Learning from your Game Experiences

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When I first started at Riot, the first thing I started on was helping with the UI for Kayn (a champion in League of Legends), and it quickly became apparent why the designers around me were some of the best. I remember a conversation where a game designer clearly and succinctly articulated why they didn't enjoy a mechanic being tested. With just a few words, they described what they would have done differently, and why it would work better — a stark contrast to the conversations I always had with my close friends, all of whom have played games our whole lives.

I recall many conversations that followed the "Oh what a great game! It was so cool!" or "Wow that game sucked!" Very few of them were deeply reflective that broke down why a thing was cool, resonant, or added to our overall experience. We weren't critically thinking about our experiences, which is what I had heard from the conversation with this game designer.

Since working at Riot, fielding questions from aspiring UX & Game designers, and interviewing candidates, I've come to the conclusion that learning to think and reflect critically about your game experiences is a key step in translating a love of playing games into a career of making them.

> "If you want to design games, start thinking about them critically."

Why this matters

Games are full of interconnected systems and designs, and sometimes you'll dislike designs that others enjoy: For example, maybe you're not a fan of daily quests, but your grind-inclined friend absolutely loves them. Being able to understand and communicate *why* you dislike something is generally the first step in understanding the creator's intent. And through that empathy, you can approach the design process in a different (and often better) way. The process of design often involves lots of experimentation, testing, and iteration. Having that empathy can help you evaluate different solutions faster, or understand the trade-offs that a designer made to avoid duplicative work.
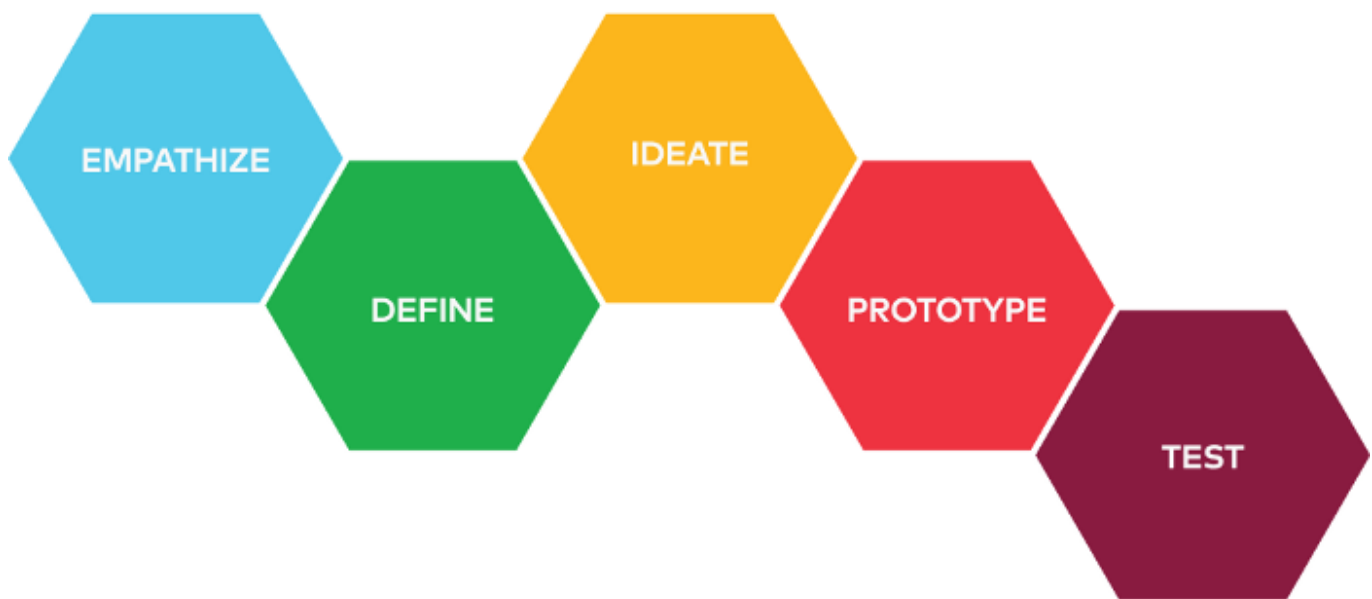
UX Process. Stanford D.School — Design Thinking Bootcamp

If you aspire to become a designer in the game industry, a deep and abiding love of gaming is a crucial piece of that puzzle. As a designer, one of the most valuable things you can bring to the table is your own personal experiences and context. However, you may have heard the (overused) saying "Don't design for yourself," but I think a much better rule of thumb is "Recognize your own biases and preferences and take those into account as you're designing."

It's true that very rarely as a designer are you designing exclusively for yourself. More often than not you're designing for a more broad audience, or even a narrow group of people who might not share your specific interests and tastes. This doesn't devalue your own experiences and subject matter expertise though. All those years of gaming can

genuinely help you bring a world-class design to market, especially if you're able to understand what your own biases and tastes are and intentionally design around them. This is where being able to reflect critically on your gaming experiences, not only the ones you dislike but also the ones you enjoy, comes in. Being able to articulate why you enjoy an experience often involves a large amount of introspection, and it's that introspection that can help you uncover and identify those personal preferences and biases both as a designer and gamer.

A Framework for improving

So, if you're sold that critically thinking about your play experiences and being able to articulate those thoughts is important, you might be wondering how you can start improving at this. Here is a simple framework that I've used to do just that:
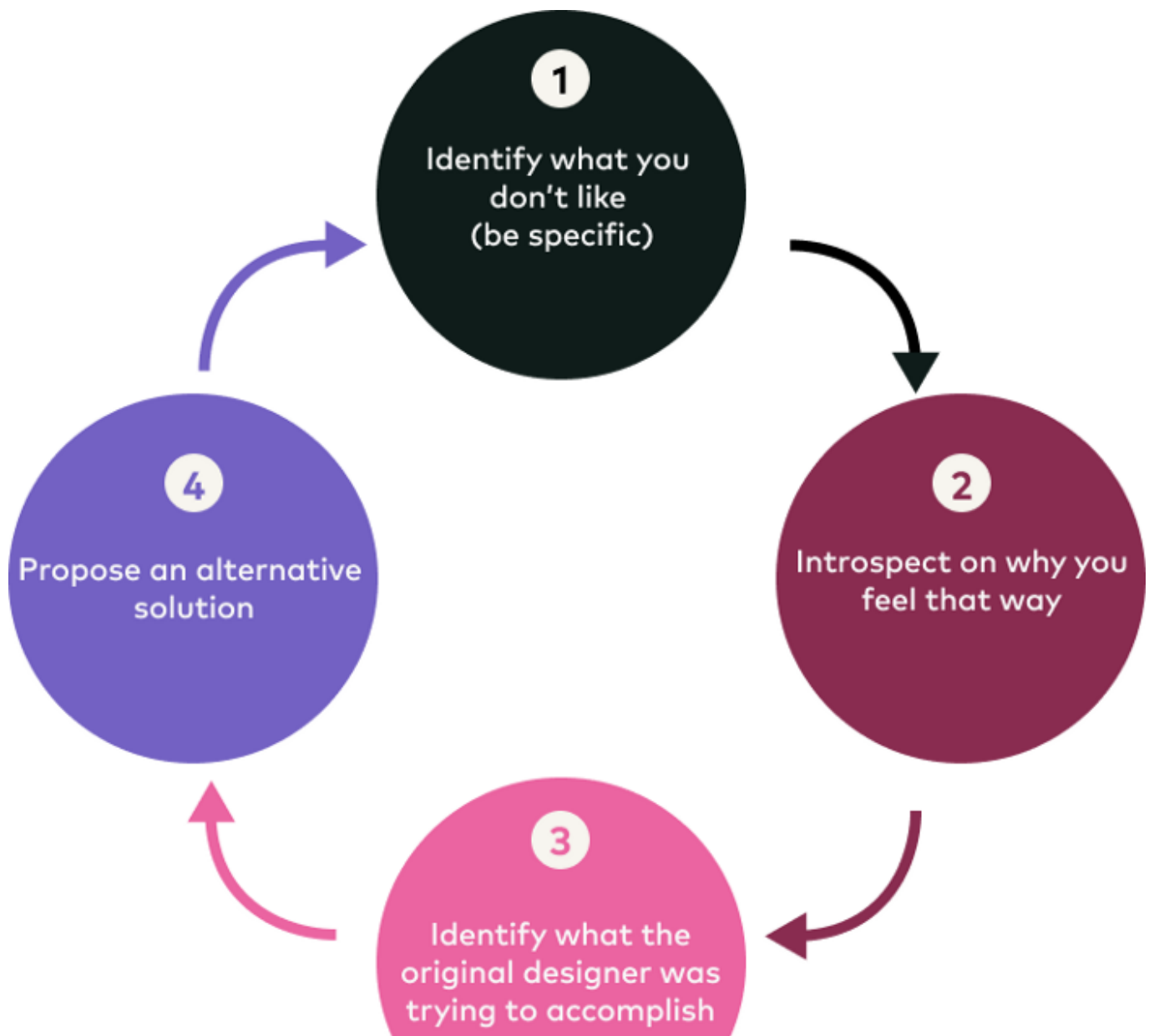
Framework for Improving at critically evaluating your game play experiences

## Identify what you don't (or do!) like

Let's start with breaking down why you dislike something. Instead of saying something sucked, or was "bad," take a step back and dive into what exactly it was you didn't enjoy. Being able to point to a specific mechanic, system, or point in the game, will help ground your conversation in solid examples that you and others can reference.

A great example of this in action is when my Games Book Club played through the critically acclaimed Hollow Knight. For the uninitiated, it's a very popular game with a reputation for being hard but immensely rewarding. When reviewing the on-boarding into the game, I found myself falling into the trap of saying "It really sucked." After stopping and reflecting on this, I realized that the underlying reason I felt it "sucked" was because dying (especially in the early game) was really painful.

Reflect on why you feel that way (what specific things are driving that feeling?)

Being able to reflect and breakdown why you feel a certain way will take a shallow, subjective statement, and evolve it into a deeply contextual opinion. It's absolutely okay to dislike an experience that other people find enjoyable. But, being able to articulate that dislike will help others understand where you're coming from, what preferences you hold that might be silently shaping your opinions, and let them see your point of view.

Using the Hollow Knight example from earlier, after reflecting on why dying "sucked," I realized it was how at odds the design of death felt with the encouragement of exploration. In a game that was so much about exploration and finding your own path, having to go back to an area you potentially regretted visiting, just to get your body, often led to a vicious cycle of being "in over your head" and unable to go elsewhere for risk of losing all your hard-earned currency. Mark Brown of Game Maker's Toolkit does a fantastic job at articulating this himself in his video "The World Design of Hollow Knight."
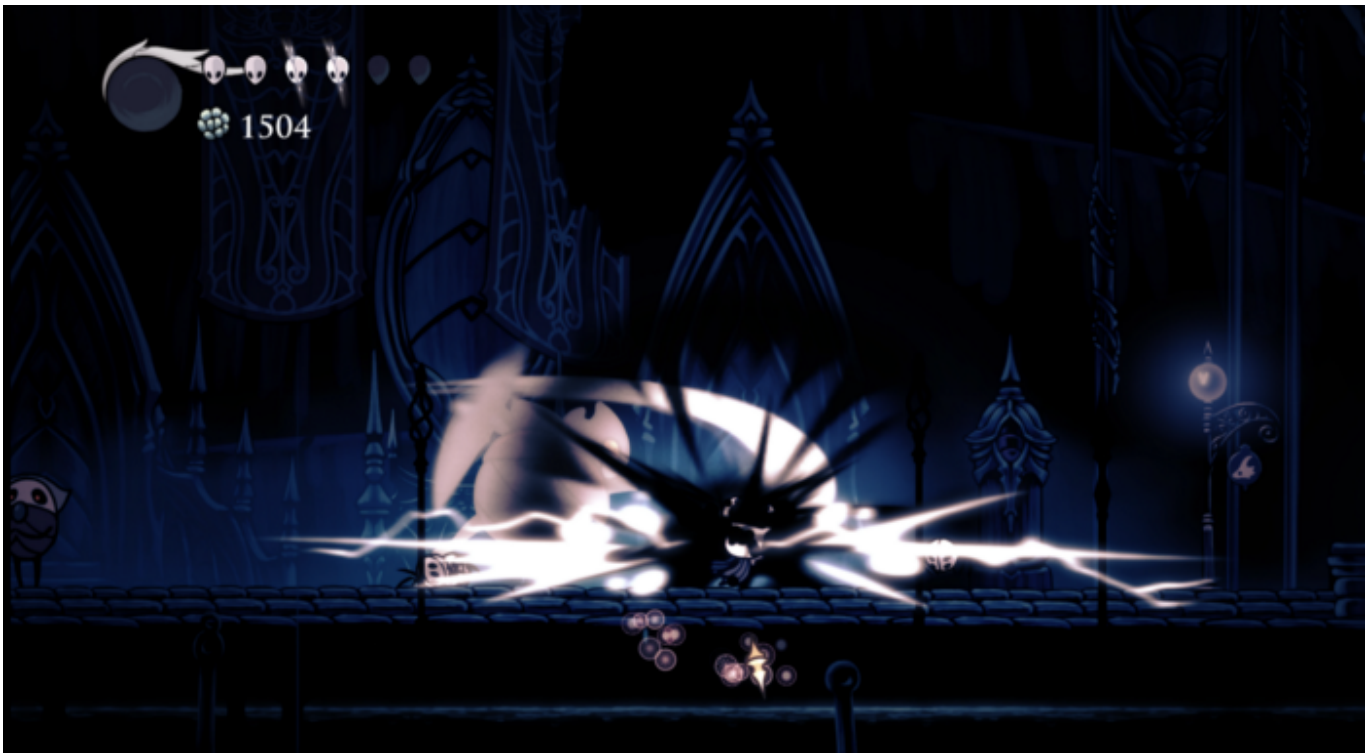
Hollow Knight, PC Edition 2020.

Try to identify (even if it's just a guess!) the original design intent

Once you're able to reflect on why you're reacting to that specific thing in your game, you can begin to reverse engineer the design process. Ask yourself questions like: What is this system accomplishing? Why would I put this system in the game? How does the design of this affect how players engage with the game? These can help illuminate the questions and problems the original designers faced, and knowing the decisions they made and some of the questions they ran into can help you explore alternative options.

> "Learning to think and reflect critically about your game experiences is a key step in translating a love of playing games into a career of making them ."

Propose an alternative solution

It's one thing to have alternate options to explore, it's another to actually suggest one. Many times people stop once they've identified potential alternatives, but this is a trap. Without thinking through the whole system from the point-of-view of your alternative design, you're never forced to confront all the edge cases and systems integrations that your alternative design would have to account for. When you start to think through all

the details your design is going to have to account for, you begin to get an even greater appreciation for the solution that the original designer went with, and a deeper understanding of the trade-offs they made.

In summary

Going through the process of introspection and forcing yourself to think deeply about why you feel a certain way can be challenging and uncomfortable. However, mastering this, will give you a huge advantage when you are interviewing for a design role in games -- or just collaborating with others to make your own game.

Ultimately, thinking critically about the things you experience is a fundamental design skill and my hope is that this framework will give those who need it an easy starting point for improving.

Sources :

Brown, Mark. Game Maker's Toolkit. "The World Design of Hollow Knight | Boss Keys" *YouTube*, 31 Oct. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ITtPPE-pXE.

Holcomb, Sarah. "Design Thinking Bootleg." *Stanford D.school*, Stanford D.school, 7 June 2018, dschool.stanford.edu/resources/design-thinking-bootleg

Additional Links and Inspiration :

- Game Maker's Toolkit (youtube)

- Extra Credits, Reality is Broken (Jane McGonigal)

- Rules of Play (Salen & Zimmerman)

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