Design values are like a blueprint for your play machine. They help you identify what kind of play experience you want to create, and articulate some of the parts that will help your play machine generate that experience. And if you get lost in the design process, design values will help you get back on track.
Defining design values

Designing play machines is really challenging, in large part because of the way games work. You design the thing that the player puts into motion through their play. It is the whole second-order design problem we discussed in chapter 1—you don’t have direct control of how they will play, you simply define the parameters within which they play. And as we saw in chapter 4, playing our games often asks a lot of players, leading to all sorts of different play experiences, like we discussed in chapter 3.

One of our best tools to help guide our design to provide particular kinds of play experiences are design values, a concept we borrow from Eric Zimmerman. Design values often translate into a shorthand to remind you the kind of game you have set out to design. Maybe better stated, they are the characteristics you want your players to experience while playing your game. They are also the sketch of our play machine, guiding us in our design process and helping us stay on track. Sometimes design values are general ideas like competitive or cooperative or strategic or chance-based. Sometimes design values are an adjective like fast or long or twitchy. Sometimes they are more about the way the player interacts, or the frequency of the interaction, or a particular kind of action you want them to be able to experience in the game.

Elements of design values

Creating design values is a process of determining the who, where, when, what and why of your game. While not every game begins with all of these, the following are the general considerations we discuss while establishing the design values for our games.

Who is playing?

Perhaps the most important question to ask about your game: who are you designing it for? Knowing who will play your game is important for a number of reasons. What are they interested in? Why would they want to play your game? You aren’t necessarily concerned with the exact people (though that is the case sometimes), but the general kind of player that you think will enjoy the experience, or to whom you want to convey the message within your game. Knowing who you are designing for also helps take into account what we ask of our players.

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1 Is there something we can cite for this?
**Where are they playing?**

Thinking about where your game will be played is equally important. Are they on the subway or bus playing in short spurts? Are they at a party playing with other people? Having an idea of where people are will help you think about whether or not your game is making sense for players and their context.

**When are they playing?**

A related question is when—in a club or bar? In the subway? On their couch at home? Are they setting aside their evening or afternoon for your game? Knowing when someone is playing can give clues to how long a session length might be, and how to pace the game. Is there something else going on that your game will be part of, like a party or a group of friends gathering for drinks? Are they waiting for the bus or subway or in line at the store?

**What are they doing?**

Is there an activity in the game that players can find satisfaction in doing? sliding, jumping, flinging? Many games involve what designers call a “core mechanic,” a primary action that players do over and over again in pursuit of the game’s goal. Because it is often repeated throughout the game, this core mechanic needs to be something that players find pleasure in learning and doing.

**What’s the point of view? How do they see and hear it?**

How will your players engage with your game? If it is a videogame, what are they seeing: a first person camera, a third person camera? An implied camera? How are they hearing what is going on?

*Is the game Competitive? Cooperative? Both?*

Are players going head-to-head, or working together? If they are playing cooperatively, is it symmetrical or asymmetrical cooperation?

*How do players make decisions? In real-time or by turns?*

Are decisions made in real time, or do players take turns making them?
Where does the challenge come from?
Is the challenge primarily physical or mental, or a combination of the two? Is the challenge coming from the game itself or from other players?

What is the mix of skill, chance and strategy?
To what degree is the game skill-based? Or is it heavily reliant on chance? Is there an opportunity for players to develop strategies?

What’s the theme?
What narrative and visual handles are there for players to be able to grasp how the world might work?

What are some adjectives around how the game will feel?
What do you want players to feel like while playing your game? Will they be laughing hysterically, in deep concentration, on the verge of frustration, frightened?

What will the game look and feel like?
Are there visual and audio reference points? Is there a particular art style, or time period that inspires you?

Why use design values?
This may seem like a lot of things to think about before designing your game. And it is a lot. But these are all important factors to consider at the beginning of the design process for a number of reasons. For one, they establish the overarching concept, goals and “flavor” of your game. The design values become the guide for keeping to the agreed-upon plan. Without them, you could easily get lost in the many minutiae of the game design process and forget what you were trying to accomplish entirely.

Just as important is the way design values create a shared understanding of the game. Most games are made collaboratively, and everyone on the team is likely to have opinions and ideas about what the game is, and what its play experience should be. Design values allow the team to agree on what they are making, and why they are doing it. To help see how design values play out in real world examples, below are three case studies: thatgamecompany’s Journey, Blinkbat Game’s Desert Golfing and Naomi Clark’s Consentacle.

Case Study: thatgamecompany’s Journey
thatgamecompany’s *Journey* was an idea Jenova Chen, the company’s co-founder and creative director, had during his time as a student in the University of California’s Interactive Media and Games Division MFA program. He had been playing a lot of MMOs, but was increasingly dissatisfied with the inability to really connect with other players on a human, emotional level. At the time, well before thatgamecompany formed, the ideas were beyond the abilities of Jenova to pull off on his own. Years later, after thatgamecompany had *Flow* and *Flower* under their belts, Jenova thought it might be time to take on the challenges of *Journey*, the game concept he had begun as a student.

In Jenova Chen’s talk at the 2013 Game Developer’s Conference about designing *Journey*, he described the goal of designing a game that makes you feel “lonely, small, and with a great sense of awe.”[^2] This was a design value: make a game that generates this kind of feeling in the player.

Jenova also wanted the game to involve multiplayer collaboration (in the case of *Journey*, two players). This led to a second design value for the game—being able to share the emotional response with another player, and to have that act of sharing heighten the overall emotional impact.

Related to the multiplayer aspect of *Journey*, Jenova wanted to create a game seamlessly handled the player connections without distracting from the play and emotional arc of the game. This meant not having to wait for other players to log in, no distracting chat, just cooperation and camaraderie. This is another design value, and another approach to design values—identifying a problem in other games to solve or at least engage with through your own game.

In addition to these initial interests, the game’s design is also informed by where it is played. *Journey*’s design values were influenced by the fact that it was being made for the Playstation 3. Sony asked them to make a single player game, which influenced how the cooperative mechanic was implemented. It’s seamless, and the experience doesn’t actually rely on other players being online and playing with you. Players appear and disappear as a natural occurrence in the world. And of course, a game created to be experienced in your living room is going to be more cinematic and immersive than a game you might play on your phone while waiting for the bus.

**figure 5.2:** Player character sliding in the sand of *Journey*.

During the design process, the design team went to visit sand dunes for inspiration for the game’s environment. While there, they noticed how enjoyable it was to move through the sand. They realized how exciting it was to climb the sand dunes. There was real anticipation for seeing what was at the top, which lead to the idea of sliding in the sand as if it were a wave.
This lead to another design value for Journey: creating a sense of awe as you move through the environments, and creating experiences that felt realistic yet better than reality.

One additional design value for Journey relates to the emotional and narrative arc of the play experience. Jenova was inspired by Joseph Campbell’s work on the “monomyth” of the Hero’s Journey, which builds upon the three-act structure common to theater, film and literature. Jenova and his team began by creating a landscape that literally and emotional tracked the arc of a traditional three-act narrative. This was intended to create an emotional flow from the highs of players sensing freedom, awe and connections to the lows of being trapped, scared and alone.

To achieve all these goals, Jenova and the thatgamecompany team had to work through a number of problems around player expectation and the conventions of designing 3D worlds and multiplayer gameplay. Having the design values of the game allowed the team to remain focused on their goals and understand what they were aiming for in the design of the game. It took a good number of cycles through the iterative process to get the game to meet Jenova’s goals. This was in large part because he wanted to do things that differed from most other games. And so he and the thatgamecompany team had to experiment and try things out to slowly meet their goals for the Journey player experience. And as they went, revisit their design values to both make sure they were staying true and refine and clarify the team’s goals.

Case Study: Justin Smith’s Desert Golfing
Justin Smith’s *Desert Golfing* is a deceptively simple game: using the tried-and-true *Angry Birds*-style “tap, aim, pull and release” action, players hit a ball through a desert golf course of 3,000 (or more) holes. The game is deeply minimal in all ways: a single action for achieving a single goal (get the ball in the hole), yielding a single score (your total number of strokes) over a series of holes, all with minimalist flat color graphics and a simple set of sound effects.

*Desert Golfing* began with a simple idea: making an “indie *Angry Birds*.” For Smith, this was shorthand for keeping all the pleasurable aspects of the “pinball stopper” action of the popular game, while removing a lot of the extraneous details that he felt detracted from the potential of this mechanic. This was the first and primary design value for the game. It meant keeping the gameplay minimal, which kept a clear focus on the core action.

Smith describes his design approach as “asynchronous”—he collects ideas in a notebook (like the “indie *Angry Birds*”) and then when ready to work on a game, flips through his notes to find ideas that connect. Justin had always had an interest in sports games, and golf games in particular, which happened to lend itself well to the “pinball stopper” action. The interest in golf led to a thought experiment in which Smith imagined putting a golf game on top of thatgamecompany’s *Journey*. Though he of course didn’t do that, it did inspire the color palette and environment of the game. This provided the next design value: the characteristics of the game’s world.
Smith also thought some about the minimum play experience, and wanted players to be able
to have a satisfying play session that was as small as a single stroke of the ball. This created the
third design value: a deeply satisfying and discreet sense of pleasure from each action. This put
a lot of importance on the “pinball stopper” action. Smith had to tinker with the responsiv-
ness of the pull-and-release gesture, the way it was visualized and how the sound effects sup-
ported player’s understanding of what they did.

Knowing he wanted a golf game, Smith thought about how he might generate the holes. he
was much more interested and attuned to procedurally generating the holes than manually
creating them. This led to the idea of creating a seemingly endless golf course in a desert, and a
fourth design value: a sense of infiniteness to the game. To acheive this, Smith had to develop
a set of more concrete rules to procedurally generate the first 3,000 holes of the game. This
came through a series of trial and error as he moved through iterative cycles of generating
levels, evaluating the results, and making changes to the rules controlling the golf course and
hole placement.

The final design value related to how players shared their Desert Golfing play experiences. He
wanted to allow players to organically find things they wanted to share and discover about the
game. This led to a couple of things: one was the gradual shifting color palette. It created a
sense of discovery that players wanted to share within one another. Similarly was a player’s
stroke total. Instead of creating leaderboards that would drive competition, Smith left it to
players to find ways to share their scores. This left players to talk about this in person and
through social media.

Case Study: Naomi Clark’s Consentacle
Naomi Clark’s cardgame, Consentacle, is an interesting example of a game concept that began with a particular idea that was shaped through the designer’s experiences playing other games. Consentacle grew out of a dissatisfaction with a particular strain of animé—hentai, a genre notable for its sexual relationships between young women and tentacled monsters. The traditions of the genre had the monsters in the position of power. Naomi wondered what might happen if she created a game in which both characters had equal power.

There was one other thing from Hentai that Naomi drew inspiration from: the idea of developing alternative genders, which Naomi thought worked as a perfect metaphor for queering gender. This also fit Naomi’s interests, though she wasn’t exactly sure what form it would all eventually take. Together, these provided the theme of the Consentacle, which is a strong guiding form of design value: finding ways to embed or express a theme through a game’s play.

With these ideas tucked away for a future project, Naomi began playing Android: Netrunner. Thanks to her friend and fellow game designer Mattie Brice, Naomi noticed that if you approached Android: Netrunner as a role-playing game, there was an intimacy to the interactions of the Corporation and the Runner. The Corporation was always vulnerable to the Runners, who in turn were continuously probing to gain information and points. It reminded Naomi of the dynamics of her game idea, Consentacle, and so she decided to use this as a point of refer-
ence. This led to the second design value: exploring the inherent intimacy of collectible card game economic systems as a system for emotional engagement.

Naomi realized that a good deal of the intimacy came from the interactions around imperfect information spaces—the Corporation always had hidden information that the Runner had to think about and try to learn.

figure 5.5: Antoine Bauza’s Hanabi.

Naomi began looking around for other cardgames and boardgames that used hidden information in similarly intimate ways. She began playing Antoine Bauza’s Hanabi, a card game in which players can see one another’s cards, but not their own. In Hanabi, players must collaborate to help one another make the right decisions. This led Naomi to her next design value: collaborative gameplay as an exploration of consensual decision-making.

With these components in place, Naomi quickly conceived of the basic play experience of Constenacle. Players, one a human, the other a tentacled alien, work together to build trust, which would lead to satisfaction. This is done by simultaneously playing a card that when combined, describe actions players can make around the collection of trust tokens and satisfaction tokens.
In the beginner’s version of the game, the players can discuss which cards they will play, but in the advanced version, they are not allowed to talk, and so must develop alternate means of communicating with one another.

With constraint being a big part of a game designer’s toolkit, Naomi began to think about ways she could constrain player’s ability to collaborate in a fun way. This led Naomi to think about the ways players could work together without regular communication. She came up the idea of using what she calls “collaborative yomi”—players trying to guess one another’s actions in order to help one another, instead of the normal understanding of yomi as trying to take advantage of one another. This was the third design value for the game.

Because the game was seeking to encourage collaboration, Naomi decided fairly early on that she didn’t want the game to have a absolute win/lose condition. This was the fourth design value for the game. With this in mind, Naomi began thinking about ways to give players feedback on how they did without declaring a winner or loser (which would push against the collaborative nature of the game). Naomi took inspiration from the quizzes in Cosmopolitan magazine that rate along a scale. So the game used a scale to evaluate the collaborative score as well as the spread of points earned by the two players.

**Summary**

Design values are helpful in guiding the design process. And this is important, because as you create your game and test it with others, you need a goal to work towards. Design values can answer many of the questions that arise in the process of making a game. They function as tools for calibrating the team’s understanding of the game they hope to create. They are also lighthouses of sorts guiding the often-murky journey through a game’s design.

**Exercises**

Take a game and “reverse engineer” its design values. Pay close attention to how the game makes you feel, and how you imagine the designer might have captured those feelings in design values.

Take a game like Go, Checkers or Chess, and give it a new set of design values. Then make one rule change that addresses each of the design values.