**Amy Jo Kim - 5 Speed Bumps on the road to innovation**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/10/07/5-speed-bumps-on-the-road-to-innovation/>

When you’re in the early stages of creating an innovative product, success comes from running many small, high-learning experiments. When these experiments slow down or stall out, it’s often due to well-meaning people who don’t understand the nature of early product development.

As you’re building and developing your innovative product, watch out for these speedbumps along your path.

## Speedbump #1: The Mass Market Visionary

Mass Market Visionaries are focused on where their product is headed, and what it could be — not where it is RIGHT NOW. They’re uncomfortable focusing on a small early market of customers who don’t necessarily fit their big vision of a mass-market product.

Problem is — if you’re building something innovative and you don’t capture and delight your micro-vertical, you won’t get the chance to HAVE a mass market to worry about.

If your product is mainstream-friendly and easy to understand, go ahead and target the masses. But if you’re building something innovative,[mainstream consumers won’t be able to understand or value your creation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology_adoption_lifecycle" \t "_blank) — or give you the feedback you need to evolve.

## Speedbump #2: The Passionate Believer

It takes superhuman self-control to listen dispassionately while early customers rip apart your beloved ideas. Entrepreneurs who believe deeply in their idea will be sorely tempted to focus on results that confirm their beliefs.

Passionate Believers tend to dismiss or derail customer insights that don’t support the outcome they want to see. Sometimes they’ll partner up with Data Nazis (see below) to bolster their case for ignoring the results of subjective customer research.

The simplest way to manage this is to remove the entrepreneur from the face-to-face customer interviews. Instead, have a dispassionate third party (internal or external) collect the data.

## Speedbump #3: The Data Nazi

Some people worship at the altar of Analytics, and believe that actionable research ALWAYS involves A/B testing and thousands of data points. That’s great if you’re optimizing an existing product, but a total FAIL for bringing something new and innovative to life.

Data Nazis don’t have much hands-on experience bringing innovative products to life. They set themselves up as the champions of TRUTH, and dismiss any qualitative research as “unscientific” to push their own agenda.

Innovation comes from iterative prototyping and testing. Analytics come later. Know when to use both.

## Speedbump #4: The Cautious Thinker

Every successful, high-performing MVP team I’ve worked with is empowered to do fast, iterative decision-making. If your team is weighed down by fearful, cautious thinkers, your speed and agility will be severely hampered.

The most effective MVP teams make lots of small, revocable decisions to keep moving – and use Lean tactics to recover quickly and learn from mistakes.

**Speedbump #5: The High-Gloss Champion**

Whenever I see entrepreneurs focus on polished visuals before working out their core activities and systems, my confidence in their success plummets. Visual quality is important at some stages of product development — you don’t want to ship an ugly, hard-to-use product.

During the fast-iteration stages of early customer discovery, focusing on polished visuals is a major speedbump. High-gloss champions are deeply attached to polished visuals, and have a hard time imagining how sketches and wireframes might evolve into something wonderful. These same people can be fooled by hi-res visuals into thinking something is further along than it is (AKA “The Clinkle Effect”)

**Amy Jo Kim - Top 3 Mistakes Startups Make Building their MVP**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/08/28/top-3-mistakes-startups-make-building-their-mvp/>

I've used the [MVP Design Hacks](http://mvpdesignhacks) approach to help dozens of teams bring their early ideas to life.  Some teams THRIVE with this approach, and go on to great success.  Others don't.

Sadly, some teams I've worked with were mired in problems that prevented them from building an effective MVP. Here are the 3 most common MVP mistakes I see startups make that can cripple their team.

**Mistake #1: Lusting after hi-res visuals too early**

There's a certain type of person who cannot grasp a product concept with sketches - they need to see something that looks finished.  These same people are often fooled by hi-res visuals - they think something is further along than it actually is. Let's call it "The Clinkle Effect." :-)

LESSON: Don't fall prey to The Clinkle Effect. Try not to slow down your team by lusting after - and investing in - hi-res visuals too early. Instead, focus on building a low-res, high-value, easy-to-update prototype for your MVP  - it will setup the right incentives to maximize your team's learning.

**Mistake #2: Dismissing Tester Feedback**

These days, many  of us worship at the alter of analytics - which are great for many situations, but not all. When you're doing early MVP design and testing, you're collecting subjective responses and looking for patterns and "hot spots" of excitement. If you've got the right testers, you only need a handful to know if you're on the right track.

LESSON: The best designs come out of iterative prototyping and testing. Analytics come later. Know when to use both powerful tools.

**Mistake #3: Selective Listening**

As an entrepreneur, it's very hard to listen objectively and hear criticism of your great ideas. But if you're committed to building something people want and need, customer feedback is a gold mine.

LESSON: Listen objectively, like a scientist, for the key message your customers are communicating - even (or especially) if it challenges your core assumptions.

**Amy Jo Kim - Start Me Up: 5 Power Tactics for Great Onboarding**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/05/05/start-me-up-5-power-tactics-for-great-onboarding/>

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Great onboarding invites you in, shows you the ropes, and helps you accomplish something you care about. It makes you feel smart, empowered, curious, and ready for more. Here are 5 design rules for tightening your funnel and turning newcomers into regulars.

**1. Clarify your Message and Value Prop**

It all starts during Discovery - when people first hear about your product through a friend, or via social media or advertising. That's when initial expectations are set - they'll either be attracted or repelled. Strong, clear messaging about your core experience and value prop are vitally important at this stage.

When discovery happens through word of mouth, your  customers will express their own take on your value prop. That's good news - IF your product delivers on it's promises.

**2. Welcome Newcomers and Set Expectations**

When someone moves through Discovery and starts playing, they're setting out on their own personal learning path. If you want them to become happy and engaged, acknowledge them and give them a clear and compelling sense of what's to come.

How you do this, of course, depends on your product, positioning, audience, and most of all your onboarding goals. Great onboarding can be brief and to the point, if that's what the product is all about.

**3. Help players customize their learning level and style**

At the beginning of onboarding, Lumosity asks you to personalize your brain fitness goals along five dimensions - and uses your answers to customize your training program (at least in appearance - I couldn't tell if the info was actually used).

Contrast that with Duolingo, which lets players choose a language, decide whether or not to set a goal, and start playing  - with the option to test out of content if they have the proficiency.

**4. Provide Lightweight Activities That Build Investment**

The best way to learn is to DO - with appropriate constraints, coaching and tips along the way. Great onboarding  quickly engages players in activities that help them learn the ropes and invest in the experience.  During onboarding, Lumosity offers short, varied games that target different brain functions. This visual creates a powerful urge to see those skills improve - and thus an effective incentive to sign up for training.

**5. Show visible progress towards meaningful goals**

People don't like to feel coerced; they want to see progress towards goals they've chosen; they're intrinsically motivated to get better at something that matters.

Great onboarding feels like making progress towards something you care about.  Ask yourself:  why are my players here? what are their goals - both short-term, and long-term? What do they want to learn and master? Think about how you can weave those goals and aspirations into your progression system.

One straightforward approach is to ask players directly about their goals, then track and display progress against those goals.

**Amy Jo Kim - Entice Me Back: How Core Loops drive Re-Engagement**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/05/27/entice-me-back-how-core-loops-drive-re-engagement/>

If you're anything like me, you try out a lot of new games, apps & services - but only stick with  a few. Why is that? How do digital services entice us back, over and over again? What does it take to turn a one-time experience into a habit?

For each of us, the answer is deeply personal. We become habitual users of games, apps and services when they hit that singular "sweet spot" of opportunity, need fulfillment and social context. My son, for example, NEEDED to be on Myspace, then Facebook - and now Snapchat. His daily habits were formed -  then broken & re-formed - as his tribe migrated.

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Minecraft, Candy Crush, Clash of Clans - all these habit-forming systems are built around a compelling feedback loop with a pleasurable, repeatable activity at it's core.  These [**Core Loops**](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/MichailKatkoff/20131024/203142/MidCore_Success_Part_1_Core_Loops.php)(AKA Game Loops, Compulsion Loops, Habit Loops, Activity Loops, Engagement Loops) are widely used in gaming and elsewhere to model players' action chains and in-game progression.

A well-crafted Core Loop is essential for great gameplay - and in sophisticated games, these loop systems can get quite complex. For example, [**this excellent analysis of Clash of Clans**](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/MichailKatkoff/20131024/203142/MidCore_Success_Part_1_Core_Loops.php) illustrates how core loops, double loops, nested loops, and micro-loops that all work together to make that game so compelling to play. If you want to understand loop design in online games, this article is great background reading.

Every complex system starts out as a simple system that works - and then evolves. Don't let complexity scare you off - not every app needs the inter-connected loop system of a free-to-play strategy game.

To entice your players back, start by crafting and tuning a simple, solid **Core Loop** based around three key design rules:

1. **start with COMPELLING ACTIVITIES players want to do repeatedly**
2. **create a mix of FEEDBACK and PROGRESS to increase players' skill, motivation and flow**
3. **develop an integrated system of TRIGGERS and INVESTMENT to pull players back**

**Amy Jo Kim - 5 Tips for Super-Charging User Interviews**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/02/06/listening-time-5-tips-for-super-charging-user-interivews/>

Let’s say you’ve [developed a Microvertical hypothesis](http://wp.me/p2I6uq-9I), and you're starting to recruit people who fit that description.  Now your job is to write and conduct Screening Interviews, and learn more about who these people are, and how they react to your core value prop.

At this stage, the questions you ask - and how you react to and followup their answers - will determine the quality of insight you gather. Here are 5 tips to help super-change your interviews with actionable insights.

**Do a pre-interview Screening Survey to collect basic data**  
Don't waste precious interview time collecting simple-to-answer basic info. Instead, create a pre-interview Screening Survey to learn basic data upfront about your potential subjects. For best results, embed this survey into your recruiting efforts. Include questions about their age, occupation, tech habits, favorite media sources, etc in this survey - along with any qualifying questions that will help you filter their need and readiness for your product.

**Ask questions that illuminate habits, needs, pain points, and triggers**  
A good interview script asks question that illuminate the habits, emotions and triggers embedded in people's daly lives. What is their day like? What activities do they do regularly - and at what time?  Who do they interact with and care about? What do they long for - what's missing in their lives? What's causing them friction and frustration? What are they tired of and eager to change? What elicits a strong emotional reaction?

**Tweak your interview script to focus on useful and revealing questions**  
This is guerrilla-style customer development, not a controlled scientific experiment. If you do 15 screening interviews, after the first few you'll likely  notice patterns, and start learning which questions are working and which are not. Go ahead and edit your script between interviews to remove questions that aren't yielding good info, expand on ones that are, and add new questions to drill down on emerging themes. Identify emerging patterns early and formulate as mini-hypotheses.

**Keep an eye out for existing habits to piggyback on**  
Creating brand new habits is tough. It's so much easier to piggyback on an existing habit. For that reason, as you're conducting your interviews, listen closely for existing habits that might serve as "hooks" for your offering.

**Keep calm, unbiased and dispassionate during the interviews**  
One of the hardest things for a passionate product creator to do is [watch people react to their product and challenge their core beliefs](http://www.eleganthack.com/lean-is-listening/). That's why you need someone who's not emotionally invested in the product to conduct the interviews - ideally a trained researcher, but in practice anyone who listens well and can record what they see and hear without influencing the results.   The interviewer's demeanor needs be calm, unbiased and dispassionate - and sometimes that means handing over the reins.

**Amy Jo Kim - How to Mobilize your Microvertical**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/02/04/mobilize-your-microvertical-a-5-step-plan/>

Today I'll outline a 5-step plan for finding articulate, qualified early adopters who can help you bring your project to life. I affectionately call this Operation Find & Delight.

**Step 1: clarify your product/business goals and constraints**

Take a look at your product vision, business focus, revenue model and team skillset. What audience or demographic are you best setup to serve? What are the technical and/or access requirements for using your product - especially early on?  Who do you NOT want to serve for regulation, liability or revenue reasons?

**Step 2: Create a testable Microvertical Hypothesis**

Once you've clarified your goals, ruled out certain audiences and broadly focused on who you're serving, it's time get specific. Given the market space, tech platform and audience you’re targeting, ask yourself: who NEEDS your product the most and is likely and able to use it?  Who’s already doing something similar - or using similar products? Who would find it life-changing in a meaningful way?

Your job is to create a description of a PERSON OR GROUP OF PEOPLE who you think are likely to be valuable early enthusiasts.  In this description, include details that are relevant to when and how they'll use your product, such as technology platform, behavior patterns, use of existing services,, etc.

**Step 3:  Test and refine your Hypothesis with customer research**

Now that you’ve generated your Microvertical Hypothesis, it's time to recruit people who fit that profile and test your value prop with subjective research methods like surveys, interviews, and field studies.

You can kickstart this process by doing Screening Interviews, a guerilla-style research technique that can quickly and iteratively help you identify your Microvertical. Heres how it works:

* Use your MicroVertical Hypothesis to recruit 15-20 subjects for paid research (which come at a later stage)
* Conduct 15-minute screening interviews to learn about their lifestyle, habits and attitudes relating to your product (I'll write a separate post about how to construct effective screening interview questions)
* Summarize the patterns you're seeing, and how those patterns support or challenge your hypothesis
* After you've completed the screening interviews, select a subset for paid research, based on feedback quality and  "fit" with your value prop, business model, and schedule.

**Step 4:  Update and circulate your validated Hypothesis within the team**

The purpose of Customer Development is to focus the entire team on building things that people actually want. It's important to keep your team in the loop as you're doing  early research.

You can inform the team about your intial Hypothesis, collect their input, do  Customer Development research, and then cycle back with the team and communicate the research results as a set of changes and/or confirmations to your Hypothesis.

**Step 5: Build an ongoing Microvertical feedback loop and private community**

As a product creator, one of the most powerful resources you can develop is a network of pre-qualified players who can give you early feedback on new features & systems. Recruiting and vetting people takes time and effort upfront - so once you’ve identified them, it's smart to keep that relationship alive and reap the benefits of play-testing with known players throughout your MVP process and beyond.

A connected community of early adopters can dramatically increase your chance of successfully launching innovation.

**Amy Jo Kim - The 7 Habits of Highly Successful MVP Teams**

<http://amyjokim.com/2014/01/23/the-7-habits-of-highly-successful-mvp-teams/>

After going through a number of MVP launches,  I’m starting to see  patterns about what works - and what doesn’t - when your goal is get a strong MVP out the door. In the spirit of lessons learned, here are **7 Habits of Highly Successful MVP teams.**

**Habit #1: They collect validated knowledge about players' unmet needs, pain points and secret desires**

This is customer development through a game design lens: you need to build something people want and need - AND create a compelling, useable experience that keeps people playing.  You're not designing for everyone - you're designing for specific people and use cases. Successful MVP teams IDENTIFY their target players, LISTEN and LEARN proactively, CREATE sketches/prototypes that capture the essence of the product idea, and TEST their ideas on target players so they can continue iterating.

**Habit #2: They identify and leverage a  Microvertical of early enthusiasts**

Every successful innovative product has an early group of enthusiasts who discover it and make it their own. Most successful online games all found an early, enthusiastic group of participants who helped to kickstart the system towards growth.

Think of this group as your Microvertical - the first wave of people who LOVE and NEED your product, and will evangelize it out of sheer enthusiasm. Who are these people? What do they have in common? The sooner you find and start connecting with your Microvertical,  the sooner you’ll be on your path towards building something people really want and need.

**Habit #3: They understand and piggyback on people's existing daily habits**

If you understand the daily habits of your target players, you can increase your chances of success by designing your experience to extend and enhance those habits.  Existing habits are something you can look for and learn about during Customer Development interviews and early user testing.

**Habit #4: They playtest their experience with real customers early and often**

Play-testing your idea in sketch/prototype form is how you validate assumptions and test your product hypothesis. The Lean Startup movement popularized the idea of iterative playtesting, and has spawned great ideas for getting “Lean Feedback” like [fake landing pages and adwords campaigns.](http://www.startuplessonslearned.com/2008/11/using-adwords-to-assess-demand-for-your.html)  In game development, iterative playtesting with real players is business-as-usual - it’s how great games get built.

Showing early sketches and mockups to real customers would have saved that company weeks of UX and engineering work.

**Habit #5: They create and maintain a Player Advisory Group for ongoing feedback**

As a product creator, one of the most powerful resources you can develop is a network of pre-qualified players who can give you early feedback on new features & systems - [like this one](http://puppetlabs.com/community/puppet-test-pilots-program). Recruiting and vetting players takes time and effort upfront - so once you’ve identified people who can give you good feedback, it's smart to keep that relationship alive and reap the benefits of play-testing throughout your product lifecycle.

**Habit #6: They bring their core systems to life before polishing visuals**

The best product teams I’ve worked with understand how to bring systems to life with minimal production values.  When I see an entrepreneur focus on polishing visuals before working out and tuning their basic activities and systems, my confidence in their success plummets. Smart MVP teams know how to create “just enough” visuals to test and tune their experience. They do this by finding and leveraging early enthusiasts who can see beyond the visuals and engage with the basic experience over time.

You don't want to ship with an UGLY product - but don't let polished visuals seduce you into thinking you're further along than you are.

**Habit #7: Enable enthusiasts to go deep, develop expertise, and build status**

Most successful games develop a following of hardcore players who want to feel like they're part of the development cycle. These players don't represent the mass audience for that game - they're the enthusiasts,  experts,  university students, miltary wives, wanna-be devs. The gaming Microvertical.

Among YOUR Microvertical, there will likely be some enthusiastic players who want to go deep - to master your systems, offer their product ideas,  test out new features, peek behind the scenes, earn status and become know in the community. Smart MVP Teams find a way to say YES to these people and co-opt their energy and enthusiasm.  You can start simple by providing feedback forums and engaging with people right from the start. As you product evolves past the MVP stage, you can add expert-specific features and systems (when appropriate) to cater to your enthusiasts, leverage their knowledge, and keep them engaged in your product.

**Amy Jo Kim - The Developer’s Journey: LeanUX meets the Customer Lifecycle**

<http://amyjokim.com/2013/10/20/the-developers-journey-leanux-meets-the-customer-lifecycle/>

Today's smartest startups test their ideas, UX & technology early and often with real users. To mesh smoothly with  Lean Startup practices, I've added another dimension to the PJF called  "The Developer's Journey" - AKA how you refine and grow your MVP over time. This tells you WHERE to focus your efforts early-on, WHICH elements to flesh out and test first (and delay for later) and HOW to scale and expand on your initial success.

As you're bringing your product to life via Lean Startup practices, where do you put your focus?

**1. Start by developing your Habit Loop.**  
The purpose of your MVP is to test your core assumptions and better understand the needs, habits and desires of your core audience AKA micro-vertical.  Early-on, , focus on testing and tweaking your Habit Loop -  AKA  game loop, engagement loop, compulsion loop, core loop. Look for the "hook" that gets people coming back regularly - ideally, coming back daily.

**2. When you're ready to scale into Beta, refine your Onboarding**

Once you've identified a core Habit Loop, you're in a good position to design an effective onboarding system - which will allow you to scale to a larger, less "insider" audience. As you build  and run your Beta you'll want to develop, test and tweak your Onboarding mechanics as you continue to develop and refine your Habit Loop.

**3. Plant the seeds for Mastery - then co-develop your systems with passionate players.**  
The role of Mastery is an oft-misunderstood piece of this puzzle. Mastery is tied up with learning, competence, and skill. What makes your system engaging to master? What skill is the player learning?  How is mastery communicated and celebrated? How does your system shape, constrain and enable social interaction?  Does the system encourage people to compare themselves to others? Does it enable battles and contests? Does it setup people to join forces in service of a greater cause?

If you aspire to build a game-like system, think early about what skill your players will be developing and mastering. Then ask yourself:  how can our most skilled and passionate players contribute to the system - and the community? What enhanced role and powers could they earn?  But when it comes to creating earned roles and powers for expert players, you'll be most successful if you take your cues from the needs, habits and desires of your core enthusiasts.

**Amy Jo Kim - Designing Sustained Engagement: 3 Questions to get you started**

<http://amyjokim.com/2012/10/03/designing-sustained-engagement-3-questions-to-get-you-started/>

What makes a digital experience engaging over time? How do you grab people's attention during onboarding - and keep them interested and coming back for months, even years?

To drive sustained engagement, you need to think about who you're designing for, what motivates them, and how their experience will unfold over time.  As you're formulating your product vision and engagement strategy, here are some good starter questions to ask.

**1) Who are your players? What's their** [**Social Engagement Style**](http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/19/social-engagement-whos-playing-how-do-they-like-to-engage/)**?**

Knowing who you're designing for is crucial, especially if you're integrating game design into your service. Ever heard of Customer Development? This concept is about understanding and testing out WHO is going to use your service.

Once you've identified your core target audience, you can use [our Social Engagement Styles matrix](http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/19/social-engagement-whos-playing-how-do-they-like-to-engage/) as an analytic framework to think through player motivations. Are you players motivated by Competition? Collaboration? Visible Achievement? Exploration? Self-Expression? What's most important? What's missing from their lives? How does their behavior shift at different times in their lifecycle? What qualities reinforce their identity, and tap into their aspirational view of themselves?

**2) How will you define, measure, visualize and reward**[**Progress Over Time?**](http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/14/the-players-journey-designing-over-time/)

People are deeply engaged by learning new things, attaining skills, and making progress along a **meaningful**continuum. What can YOUR players get better at? What skills are they developing when they engage with your service over time? What metric are they improving - and what makes that metric meaningful? What new powers, access and privileges open up as they progress?

Figuring out the right progress metrics for your system can be tricky. Your progress metrics should leverage the core value of your service - AND tap into the motivations and aspirations of your target players.

**3) What** [**Happy Habits**](http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/17/happy-habits-engagement-design-meets-positive-psychology/)**drive sustained engagement during onboarding, habit-building and mastery?**

[Happy Habits](http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/17/happy-habits-engagement-design-meets-positive-psychology/) are engagement loops that stimulate ongoing positive emotions. What's the emotional arc for first-time players? What's the trigger (internal or external) that reminds them to return? What kind of feedback and sense of progress do you provide? What's the emotional payoff? Think about the emotional arcs and loops that your players experience during onboarding, habit-building and mastery. If you can design a compelling feedback loop that helps your players gain skill and move towards mastery of something they care about, you're off to a good start.

**Amy Jo Kim - Happy Habits: Engagement Design meets Positive Psychology**

<http://amyjokim.com/2012/09/17/happy-habits-engagement-design-meets-positive-psychology/>

Recently, I've been immersed in a project that's translating the science of happiness into a compelling, habit-forming digital service. I've been digging into the scientific literature on positive psychology and neuroscience correlates, and learning about the [activities the reliably make people happier](http://reformjudaismmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=2930). I'd like to share 3 key things I've learned from this journey.

**1) Investing in Meaningful Relationships makes people happier**

There are a variety of regular practices -  including gratitude, kindness, mindfulness, and empathy - that have been shown to improve happiness in clinical trials. However, the most robust and widely-cited finding is the impact of relationships on happiness. In a nutshell, people who cultivate meaningful relationships report higher levels of happiness.

**2) Social Comparison makes people unhappier**

In the age of Gamification Everywhere, social comparison has become a default technique for motivating and engaging people. But happiness science reveals that [judging yourself in relation to others is a mental habit that leads to envy, guilt, regret, and defensiveness](http://www.hss.caltech.edu/%7Elyariv/Papers/DarkSide1.pdf). Once you start comparing yourself to others, you've jumped onto a treadmill that never stops - there is ALWAYS someone else who is smarter/better/stronger/richer/more beautiful/more popular than you are.

**3) Happiness is a Habit - you CAN change the way you think and perceive the world**

Since my academic background, I'm familiar with the research on brain plasticity - which boils down to You Are What You Think.  Brains turn out to be highly programmable - within certain limits, you can literally rewire your brain and stimulate growth and change through specific mental activities.

There are a collection of well-researched techniques or "interventions" for developing a positive life outlook and generating feelings of happiness and well-being. When people do these regularly, their outlook and mood improves. Creating an engaging, compelling digital service to deliver these interventions is hard - and we're just starting to understand what Happy Habits look like in action.