

On finding a project's soul



Game designer Peter McPherson discusses defining goals by what he has control over, working as a full-time parent, and being curious about the everyday.

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As told to Nicole Amato, 2292 words.

Tags: [Games](#), [Process](#), [Family](#), [Beginnings](#), [Time management](#), [Focus](#).

What do you do when you're creatively stuck?

When I'm creatively stuck, I tend to pivot to a different project because I work on multiple projects at a time, largely for that reason. I tend to follow the project that's working well and that I'm feeling excited about. Sometimes when I hit a roadblock, I just set a project aside and leave notes for myself so I can easily return to it and know where I was... I will go back to what the soul of the project is supposed to be. Not always, but I'll sometimes have a brief document that talks about my vision for a game, its most important ideas. Usually there's one most important idea. Then I can just look at the game through that lens and hopefully identify parts that are not benefiting that goal. I can cut those parts out, take the game back a few steps, and have some clarity after that.

How do you determine what the soul of a game is, or what is the most important idea? I find that to be so overwhelming as a game designer.

Fit to Print is a game that had a clear soul. I thought about what would a newspaper game feel like: frantic energy and the impossibility of perfection. Those were the two main energies. That's when it's easy, when a game is really about evoking something very specific. With something like Wormholes, the soul was less clear. I wanted people to move through space really fast and to connect planets, and I think that was a strong idea, but there were many many more ways to go about it. It wasn't immediately clear what type of game it was supposed to be, and it took a whole bunch of different forms throughout development. There were just more questions to ask. I don't know how to do it deliberately-how to deliberately have that specific kernel of an idea-but projects always go much easier when I have that from the start.

How do you avoid burnout?

I try to give myself breaks before I'm starting to feel worn out. In my experience, it's a bit like staying hydrated. As soon as you notice you're thirsty, it's kind of too late. I have a tendency to want to work until I feel like I deserve a break. And it's taken me a long time to figure out that for me, that is not the right course of action, because I'll hit burnout before I reach that moment of satisfaction of, "Yes, I've gotten enough stuff done and now I deserve to play video games for an hour." Those breaks are on a day-to-day basis-like an hour break in the middle of the day-or they're month to month. I try to give myself a day or two of chill time.

I think I've come up with the most irresponsible method of time management and it's working really well for me. My system is that I don't plan the time when I'm going to do work. I only plan the time when I'm going to relax. And then once I've done that relaxation time, then I generally feel like I want to work anyway. So I'll plan out my day knowing, okay, at 9 P.M., I'm playing video games no matter what. I'll set aside other responsibilities-except for the parenting ones that are vital-and the work tends to fall into place.

How did you manage to create a path outside the established system?

I have always wanted a career outside the established system. I grew up with a father who was a cartoonist, and so he was home most of the time doing his creative work all hours of the day, and I really admired that creative lifestyle. I have always wanted something similar of being immersed in creativity and the freedom and flexibility that it gives you. As to how I did it, I wish I could give myself more credit, but it's definitely a whole lot of luck and a whole lot of thanks to people who have made this strange career path possible for me. So AEG obviously giving me a huge first chance with Tiny Towns and doing a ton of marketing for that game back when it came out, not to mention all of the early reviewers who grabbed on to that game and interviewed me. I've had really wonderful experiences with this industry on the whole.

How do you start a project? And how do you know when a project is done?

Most game ideas do start out as a Google Keep document in my phone, writing out "what if this, what if that" for a game idea, and I'll just sort of run with it. It becomes almost a stream of consciousness thing of writing down every possible idea I have. And then hopefully early-ish on in this brainstorming process, I come down to the core tension of the game. Here's what players are doing, here's the theme, this is their goal, this is what tools they have to move toward that goal. Once I reach that point, the ideal situation is that I'm so excited about the idea that I create that first early prototype. Or, sometimes I think I have a pretty good working system in my head and I will go to my game design notebook and write down what I think the starting rule set could be: a list of the bare minimum components I need to design to make this work and then I go from there. Both of these routes I think can work pretty well... Ideas where it's not quite as clear how that system is going to function, it's more important to get it on the table first, to feel out where the boundaries are going to be.

Done for me usually means when it's ready to be pitched to a publisher. I believe very much in a healthy development cycle for a game and I want it to be grilled and tested by other people. I know I'm never going to have a game in an unchangeable state before I start pitching it, even though I try to get it as close as possible. What that looks like for me is a game where I have done unguided testing on it from a rules document that is hopefully clear enough and doesn't have any glaring issues. I am not getting a lot of negative feedback from play testers; people are simply saying they want to play this game again; I've gone through three or four play tests without major changes and it's starting to lock in. That used to be a bigger number. Like with Tiny Towns, I probably did 100 or 150 play tests of that before I started pitching.

Is it okay to abandon a project?

I definitely think it's okay. Sometimes a similar game comes out on the market and I'll see that game and just think, "Wow, that idea is executed so much better than mine. I was not the right person to make this game." It's almost a relief. It's nice. Someone else has taken this on. I'm going to pre-order it and play it and have a blast, and I'm glad I didn't spend a hundred more hours working on this.

I try to make all of my games for myself. If I'm not having fun with a project, if I'm not looking forward to each play test, that's a huge problem. It's going to take so much more energy for me to push through. Even if I could complete it, and even if it could turn into a great game, it'll just take me two or three times more time than a project I'm really passionate and excited about and I enjoy every moment working on it. I have a shoebox in my closet full of scraps of old prototypes with little index cards of the rules so that I remember them. If I ever want to go back to one of them, they're there. It's like when you're reading a book you're not enjoying that much. If you just switch to a book you are really enjoying, you'll literally read more books in your life. You'll design more games in your life if you work on projects you're excited about and into.

How do you define creative success and how do you define failure?

I try to define goals in terms of things I have control over. If success looked like getting a game signed with a publisher or published, that would be out of my control. And I think I'd be pretty frustrated. It's definitely a success, but success for a creative project means a game that I am happy with, that I enjoy playing, that my friends and family ask me to play. I have a drawing game called Artiste that I have just about given up hope on

signing. My friends really love it, and every once in a while I'll take it back out and we'll play, and I'm so happy with that game even though I don't think it's really publishable. But I'm so happy with it as a creative product. I don't think there's anything wrong with making a game just for yourself. I think in many ways that's a fantastic goal.

What does your curiosity look like and how do you explore?

I think my curiosity is mostly day-to-day. I really try to resist pulling out my phone when I'm in a public place and I'm waiting in line somewhere, especially if I'm somewhere familiar. I'll instead play the game of, what things can I notice in the space I've been in 100 times that I haven't noticed before? Or I'll eavesdrop a little bit and see what interesting bits of conversation I can pick up on. I just try to be really present and take things in. Or if I'm going for a walk somewhere, I'll very simply look up instead of down. I try to enjoy being mindfully present when I can and pick up on things that way. And then I also try to remain curious about art in general, especially things I don't particularly enjoy. I'm fascinated by things that I don't like at all but other people love, because I can still discover what it is they love about those things. Even if it doesn't end up fostering a love in me for those things, it's still interesting to understand why these things click for other people and not for myself.

Can you give me an example?

Wheel of Time is a good one, because I like modern fantasy quite a bit and I love epic fantasy. So I read the first couple of those a few years ago. And while they didn't click for me, and it's a very long, ambitious series to read, I understand the magic that is there for other people. And now I understand a bit of that culture for people.

What's a creative tick you have to fight against?

My two game design ticks are negative points and spatial puzzles, especially in combination. For some reason, I just love doling out negative points to players—and people don't always love that, which is the point. But negative points don't impede your ability to do things in a game. They just lower your maximum score. So I really like them as an elegant way of punishing players, because positive reinforcement is important in games and so is negative reinforcement. It's one of my favorite tools even though it ends up getting cut from most of my designs. And then spatial puzzles because my brain just works spatially. I think it's how I visualize problems. Sometimes I'll sit down to play a Euro game and as soon as I realize, "Oh, there's no spatial element in this game, it's just tracks and stuff," I get really lost. I don't know if these are problems I want to fix, *per se*, but they're definitely things you can find in most of my designs.

Do you have a day job that you balance with your creative work?

I'm a full-time stay-at-home parent as my current day job. It's really interesting being a parent and a game designer. I don't know if *balance* is the right word. I wouldn't say I balance it against game design, but I try to treat it as my main thing and then I find time for game design when I can. Sometimes this looks like playing with my daughter and thinking about an idea, then taking quick notes on my phone when I can because I try not to look at my phone too much around her. So I can really work through a lot of ideas while I'm just playing with Bluey toys with her. I've had some great ideas and great breakthroughs while brainstorming with her. Otherwise it means waking up at 5:30 or 5:45 most days to get in what work I can and then working in the evening until my brain becomes total mush and I need to lie down. I think it's possible to work on games as a parent, but it's difficult to feel like I'm full-time game designer right now. And that's absolutely fine.

Peter McPherson Recommends:

Reading [Ali Smith](#)

Playing [Outer Wilds](#)

Going on a flower walk with [Newcomb's Wildflower Guide](#)

Reading *A Gamut of Games* by Sid Sackson

Reading *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke

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