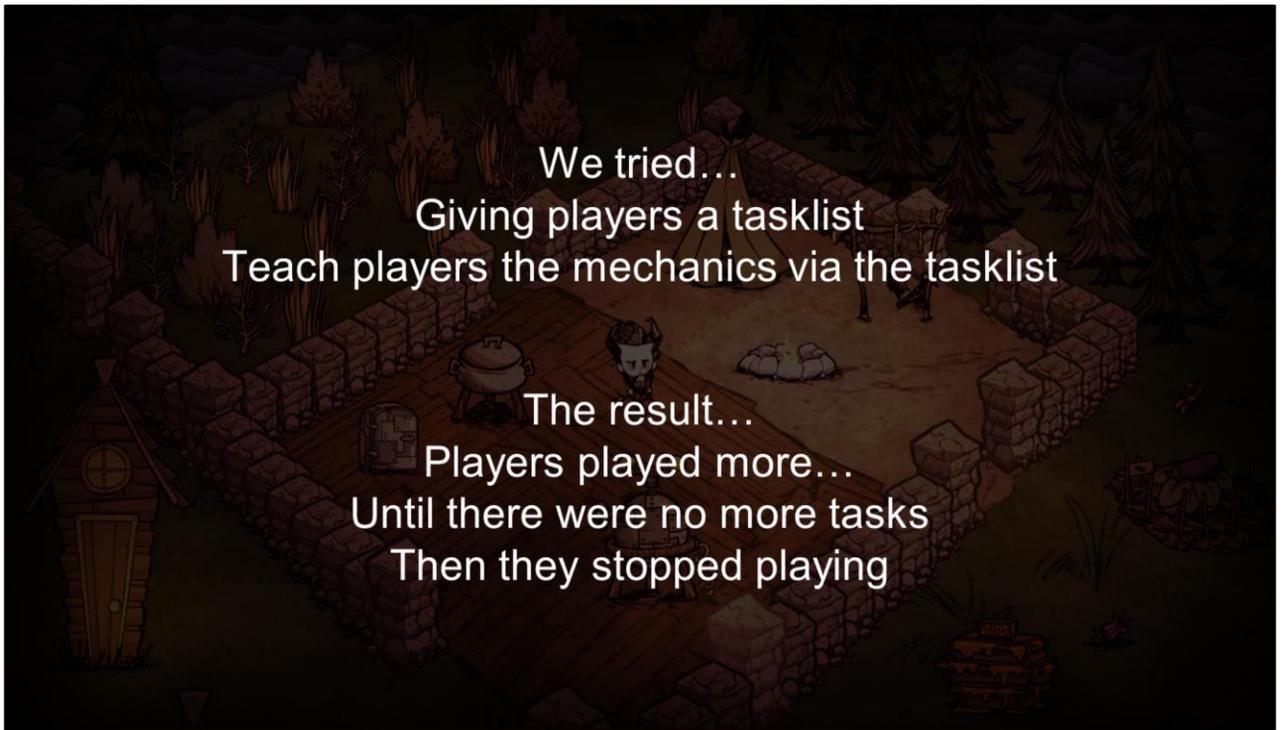
“Shank may sound like the best game in the world, but in reality all its virtues are undermined by a fatal flaw – it's way too simple.”

“Shank is a visually attractive but completely shallow excuse for a 2D brawler game. Frustrating combat doesn't help.”

Making the tutorial easier actively made the rest of the game worse. We needed to use the tutorial to teach them how to learn, instead we painted ourselves in a corner.



Uncompromising survival game, where we don't give you any goals, and you have to figure it out. When we first playtested it, we thought we screwed up, people gave us this sort of feedback



We tried...
Giving players a tasklist
Teach players the mechanics via the tasklist

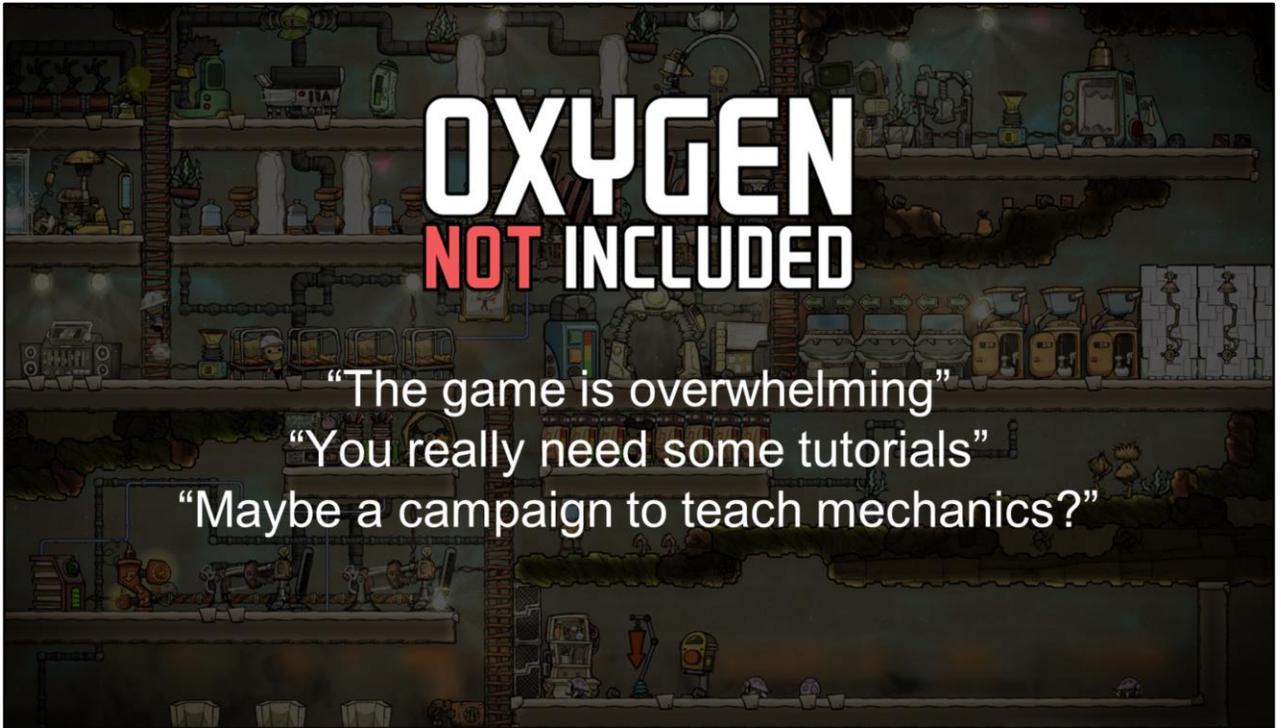
The result...
Players played more...
Until there were no more tasks
Then they stopped playing

We accidentally replaced the intrinsic reward of learning to play with the extrinsic reward of completing the tasklist. THE TUTORIAL WAS A DIFFERENT GAME THAN THE ACTUAL GAME



Instead we...

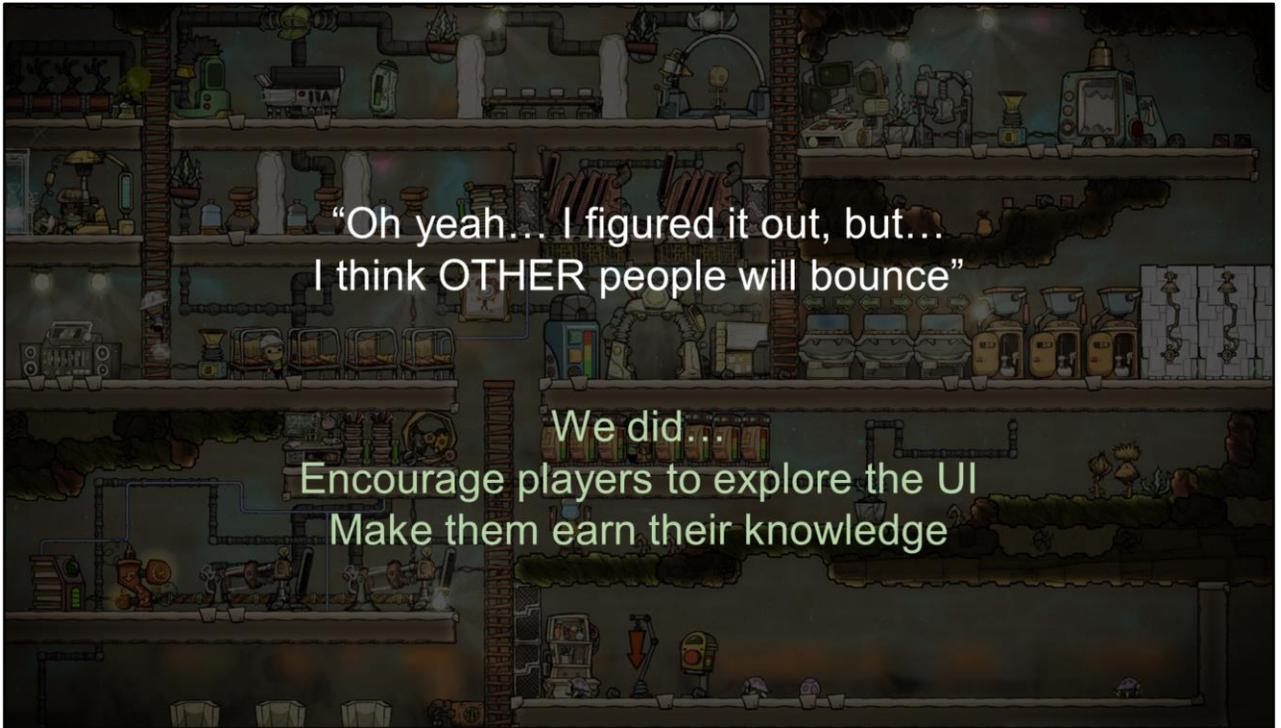
Told them they needed to figure it out
Gave clear feedback on cause / effect
Worked on UX to teach them when they failed



ONI: colony simulation game where everything is simulated! It's EXTREMELY complex.

We focused on giving you the tools to learn how to play. It just wasn't feasible, enjoyable, or in the spirit of the game to tutorialize the mechanics. It's part of the game to discover how things work.

And... we we barraged with feedback on how hard the game was.



We noticed players came back anyway! In our initial tests we had something like D1 retention of 75%. So we asked what happened.

The game made them feel smart. So we shipped it.

Some guidelines

- The “tutorial” should be the same game as the game
- Everything you do in the tutorial informs what the rest of the game is about
- Make room for player growth (no need to explain everything)
- The middle and end of the game is at least as important as the beginning
- You WILL get A LOT more feedback about the beginning
- Players are resilient if they can feel there’s an interesting experience

JAMIE CHENG

**CEO
Klei Entertainment**

ALEISSIA LAIDACKER

Head of Product & Technology
Open Meta
@Aleissia

Our next speaker is known for her experience in a wide range of design experiences.

She got her starts in games, working in technology, AI and gameplay at Ubisoft on games including the Assassin's Creed franchise

She's held titles Head of Developer Experience at Magic Leap and Global Director of Creative Technology at The Mill.

She's been working in the AR, XR and Metaverse spaces to bring creative and technically innovative way to push interaction and

storytelling.

Aleissia Laidacker!



Hey Gang! I'm Aleissia Laidacker. Today, my Rule of the Game is to "Expand Your Game Design Horizons".

We as game designers need to look towards new fields to flex our skills - places we might not expect - but that absolutely need game designers.

I'll be diving into some examples of work i've done that might fall outside of traditional games, but where I've had a lot of fun incorporating game design principles.



IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

Back in 2012 I became pretty obsessed with the early rise of Immersive Experiences...

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES



Sleep No More



Meow Wolf



Secret Cinema

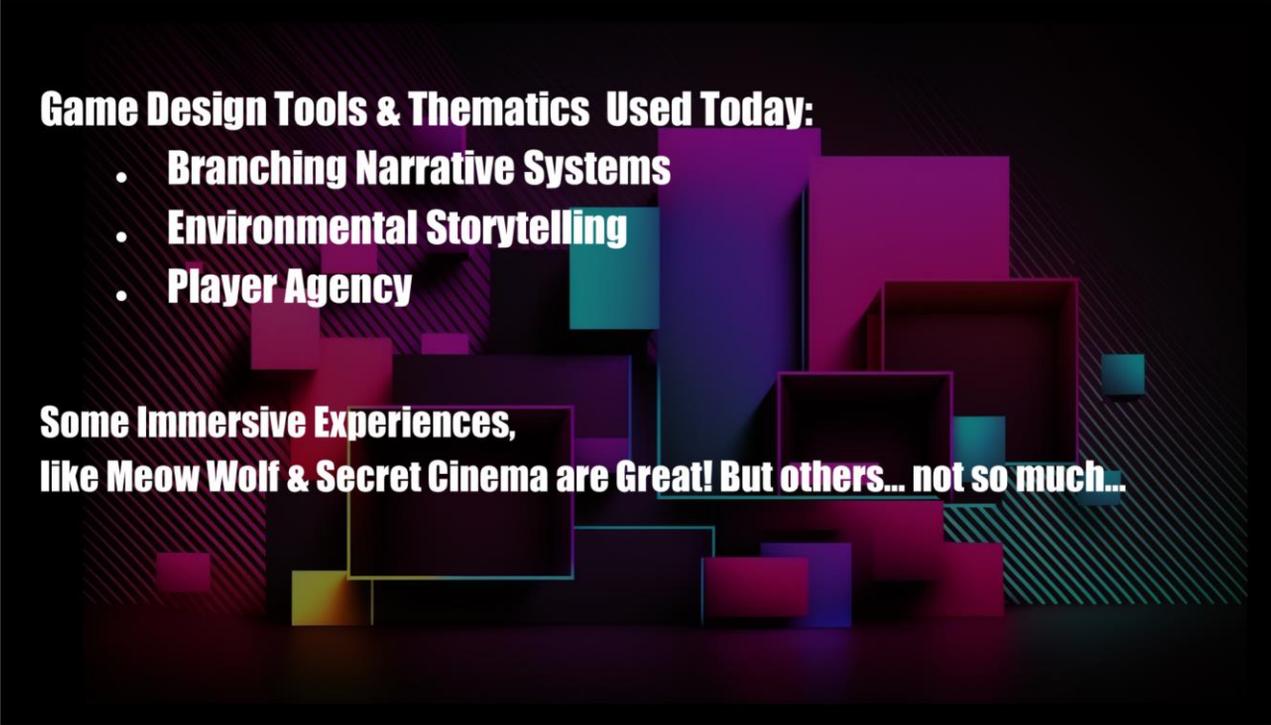
Sleep No More and Meow Wolf really inspired me to see a whole new way of using Game Design for real-world experiences.

Secret Cinema is one of my fav Immersive Experience, where you get assigned a role to play and missions to solve inside custom built movie sets...

When I went to the one for Blade Runner, I was assigned the role of a performer but I was also a secret replicant! While my friend was an investigator tasked to investigate and arrest the replicants.

When I went to the one for Stranger Things, I had to solve a series of puzzles to find the secret code, so the workers at "The Mall" would open up a hidden vent shaft I had to crawl through, that led me to "The Upside Down". And this year, I went to the one for Guardians of the Galaxy where I actually had to put

together an old school Mix Tape, and used it to barter and trade with the alien residents to lead my team to victory!



Game Design Tools & Thematics Used Today:

- **Branching Narrative Systems**
- **Environmental Storytelling**
- **Player Agency**

Some Immersive Experiences, like Meow Wolf & Secret Cinema are Great! But others... not so much...

Well designed immersive experiences incorporate GOOD GAME DESIGN. Using techniques like environmental storytelling and branching narrative systems just to name a few.

But many of the Immersive Experiences out there DONT! Causing their experiences to feel boring or confusing...

Game Designers Needed!

- **Better Replayability**
- **Progression System Design**
- **Better Signs and Feedback**
- **Leveraging Gaming & Immersive Technologies**

There's a big need imo for Game Design help to think about Gameplay, Replayability and better UX for these experiences.

Meow Wolf is the only one I know of where an RFID card is given to every visitor. They can tap their card at terminals to check in and view their progress. This allows users to see how many missions they've solved. Encouraging visitors to come back if they didn't have time to check everything out the first time.

MIXED FLOUR - Copenhagen, Denmark (2018)



Introducing an Immersive Design Company focused on creating location-based experiences that bring together Food, Gaming, and Interaction Design

**Co-Founders:
Aleissia Laidacker &
Anita Sarkeesian**

Back in 2018, Anita Sarkeesian and I founded a company called Mixed Flour to build Immersive Experiences that combine Game Design with Food.



We hosted our first event with chefs from NOMA who were opening a new restaurant in Copenhagen. We worked with the chefs for months to find ways to incorporate game design and storytelling into a multi-course tasting menu and narrative.

In our experience, we used projection mapping and environmental storytelling to immerse our dinners into the story.

We used AR where the diners had to Forage and Hunt for their food. Only once enough virtual mushrooms, veggies and a deer were collected, did the chefs reveal the matching food courses to eat.

The dessert however, was a bit trickier. Where the whole restaurant turned into an escape room! We used food elements to hide clues in. Candles to unlock invisible ink messages. And

everyone had to work together to unlock the final mystery, and dessert.

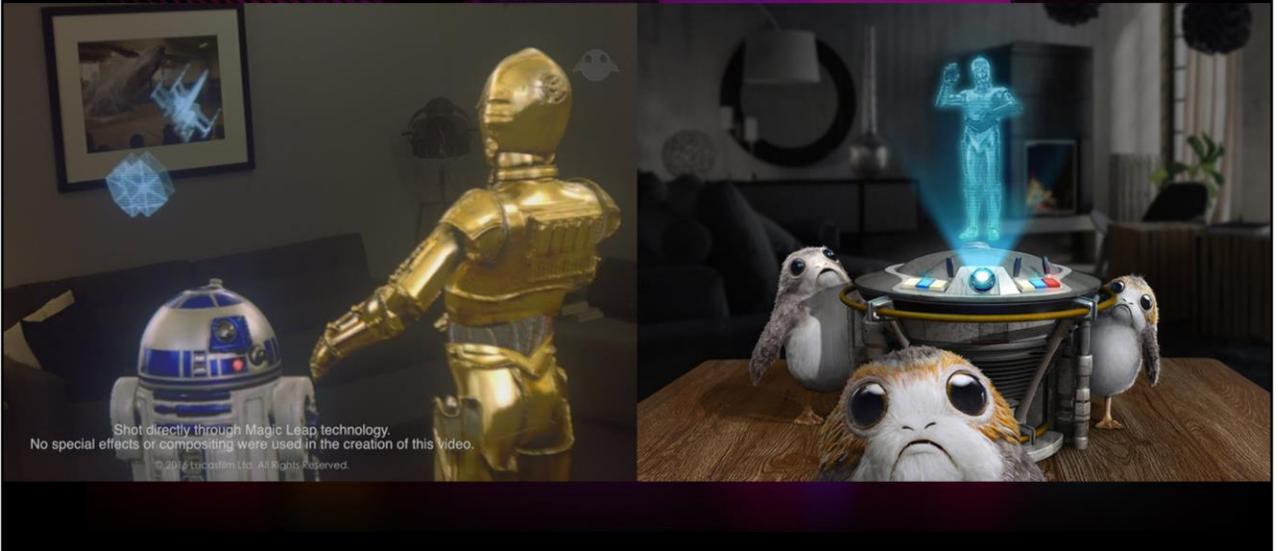
This was one of the most fun experiences I got to work on. And I loved seeing game design used in a VERY non-traditional way!



AUGMENTED REALITY

Back in 2017, I decided to dive into the world of AR and joined Magic Leap.

AUGMENTED REALITY - ILM / STAR WARS



One of my favorite projects I got to work on was the the PORGS project with ILM.

We did a few projects for Star Wars but I really loved the PORGS GONE WILD - IOT Project.

We had AR Porgs interact with various IOT elements in a living room They would jump around the space, turning on a Sonos speaker to play the star wars theme. They would then turn on your TV to start watching star wars. They'd turned on/off smart lamps and IOT connect fans. Showing that AR not only can and should interact with real world environments but can ALSO interact with the real world through IOT devices.

AUGMENTED REALITY - AR MARIO KART



A very different kind of AR example that I love is what Nintendo built a few years ago.

Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit uses a pass-thru camera to capture a person's home and the players get to drive their carts through AR obstacles via the switch.



AR is still very new but really needs great game designers to think of fun and novel ways to use AR.

If there's one suggestion I'd give, it's for designers to check out Niantic's Lightship AR SDK and the 8th Wall platforms. They are SUCH amazing and easy to use tools to play around with so you too can build your own, World-Scale AR Games!

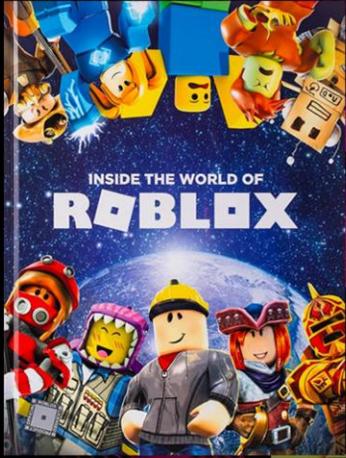


THE METaverse...

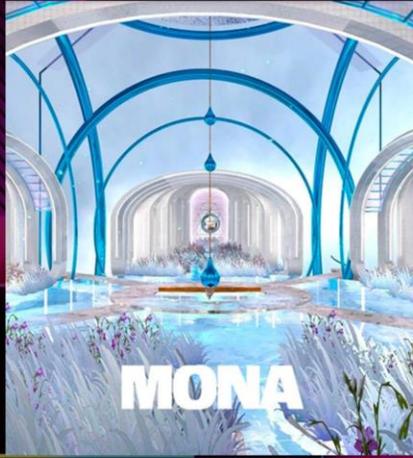
...yes... I know...

Alright, moving onto the most overused term ever... The Metaverse.

METVERSE PLATFORMS



Roblox
58M Daily Active Users



Mona
> 10K Active Creators



Decentraland
30 Monthly Active Users :(

Over the past few years it seems everyone is building their own Metaverse.

There's some really great ones out there!

Roblox have built some VERY Creator Friendly Tools that kids and adults alike love to use!

Mona is a great platform that exposes things like Unity's Visual Scripting. So any creator can build interactive games and publish them to the web, for free, and for anybody to play.

But then there are MANY metaverse worlds out there with nothing to do in them.... Some of these virtual worlds may look great! But without proper gameplay, there's no reason for users to ever go back to them...

METaverse EXPERIENCES - CONCERTS



Fortnite
Ariana Grande 27M



Fortnite
Travis Scott 46M



League of Legends
The Mill x WaveXR 100M+

Last year, I got to work on Pentakill's Immersive Concert with League of Legends, and we we got over 100M attendees! One of the reasons that people said they enjoyed the experience was because it was interactive. A Metaverse Experience NEEDS Interaction! And it's not something we see in all of these experiences.

THE METAVERSE NEEDS GAME DESIGNERS!!!!

- **Seriously Though....**
- **Motivation Systems**
- **Progression System**
- **Economy Systems**
- **Basic Interaction Design**
- **.... Just plain old Gameplay Design would make such a difference!**

One of the reasons I like working on “Metaverse Projects” is because I get to work with Fashion Designers, Brands, Musicians, Artists! The kind of people I don’t typically get to work with in traditional games. I’m personally happy to see everyone jump on the metaverse bandwagon BUT people need to stop spitting out virtual worlds with nothing to do? The metaverse needs gameplay... Progression systems.... Long-term motivation design....

I’d love to see more Game Designers get involved here and have companies invest in building out proper interaction and design systems for their players. I don’t think “The Metaverse” is going away... so there’s def a need for more game design love in many of these worlds.



WEB3

OK, the Controversy Topic! WEB3 :)

Crypto, NFTs and Web3 have had A LOT of debate and controversy over the past few years...

But with ANY new form of technology, there's always going to be VERY uncomfortable moments at the beginning...

REMEMBER WHEN...

- **GAMIFICATION**
- **FREE-TO-PLAY**
- **EPISODIC GAMES**
- **PERMA-DEATH**
- **EARLY KICKSTARTER PROMISES**
- **etc...**

DO Y'ALL REMEMBER WHEN SOME OF THESE CONCEPTS WERE INTRODUCED...

Not everyone was on board. BUT when the RIGHT people use NEW Technology and Platforms in Honest, Fun and Novel Ways, there's possibilities for completely new and exciting game experiences to arise..

Web3 Technology Enables (many things...)

- OWNERSHIP
- INTEROPERABILITY
- PUBLIC HISTORY

Crucible



EMERGENCE

MONA



L¹

I have been working with a number of companies over the past year, building Tools and SDKs for game devs to leverage Web3 in easy ways.

I see a lot of opportunities with this new tech. Web3 is far from perfect but there are great companies trying to build some really amazing new tech for games!

Tools so users can actually OWN the assets they use and build in games. Templates and standards so content can be Interoperable across any game world!



NFT **USER OWNED** **GAME OBJECTS**

I personally try not to use the word NFT much anymore, and I just call them User Owned Game Objects or Collectibles.

As web3 tech becomes more and more adopted, we really need great game designers to think about the possibility space for the future kinds of games that could be built. Giving more control to players to own their assets, to enable more tools for user generated content and for Player Driven stories to utilize these assets across different game worlds in interesting ways.

The image features the text "AI TOOLS" in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered on a dark background. The background is filled with abstract, glowing lines and shapes in shades of purple, blue, and teal, creating a sense of motion and digital energy. The text is the primary focus, standing out sharply against the complex, light-filled backdrop.

AI TOOLS

Final Topic is AI. Everyone is talking AI these days. The Good The Bad The Ugly.

Fun story, back at GDC 2018, I remember MANY of us who spoke at the AI Summit kept echoing the same sentiment. Where is the innovation in Game AI? Why do we keep seeing the same scripted AI tools being used, with VERY little innovation in the AI Field? Well AI Designers, the time has come...

CHATGPT USE CASES FOR GAME DESIGN

DIALOGUE SYSTEMS

ChatGPT can be used to create a dialogue system in the game. Players can interact with non-playable characters (NPCs) in the game and have conversations with them...

QUEST SYSTEMS

ChatGPT can be used to generate quests for players to complete. The game can ask players to complete certain tasks, and ChatGPT can be used to generate hints or clues to help them complete the quests.

STORYTELLING

ChatGPT can be used to create a dynamic and immersive storytelling experience in the game. The game can generate stories based on the player's actions and decisions...

AI-CONTROLLED CHARACTERS

ChatGPT can be used to control AI characters in the game. The AI characters can use ChatGPT to communicate with the player and make decisions based on the player's actions.

This is just something I asked in ChatGPT the other day, to see how could GPT4 could be used for Game Design.

And it gave me a few use cases for Dialogue Systems, Quest Systems, Storytelling and NPC Systems...

ChatGPT

“Can you write me a simple video game npc style monologue to a hero sending them on a quest”

Greetings, adventurer!

I have a task that requires a hero's touch. As you may know, our village has long been plagued by a terrible curse. Our crops wither, our livestock fall ill, and our people suffer. But I believe there is hope. Legends tell of a powerful artifact, hidden in a nearby cave, that has the power to break the curse once and for all.

I must warn you, though - the cave is filled with dangers. You'll face fierce beasts, treacherous traps, and ancient guardians. But I have faith that you're up to the challenge. Should you succeed in obtaining the artifact, you'll be handsomely rewarded - not just with gold, but with the gratitude of our entire village.

Please, hero, will you help us break the curse and bring prosperity back to our land? The fate of our people rests in your hands.

I then asked it to write me a simple NPC monologue to send a hero on a quest and actually got some decent results....

ChatGPT

“Can you give the same monologue but as if you’re scared of the hero”

G-greetings, adventurer.

I-I have a task that requires a hero’s bravery. Our village is cursed, and our people suffer. B-but there is hope. Legends tell of a powerful artifact, hidden in a nearby cave, that can break the curse.

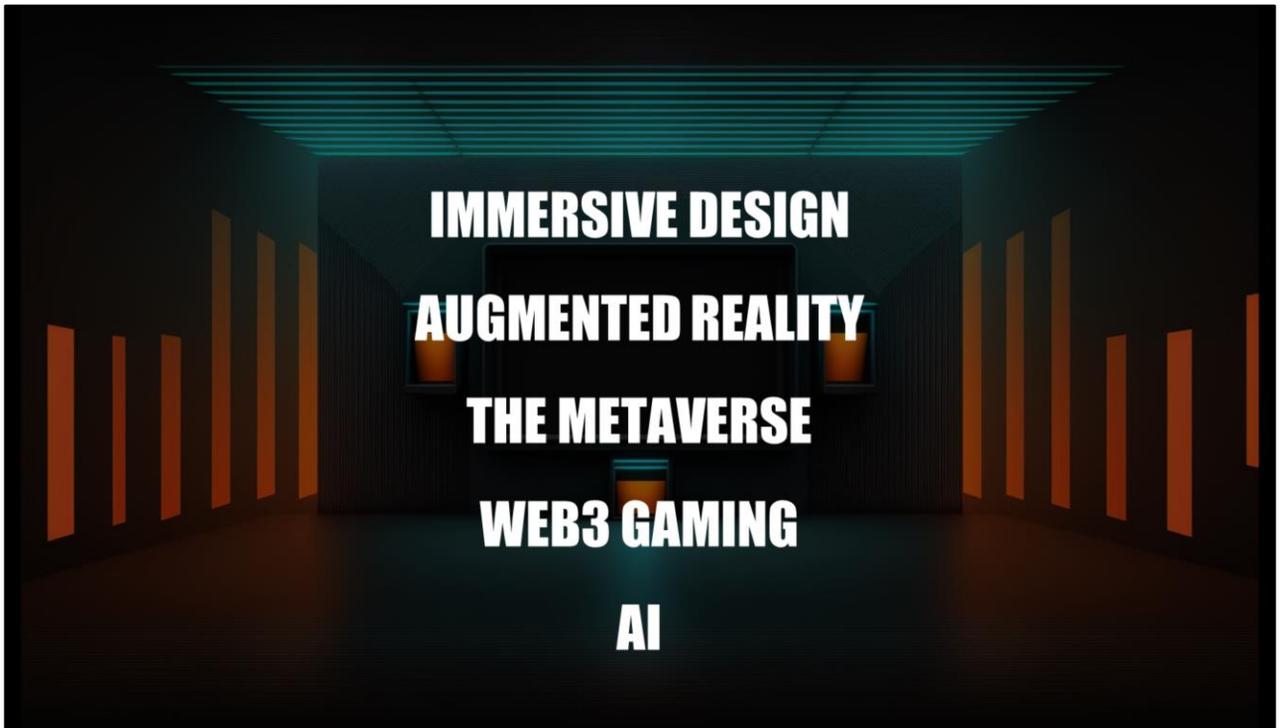
B-but... the cave is incredibly dangerous. Filled with beasts, traps, and ancient guardians. O-only a brave hero would dare to enter. That’s why I’ve come to you.

P-please forgive me if I seem nervous - it’s not that I don’t trust you, but... well, heroes like yourself have a reputation for being... unpredictable. But if you could retrieve the artifact for us, it would mean everything to our village. We would reward you handsomely, of course - with gold, and... and with our eternal gratitude.

S-so, hero, what do you say? Will you help us break the curse, and bring peace to our troubled land? P-please, be careful in the cave. And... and come back safely

Then I adapted the questions to generate the same monologue but with the hero being scared....

These are just really simple examples. Does this mean AI is going to make a whole game for us without the need for game designers? No, this still need to be plugged into world states, game states and everything we need for a robust game. But it certainly opens up interesting avenues to have loads of replayability? To allow more creators to build large scale games WITHOUT needing monster teams. Or just to spit ball ideas back and forth with an AI.

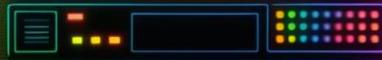


So, I feel like my last 7 years or so may have been spent outside of traditional games. I decided to explore new avenues and I feel i've really grown as a designer!

So I encourage you to Expand Your Game Design Horizons. Be Curious. Try new fields. Try out new technologies. There's a lot of fun to be had. And a lot of areas that need experts like all of you. Thank you!!

THANK YOU!

**EXPAND YOUR
"GAME DESIGN"
HORIZONS**



**ALEISSIA LAIDACKER @ALEISSIA
MAVEN XR, OPEN META ASSOCIATION, MONAVERSE, FUTUREVERSE**

ALEISSIA LAIDACKER

**Head of Product & Technology
Open Meta
@Aleissia**

RICHARD LEMARCHAND

Associate Professor
USC Games
@rich_lem

Our next speaker is an associate professor at the University of Southern California games program who has just recently published his book *A Playful Production Process for Game Designers (and Everyone)* from MIT Press

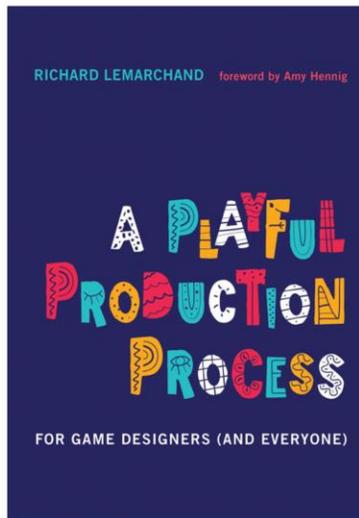
If you go back a ways, you may know him as Lead Designer on the first three *Uncharted* games, and if you go back even farther you may know him from his work on *Jak 3* and *Soul Reaver*.

More recently he has blended teaching with working on independent art projects, such as the VR installations *Phenomenology* and *The Meadow*.

And last but not least, the GDC faithful will know him as the longtime host of the GDC Microtalks session which played a part in inspiring this very session...

Richard Lemarchand!

Richard Lemarchand



Good morning, GDC, and thanks for that excellent introduction, Richard Prime.

Today I want to tell you about a game design principle that helps people to make better games to higher levels of quality, and, very importantly, without running out of time. Many of you will recognize it, though I think not too many people have a name for it.

We have a list of things that we want to implement, but:

- ...what order to build them in?
- ...is this the right stuff to build?
- ...what if it takes longer than we thought?
- ...what if we need to make changes?
- ...will the game come together at the end?

There is a group of classic problems that most game developers face. We have a long list of things that we think we want to implement to make this game. But:

- What order should we build them in?
- Is this even the right list of things to build?
- What happens if some of them take longer to build than we thought?
- What happens if we need to make changes?
- Is the game going to come together at the end?

concentric development

The answer to these questions lies in a thing called concentric development, and so my rule of the game is:

Rule:
“assemble your game concentrically”

Richard Lemarchand, USC Games

assemble your game concentrically.

I got the name “concentric development” from (CLICK)
John Spinale,



John Spinale

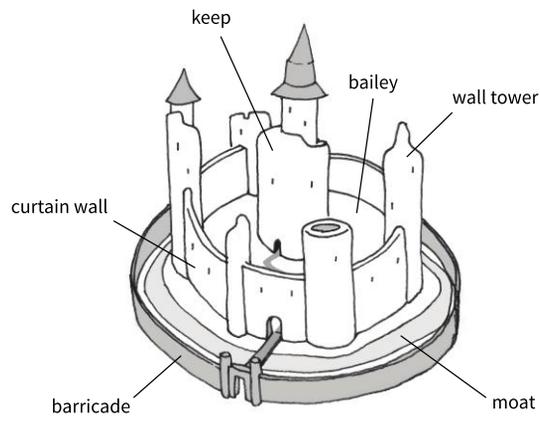
John Spinale, who I worked with at Crystal Dynamics back in the day. We were talking about how troublesome it is, when a team is working on a lot of different things all at once, and everything is half-broken all the time. We'd both noticed that on the best teams we'd been a part of, the team would focus on just a small number of core things that they were certain they wanted, and finish them to a really good level of polish, before moving on. John said, "yeah, me and my friends call that *concentric development*."



And a few years later, when I got to Naughty Dog, I was delighted to discover that they had always worked in this way, even though they didn't have a name for it.



So of course, concentric refers to enclosing shapes that share the same center.



The concentric structure of a castle

—A Playful Production Process

Castles are built concentrically with a precious thing at the core, well-defended by the layers around it.

concentric games?

hierarchies of game mechanics

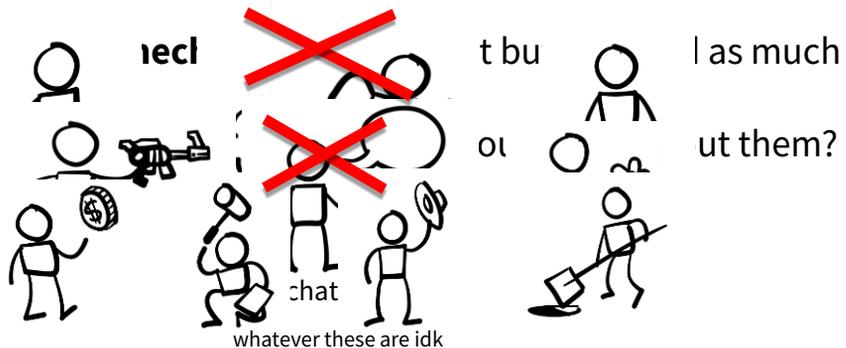
When we think about our *games*, (CLICK) we often discuss them in terms of hierarchies of game mechanics. We talk about the (CLICK) primary game mechanics

primary game mechanics – fundamental to gameplay

(including some environments, objects, characters they interact with)

secondary

tertiary

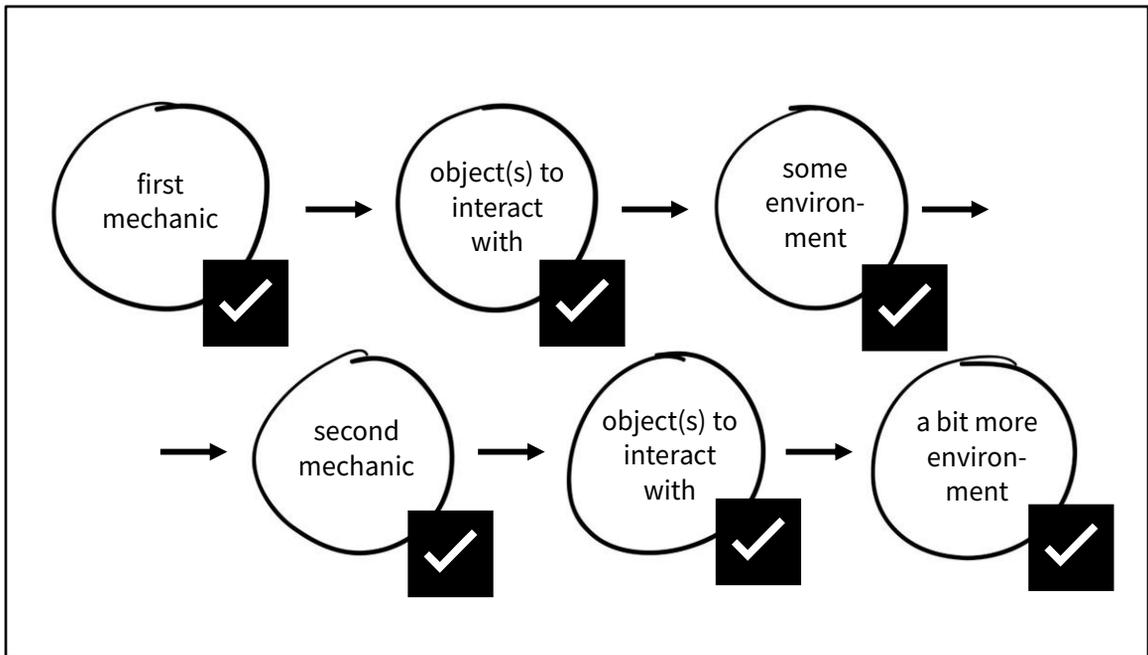


primary game mechanics, the things that are present throughout our game and provide kind of a bedrock of gameplay. These are the most fundamental interactive verbs and systems of the game, (CLICK) and also some of the elements that support them: environments, objects, and characters.

(CLICK) Then there are secondary mechanics and game elements, which are also important, and are used a lot, but not quite as much as the primary mechanics, and then (CLICK) tertiary mechanics which exist more on the

fringes of the game's design, still probably important in the grand scheme of things, but maybe we could do without them.

In concentric development, (CLICK) we don't start implementing those secondary and tertiary mechanics, until the primary core mechanics are implemented, and pretty much finished.



And we don't just slap together the mechanics we're implementing, as we would do when we're prototyping. Instead, (CLICK) we take the time to work on them, (CLICK) and the supporting game elements they interact with, (CLICK) until they are complete and polished in a shippable way, (CLICK) including some environment, and good sound design and visual effects design (CLICK)—both of which are important to ensure that we have good game feel, of course.

Only when we've got a group of game elements that are

polished and shippable, do we move on to the next mechanic, (CLICK) (CLICK) and the elements that support it. (CLICK) (CLICK) And we keep on implementing in these discrete, concentric steps, (CLICK) (CLICK) working through our mechanics in a rational, hierarchical order.

So what does this mean in practical terms? Let me give you a couple of examples from our work at Naughty Dog.



I had a lot of fun working on *Jak X: Combat Racing*, where we took all the lessons (CLICK) the studio had learned from making *Crash Team Racing* for the PS1, and deliberately used concentric development.



We got a drivable car working quickly, based on the dune buggy from *Jak 3*, and began to tune the way it handled with boosts and drifting.



On-paper track designs
by Hirokazu Yasuhara

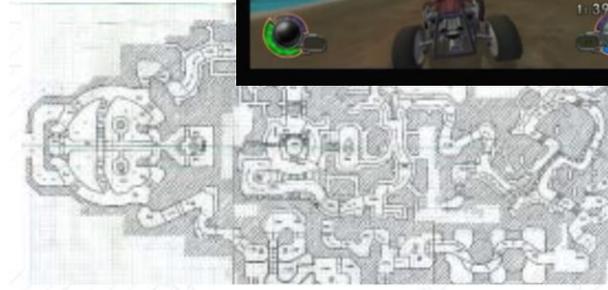
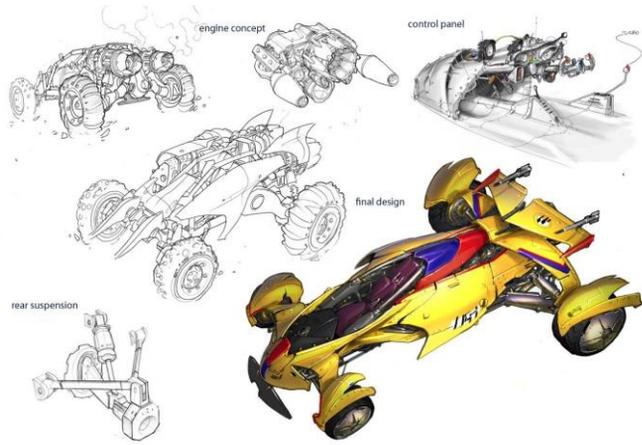


Image from jakanddaxter.fandom.com

Yasuhara-san designed the first of our many tracks to give us something to race around, (CLICK) and it didn't take long to set up a split screen mode, so that two humans could race each other and start to get a feel for the competition in the game.

Jak X character concept art by Bob Rafei



Jak X car concepts by Hugo Martin

We modeled our first slick-looking racing car body and a new Jak driver, and then almost immediately, we had a fairly polished and playable set of “primary” mechanics that we could see was going to be fun.



Jak X PlayStation 2
screenshots

Next we built out the most basic weapons and enemy AIs, which helped reveal more of the secondary mechanics to us, and we began to implement the story mode, which Dan Arey wrote and directed. Remember, as we were doing this, we finished up all the assets including UI and put in at least first pass audio design, so we could properly evaluate what we had.



Shout out to the whole amazing *Jak X* team, including everyone who worked on the 2017 remake for PlayStation 4!

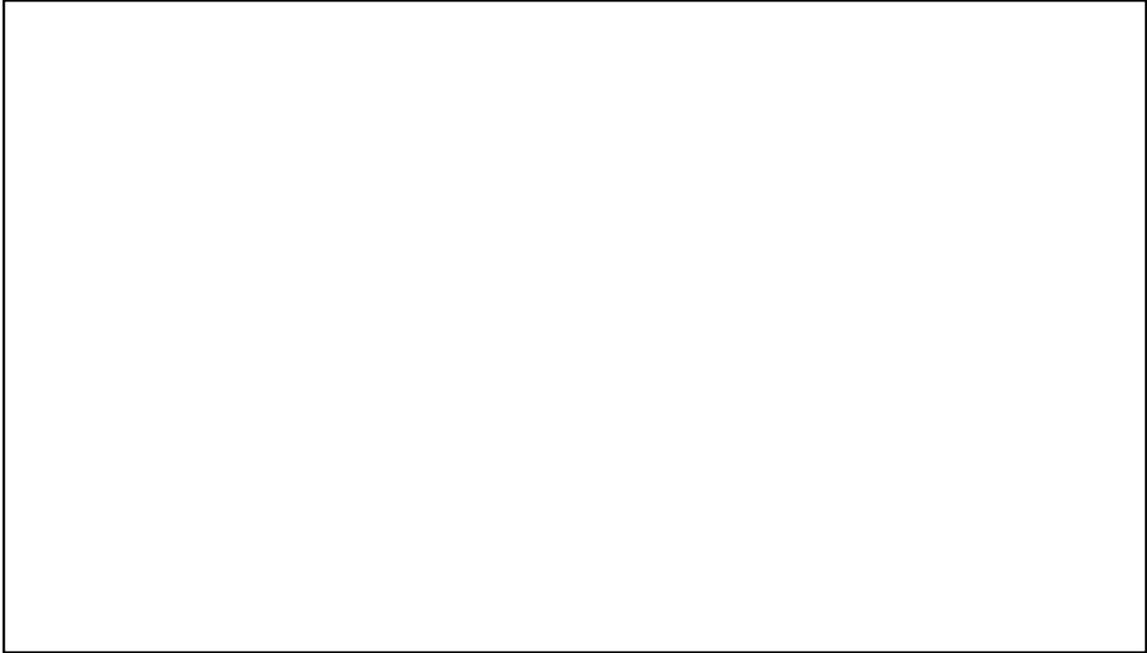


⏏ ⏏ Ratchet came! ⏏
⏏

Jak X
PlayStation 2
screenshots



Then we were able to iterate on more tertiary mechanics—including some things that we could possibly have lived without, if we'd run out of time—like online multiplayer, customizable cars, and a bunch of different match types. Hopefully by now you're getting the spirit of concentric development, that we build and complete, build and complete, each of the game's systems, before moving on.



<Video not shared>

We used the same approach with the first *Uncharted* game, and I'm pretty excited because I have a small scoop for you: what you're looking at right now is a video from 2006 that's never been seen in public before. This was an internal Sony demo of *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, from about a year before we shipped, that I got special permission to show you. Thanks, Evan! *Uncharted* fans will have immediately noticed the white t-shirt that Drake didn't wear in the shipping game, and the lock-on

aiming system we changed late in development, which I talk about in my book.

The first thing we did was focus on the absolute core of our gameplay, Drake's traversal system, finishing up his character model, rigging, and the blended animation systems for his walks, runs, and even idles.

Then we moved on to his jumps, his mantles, and the basics of his climbing, again bringing each thing to a shippable level of polish, including sound, which often gets forgotten. And only then did we put in the shooting mechanics, and then the melee combat, and so on, and so on.

Again, we were always working in a rational order, bringing each set of stuff that we put into the game to a good level of completion, aesthetically and from a game design point of view, before we moved our focus on to other stuff, constantly giving ourselves a solid foundation to build on.

why do concentric development?

So why do we do all this? Why is it good?

George Kokoris:

“...like putting up walls before the foundation has dried.”

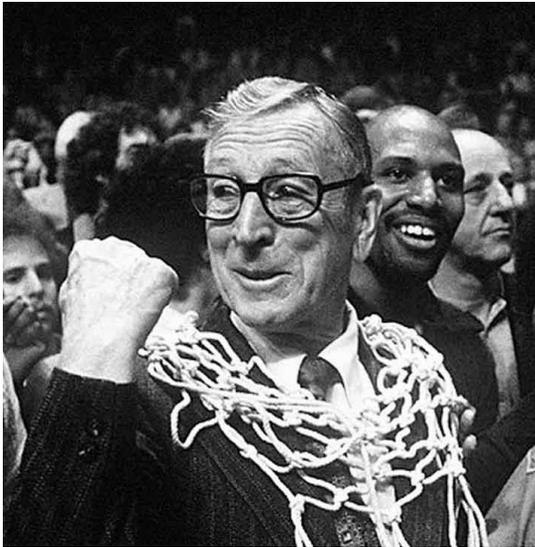


Image: OpenAI DALL-E

Well, to put it simply in the way that my friend the game designer George Kokoris, did: to implement secondary mechanics before the primary mechanics are properly finished, would be (CLICK) like trying to put up the walls of a house before the cement foundation has properly dried. If the core elements of your game’s design are not solid, you are at risk when you try to build onto them.

modularity,
stability,
evaluation,
and iteration

Another good thing about concentric development is that we're working in a modular way, which helps us work towards stability in our game's design and code. If our game is stable, we can playtest it—if it isn't, we can't. If we can test it, we can evaluate the results of the test, and then we can iterate on our design. And that leads in a straight line to excellent games.



John Wooden
(famous UCLA 🏀 coach):

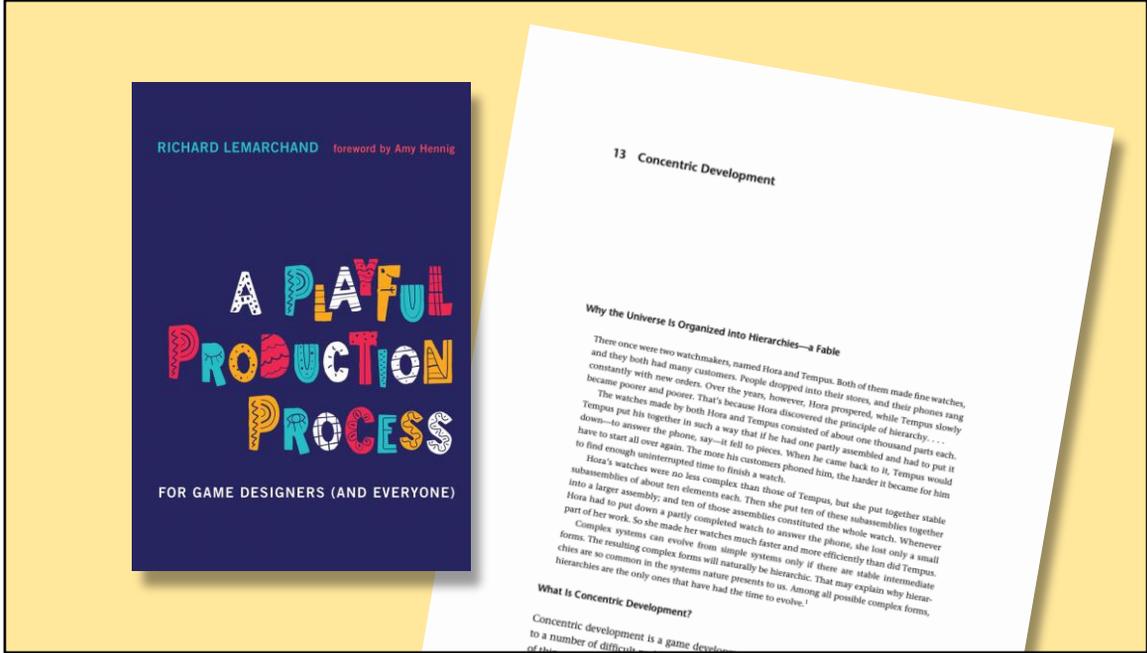
“If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?”

Concentric development is key when it comes to time management and scoping our projects down. For a start, the legendary UCLA Basketball coach John Wooden is famous for saying: (CLICK) “If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?” If we are always making sure that everything we have put in our game is good, then we will always have a game full of good stuff, and if we have to scope down and not implement some things that we wanted to implement, our exposure to risk is decreased.

concentric development
helps us to fight against

   **crunch**   

Additionally, the time and scope management aspect of concentric development prevents us from having to go through that stressful, crunchy process of rushing to complete half-broken work at the very end of a project, meaning better physical and mental health for the developers on our team, better business outcomes for our studios, and better games.



There are lots of other convincing reasons to work like this, but I don't have time to tell you about them today. You can read about them in chapter 13 of my book.



Image: OpenAI DALL-E

But one last idea that I'll throw out to you is that I learned a long time ago that players will never notice the things that you *wanted* to put into your game, but didn't have time to put in there. However, they will *definitely* notice things that *are* in your game that you didn't have time to make good. One bad apple can spoil the whole barrel, right? Or, as this design principle is sometimes summed up,

Google Play game by K Bros



“how much poop do you mind having in your soup?” Most people's answer is, of course, no poop for me, thanks very much, in either my soup, or the design of the games that I play.’



In my experience, an almost mystical thing about game design is that, if you've got a set of elements that work well as individual components, you can almost always find ways to tie those elements together into a coherent, fun, playable whole. This was true on *Jak X*, it was true on all the *Uncharted* games, and it's been true on pretty much every student project I've supervised in the USC Games program.

Rule:
“assemble your game concentrically”



Richard Lemarchand, USC Games

So, go forth, and assemble your games concentrically.

It's an honor to be presenting alongside these incredible speakers. Lovely to see you everyone—come and chat in the breakout room after and join me at my book signing at the GDC bookshop at 1:30pm today! Thanks for having me, Richard, thanks to my students and colleagues for their help with this talk, and thank you all for your time!

RICHARD LEMARCHAND

Associate Professor
USC Games
@rich_lem

**Good Game Design
is about Belief**

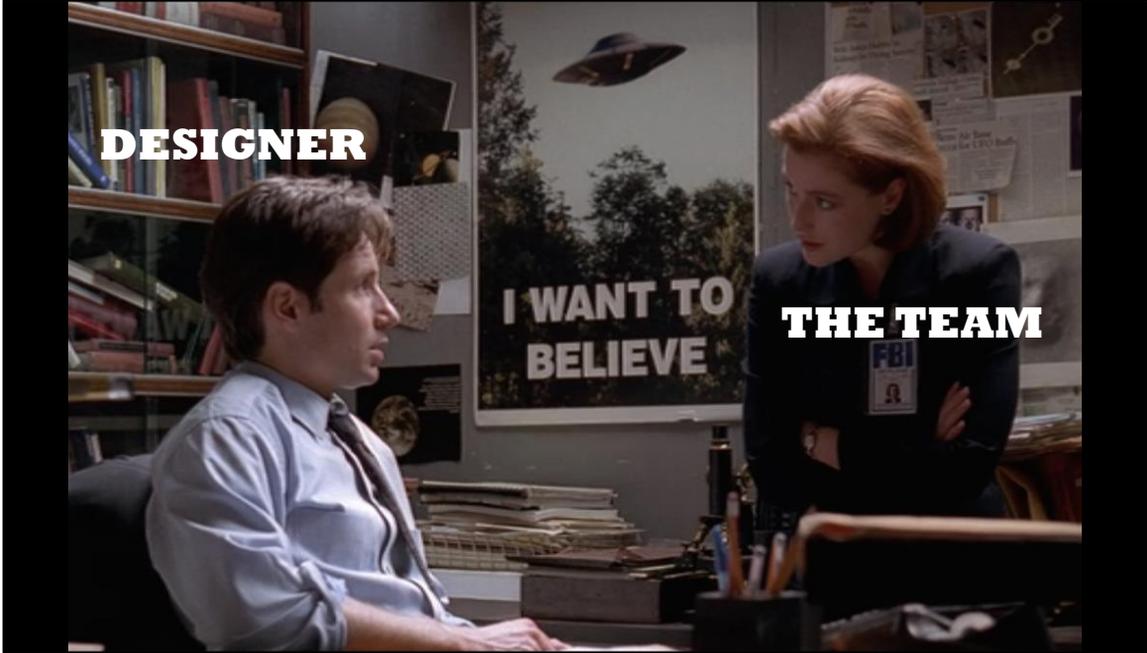


Remember as a designer your job is to believe! You know that great game is out there!

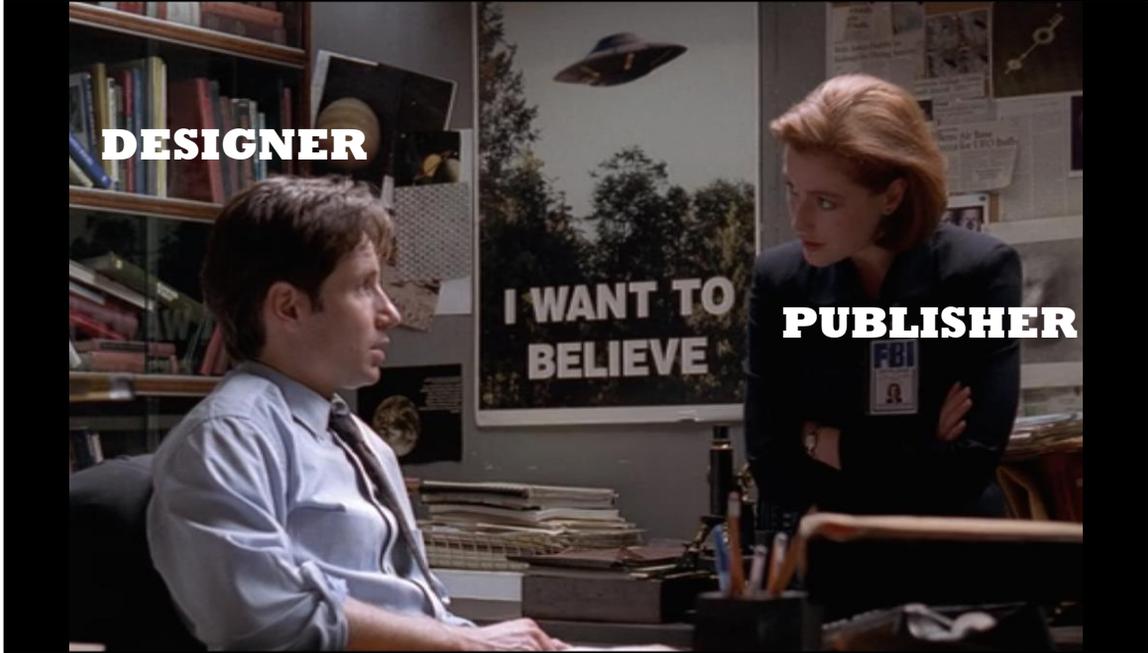
But also remember that we all need that producer who can help provide some healthy skepticism.



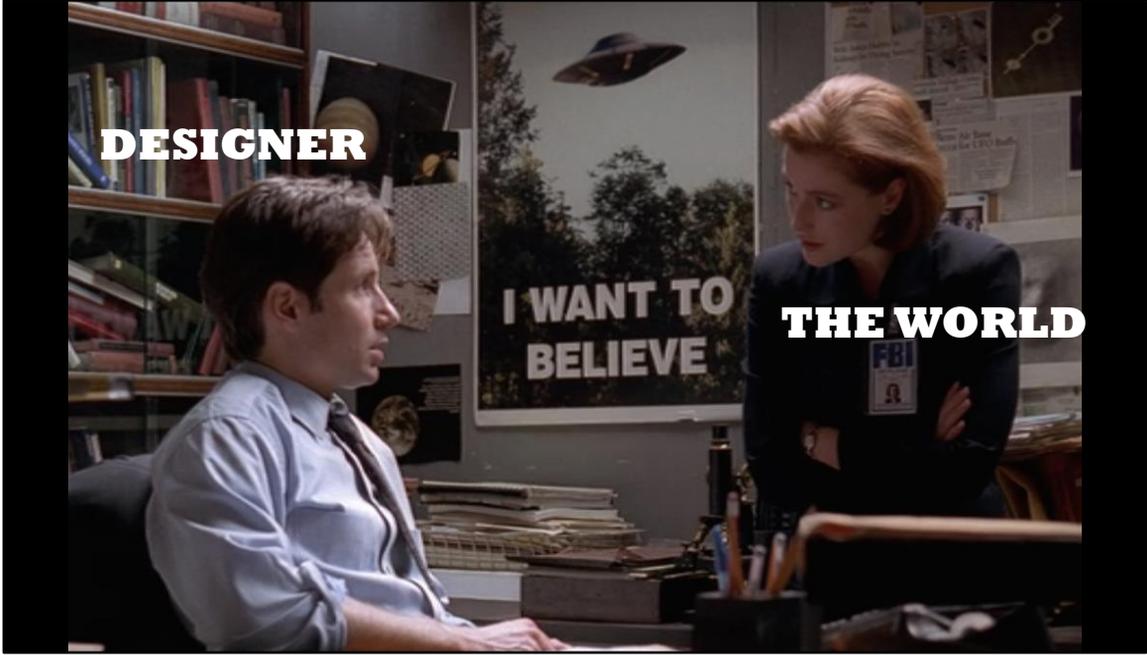
Because you have to convince skeptics like the producer



Or just the team



Or the publisher



Or ultimately the world

Rules of the Game 2023

With your host **Richard Rouse III** @richardrouseiii

Tanya X. Short “Make a (good) Mess”
@tanyaxshort

Beth LaPensée “Approach Games as Characters”

Jamie Cheng “Don’t Smooth Out the Beginning”

Aleissia Laidacker “Expand Your Game Design Horizons”
@Aleissia

Richard Lemarchand “Assemble Your Game Concentrically”
@rich_lem

Slides at: www.paranoidproductions.com

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And fin.

We’re not going to do Q&A but we’ll be hanging around up here for as long as they’ll let us if you want to come ask us some questions.

And please remember to fill out your surveys! We read each and everyone one of the comments and find they can be really helpful knowing how much you like sessions like this.

Thanks everyone!