On feedback being the best pa

Game designer Hazel Reynolds discusses having lots of ideas that aren't all good, making phone-free memories, and scheduling play days with her team.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1381 words.

Tags: Games, Business, Inspiration, Day jobs, Time management, Collaboration.

How do you come up with ideas for your games? How do you reach the final idea for different projects?

Yeah, where do ideas come from? In general, I put loads of interesting stuff in my brain. Museums, galleries, playing other games, going down rabbit holes on the internet. And then I try and have lots of time with nothing in my brain—so, sea swimming or a long walk, where my brain can just join all the dots up together. Everyone has their good ideas in the shower because finally your brain's like, "I'm going to have a rest and join all the dots together."

But some of the games have come from more specific places. Randomise is our first game, and I made that deliberately to lure my 12-year-old sister away from her iPad. That was my first game I ever made, and I just mashed up the three big party games I knew—Charades, Articulate, and Pictionary—and then mixed it up with these random combinations. You get three cards, and you get a really silly identity, like a confused octopus eating spaghetti, and then you choose whether you act, describe, or draw it. So it was very simple. Our bestseller is Six Second Scribbles. I used to be very bad at drawing but I loved drawing games, so I wanted to make a drawing game that you can win without being good at drawing.

Our newest game is my favorite game we've ever made. The Curator is a project that's been really close to our heart, that we're making because we love the game and we want a copy in our house. About seven years ago I started developing, thinking about making photography exhibitions to communicate certain themes, and whether the other players would see the same things in the photos that you selected. We had a box of Magnums, 100 great photographs that we bought off Amazon, and I used that for the original prototype, and we loved it. We played it after dinner, we played it with all our friends, but never in my wildest dreams did I think we'd actually end up making the game with Magnum Photos.

Something I like about your games is that they're easy to figure out how to play. The rules aren't 45 pages long. Is accessibility part of your philosophy?

Yes. I'll say that the games we play ourselves… we have wide-ranging tastes. We recently spent, I think, an hour and a half learning how to play Terraforming Mars, which has become one of my favorite games to play. I'll happily digest a large rule book. But the type of games we want to make are the games that are going to be as accessible to as many people, as quick as possible. We do a lot of work on the rules actually, just to make sure we're articulating them in the most simple way, and we do a lot of testing to make sure they work. We make games that everyone can join in with, everyone can enjoy. There's a real low barrier to entry. You can play as much with your 8-year-old as you can play with a grandparent, or your friends while you're having dinner or drinking. We want them to be as widely enjoyed as possible.

I know you work with your husband on Gamely. Is there anyone else on the team?

Yeah, there's five of us. We all work various levels of part-time and it's a really nice team. Four of us are based in Brighton and then there's one based back in Scotland, but he comes down three times a year basically just for our play days. We have these play days where we go out and play games and eat food together, and we do all our catching up and our bonding. Because we're a small team and we're working part-time, we're incredibly efficient when we're in the office, especially because some days we're working school hours, 9:30 to 2:30… We need those three play days a year to just hang out with each other. Because when you're really well bonded with someone and you know each other really well, it's much easier to get things done. There's zero office politics or anything. We're just all really good friends who make cool stuff together.

How do you decide when to pursue an idea all the way to making a game, and when to abandon an idea?

I have a lot of ideas, and lots of them aren't very good. I think it's good and healthy to have lots of ideas. I think if you get too attached to one idea, it's probably not a very healthy space to be in. People have said to me, "Your games are like your babies." I do not feel like that anymore. I know because I've had children. I feel totally different about my children than I feel about my games. My games are weird science experiments that I'm playing around with—dabbling, trying. They're fun and they're exciting, but if this science experiment doesn't work, it can go in the bin. Or bits of it can go in the bin.

If we have an idea and it doesn't work, often there's an element of it that's really good. But there's a whole load of stuff that isn't. I love play testing. I think what's really important, especially when taking in different ideas, is to get to the insight behind the suggestion. If someone makes a note and you think, "That's horrible, I don't want to do that," get to the insight *behind* the suggestion. What is it you're trying to fix with that suggestion? And then you find the real problem with the game, and there might be a whole load of different solutions that you can come up with to fix that bit.

What makes a game successful? Is it successful if people play it, if it's out in the world? Or is just completing it enough?

My absolute favorite thing about making games is the reviews and the feedback that we get from people. Every now and then I'll go into the reviews or some emails that we receive, and that's what makes me want to get up and keep making games for people. We get a lot of feedback, particularly people who've got teenagers who are hard to connect with. When I read stories like, "I've got a 13-year-old that wants to play all those video games, but this is the game that's helped us connect and now he wants to play it every night," it gives me goosebumps. Or people find it hard to find an activity that will connect older grandparents and kids, and then they've had that total connection, people have put down their screens… That magical moment when you realize that you haven't looked at your phone for an hour is what we want to create for people.

My nan is 86 now. I make her try all of my games, and I've got so many memories of her playing them. I think games create that magical sphere where people are so present in a way that you're not often these days. For me, a successful game is one that has brought people together and given them a moment that they'll remember forever.

Hazel Reynolds recommends:

Remind yourself regularly that you are going to die. Listening to *Four Thousand Weeks* by Oliver Burkeman, on repeat, helps me with this.

Spend as much time as you can laughing and making memories with the people you love. This is what it's all about.

Work out what your version of success looks like and build your work and life around this. My success metrics include how many hours a week I get to play beach volleyball.

Be creative by doing creative things. Make time for the projects that excite you and keep making new things that bring you joy.

Do nothing. Plan in 'white space' to your week with no expectations or to do list. Find out what emerges when you take time to pause, breathe and think.

Name

Hazel Reynolds

Vocation

game designer