

# CHAPTER SIX

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## The Game Begins with an *Idea*

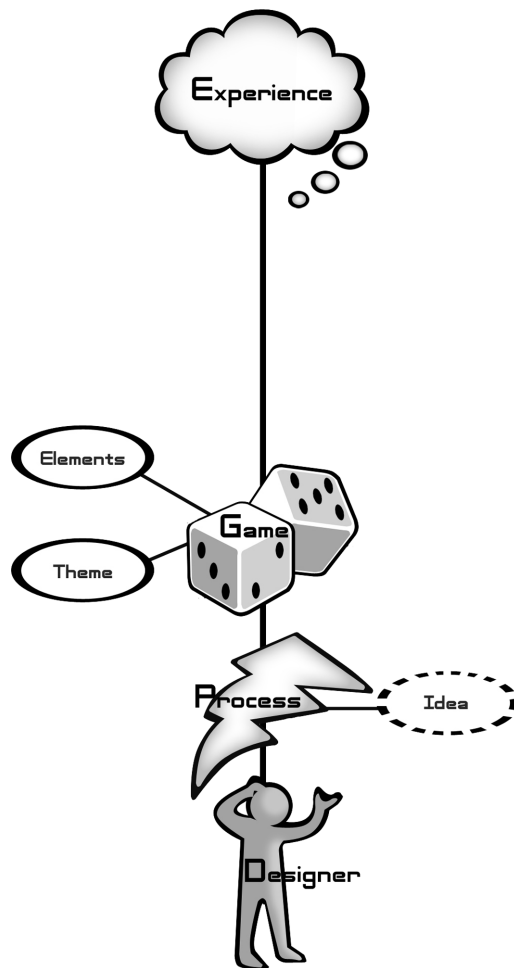


FIGURE 6.1



p0010 Hopefully, this book will inspire you to try designing some games of your own.  
 p0020 When you do that (maybe you have already), you might be thinking that you aren't going about it the right way, not using the methods that "real" game designers use. I'm guessing the method you used to design your games was something like

- o0010 1. Think of an idea.  
 o0020 2. Try it out.  
 o0030 3. Keep changing it and testing it until it seems good enough.

p0060 Which sounds kind of amateurish. Well, guess what? That is exactly what real game designers do. And this chapter would end here, except for the fact that some ways to do these things are better than others. You already know *what* to do. In this chapter and the next, we are going to discuss *how* to do it as well as possible.

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## Inspiration

p0070 As I mentioned earlier, I worked for several years as a professional juggler. When I was about fourteen years old, and my repertoire of tricks was limited to two, I attended my first juggling festival. If you haven't attended one, they are remarkable to see — they mainly consist of jugglers of all levels of skill and ability standing around in a large gymnasium, talking about, experimenting with, and sharing new techniques. It is a place where you can attempt the impossible and drop without shame. But attending alone, my first time, it didn't feel that way. I was incredibly nervous — after all, I wasn't a "real" juggler. I mostly walked around, eyes wide, hands in my pockets, terrified that someone would point and shout "Hey! What's HE doing here?" But of course, that didn't happen. Everyone at the festival had learned just like I had — they had taught themselves. Once I grew comfortable, I took out my beanbags and did a little practicing of my own. I watched other people do tricks, and I tried imitating them — sometimes I could do it. But as I looked around for more examples of techniques to try, there was one juggler who stood out from the rest. He was an old man in a powder blue jumpsuit, and his tricks were not like the others at all. He used patterns and rhythms that were unique, and his tricks, though not astonishing in their difficulty, were simply beautiful to watch. I had to watch a long time before I realized that some of the tricks that seemed so special and unique when he did them were things *I could already do* — but when he did them they had such a different style, a different feeling, that they seemed like something completely new. I watched him for about twenty minutes, and suddenly he looked at me, and said "Well?"

p0080 "Well, what?" I said, kind of embarrassed.

p0090 "Aren't you going to try to copy me?"

p0100 "I — I don't think I would know how," I stammered out.

p0110 He laughed. "Yeah, they never can. Know why my tricks look so different?"



p0120 “Uh, practice?” I managed.

p0130 “No — everybody practices. Look around! They’re all practicing. No, my tricks look different because of where I get them. These guys, they get their tricks from each other. Which is fine — you can learn a lot that way. But it will never make you stand out.”

p0140 I thought about it. “So where do you get them?” I asked. “Books?”

p0150 “Ha! Books. That’s a good one. No, not books. You wanna know the secret?”

p0160 “Sure.”

p0170 “The secret is: don’t look to other jugglers for inspiration — *look everywhere else.*” He proceeded to do a beautiful looping pattern, where his arms kind of spiraled, and he turned occasional pirouettes. “I learned that one watching a ballet in New York. And this one...” he did a move that involved the balls popping up and down as his hands fluttered delicately back in forth. “I learned that from a flock of geese I saw take off from a lake up in Maine. And this,” he did a weird mechanical looking movement where the balls almost appeared to move at right angles. “I learned that from a paper punch machine on Long Island.” He laughed a little, and stopped juggling for a minute. “People try to copy these moves, but they can’t. They always try... yeah, look at that fella, over there!” He pointed to a juggler with a long ponytail across the gym who was doing the “ballet” move. But it just looked dumb. Something was missing, but I couldn’t say what.

p0180 “See, these guys can copy my moves, but they can’t copy my inspiration.” He juggled a pattern that made me think of a spiraling double helix. Just then, the PA announced a beginner’s workshop — I thanked him, and ran off. I didn’t see him again, but I never forgot him. I wish I knew his name, because his advice changed my approach to creativity forever.

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## *Lens #11: The Lens of Infinite Inspiration*

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*When you know how to listen, everybody is the guru.*

– Ram Dass

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To you use this lens, stop looking at your game, and stop looking at games like it. Instead, *look everywhere else.*

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Ask yourself these questions:

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- What is an experience I have had in my life that I would want to share with others?

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- In what small way can I capture the essence of that experience and put it into my game?



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Using this lens requires an open mind and a big imagination. You need to search your feelings and observe everything around you. You must be willing to try the impossible — for surely it is impossible for a roll of the dice to capture the excitement of a swordfight, or for a videogame to make a player feel afraid of the dark — isn't it? Use this lens to find the non-game experiences that will inspire your game. Your choices in the different quadrants of the tetrad (technology, mechanics, story, and aesthetics) can each be united by a single inspiration, or each can build on different inspirations, blending them together to create something entirely new. When you have concrete visions based on real life that guide your decision making, your experience will acquire an undeniable power, strength, and uniqueness.

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This lens works hand in hand with Lens #1: Essential Experience. Use the Lens of Infinite Inspiration to seek and find beautiful experiences, and the Lens of Essential Experience to bring them into your game.

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Inspiration is one of the secrets behind the strongest games. But how can you turn inspiration into a great game design?

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The first step is admitting you have a problem.

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## State the Problem

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The purpose of design is to solve problems, and game design is no exception. Before you start coming up with ideas, you need to be certain of why you are doing it, and a problem statement is a way to state that clearly. Good problem statements tell both your goal and your constraints. For example, your initial problem statement might be:

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“How can I make a Web-based game that teenagers will really like?”

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This makes clear both your goal (something teenagers will really like) and your constraints (it must be a Web-based game). One advantage of stating things so clearly is that it can make you realize that you might be mistakenly over-constraining the real problem. Maybe you've been thinking “Web-based game,” but really, there is no reason that what you create has to be a game at all — maybe some kind of Web-based toy or activity would be okay as long as teenagers really like it. So, you might restate your problem in broader terms:

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“How can I make a Web-based experience that teenagers really like?”

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It is crucial that you get the problem statement right — if you make it too broad, you might come up with designs that don't meet your true goal, and if you make it too narrow (because you were focusing on solutions instead of the problem) you





might cut yourself off from some clever solutions because you assumed that a certain kind of solution was the only valid one for your problem. People who come up with clever solutions are almost always the same people who take the time to figure out the real problem.

p0330 Three advantages of clearly stating your problem:

- o0040 1. **Broader creative space.** Most people jump to solutions too fast and start their creative process there. If you start your process at the problem instead of at a proposed solution, you will be able to explore a broader creative space and find solutions that are hiding where no one else is looking.
- o0050 2. **Clear measurement.** You have a clear measurement of the quality of proposed ideas: How well do they solve the problem?
- o0060 3. **Better communication.** When you are designing with a team, communication is much easier if the problem has been clearly stated. Very often, collaborators will be trying to solve quite different problems and not realize it if the problem has not been clearly stated.

p0370 Sometimes, you will have already explored several ideas before you realize what the problem “really” is. That’s fine! Just make sure you go back and restate the problem clearly, once you see what it is.

p0380 A completed game design will cover all four elements of the elemental tetrad: technology, mechanics, story, and aesthetics. Often, your problem statement will constrain you to some established decisions about one (or more) of the four elements, and you will have to build from there. As you try to state your problem, it can be useful to examine it from the point of view of the tetrad to check where you have design freedom, and where you don’t. Take a look at these four problem statements: Which ones have already made decisions in what parts of the tetrad?

- o0070 1. How can I make a board game that uses the properties of magnets in an interesting way?
- o0080 2. How can I make a videogame that tells the story of Hansel and Gretel?
- o0090 3. How can I make a game that feels like a surrealist painting?
- o0100 4. How can I improve on Tetris?

p0430 What if, by some miracle, you have no constraints? What if somehow you have the liberty to make a game about anything, anything at all, using any medium you like? If that is the case (and it seems highly unlikely!) you need to decide some constraints. Pick a story you might like to pursue or a game mechanic you would like to explore. The moment you pick something, you will have a problem statement. Viewing your game as the solution to a problem is a useful perspective and Lens #12.





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## Lens #12: The Lens of the Problem Statement

To use this lens, think of your game as the solution to a problem.

Ask yourself these questions:

- What problem, or problems, am I really trying to solve?
- Have I been making assumptions about this game that really have nothing to do with its true purpose?
- Is a game really the best solution? Why?
- How will I be able to tell if the problem is solved?

Defining the constraints and goals for your game as a problem statement can help move you to a clear game design much more quickly.

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## How to Sleep

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We have stated our problem and are ready to brainstorm! At least we will be, once we have properly prepared. Sleep is crucial to the process of idea generation — a good designer uses the tremendous power of sleep to its maximum advantage. No one explains this better, I think, than surrealist painter Salvador Dali. The following (Dali's Secret #3) is an excerpt from his book *Fifty Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship*.

*In order to make use of the slumber with a key you must seat yourself in a bony armchair, preferably of Spanish style, with your head tilted back and resting on the stretched leather back. Your two hands must hang beyond the arms of the chair, to which your own must be soldered in a supineness of complete relaxation...*

*In this posture, you must hold a heavy key which you will keep suspended, delicately pressed between the extremities of the thumb and forefinger of your left hand. Under the key you will previously have placed a plate upside down on the floor. Having made these preparations, you will have merely to let yourself be progressively invaded by a sense of serene afternoon sleep, like the spiritual drop of anisette of your soul rising in the cube of sugar of your body. The moment the key drops from your fingers, you may be sure that the noise of its fall on the upside-down plate will awaken you, and you may be equally sure that this fugitive moment during which you cannot be assured of having really slept is totally sufficient, inasmuch as not a second more is needed for your whole physical and psychic being to be revived by just the necessary amount of repose.*



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## Your Silent Partner

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Is Dali crazy? The benefits of a good night's sleep are easy to believe — but what possible benefit could there be in a nap that lasts only a fraction of a second? The answer becomes clear only when you consider where your ideas come from. Most of our good, clever, creative ideas are not arrived at through a process of logical, reasoned argument. No, the really good ideas just seem to pop up out of nowhere; that is, they come from somewhere below the surface of our consciousness — a place we call the subconscious. The subconscious mind is not well understood, but it is a source of tremendous, and possibly all, creative power.

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Proof of this power is evident when we consider our dreams. Your subconscious has been creating these fascinating little comedies and dramas, each one different, three shows nightly, since *before you were born*. Far from a sequence of random images, most people frequently have dreams that are quite meaningful. There are many known instances of important problems solved in dreams. One of the most famous is the story of the chemist Friedrich Von Kekule who had long been puzzling over the structure of benzene (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>6</sub>). No matter how he tried to make the chains of atoms fit together, it didn't work. Nothing about them made sense, and some scientists were wondering if this pointed to a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of molecular bonding. And then, his dream:

*Again the atoms danced before my eyes. My mind's eye, sharpened by many previous experiences, distinguished larger structures of diverse forms, long series, closely joined together; all in motion, turning and twisting like serpents. But see what was that? One serpent had seized its own tail and this image whirled defiantly before my eyes. As by a lightning flash, I awoke.*

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And upon awakening, he knew that benzene's structure was a ring shape. Now, would you say the Kekule himself thought of the solution? From his description, he merely watched the solution play out in front of him and recognized it when he saw it. It was as if the author of the dreams had solved the problem and was merely presenting it to Kekule. But who is the author of these dreams?

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On one level, the subconscious mind is part of us, but on another, it seems to be quite separate. Some people become quite uncomfortable at the idea of regarding one's subconscious mind as another person. It is an idea that sounds, well, kind of crazy. But creativity is crazy, so that shouldn't stop us — in fact, it should encourage us. So, why not treat it like a separate entity? No one has to know — it can be your little secret. Bizarre as it sounds, treating your subconscious like another person can be quite useful, because as humans, we like to anthropomorphize things, because it gives us a well-understood model for thinking about and interacting with them. You won't be alone in this practice — creative minds have been doing it for thousands of years. Stephen King describes his silent partner in his book *On Writing*:

*There is a muse (traditionally, the muses were women, but mine's a guy; I'm afraid we'll just have to live with that), but he's not going to come fluttering*



*down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station. He lives in the ground. He's a basement guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all the grunt labor, in other words, while the muse sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you. Do you think this is fair? I think it's fair. He may not be much to look at, that muse-guy, and he may not be much of a conversationalist (what I get out of mine is mostly surly grunts, unless he's on duty), but he's got the inspiration. It's right that you should do all the work and burn all the midnight oil, because the guy with the cigar and the little wings has got a bag of magic. There's stuff in there that can change your life.*

*Believe me, I know.*

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So, if we pretend our creative subconscious is another person, what is that person like? You might already have a mental picture of yours. Here are some common characteristics of the creative subconscious that most people seem to share:

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- **Can't talk**, or at least chooses not to. Not in words, anyway. Tends to communicate through imagery and emotions.

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- **Impulsive**. Tends not to plan ahead, tends to live in the moment.

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- **Emotional**. Gets swept up in whatever you are feeling — happy, angry, excited, afraid — the subconscious seems to feel things more deeply and more powerfully than the conscious mind.

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- **Playful**. It has a constant curiosity, and loves wordplay and pranks.

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- **Irrational**. Not bound by logic and rationality, the subconscious comes up with ideas that often make no sense. Need to go to the moon? Perhaps a long ladder will work. Sometimes these ideas are a useless distraction, but sometimes they are the clever perspective you have sought all along — whoever heard of a ring molecule, for example?

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I sometimes wonder if the long-term appeal of the character of Harpo Marx, from the Marx Brothers films has to do with the fact that he matches the profile of the creative subconscious almost perfectly — perhaps this is his resonant theme. Harpo doesn't speak (or doesn't care to), is impulsive (eats whatever he sees, chases girls, gets into fights), is very emotional (always laughing, crying, or having fits of anger), is always playful, and is certainly irrational. However, his crazy solutions to problems often save the day, and in quiet moments, he plays music of angelic beauty — not for the praise of others, but simply for the joy of doing it. I like to think of Harpo as the patron saint of the creative subconscious (see Figure 6.2).

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Sometimes, though, working with the creative subconscious can make you feel like you have a deranged four-year-old living inside your head. Without the rational mind to plan things out, take precautions, and set things straight, this guy would never survive on his own. For this reason, many people get in the habit of ignoring





FIGURE  
6.2

f0020 Salvador Dali paints a portrait of Harpo Marx on a dinner plate.

what the subconscious mind suggests. If you are doing your taxes, that is probably a good idea. But if you are brainstorming about games, your silent partner is more powerful than you are. Keep in mind that he has been creating entertaining virtual worlds for you each night, since before you were born, and he is more in touch with the essence of experience than you can ever hope to be. Here are some tips for getting the most out of this unusual creative partnership.

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### *Subconscious Tip #1: Pay Attention*

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As usual, the key is listening, this time to your *self* (sort of). The subconscious is no different than anyone else: If you get in the habit of ignoring it, it is going to stop making suggestions. If you get in the habit of listening to it, seriously considering its ideas, and thanking it when you get a good one, it will start to offer more and better suggestions. So, how do you listen to something that can't talk? What you must do is pay closer attention to your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions, and your dreams, for those are the ways the subconscious communicates. This sounds really strange, but it really does work — the more you pay attention to what the subconscious has to say, the more work it will do for you.

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For example, say you are brainstorming ideas for a surfing game. You are thinking about which beaches it should be set at and what kind of camera systems are going to be best for a surfing game. Suddenly, you have this inkling of an idea: “What if the surfboards were bananas?” which is crazy, of course — and where do you think it came from? Now, you could say to yourself, “That’s stupid — let’s constrain this to reality, please.” Or, you could take a few moments, and seriously consider the idea: “Okay, so what if the surfboards *were* bananas?” And then another thought comes: “With monkeys surfing on them.” And suddenly, this doesn’t seem so dumb — maybe



this banana surfing monkey game could be something different, something new, something that might gain you a wider audience than the more realistic game you had originally planned. And even if you ultimately reject the idea, your subconscious might feel a little more respected and take part more seriously in the brainstorming process because of the time you spent considering suggestions — and what did it cost you? Only a few seconds of quiet reflection.

s0080

### *Subconscious Tip #2: Record Your Ideas*

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Certainly you will record your ideas during a brainstorming session, but why not record them all the time? The human memory is terrible. By recording all of your ideas, two things happen. First, you'll have a record of many ideas that you would likely have forgotten otherwise, and second, you'll free up your mind to think of other things. When you think of an important idea, and you don't write it down, it kind of bangs around up there, taking up space and mental energy, because your mind recognizes it as important and doesn't want to forget the important idea. Something magic happens when you record it — it is like your mind doesn't feel the need to think about the idea as much. I find it makes my mind feel clean and open, as opposed to cluttered and cramped. It leaves the freedom to think seriously about the design of the day, without tripping over the clutter of important unrecorded ideas. It sounds weird, but that is how it feels. An inexpensive voice recorder can be an invaluable tool for a game designer. Whenever an interesting idea comes to you just speak it into the recorder and deal with it later. You have to have the discipline to periodically transcribe those recordings, but really, that is a small price to pay for a huge idea collection and a clean mental workspace.

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### *Subconscious Tip #3: Manage Its Appetites (Judiciously)*

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Let's be honest here — the subconscious mind has appetites, some of which are primal. These appetites seem to be part of its job — just as it is the rational mind's job to determine which appetites can be safely fed, and how to go about doing that. If the subconscious mind feels one of these appetites too strongly, it will obsess about it. When it is obsessing, it can't do good creative work. If you are trying to come up with new ideas for a real-time strategy game, and all you can think about is candy bars or how your girlfriend left you, or how much you hate your roommate, you aren't going to be able to get much good work done, because these intrusive thoughts will distract you, and the source of these intrusive thoughts, your subconscious mind, isn't getting any work done either, and he's the one who has to do the heavy lifting. Maslow's hierarchy, which we'll discuss in Chapter 9, is a pretty good guide here — if you don't have food, safety, and healthy personal relationships, it will be hard to do self-actualizing creative work. So, make it a priority to





get these things worked out, and come up with compromises that will keep your subconscious satisfied so it can spend its time coming up with genius ideas. Use good judgment, of course — some appetites are dangerous and should be curbed, not fed, for if you feed them, they tend to grow, which makes everything much worse in the long term. It is possible that the tendency for so many creative types to self-destruct may be the result of a close, but poorly managed, relationship with their subconscious mind.

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### *Subconscious Tip #4: Sleep*

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As Salvador Dali points out, sleep is crucial, and not just the slumber with a key. We used to think that sleep was for the body — but it has become clear that sleep is primarily for the benefit of the mind. Some strange process of sorting, filing, and reorganizing seems to be going on when we sleep. Clearly, the subconscious is wide awake and active for at least a part of the sleep cycle — the part that features dreams. I have built up my relationship with my own creative subconscious to the point that I sometimes get a sense of when he “is around” or “is not around,” and I certainly find that when I haven’t had enough sleep, often he isn’t around. It feels like he takes naps when I (we?) haven’t had enough sleep, or at least he isn’t participating much in what I’m doing, and this absence shows in my work. I have been in more than one brainstorming meeting where I was contributing almost nothing useful, and then just following a feeling of him “showing up,” a flood of useful ideas came forth.

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### *Subconscious Tip #5: Don’t Push Too Hard*

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Did you ever try to think of a name during a conversation, maybe someone you know, maybe some movie star, and you know you know it, but just can’t think of it? So you squint your eyes and try and force the answer out of your mind — but it just doesn’t come. So, you give up and move on, talking about something else. A few minutes later, suddenly the answer pops into your mind. Now, where do you think that came from? It is as if the subconscious was working on the problem of finding that name in the background while you moved on to other things. When it found the answer, it gave it to you. No amount of concentration or straining was going to move it along faster; in fact, this seems to slow the process down, because who can work with someone looming over their shoulder? The same goes for your creative work. Don’t expect immediate answers from your subconscious. Give it a problem to solve (one more advantage of a clear problem statement!), make clear the problem is important, and leave it to do its work. The answer might come quickly, it might come slowly, it might not come at all. But nagging and looming won’t make it come any faster — it will just slow things down.





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## *A Personal Relationship*

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You may find that your relationship with your subconscious is different than what I describe here. This is expected — different people's minds work in different ways. The important thing is that you find the techniques that work best for you, and the only way you can do that is by following your instincts (hints from the subconscious) about what will be creatively productive, and start trying experiments. Some of these will be necessarily strange. Slumber with a key is strange, but it worked for Dali. Treating your subconscious mind like a full-time roommate is strange, but it works for Stephen King. To become the best game designer you can be, you must find the techniques that work for you, and no one can tell you what those are — you must discover them yourself.

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## **Fifteen Nitty-Gritty Brainstorming Tips**

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You and your silent partner are ready to tackle your problem. Now comes the fun part: brainstorming! That is, it's fun when the ideas come — when they don't, it's terrifying! So, how can you make sure they do come?

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### *Brainstorm Tip #1: The Write Answer*

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You've stated your problem. Now, start writing down solutions! Why write them down? Why not just sit and think until that brilliant idea comes to you? Because your memory is terrible! You are going to want to mix and match little pieces from dozens, if not hundreds, of ideas and you will never be able to remember them all. Even worse, as we discussed earlier, when you have many disconnected ideas in your head, they can crowd out new ideas. So make room! Were you ever really mad at someone so you wrote them a nasty letter (which you might have never sent) and immediately felt better? Something magic happens when you put your ideas on paper. So do it!

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### *Brainstorm Tip #2: Write or Type?*

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What is the best way to record your ideas? Whatever works best for you! Some people like typing best, some like writing. I personally like writing on unlined paper, because it allows for more expression and creativity — you can circle ideas, draw little sketches, connect ideas with arrows, cross things out, etc. You can always type up the good stuff later.

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### *Brainstorm Tip #3: Sketch*

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Not all ideas can be easily expressed through text. So draw some pictures! It doesn't matter that you can't draw — try! When you express your ideas visually, not only will





you remember them more easily, the pictures you draw will trigger more ideas. Try this out. You'll be surprised at how well it works. Need to make a game about mice? Start drawing some mice — real rough — just crude little mouse blobs. I guarantee you will find ideas popping into your head that simply weren't there a minute ago.

s0170 ***Brainstorm Tip #4: Toys***

p0770 Another way to get your mind visually engaged in your problem is to bring some toys to the table. Pick some that have something to do with your problem, and some that have nothing to do with it! Why do you think that restaurants like TGI Friday's have all that crazy stuff on the walls? Is it just decoration? No. When people see it, they think of things to talk about, and the more things they think of to talk about, the more enjoyable their restaurant experience. If it works for restaurateurs, it can work for you. Toys don't just visually engage your creativity — they also engage it in a tactile way. Even better, why not bring a big lump of clay, or Play-Doh, so you can make little sculptures of your ideas? It sounds silly, but *creativity is silly*.

s0180 ***Brainstorm Tip #5: Change Your Perspective***

p0780 The whole point of the lenses in this book is that they get you looking at your game from different perspectives. But why stop there? Don't just brainstorm sitting in your chair — stand up on your chair — things look different up there! Go different places — immerse yourself in different things. Brainstorm on the bus, at the beach, at the mall, in a toy store, while standing on your head — anything that sparks your imagination and makes you think of new things is worth doing.

s0190 ***Brainstorm Tip #6: Immerse Yourself***

p0790 You've stated your problem, now immerse yourself in it! Find people in your target audience at the mall — what are they buying? Why? Eavesdrop on them — what are they talking about? What is important to them? You need to know these people intimately. Have you settled on a technology already? Learn everything you can about it — cover your walls with its specs — find that secret thing it can do that no one has noticed yet. Are you locked into a theme or storyline? Find other adaptations of similar stories and read or watch them. Do you need to do something new with an old gameplay mechanic? Play as many games that use that mechanic as you can find — and some that don't!

s0200 ***Brainstorm Tip #7: Crack Jokes***

p0800 Some people are nervous about using humor to do serious work, but when you are brainstorming, sometimes jokes are what get the job done. Jokes (Can you be





a closet claustrophobic?) loosen up our minds (Is it possible to be totally partial?), and make us see things from a perspective that we missed before (Save the whales! Collect the whole set!) — and new perspectives are how great ideas happen! Be warned, though! Jokes can get you off track, especially in a group setting. It's fine to get off track sometimes (the good ideas might not be on the track), just make it your responsibility to get things back on track. A brainstorming commandment to live by: "He who derails, rerails."

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### ***Brainstorm Tip #8: Spare No Expense***

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From childhood, most of us are trained not waste resources: "Don't use the good markers!" "Don't waste paper!" "Don't waste money!" Brainstorming is not the time to be frugal. Never let materials get in the way of your creativity. You are going to be trying to find the million dollar ideas — you can't let a few pennies for paper or ink get in the way. When brainstorming, I like to use a fancy pen and heavy gauge paper, and I like to write in big letters, only using one side of the paper. Why? Partly because I can lay out all the sheets on the table, or on the floor, and consider all the ideas from a distance if I need to. Partly because it gives the process a certain dignity. But partly because it just feels right! And when brainstorming, you need to do what feels right for you — every little thing you do that makes you a little more creatively comfortable increases the chances that the great idea will come. And what is right for one person isn't right for everyone — you must constantly experiment to find what works best. But if you can't get the materials you prefer, don't you dare whine about it — use what you've got! There is work to be done!

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### ***Brainstorm Tip #9: The Writing on the Wall***

p0820

You might prefer writing on a whiteboard to writing on paper. If so, do it! If you are brainstorming in a team setting, you will need some kind of solution that everyone can see at once. Some people like to use index cards to write down their ideas. These can be tacked to a bulletin board and have the advantage of being easily repositioned. The downside is that they are sometimes too small for a big idea. I find I prefer giant (2 ft. × 2.5 ft.) Post-It sheets (expensive, but we spare no expense!), or sheets of butcher paper with masking tape. This way, you can write lists on the wall, but easily reposition them when you run out of room. Even better, you can take them down, stack them, roll them up, and store them. A year later, when someone says, "Hey, what were some of those robot game ideas we had last year?" you can go pull them out, stick them up, and restart your brainstorming session as if it had never stopped.

s0230

### ***Brainstorm Tip #10: The Space Remembers***

p0830

This excellent phrase is from the book *The Art of Innovation* by Tom Kelley. One more reason to put things on the wall: our memory for lists is bad, but our memory





for where things are positioned around us is very good. By posting your ideas in the room all around you, you can more easily remember where they are. This is crucial, since you will be trying to find connections between dozens of different ideas, and you need any help you can get — particularly if you will be brainstorming over several sessions. It is quite remarkable. If you put a bunch of ideas up on the walls, and you go away for a few weeks, you will forget most of it. But walk back into that room where the ideas are posted, and it feels like you never left.

s0240

### ***Brainstorm Tip #11: Write Everything***

p0840

*The best way to have a good ideas is to have a lot of ideas.*

p9000

– Linus Pauling

p0850

You've got your fancy pens, your fancy paper, your fancy coffee, some toys, some modeling clay, everything you think you might need to be creative. Now you are waiting for that brilliant idea to come. Mistake! Don't wait — just start writing down everything you can think of that is remotely connected to your problem. Write down every stupid idea that comes into your head. And a lot of them will be stupid. But you have to get the stupid ones out of the way before the good ones start showing up. And sometimes a stupid idea becomes the inspiration for a genius idea, so write it all down. Don't censor yourself. You have to give up your fear of being wrong and your fear of looking silly. This is hard for most of us to do, but it comes with practice. And if you are brainstorming with other people, certainly don't censor them — their stupid ideas are just as good as your stupid ideas!

s0250

### ***Brainstorm Tip #12: Number Your Lists***

p0860

Much of your brainstorming will consist of lists. When you make lists, number them! This does two things: First, it makes the lists easier to discuss (“I like ideas 3 through 7, but 8 is my favorite!”), secondly, and this is *extremely weird*, when a list of things is numbered, the numbers somehow give a certain dignity to the things in the list. Consider these two lists:

u0120

- chicken broth

u0130

- umbrellas

u0140

- wind

u0150

- spatulas

o0110

1. chicken broth

o0120

2. umbrellas

o0130

3. wind

o0140

4. spatulas





p0950

Don't the items in the numbered list seem more important, somehow? If one of them suddenly disappeared, you would be much more likely to notice. This dignity will make you (and others) more likely to take the ideas on the list seriously.

s0260

### *Brainstorm Tip #13: Mix and Match Categories*

p0960

It's great when game ideas, Athena-like, spring forth from your head, fully formed. But it doesn't happen that way every time. A great technique for helping ideas come together is to brainstorm in categories. The elemental tetrad comes in handy here. For example, you might have decided you want to make a game for teenage girls. You might make separate lists, which you can start to mix and match. Something like

p0970

#### **Technology Ideas**

o0150

1. Cell phone platform

o0160

2. Handheld game

o0170

3. PC

o0180

4. Integrated with instant messaging

o0190

5. Game console

p1030

#### **Mechanics Ideas**

o0200

1. Sims-like game

o0210

2. Interactive fiction game

o0220

3. The winner makes the most friends

o0230

4. Try to spread rumors about the other players

o0240

5. Try to help as many people as possible

o0250

6. Tetris-like game

p1100

#### **Story Ideas**

o0260

1. High school drama

o0270

2. College-themed

o0280

3. You play cupid

o0290

4. You're a TV star

o0300

5. Hospital theme





- o0310 6. Music theme
- o0320 a. You're a rock star
- o0330 b. You're a dancer

p1190 **Aesthetic Ideas**

- o0340 1. Cel shaded
- o0350 2. Anime style
- o0360 3. All characters are animals
- o0370 4. R&B music defines the game
- o0380 5. Edgy rock/punk music defines the feel

p1250 Once you have lists like these (though you should have dozens more entries on each list!) you are free to start mixing and matching ideas — maybe a cell-phone-based Tetris-like game, which has a hospital theme, where all the characters are animals.... Or how about a Sims-like console game based on high school with an anime style? By having all these lists of partial ideas that can easily be mixed and matched, fully formed game ideas that you might never have thought of start springing up all over the place, each taking on a life of their own. Don't be afraid to make up other categories, either, as you need them!

s0270 ***Brainstorm Tip #14: Talk To Yourself***

p1260 There is tremendous social stigma against talking to yourself. But when brainstorming alone, some people find it really helpful — there is something about saying things out loud that makes them more real than just thinking them in your head. Find a place where you can freely talk to yourself without getting funny looks. Another trick, if you are brainstorming in a public place: hold a cell phone next to your head while you talk to yourself — it's silly, but it works.

s0280 ***Brainstorm Tip #15: Find a Partner***

p1270 When you brainstorm with other people, it is a very different experience than brainstorming alone. Finding the right brainstorming partner can make a world of difference — sometimes the two of you can get to great solutions many times faster than either of you could alone, as you bounce ideas back and forth and complete one another's sentences. Just having someone to talk out loud to, even if they say nothing, can sometimes move the process along faster. Do keep in mind that adding more and more people doesn't necessarily help, though. Usually, small groups of no more than



four are best. Groups work best when brainstorming a narrow problem, not a broad, open-ended one. Also, certain people make bad brainstorming partners — these are usually people who try to poke holes in every idea, or people who have very narrow tastes. These people are best avoided, and you'll be more productive without them. Team brainstorming can have tremendous benefits and tremendous perils, which we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 23.

s0290

## Look At All These Ideas! Now What?

p1280

Our goal with this chapter was to “Think of an idea.” After a little brainstorming, you probably have a hundred! And this is how it should be. A game designer must be able to come up with dozens of ideas on any topic. As you practice, you will be able to come up with more and better ideas in less time. But this is just the beginning of your design process. The next step is to narrow down this broad list of ideas, and start doing something useful with them.

