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5 timeless principles of good game design

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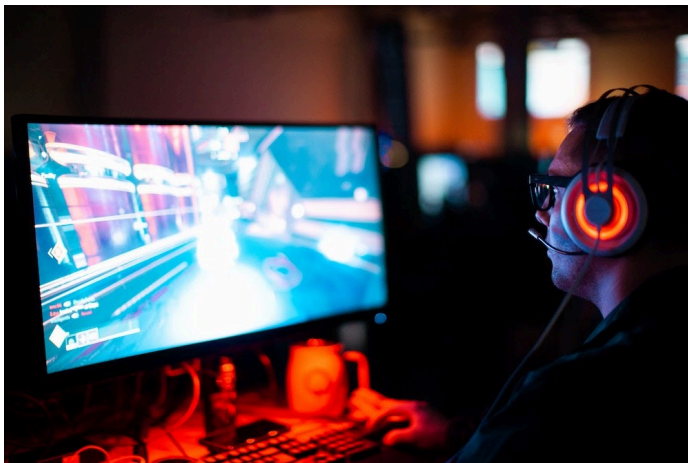
BY EVELYN TRAINOR-FOGLEMAN

Chat

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Good game design can be the element that makes or breaks a game from the first button push or keystroke. Good game design goes beyond the technical aspects of a game (like graphics and fps) and defines how a player will play and experience a game.

If you want to be a great game builder, you need to master some fundamental principles that make up an excellent game design. We're here to get you started by breaking down some of the essential principles to keep in mind during the game design process.

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Why is Good Game Design Important?

Put simply; good game design is what makes games fun. A game developer can have all the fancy graphics and the most complex narrative ever created. Still, if they don't have the basics of good game design incorporated, it's unlikely that their players will want to immerse themselves into the world of the game.

But how do you make something fun? Aren't games by their very nature fun? Well, yes and no. A game may be fun when you first pick it up, but it can get boring quickly if there's not a good flow or difficulty increases. Conversely, if a game is too difficult from the start, players will get frustrated and likely not complete it.

Game design principles focus on the players' experience from start to finish. It lays out how the player will play the game, from its core mechanics to its overall story arc. It's

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both an art and science of how to gain players' attention

The key to good game design is to start simple and build out from there. If the core elements of your game idea don't work, all the bells and whistles won't necessarily get you back on track.

Five Fundamental Principles of Good Game Design

Principle #1: Design Your Game Around a Core Mechanic

Whether you're building a simple puzzle game or a complex first-person shooter, you'll notice that nearly every game since the earliest days of game design is ultimately designed around one or a few simple gameplay mechanics.

Some examples include:

Tetris - Rotate falling shapes to fit together in a certain defined play space

Mario Kart- Drive a small vehicle through different courses

Call of Duty - Point and shoot a weapon to eliminate enemy players

While all of these games' dynamics are more complex than just the simple action described, this is the core action that players will be taking over and over again throughout the game. It is important to define what this mechanic will be when designing your game.

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Once you've defined what your core game mechanics will

mechanic isn't engaging, your players will quickly find themselves bored or frustrated, even if you have other fantastic elements in your game.

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Principle #2: Make Your Game Easy to Learn, but Challenging to Master

This principle has been used over and over again in game design because it simply works. You want players to be able to load your game and begin playing as quickly as possible. This means that you need to teach the fundamentals of gameplay quickly and efficiently so that players are immediately engaged.

However, once your players have some time to get the hang of the gameplay, you need to ensure that the game gets progressively more difficult to master. During level design, constantly ramping up the difficulty as players get more experience is crucial to building a game that players want to finish. A victory that is not at least somewhat hard-won doesn't feel like much of a victory, does it?

Principle #3: Make Sure You Have Balanced Gameplay Options

This may seem vague at first glance, so let's elaborate. You want to give players options throughout their gameplay. Say you're playing Mario Kart. You have the option to stick to the main course, which is longer but easier to maneuver.

However, you also have the option to take "shortcuts," which are more difficult to find and often more difficult to maneuver, but give players the benefit of a shorter course. This will encourage them to weigh their options against their

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skill level and make calculated gameplay choices that are

Another good example of this is customizable characters and equipment. In The Witcher III and other RPGs, you have the option to equip your character with different gear depending on what elements of their strengths and weaknesses you want to protect or expose.

Not a strong fighter? You have the option to put on heavier armor that protects against the blows you can't dodge. Are you skilled with a blade? You can opt for lighter armor that offers less protection but gives attack bonuses for more critical hits.

Balanced gameplay allows players to self-customize a game and even give them goals to reach (i.e. mastering all the shortcuts in a racing game) that keep the game challenging and accessible.

Principle #4: Provide Regular Feedback and Rewards

Players want to know what they're doing well and what they can improve on, so designing regular rewards for things like getting a certain amount of experience or building in combat prompts and hints for when players are struggling can have a massive impact on your player's engagement.

Regular rewards give mini boosts of accomplishment in a long stretch of gameplay and allow the player to track their progress and reach for goals, which keeps gameplay engaging and fun.

Principle #5: Give the Player a Meaningful Core Mission

This is another concept that can seem very vague, but at the core of what makes good gameplay is an ultimate mission that the player can connect with. In Tetris, this can be as simple as "get as many 5 row combos as possible," but it can be a lot more open-ended and engaging for a more cinematic game.

Whatever you choose to make the player's core mission, make sure it's something that players will want to see through. Perhaps they're trying to solve a mysterious murder or re-unite war-torn kingdoms. An engaging

⊘ **Cookies Preferences**   nmerse themselves in the game

and gives an incentive to play a game through until the

These principles only scratch the surface of what makes great game design, but they are some of the core elements that can get you started on your journey to creating a game that will keep players glued to their consoles and Twitch audiences clamoring for hours and hours of streaming.

If you're looking for more resources on good game design, check out these great books and podcasts that do deep dives into what makes great games:

The Art of Game Design by Jesse Schell

A Theory of Fun for Game Design by Raph Koster

Level Up! The Guide to Great Video Game Design by Scott Rodgers

Game Feel: A Game Designers Guide to Virtual Sensation by Steve Swink

15 Must-Hear Game Design Podcasts

If you're looking for a better way to bring your game design team closer together as you perfect your latest release, check out Evercast. Evercast is a virtual collaboration platform that allows you to stream professional game design software in ultra-low latency HD video while live chatting with your team. Whether your team is across the office or across the world, Evercast allows you to stay in sync and get projects done faster by working together.

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Evelyn Trainor-Fogleman is a writer based in New York City. After over half a decade in the film industry, she came back to her Journalism roots to write for a variety of media outlets about subjects including technology, business, marketing, and social and environmental justice.

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