



Game Design

Tricks that Hook Players

By Casey "Boz" Weeks

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Game Design Tricks that Hook Players (Version 1)

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Table of Contents

Your Free Gift	4
Introduction	6
1. Are you nailing the fundamentals?	7
2. Does the game have a strong core design at the root of all features?	7
3. Are the mechanics and fiction layer tied together in a cohesive theme?	8
4. Is there a clear purpose? Do you have a clearly defined micro and macro design?	8
5. Have you tested several prototypes of your game before deciding on a direction?	9
6. Are there benefits even when the player is not playing?	9
7. Is your game performing magic tricks that make the player feel the illusion that they are really good at the fantasy presented in-game?	10
8. Can the community find plenty to talk about your game and secrets to trade?	11
9. Does your game mechanic have multiple implications?	11
10. Are players given clear differentiation between options?	12
11. Do all of your main mechanics support each other in the same direction and align with what's fun?	12
12. Are you Encouraging or Rewarding players to do what they already want to do?	13
13. Have you talked to your players? Have you put your game in front of players who have never seen your game before?	14
14. Are obstacles/challenges/enemies challenging the player to master the mechanics?	14
15. Would your game be fun to speedrun?	15
16. Can the mechanics be simplified and combined to create emergent game play?	15
17. Are the mechanics utilizing resonance to help players intuitively fit how the mechanics work into their mental model?	16
18. Is your game's resonance adequately divorced from reality to be appealing?	17
19. Is there regular and visible progress?	17
20. Where can variable reward schedules be created and offset to hit at different times after each other?	18
21. Can what was once a challenge now be almost automatic but you still have greater challenges to overcome?	19
22. Are spikes in difficulty broadcasted as such?	19
23. Are there mechanics that make the player feel like they could have a different experience on another playthrough?	20
24. Have you eliminated everything that is unneeded creating a more compact and powerful version of your game without distraction?	20
25. Do you have a design system that feels like you can plug in more content and the game would have more great content?	21
26. Does your game have it's own unique artistic style or voice?	22
The Checklist	23
A Closing Word	25

Introduction

Over the years I've come across Game Design Tricks in videos, books, articles, games themselves, and my own work. I've always kept loose notes on all of these techniques and I decided to finally compile it all together into a sort of checklist to use when designing a game.

First, I'll talk about each trick, and then at the end, I will compile it into a single checklist you can use for your games.

These are not meant to be definitive or comprehensive or that every game needs each and every one of these items, but instead, a sort of guide to peruse while designing your game. If a tip doesn't make sense for your game, skip it! If you need to make a few alterations to the item, do so. Every game is different and while I've attempted to make these rules more universal, all games are unique and will have their own special tricks to bring to the world.

This list is filtered through my perspective, tastes, and games library, so this list can easily grow over time with more input.

Alright, let's do this thing!

1. Are you nailing the fundamentals?

- a. It makes the most sense to start here because almost this entire eBook is tips to nail the fundamentals.
- b. Casey Yano talks about this at length in his article “Chicken Noodle Soup” <https://caseyyano.com/chicken-noodle-soup-29d80e16adff>
- c. As he says in the article “Don’t try to wow people with cheap one-off tricks. Wow people with how well you implement the basics.”
- d. A lot of what makes unique games smash hits is a solid understanding of the basics. Idea + Execution. Execution is a skill acquired from years of making games. If you’re just starting out, focus more on making variants of existing popular games to polish your fundamentals. This could be anything from numbers going up to working on powerups to a fluid UX to game design that just “gets it” to a solid UI and achievements system.
- e. This is related to something I call “Tightening the Screws”. At some point you will need to go through every detail of the game and making little tweaks to make the game feel much more cohesive.
- f. Study the low budget indie hits

Games that nail this:

Vampire Survivors, Balatro, Devil Daggers, Pizza Tower, Candy Crush, Celeste, Cookie Clicker, Cave Story, Braid

2. Does the game have a strong core design at the root of all features?

- a. At the core of your game is a concept - this might be a way of playing or an idea you want to communicate. Every element of your game then ties back to this core design to reinforce it. Some industries, such as advertising call this the “seed” in which everything grows from.
- b. The 2016 DOOM famously had the core “push forward” in which you were also encouraged to charge straight towards your enemies than duck behind cover. The glory kill system and rewards grew out of this core.

- c. Rami Ismail covers this topic in a post: <https://ltpf.ramiismail.com/the-core/>

Games that nail this:

DOOM (2016), Marble Madness, Tetris, Punch Out!!, Dance Dance Revolution, Ikaruga, Wii Sports, Peggle, Minecraft, Undertale, Disco Elysium

3. Are the mechanics and fiction layer tied together in a cohesive theme?

- a. Once you have your core design you will want a narrative layer to go with it. A good game narrative can be one that calls back to the core mechanic to reinforce it.
- b. Before Your Eyes is a great example - every time you blink, time skips forward. The narrative reinforces this mechanic by being about how time passes and we lose moments to the past.
- c. Celeste is about self-improvement and the metaphor of climbing a mountain. Traditionally, video game mechanics are all about improving your skills, while in the game you are climbing.
- d. Dumb example, but a lot of shooter games are about being in war where shooting is basically the micro level interaction of soldiers.
- e. In my game, Twilight Tower, <https://boz-float.itch.io/twilight-tower> the theme was based on the color palette of the twilight time of day as the sun is going down, which typically creates anxiety about getting to safety before dark. You make desperate choices which can be the difference between dying or having to live with what you did to survive. The music and mechanics are about creating desperation that you would feel if in danger during twilight.

Games that nail this:

Portal, Braid, Papers Please, Darkest Dungeon (stress meter), Minit

4. Is there a clear purpose? Do you have a clearly defined micro and macro design?

- a. Have you ever played a game that felt a little more like a toy that you goof around with for a while and then never pick it up again? This is a game that has figured out it's micro design but not it's macro.

- b. The macro design is how you take a fun micro design and create a long term goal that requires all the different ramifications of the micro design to achieve. These macro goals might be larger victories that all add up to a major victory, or as simple as a higher score than your peers.
- c. Sometimes the purposes are small, like trying to farm enough gold to buy better equipment. And sometimes larger, like trying to get good enough equipment to beat an end-game dungeon.

Games that nail this:

Almost any famous game. The real trick is in the execution of your micro design and the macro design is the excuse to use the micro design.

5. **Have you tested several prototypes of your game before deciding on a direction?**

- a. The idea in your head is a hypothesis and it will rarely survive the experiment of testing. Make several versions of your idea in a rapid cycle to compare. The version of your game you decide to go with will have the confidence of knowing which versions you didn't go with.
- b. You'd be surprised how combining your idea with what you're learning from rapid prototyping creates a game that's much more fun.

6. **Are there benefits even when the player is not playing?**

- a. Idle games allow you to come back when you're less busy and see your progress since you were away.
- b. MMORPGs use the rest timer to give you extra EXP if you were gone for awhile. This was originally designed to help players to play in shorter sessions. How can you help players have more healthy habits?
- c. Animal Crossing famously guilt-trips players for being away too long.

- d. Some games, good or bad, have worlds that continue even after the player leaves.

Games that nail this:

World of Warcraft, Cookie Clicker

7. **Is your game performing magic tricks that make the player feel the illusion that they are really good at the fantasy presented in-game?**

- a. Some call this “putting your thumb on the scale” - it’s the Baker’s Dozen of game design. On the face of the game the player sees various challenges and chances and takes them at face value, but behind the scenes you can be tilting things in the player’s favor.
- b. Coyote Time in Celeste - giving players a little more time to jump even if they did fall off a platform.
- c. The life bar in DOOM - like a fuel gauge in a car, makes it appear like you have less health than you actually do when you’re weak.
- d. Making the hurt box of the player smaller than it appears so the player feels like they have more near-misses.
- e. Putting statistical chances in the player’s favor - players feel like they are “owed” more from random chance than they really are, so if the player keeps getting the short end of the statistical stick, throw them a bone every now and again and let them succeed even if they failed. Say they have a 50% chance of success when it’s really a 75% chance. Handle a tie scenario in the player’s favor.
- f. This has a little bit of the “customer is always right” flavor to it.

Games that nail this:

DOOM (2016), Jamestown (smaller hitbox than ship), Mario Kart, Left 4 Dead 2, Civilization series

8. Can the community find plenty to talk about your game and secrets to trade?

- a. Do you have easter eggs?
- b. Do you have an advanced mechanical micro level design that players will take to the internet to discuss and trade strategies?
- c. Do you have unlockables that players need to discover how to achieve?
- d. Is the world so full of unique offerings that players discuss the best places and ways to achieve certain goals?
- e. Are the mechanics so combinatorial and emergent that players want to discuss their favorite combos? Balatro and Slay the Spire are good examples of this.
- f. Maybe players are falling in love with the lore of the world and it's characters?

Games that nail this:

Terraria, Balatro, Slay the Spire, competitive games, World of Horror, Elden Ring, Minecraft, Dwarf Fortress, Disco Elysium, Undertale, Stardew Valley, Fall Guys, Among Us

9. Does your game mechanic have multiple implications?

- a. Context specific mechanic design ramifications or scenario-specific. RTS Building on top of a specific land type or building next to a specific type of construction creates a different type of building.
- b. Pressing button in different contexts has different effects.
- c. Ex: Mario - Jump to get past obstacles but also be used as an attack when you land on certain enemies. You can jump different heights and distances based on how long you hold the jump button.
- d. Ex: Megaman 3 - Magnet enemy above you can help pull you up to a higher ledge, or help you jump over a pit, but can also unexpectedly mess up your jump and make you fall in the pit.
- e. Ex: Breath of the Wild - Can block attacks, but Parry block timing can also reflect the attack.

- f. To practice this style of game design, try making some one button controlled games.

Games that nail this:

Devil Daggers, card comboing games, Pizza Tower, Noita, Binding of Isaac, Factorio, Dicey Dungeons, Final Fantasy Tactics, Castlevania SotN

10. Are players given clear differentiation between options?

- a. Is there sufficient difference in your abilities/features/attacks/defenses/choices that it's easy to make a decision or understanding of what works best in which scenarios?
- b. Too many options that are too similar slow down player decision making and can lead them to get bored, lose interest, or fall asleep. Whereas contrast in options can lead to firmer conviction in choices.
- c. You want to create that "Ooh, look at all of these tasty options" feeling when given a selection of options. You're looking for a lack of overlap and situational benefit.

Games that nail this:

Slay the Spire, Hades, Risk of Rain, Diablo series, Gunfire Reborn, Transistor, Zelda series, Tetris, Castlevania III, fighting game character selections without those darn mirror characters, Overwatch, Team Fortress 2, Megaman powerups, Metroid series, DOOM (2016) weapons, RPG classes, Fallout New Vegas

11. Do all of your main mechanics support each other in the same direction and align with what's fun?

- a. Ex: In one prototype for my game Twilight Tower 2, I found that playing a lot of cards was most fun, but the mechanics supported not playing cards as the optimal strategy. So the optimal strategy contradicted what was most fun and I needed to redesign around this.

- b. DOOM (2016) didn't want the average shooter game's cover mechanics in order to maintain a more fast-paced and action-packed gameplay so they added the Glory Kill system to encourage playing in the most fun way.
- c. Don't punish players for playing "the wrong way" - reward and encourage them to play the most fun way.
- d. Zelda Tears of the Kingdom open world requires crafting materials to construct armor to protect you from the areas that you are having the challenges in, so you have to experience the challenge to earn overcoming it. This mitigates the phenomenon where you become strong somewhere else and then overpower an area your first time there.
- e. Game Maker's Toolkit has a great video related to this topic: How Game Designers Protect Players From Themselves https://youtu.be/7L8vAGGitr8?si=ah_AKUrHMIK-Odtx

Games that nail this:

Zelda Tears of the Kingdom, DOOM (2016), Metal Gear Solid V, Risk of Rain gets harder the more time passes to deter dawdling

12. Are you Encouraging or Rewarding players to do what they already want to do?

- a. Supporting players for doing what they already want to do has a multiplicative effect on desire to play. They already want to play a certain way, and you're challenging them and rewarding them for doing so to create a feedback loop.
- b. Some players often want to exhibit their skill in ways that the game ignores. This might be speedrunning, or putting their skills on display in Breath of the Wild videos.
- c. Some games create optional challenges to reward players. Like strawberries in Celeste where you are given more unlocks for collecting optional pickups. Just give the player an excuse to showboat or attempt challenging feats.
- d. By making it optional, you create a more accessible game with options for all levels of skill.
- e. Achievements often work in the same way.

- f. Identify what parts of your game are the most fun and have the highest skill ceiling and then create optional challenges and award players for completing them.
- g. The opposite is making players have to log in daily to do something they hate just because they want the reward. This is the dark pattern.

Games that nail this:

Mario series, Celeste, Hades heat system, any game with systems that increase rewards with higher risk, Diablo increased loot per difficulty, Heroes of Hammerwatch, Slay the Spire Ascensions, Super Contra has more content at higher difficulties, games where you get the “true ending” for winning at higher difficulties

13. **Have you talked to your players? Have you put your game in front of players who have never seen your game before?**

- a. Kleenex Testing: Once someone has playtested your game, they are now a used Kleenex and can never test the same way again.
- b. A creator can never be their audience
- c. I've already talked about this extensively in my video “How to Make a Better Game in Less Time” <https://youtu.be/eyu8AxtlXJc>

Games that nail this:

Playtesting has become an industry standard since around the late 2000s

14. **Are obstacles/challenges/enemies challenging the player to master the mechanics?**

- a. Are you throwing players off optimal play in a way that it creates something for the player to get better at?

- b. As players improve at your game, they will want to showcase their abilities. IF they can just spam the same attacks the entire time, they will begin to become bored
- c. A more controversial example is the Marauder from Doom Eternal - it seems to grind the progress of the game to a halt. But it also creates a brand new challenge to overcome. My advice from this scenario (and it's anti-marauder) is to not make the player have to completely break out of their momentum or rhythm just because an enemy is doing something to character player styles - especially if your game flows from that.
- d. At the lowest level, this is curves on a race track. Or a ranged enemy in a melee game.

Games that nail this:

Any game with enemy priority order like Devil Daggers or DOOM (2016), Metal Gear Solid V's adaptable enemies, Dark Souls, Team Fortress 2, Slay the Spire, Fear and Hunger, enemies you can only hit in the back in melee playstyle games

15. **Would your game be fun to speedrun?**

- a. Or at least, some aspect of your game?
- b. An example of something speedrunners hate are auto-scrolling levels and long, unskippable cutscenes. This adds to replayability and lets players really exhibit mastery.
- c. Oh, and I'm not talking about the ones you can glitch through the walls at the beginning to beat the game, but ones where you can use the full moveset to amazing results with a very high skill ceiling.

Games that nail this:

Super Mario 64, Neon White, Super Metroid's insane ability set, Quake, Super Meat Boy, Portal, Celeste

16. **Can the mechanics be simplified and combined to create emergent game play?**

- a. Sid Meier like to create games where there are several simple mechanics that combine to create emergent gameplay.
- b. You might think of your game design elements as tiny simple and fun tools on their own, but when you line them up in a variety of ways, the real fun emerges in ways you never expected.

Games that nail this:

Factorio, Civilization series, Against the Storm, Banished, Slay the Spire, Balatro, Dead Cells, Legend of Bumbo, Stacklands, RimWorld, They Are Billions

17. Are the mechanics utilizing resonance to help players intuitively fit how the mechanics work into their mental model?

- a. What if you played a game where red cards always bypass green cards but not yellow cards? Okay, that's a rule to remember. However, Magic the Gather uses flying units which can bypass the defenses of ground units - this makes sense because a flying creature can go right over. That's much easier to learn and remember.
- b. Mike Rosewater of MTG fame uses the example of zombies - when you show a group of zombies the player already has existing narratives to work with to understand how zombies act and the world they might exist in
- c. Would it make sense that a fish creature has a high land running stat?
- d. What sort of properties and mechanics would you assign to a ninja character that would be different from a large thuggish character?
- e. You can start with a mechanic that has a seemingly strange mechanical effect and then think about a narrative layer to wrap around it that contains an existing connection to the player's understanding of the world.

Games that nail this:

Inscription, Project Zomboid, Stardew Valley, Civilization, Mario Kart banana, Tycoon-styled games, The Sims, Wii Sports, Beat Saber

18. Is your game's resonance adequately divorced from reality to be appealing?

- a. This is a warning that games are also intended to be fun, so if you theme your mechanic around filling out paper work or doing finances, you can still use the fantasy element of performing these tasks while making it not boring like reality. (unless your audience finds finances exhilarating)
- b. Try pushing the mechanics in a way that may seem goofy or off, but align better with the game feel
- c. How can the mechanics be pushed towards what players find the most fun and be freed from the shackles of reality?
- d. Metal Gear Solid games always come to mind when I think about this - you can hide in cardboard boxes and in Metal Gear Solid V you can steal people for your army with a giant balloon. All of this in the middle of a super dramatic and serious life or death narrative.

Games that nail this:

Metal Gear Solid series, Disco Elysium, Persona 5, The Witcher 3, Hotline Miami, The Elder Scrolls series, Papers Please

19. Is there regular and visible progress?

- a. Most roguelikes have this built in where you can see your skill is taking you farther and eventually giving you win streaks
- b. Roguelites take this a step further and allow you to build up permanent upgrades along the way to give you more of a reason to keep playing - "Next time will be better"
- c. Hades and the Mirror and Home - you might be losing constantly, but you're building up permanent stats on your character as well as your own skill. You're also finding items to build the narrative layer of the game and unlock more conversations and build relationships. They also use the Heat system to increase difficulty.
- d. Slay the Spire has the Ascensions that give you a reason to keep making the game harder and try again and again.
- e. In RPGs you "Level Up" which gives you noticeable stats and abilities that make you stronger and ready for even harder enemies.

- f. Do numbers go up? Exponentially? Logarithmically with plateaus? Aka, does the player feel like they are advancing very far from where they first started? Number go up = good.

Games that nail this:

Vampire Survivors, Cookie Clicker, JRPGs, Loop Hero, Gunfire Reborn, Hades, Slay the Spire, Darkest Dungeon

20. Where can variable reward schedules be created and offset to hit at different times after each other?

- a. We humans loooove variable rewards.
- b. Imagine a slot machine that you continually pull and every so often you win big. You can pull it infinite times.
- c. Diablo 2 invented the art of loot - each enemy is a slot machine, with harder enemies even more exciting slot machines.
- d. Imagine you're surrounded by slot machines with timers on when they can be pulled. Every time you pull one, another one or two are ready to be pulled.
- e. This could be three different types of currency in a world - each currency more valuable than the other and rewarded at a rate where the slower currency is given out based on how valuable it is.
- f. This is like crafting supplies where you have to travel the entire world to find all the different pieces with the rarest pieces on the most powerful and rare enemies.
- g. This is being rewarded for play time, for non-play time, for ability, for lack of ability, for being in different areas all at the same time. And the whole time you're just pulling slot machine levers and then running to the other levers.

Games that nail this:

Final Fantasy XIV, Diablo series, Against the Storm, Terraria, Stardew Valley, Factorio, Gunfire Reborn, Valheim, Minecraft, Cookie Clicker, Vampire Survivors, Balatro

21. Can what was once a challenge now be almost automatic but you still have greater challenges to overcome?

- a. This goes with visible progress, but a little more retrospective.
- b. This is the appreciation of where you are now because of how much you suffered before. It's a way to look back and marvel at how weak you once were or how dangerous something now trivial once felt.
- c. Earthbound had a version of this where if you ran into a weak enemy, it would automatically defeat them.

Games that nail this:

Earthbound, JRPGs, roguelikes that have a high skill ceiling, idle games with prestige mechanics, games with New Game+, high score-driven games like Devil Daggers

22. Are spikes in difficulty broadcasted as such?

- a. Have you ever been playing a game, just moving along with ease and then suddenly get one shot and game over? This is a difficulty spike.
- b. If there is a difficulty spike, it feels like bullshit unless it was advertised as a difficulty spike. If a giant stomped you it would make a lot more sense than if the same cockroach enemy from the first area suddenly destroyed you.
- c. This is usually advertised as a boss fight, or a direction you can't go yet.
- d. In games with procedural content, this sometimes appears as a combination of just the right elements to create a procedural spike in difficulty where none was expected, and it makes players very angry.
- e. So make sure that difficulty spikes are forecasted in some way. Like in Megaman when you see the boss gate. Or in RPGs where you see a save point before a menacing path.

Games that nail this:

Megaman series, Slay the Spire, Terraria, Rogue Legacy, Risk of Rain, Mario series, Left 4 Dead 2, JRPGs

23. Are there mechanics that make the player feel like they could have a different experience on another playthrough?

- a. Idle games have prestige mechanics
- b. RPGs have different builds
- c. Dark Souls has stat point distributions and weapon builds
- d. Vampire Survivors has different players and weapon combinations and new levels
- e. Diablo 3 puts on seasons with new mechanical twists (I sure did get tired of how you could play that game with a handbook, though)

Games that nail this:

Games with New Game+, roguelikes with procedural combinatorial content, any sort of game where the mechanics and challenges can be shuffled and dealt in a new way, Dark Souls, Vampire Survivors unlocked content, Super Contra higher difficulty content, They are Billions, Against the Storm, Project Zomboid, Stardew Valley with a new map, Terraria worlds, any game with a character selection, competitive games where you can have a “main”

24. Have you eliminated everything that is unneeded creating a more compact and powerful version of your game without distraction?

- a. While “messy games” (<https://medium.com/kitfox-games/in-praise-of-messy-design-62722b88258e>) are their own type of fun, you might consider minimizing the amount of complexity a player has to deal with at once. As you build your game, you might begin a process of culling or simplifying elements to point more towards your core.
- b. This goes well with sticking to your core design, as well as combinatorial simple mechanics to create emergent gameplay. If you combine this with

resonance, you have a very easy game to pick up and learn while still having massive ramifications for complex future gameplay.

Games that nail this:

Devil Daggers, Tetris,

25. Do you have a design system that feels like you can plug in more content and the game would have more great content?

- a. Converse to the previous tip, you can have a system that gets better with more content added to the system, so long as it's designed to receive more content.
- b. With a sufficient strategy to the game design, you can have a series of combinatorial mechanics that you can add pieces to forever to make the game feel more diverse and novel.
- c. This combines well with using simple systems in conjunction with one another.

Games that nail this:

Factorio, The Incredible Machine, Hades, Subnautica, Terraria, Dicey Dungeons, Darkest Dungeon, Project Zomboid, Final Fantasy VI, Final Fantasy Tactics, Castlevania SotN

26. Does your game have it's own unique artistic style or voice?

- a. A game can be memorable on the artistic front and it's up to you if mechanics take a backseat.
- b. You could always have a game that isn't much different from others on the mechanics level, but is bolstered by an amazing style that demands attention.
- c. This is typically a tool utilized by AAA, but indie can pull it off as well.

Games that nail this:

Katana Zero, Inscryption, Hotline Miami, Blasphemous, Pizza Tower, Hollow Knight, World of Horror, Darkest Dungeon, Return of the Obra Dinn, Fez



The Checklist

- [] Are you nailing the fundamentals?
- [] Does the game have a strong core design at the root of all features?
- [] Are the mechanics and fiction layer tied together in a cohesive theme?
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- [] Does your game have it's own unique artistic style or voice?

A Closing Word

I must apologize, I didn't realize almost all of the tips would use DOOM (2016) and Slay the Spire as examples. Which are probably two of my more favorite games in recent years. So I want to again remind you that these tips are a matter of taste and that anyone can create a list like this based on their favorite elements of their favorite games.

That said, my two long time favorite games of all time are Final Fantasy VI, Final Fantasy Tactics, and Castlevania SotN and I didn't mention them at all, so there's that.

Oh oops, I just went back and added them!

Goodbye.

