

WORKSHOP 01

The Core Loop and the Spine of Game Design

01

Find the thing your player will repeat hundreds of times — and make sure it is still worth repeating

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The day in three sessions

What you finish this hour becomes the input for the afternoon, and gets tested for real tonight

01

11.00 – 12.00

Find the core

Core loop + design pillars

Deliverable: Loop Canvas

02

14.15 – 15.15

Make it communicable

Game Design Document

Deliverable: One-page GDD

03

18.15 – 19.15

Prove it is fun

Paper prototype + playtest

Deliverable: Tested prototype

Miss one session and you can still follow. Attend all three and you go home with a game that has actually been tested.

How this hour runs

Teaching 36 minutes · hands-on and critique 24 minutes

0 – 5	Open + map of the day	What did you play longest, and what were you repeating in it?
5 – 13	Where the loop lives	Schell's elemental tetrad, and why mechanics carry the weight
13 – 24	Anatomy of a core loop	Act, read, gain, change — and why step four is the one people forget
24 – 32	Verbs and pillars	One verb, three pillars, and the power to say no
32 – 46	Hands-on: Loop Canvas	One page, handwritten, timed
46 – 60	Share, critique, close	Four presenters at 90 seconds each, then hand off to session two

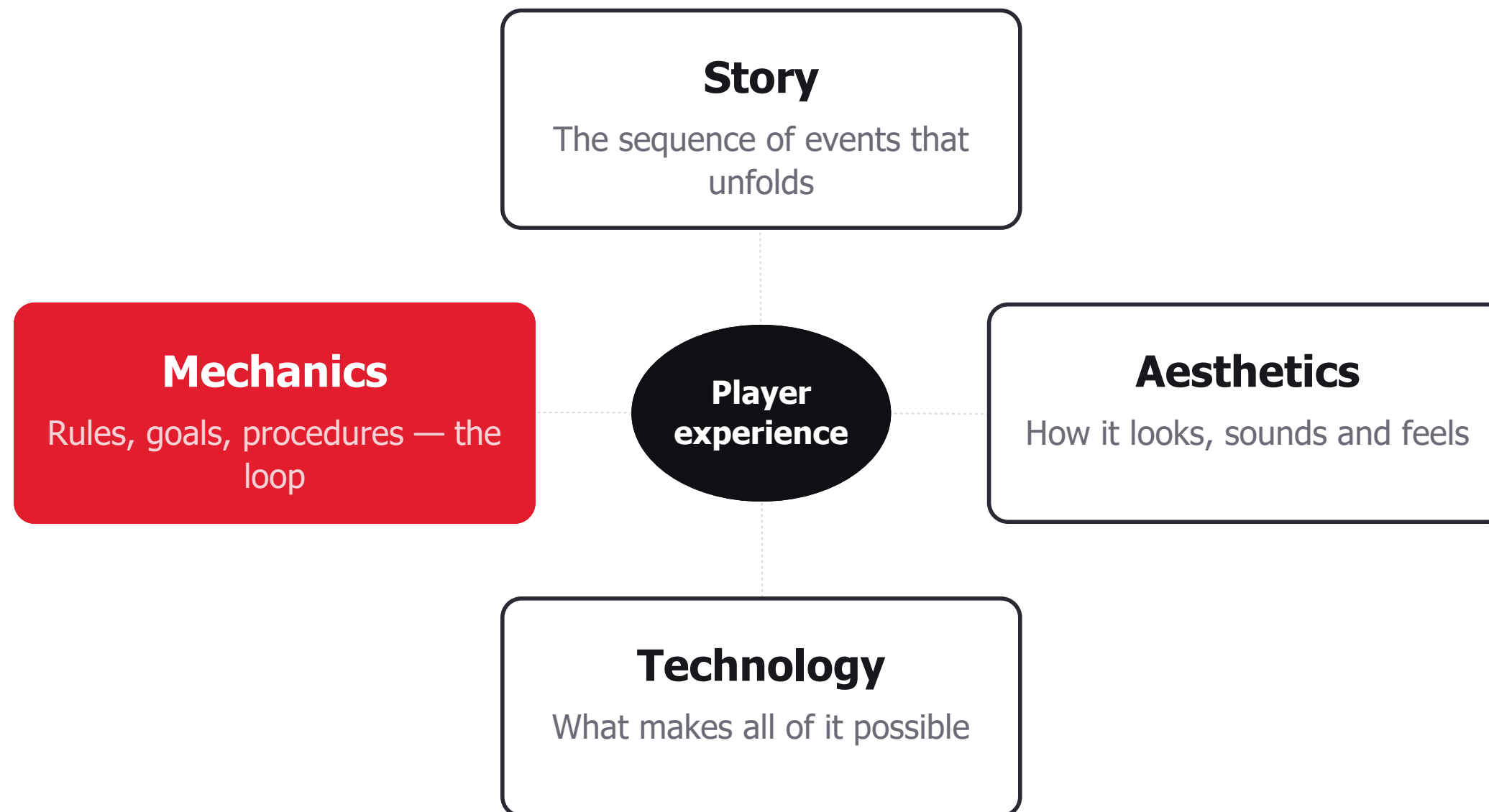
FIRST PRINCIPLE

A game is what the player repeats — not what you want them to feel

Raph Koster's argument in *A Theory of Fun* is that fun is the sensation the brain produces while it is absorbing a pattern. The moment the pattern is fully mastered, the fun stops and boredom begins. Your players will see the ending once. They will press the same button several hundred times. If the repeated act is hollow, no amount of art, music or story will rescue it.

Where the loop actually lives

Schell's elemental tetrad splits every game into four parts — the loop sits almost entirely in one of them

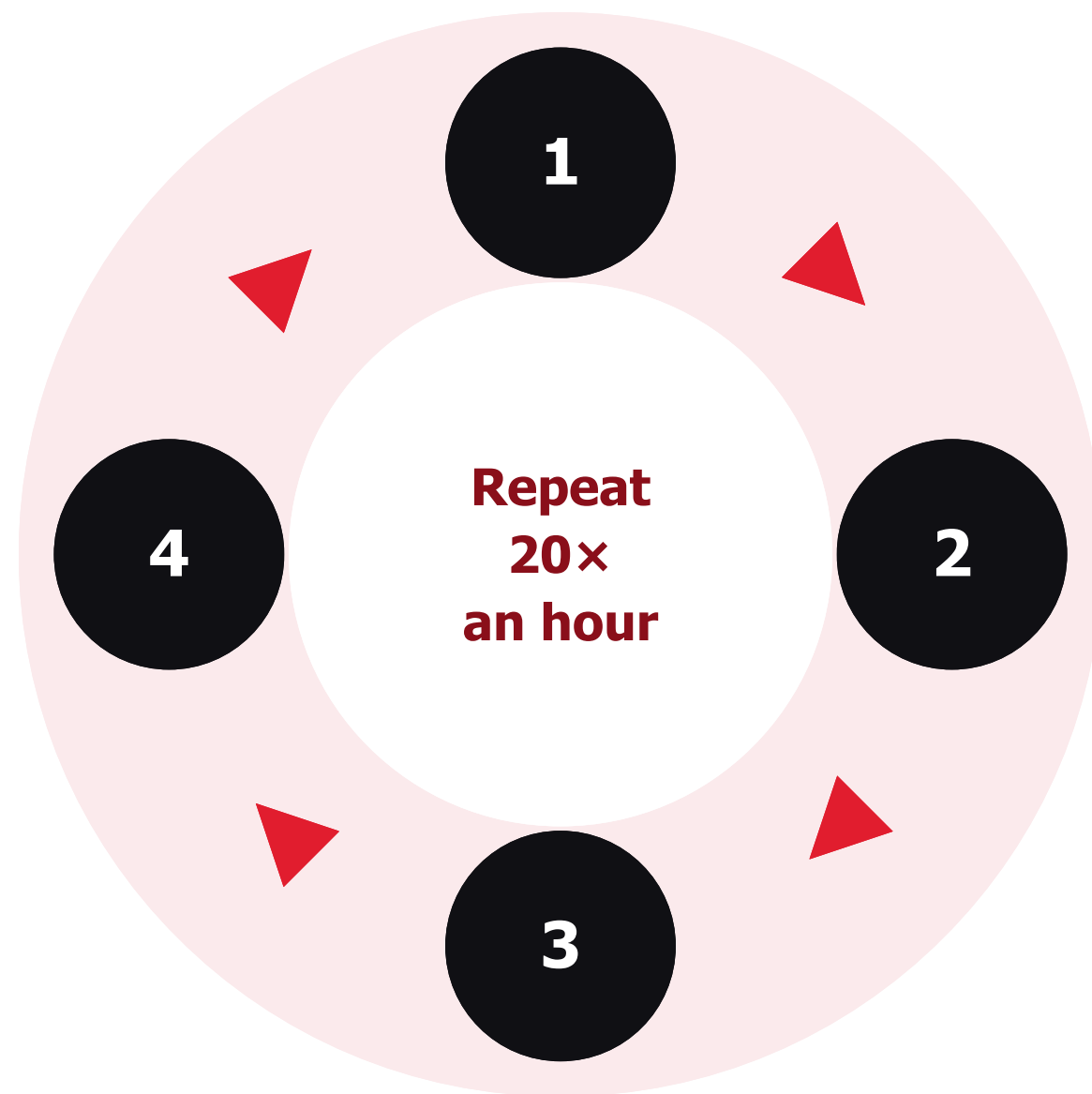


Two things to take from this

- All four elements are essential and all four influence each other. None of them is optional.
- They differ sharply in visibility: aesthetics is what a player notices first, technology is what they notice least.
- That visibility gap is a trap. Teams spend their first month on the most visible element and the least testable one.
- This morning we work only in mechanics, because that is where a core loop can be broken or fixed cheaply.

Anatomy of a core loop

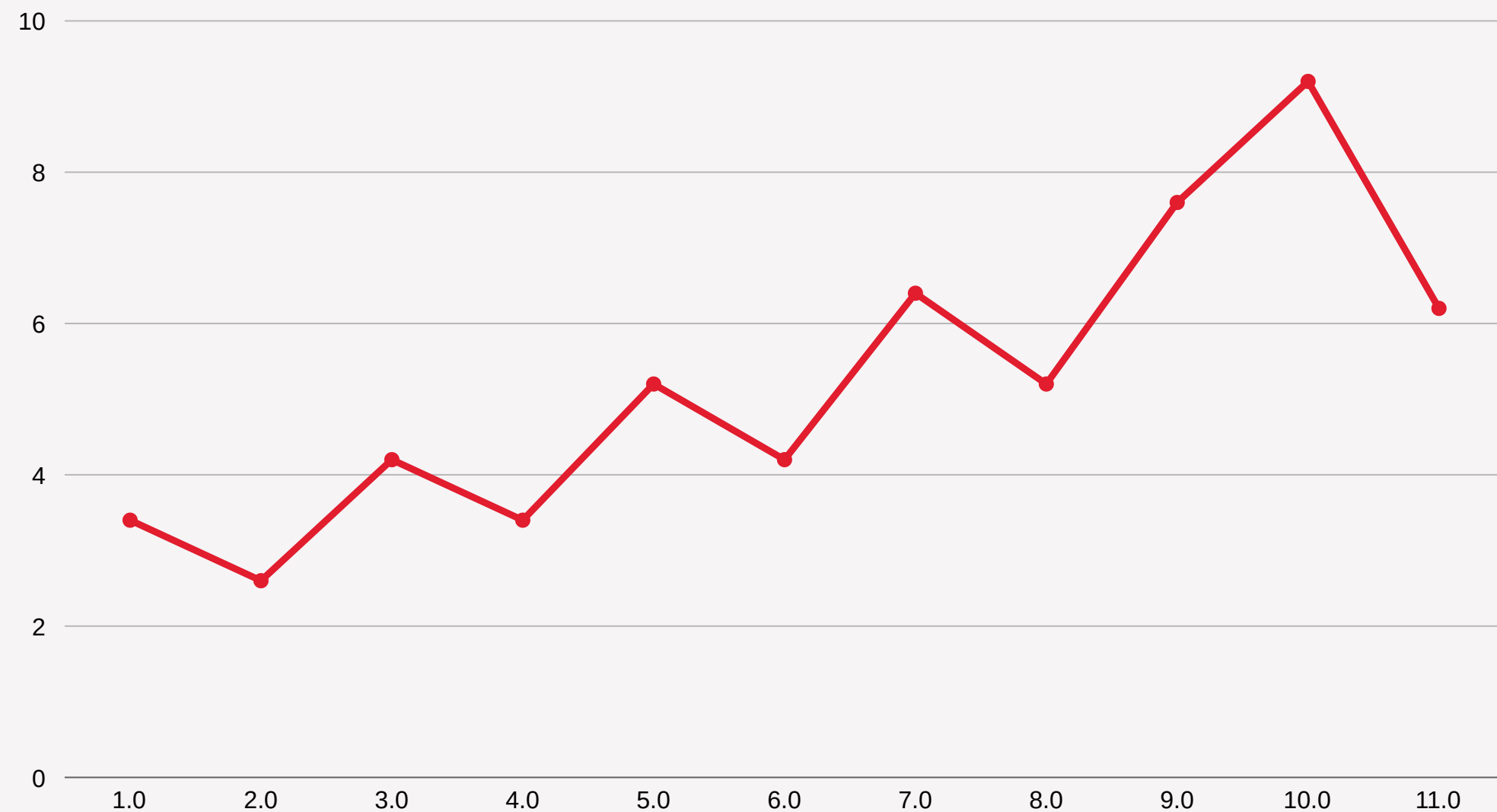
Four steps. Every loop that holds a player has all four, and cycles fast enough that boredom never catches up



- 1 Act**
The player does something that required a decision, not just a button press to advance.
- 2 Read**
The game answers immediately and legibly, through image, sound, number or shake.
- 3 Gain**
Something is banked — an item, a score, a piece of knowledge, or the feeling of nearly winning.
- 4 Change**
The next cycle is not identical, because the player is better or the options have shifted.

A loop is not flat — it has a shape over time

Schell plots audience interest as a curve; a session that flatlines is a session players leave



It starts with a hook

The opening spike is not the game. It buys you the attention you need to teach the loop.

It rises in a zig-zag

Interest climbs through alternating tension and rest. Constant intensity reads as flat.

It ends above where it began

If the last cycle is less interesting than the first, the loop has stopped teaching.

Good loops nest inside each other

The short loop keeps hands busy, the medium loop keeps the mind busy, the long loop keeps players coming back

Loop layer	Vampire Survivors	Stardew Valley	Slay the Spire
~30 seconds the hands	Weave through the crowd, sweep up experience gems	Water, chop, mine — one tile at a time	Spend this turn's energy on the right cards
~10 minutes the decisions	Choose upgrades and combine the right weapon pairs	Spend one day of energy where it pays most	Survive a fight cheaply and pick the next card
~1 hour and beyond the progress	Outlast the timer, unlock new characters and relics	Plan a whole season of crops and relationships	Build a deck that can actually beat the final act

A game starts with a verb, not a theme

If one verb describes what your player does, you have found the core mechanic



Super Mario Bros.

JUMP

Enemies, pits and pipes exist to give the jump something to mean.



Portal

PLACE

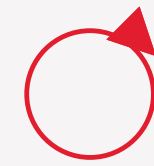
Every puzzle asks one question: where do the two doors go?



Papers, Please

COMPARE

All the tension comes from checking documents against rules that keep shifting.



Our demo game

LISTEN

The player never sees the threat, so sound is the only basis for deciding to move or hold.

Design pillars — how to say no on purpose

A pillar is not a slogan. It is a sentence that lets your team make a decision without re-arguing it



A good pillar rejects something

"Silence is the weapon" gives you the nerve to cut the entire soundtrack. "Great graphics" and "fun gameplay" reject nothing, because every game in the world wants both.



A good pillar does not fit anyone else's game

Paste your pillar onto the project of the person next to you. If it still sounds reasonable, it is too broad to be useful. Schell's lens of the essential experience asks the sharper version: what feeling must survive, and what is merely nice?



Three is enough

For the demo game: (1) silence is the weapon, (2) players lose because they hurried, not because they lacked skill, (3) fear comes from what is never shown.

A finished example — the demo game's canvas

This is what you are about to write. Short, blunt, handwritten is fine

CORE VERB (ONE WORD)

Listen

ONE CYCLE TAKES

About 20–30 seconds: listen, choose a route, move quietly, threat closes in, listen again

WHAT THE PLAYER DECIDES EVERY CYCLE

Push on to reach the thing they need, or hold still and stay safe.
The stake is distance from the threat.

WHAT CHANGES NEXT CYCLE

The threat learns the routes you have already used, and the lantern burns lower every turn

THREE PILLARS

1. Silence is the weapon
2. Players lose because they hurried
3. Fear comes from what is never shown

ONE SENTENCE, IN THE PLAYER'S VOICE

"Last time I moved too early. This time I know exactly where to wait."

HANDS-ON

14

minutes

Handwritten, one page, no more.

I will come round to every desk. If you stall, raise a hand — do not sit quietly.

Hands-on: write the Loop Canvas for your own game

1. Write your core verb. One word, and it may not be an adjective.
2. Draw the four steps of your loop and label how many seconds one cycle takes.
3. Answer what the player decides every cycle, and what is different next cycle.
4. Write three pillars. Each one must be capable of rejecting a feature.
5. Finish with one sentence, in your player's voice, about why they want another round.

Three rules

- One page maximum — if it does not fit, it is not sharp enough yet
- No graphics, audio or story talk in this hour
- If you cannot answer a field, write "don't know yet" and move on. Do not invent an answer.

Before you present — run these checks

Use this both on your own canvas and while listening to everyone else

SIGNS OF STRENGTH

- You can explain the loop in 30 seconds without describing the story
- You can name the decision the player makes every cycle
- Cycle twenty is clearly different from cycle one
- Each pillar has already made you delete something

WARNING SIGNS

- The setting has to be explained before the play makes sense
- The verb is broad — explore, survive — and says almost nothing
- The player repeats the same act and nothing shifts
- The pillars sound good but would suit anyone's project

The most common condition in this room: a very clear theme attached to a still-fuzzy verb. That is fixable, and fixable quickly.

You are holding the spine of a game

1

Fun is the brain being rewarded for learning; a loop that stops teaching stops being fun

2

The loop lives in mechanics, and mechanics are the cheapest element to fix

3

A pillar that cannot reject a feature is not a pillar

NEXT — SESSION TWO AT 14.15

We turn this one page into a document that other people read the same way you wrote it. Keep the canvas. This afternoon we build on it rather than starting again.

FURTHER READING

Where these ideas come from



A Theory of Fun for Game Design · Raph Koster

The argument that fun is the brain's response to absorbing a pattern, and that boredom arrives at mastery. This is the foundation for treating repetition, not spectacle, as the design problem.



The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses · Jesse Schell

The elemental tetrad, the interest curve, and the lens of the essential experience — the sources for how we located the loop and how we phrased pillars.



Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals · Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman

The core mechanic, and the definition of meaningful play as outcomes that are both discernable and integrated. This is the test we applied to steps two and four of the loop.



Designing Games: A Guide to Engineering Experiences · Tynan Sylvester

Mechanics generate events, events carry emotion, and elegance means few mechanics producing many situations. This is why we worked on layers rather than adding features.