FREE EBOOK

100 GAME DESIGN TIPS & TRICKS

GAME DESIGN TIPS AND TRICKS THAT CAN INCREASE YOUR SALES AND PLAYER RETENTION

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100 GAME DESIGN TIPS & TRICKS

by

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Intro

Hey! My name is Wlad Marhulets, and I'm the developer of [DARQ](). I wanted to share with you some tips & tricks about game design I've learned over the years while working on my first game (which to my surprise became #42 most shared PC Video Game of 2019, according to Metacritic). **Some of these lessons were learned by making countless mistakes, others from GDC talks, youtube videos, fellow developers, and articles. I did my best to link to sources if I managed to find them or remember them.** Some tips are genre specific. Others contradict one another. **It's up to you to use them or not. Ultimately, breaking rules is the prerequisite to innovation. My hope is that this little book helps you make better decisions when designing your game!**

If you're looking for advice, feedback, or guidance on your gamedev journey, feel free to reach out to me on Twitter ([@UnfoldGames]()).

Let's go!

1. Give the Player Clear Goals.

Without clear goals, players won't know what to do in your game and as a result, won't feel engaged. In this [Unite 2016 talk](#), Curtiss Murphy talks about 3 kinds of goals:

1. **Explicit Goals**: goals communicated to the player by the game itself. For example: "new objective, get from point A to point B."
2. **Implicit Goals**: goals that are implied by the game, but not communicated directly. For example: don't die. Win the battle. Solve a puzzle.
3. **Player Driven Goals**: these are the most interesting kind of goals. It's the player who set a goal and gets engaged in achieving it. For example: in Minecraft, you're not given a specific objective, yet you quickly find yourself working on a large project. The project invented by you. This kind of goal is the most effective in keeping the player engaged.

Player driven goals are extremely powerful. It's incredible what people manage to create in Minecraft.

2. Tell the Player What to Do, But Not How to Do It

Having clear objectives is important, but give the player the freedom to complete them on their own term. As a game designer, **try to think of multiple ways an objective can be reached.** Allow the player to choose the playstyle they prefer and avoid linearity. Make the player feel as if they are the mastermind behind the solution they came up with, even if it was carefully engineered and thought through during the design process.

Hitman series is known for giving the player a lot of freedom in how they approach each mission. There are always multiple ways to complete each objective.

3. Reward & Punishment

Reward the player for progressing in the game. Depending on the genre, it can be new items, XP, story elements, etc. **Punishment is also an important motivator, but if you overuse it, the player will likely get frustrated with your game.** The Diablo series is known for striking the perfect balance between both. The player is always motivated to move forward, being rewarded by gold, and new gear. The hope of finding a

rare piece of equipment makes the journey much more engaging. The punishment of death is always there, yet it never overshadows the rewards that come with the progress.

Diablo games feel satisfying because collecting gear and unlocking new skills serves as a powerful motivator as the player progresses through the game.

4. Teach the Player to Play Your Game

O nce you introduce a game mechanic, like jumping, make sure the player has to use it to progress further. Give it some time, and test the player's ability to use it. After some time has passed, think of a way the player could utilize the mechanic in a creative way to solve a problem or overcome an obstacle. These 3 steps are a sign of good game design and ensure that the player understands and remembers how to use a mechanic. For example, *Super Mario Bros* first teaches the player the jump mechanic. It does it by showing the player that they can hit the bricks and get over gaps. Later, the jump mechanic is being tested by making the player jump on top of little *Goombas*, the first type of enemy in the game. Finally, the player is asked to use the jump mechanic creatively by utilizing a double jump to defeat the turtles, also known as *Koopa Troopas*.

By that time, the player has a good understanding of what can be done in the game with the jump button.

Shigeru Miyamoto, the designer of Super Mario Bros, teaches the player step-by-step how to use the jumping mechanic.

5. Reuse the Core Mechanic in Various Ways

Most well-designed games don't introduce a lot of mechanics. You'll be better off having just one core mechanic. Try to find creative ways to reuse it throughout the game so that it always feels fresh. Think of Jonathan Blow's *Braid*, which uses the concept of rewinding time as the core mechanic. **The mechanic remains the same throughout the game. Each section of the game changes something about the world that makes the mechanic feel fresh.** For example, having some elements of the world be immune to the time manipulation opens up the world of possibilities for new puzzles, which Jonathan Blow explores masterfully.

Braid is centered around a single mechanic, yet it always feels fresh thanks to clever level design that gradually introduces new ideas as the game progresses. It's the world that evolves, not the core mechanic.

6. Create Your Game Loop

A game loop is a series of actions that are performed over and over again throughout your game. Every game has a core loop that remains unchanged. Your goal is to design a game loop of actions that is engaging and contrasting in nature. For example, *Skyrim*'s core game loop involves exploration, fighting, looting, and upgrading new gear. Each action has a different intensity and emotion behind it, that's why the loop remains engaging throughout hundreds of hours of gameplay. Try to create a game loop that is simple, yet varied. Making the player do too much of the same activity in the game will simply feel boring.

Skyrim's game loop consists of just a few actions, yet it remains engaging thanks to the wide range of emotions within the loop. Fighting feels exciting. Looting and upgrading gear feels rewarding, etc.

7. Surprise & Twist

Once the player gets used to the gameplay, introduce a new element, or a new rule. Look for ways to surprise your players. There are many ways to achieve this. It could be done through story twists, new mechanics, unexpected events, etc. (Spoilers ahead). How engaged were you when The Stanley's Parable teleported you into a completely different world? What about the big story and gameplay twist in The Last of Us, when Joel gets injured?

8. Make Good Boss Fights

What makes for a good boss fight? This video makes an in-depth analysis of this subject. A good boss fight should:

- **Be challenging**: nobody would enjoy the sweet victory if the bosses could be defeated as easily as other enemies.

- **Be fair**: players respond negatively when they notice the game trying to cheat to achieve difficulty. Make your boss's behavior complex yet somewhat predictable if enough practice, patience, and observation are applied.

- **Avoid false difficulty**: An easy way to make your boss fight challenging would be to it a lot of health. While bosses should be more resistant to the player's attacks, it shouldn't be the main difficulty factor. If it is, the fight becomes monotonous.

- **Be intimidating**: Dark Souls series does it best. The design of their boss fights always prioritizes new ways to intimidate the player. It could be achieved through epic music, boss size, or anything else that can help create a sense of danger.

- **Test player's skills**: A boss fight can be seen as an exam, testing the player's knowledge of all the game mechanics presented in the game prior to the fight. Make the boss force the player to utilize all the skills that are available at that point.

- **Be a part of the story**: Last but not least, make the boss fight fit well into your game's story. The player should know why they're fighting the boss. Make it personal. After all, the victory won't feel as satisfying if the boss encounter was completely random and unexpected. For example, in *The Last Of Us*, Ellie's fight with David is preceded by a lot of story elements that make the fight truly emotional. You can't help but want to hurt David as much as possible. It would have felt so differently if David didn't appear in the game before the actual fight sequence.

Bosses from the *Dark Souls* series are usually much bigger than the player. Combined with epic music, that's a good intimidation tactic.

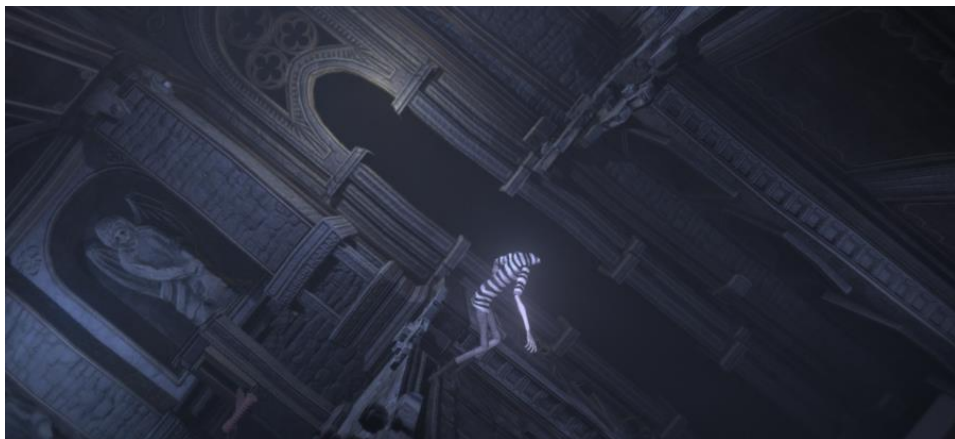## 9. Create Points of Interest

Points of interest are unique objects or structures that help the player to navigate the world. They're especially useful in open-world games where the player has the freedom of movement in all directions. Good points of interest stand out from the rest of the environment and look different from every side. You shouldn't have too many of them next to each other.

In Journey, the player is given a point of interest since the beginning of the game. The mountain top gives the player a clear sense of direction throughout the game.

10. Make Memorable Environments

Apart from big monuments and gigantic points of interest, try to apply similar principles to your level design, so the player doesn't feel disoriented in your game. In order to achieve that, **add variety to your game assets and use unique architectural elements to serve as points of interest on a smaller scale.** When designing my own game *DARQ,* making the environment look memorable was especially important to me. It's something that I had to learn the hard way during alpha and beta testing. Since the player can walk on walls and ceilings, it was easy to get lost. **I went the extra mile and made the whole environment mostly unique. There aren't many repeating assets in the game, besides small props.** Whether the player is walking on the floor, walls, or the ceiling, it's a lot easier to navigate the environment without feeling disoriented since every room looks unique and has memorable elements in them.

In DARQ, the player can walk on walls and ceilings. It allows for viewing the environment from various camera angles. That increases the need for making every room unique, featuring interesting architectural shapes that look different from every angle.

11. Make the Environment Interactive

Make **your world feel alive.** If shooting is your main game mechanic, make sure that the player can shatter windows and leave bullet holes in walls. Not being able to interact with the world according to some basic expectations can result in a lot of frustration and the loss of immersion. Conversely, being able to affect the world and see it respond accordingly is incredibly satisfying. Destructible environments are especially important in shooters. *Bro Force* feels great, and it's mostly because almost everything you see on the screen can be destroyed.
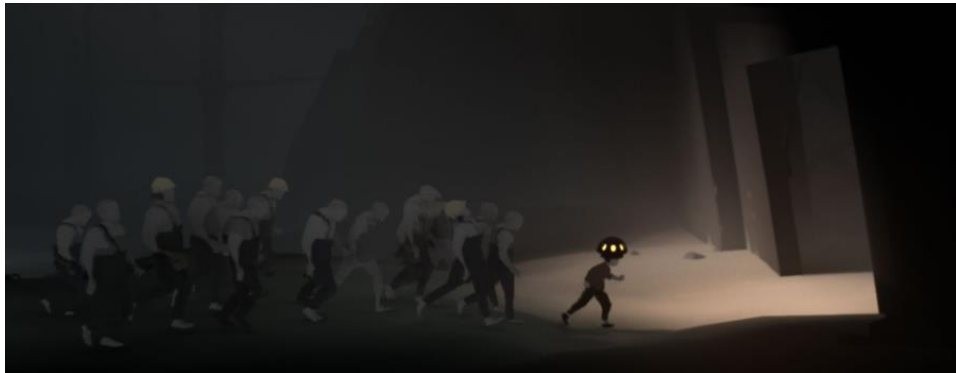

Fully destructible environments in Bro Force

12. Construct Your Story Arc

Whether your game is story-driven or not, you need to think about what your game's arc is going to look like. Typically, you want to gradually raise tension until the climax of the game that comes at the end (final boss battle, big story element, etc.). Other story arcs can be just as effective.

13. Use Light to Guide The Player

Light can be used to guide the player into the direction you want them to go. Players would naturally follow the path that leads to a lit area. Light can also serve as a warning. A flickering light or red-colored light can serve as an indication of danger.

INSIDE masterfully uses light to attracts the player's curiosity

14. Use Leading Lines to Direct Player's Attention

Another way you can guide the player is by using **leading lines that naturally occur when the environment is viewed from a certain**

perspective. Being aware of this phenomenon when designing your levels will make them feel more intuitive to navigate.

Tomb Raider environment design example: this scene encourages the player to look up. The element that stands out the most is the orange flag that points upwards. There are also stairs and implied lines that point towards the next point of interest.
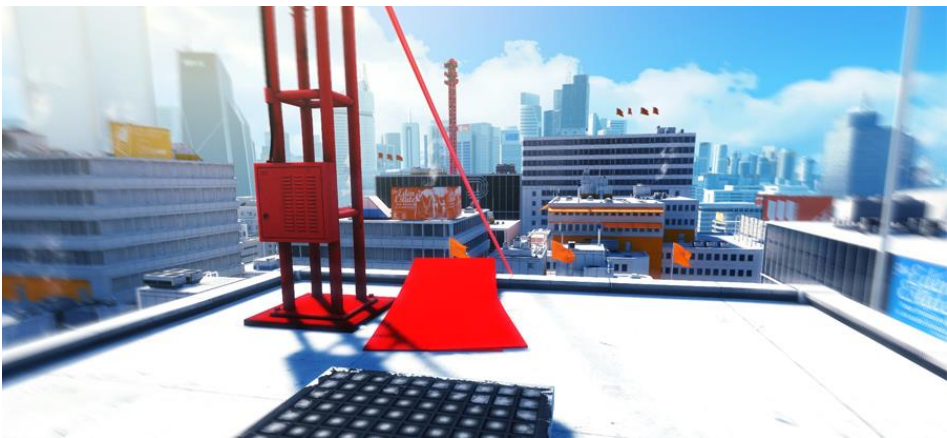
15. Let the Player Breathe

Even the most unforgiving and intense games utilize safe zones. For example, think of safe rooms in Resident Evil games. They allow the player to rest, regroup, save game, reorganize the inventory, etc. **Even the most adrenaline-filled action games need the sections where the player gets to relax.** Tension is only exciting when interrupted with moments of safety, no matter how short they may be.

Resident Evil series is known for its save rooms. They let the player breathe a little before plunging back into the adrenaline-filled gameplay.

16. Establish Visual Language

Games rarely benefit from realism. **Establish a visual language that you'll use consistently throughout your game. Both shape and color can communicate certain information** to the player. For example, in *Mirror's Edge*, the red color is used to guide the player through the fast-paced chase sequences towards the next location.

The red color is used here to help the player navigate the environment and make quick decisions in the fast-paced sequences.

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