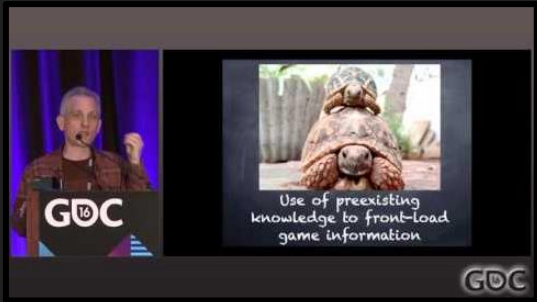# It's dangerous to design games, take this!

A deck of many tips

Theorycrafting is fun, but when I'm the one in the audience I prefer anecdotes.

I prefer when a speaker says *"this is what I experienced, here's what I think: take it, tweak it, love it or leave it"*.

Tip #1

Unified theories are like underpants: we all have our own and don't want to share.

Before getting into design I was a programmer.

2012

2013

2014

2015 - present

My professional design experience is with 4X games.

2015

2015

2015 - 2016

2016

2016 - 2017

2016 - present

Tip #2

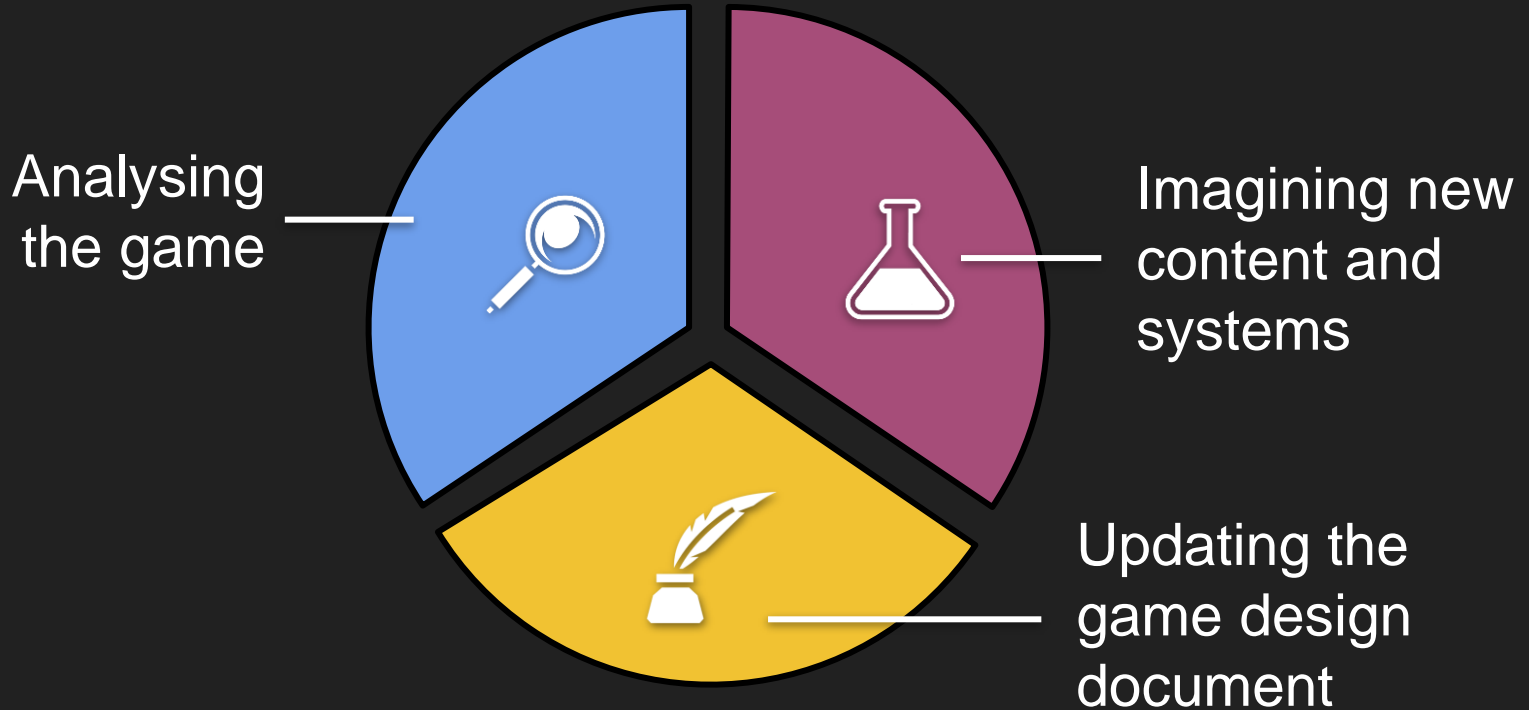Take all of this with a pinch of salt: your experience, and mileage, may vary!

There's one thing I *can* count on: to make games you'll need food, shelter, electricity, hardware, software, etc.

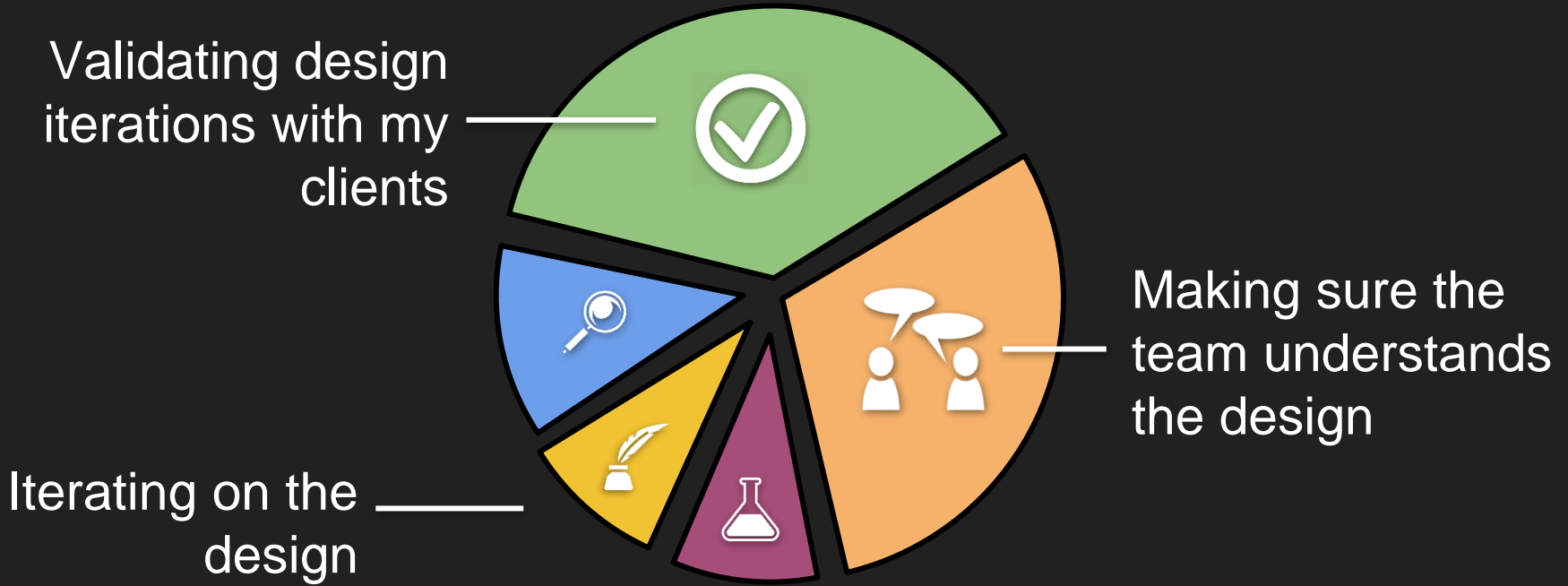You'll be answerable to whoever provides you with these things.

Tip #3

The only true independence is financial:
you'll probably have a client.

I used to think game design was mostly writing.

Analysing the game

Imagining new content and systems

Updating the game design document

But I've tended to be a go-between, not a scribe.

Validating design iterations with my clients

Making sure the team understands the design

Iterating on the design

Tip #4

Documentation is just a means to an end:
the true end goal is communication.

Side note: game-icons.net is your friend!

Tip #5

Establishing a consistent pictographic language will help your ideas stick.
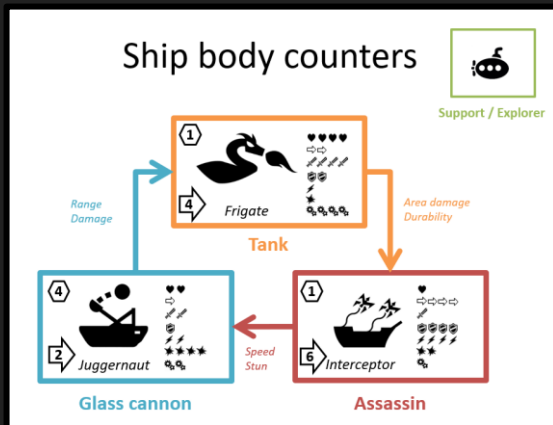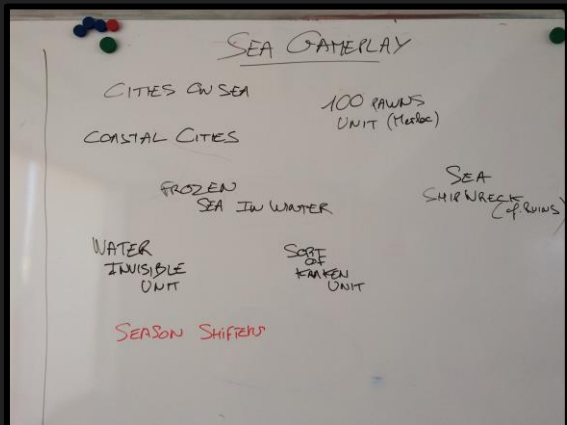
If you can't think of an evocative term and icon for your variables, it's generally a bad sign.
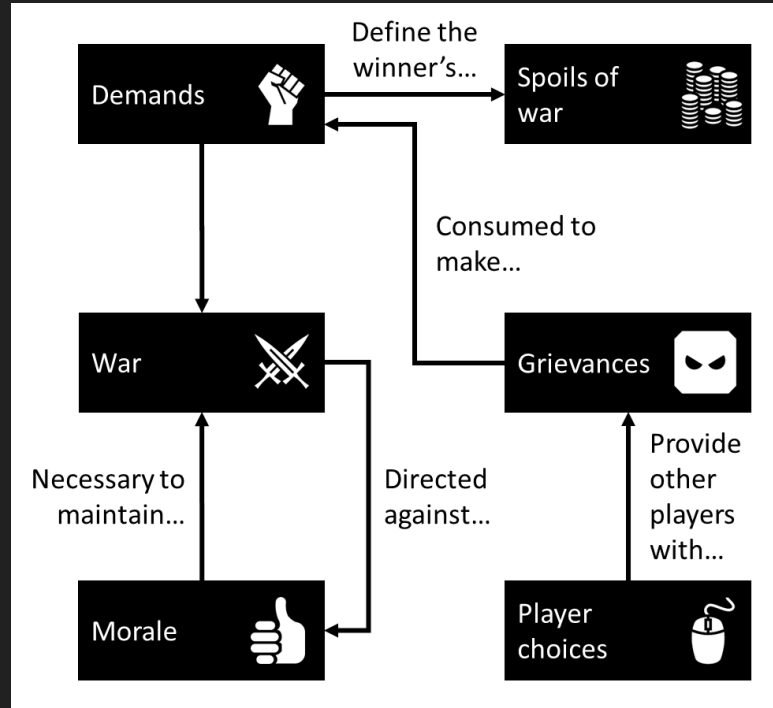
Tip #6

Words are stones: the ones you choose
for your game concepts will ground them.
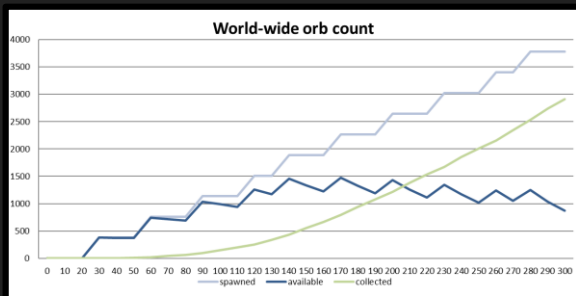
Here are some examples of Amplitude design docs.

Tip #7

The right format for documentation is the one that best gets the message across.

Some of our "documents" are even interactive.
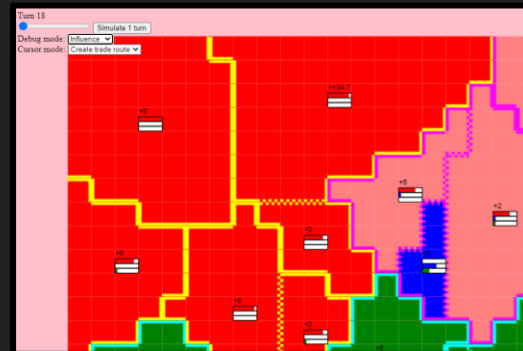
Tip #8

Better to prove your idea works with a prototype than with a bunch of theory.

Before Amplitude I never really *proved* anything.

When you're mainly working for yourself, by yourself, you need to know *what* you're making and *how*, but the *why* is just... intuition.

Tip #9

Accept that you too are biased, and get familiar with your personal biases.
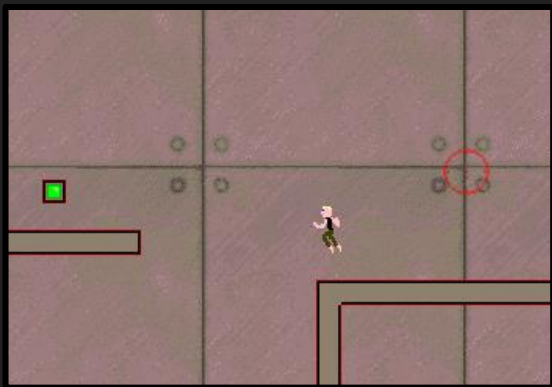
Accepting your lack of objectivity is the first vital step towards *empathy*.

Without empathy you'll only be able to make games for *yourself*.

That's fine of course… but don't quit your day job.

Tip #10

<u>Listen</u>, build rapport and intuit your client's underlying desires and fears.

Empathy will help you pick your moment...

* You feel like you're going to have a bad time.

… because *context* is often as important as *content*.

Tip #11

Take the temperature, and address the elephant in the room before starting.

"*We tend to generate false dichotomies, then try to argue one point using two entirely different sets of assumptions, like two tennis players trying to win a match by* **hitting beautifully executed shots from either end of separate tennis courts.**"

-Tim Minchin

Tip #12

Start by agreeing on null hypotheses, and check in regularly once you have.

You need empathy too to put yourself in each of your players' shoes.

Different players will want different things, and what they want will change over time.

Design different habitats.

Tip #13

You're never designing just one game,
because your audience is not a monolith.

You need to remove your ego from the equation.

Ego will have you chasing wild geese for all eternity.

Tip #14

An overly defensive design is worse than one that allows the odd exploit.

TYPICAL DIFFICULTY CLASSES

Task Difficulty	DC
Very easy	5
Easy	10
Medium	15
Hard	20
Very hard	25
Nearly impossible	30

SKILLS

Strength
Athletics

Dexterity
Acrobatics
Sleight of Hand
Stealth

Intelligence
Arcana
History
Investigation
Nature
Religion

Wisdom
Animal Handling
Insight
Medicine
Perception
Survival

Charisma
Deception
Intimidation
Performance
Persuasion

You might look at system and think *"this lacks mathematical elegance"*.

But wanting to accurately model reality? Wanting your peers to think you're smart?

That's your ego trying to trick you again.

Tip #15

Beautiful, clever, elegant systems aren't necessarily fun to interact with.

It can be helpful to take a step back from the systems and mechanics altogether.

Consider, for just a moment, the physical and emotional space in which the game will most likely be played.

Mindset and *setting* are just as important as what you're… um... playing.
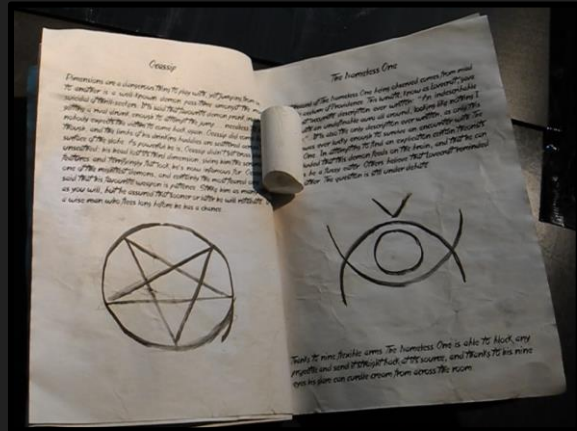
Tip #16

Remember that play happens in the mind, not in the hands or on the screen.

Accepting this blurs the line between art and rules.

But Brian Upton explains this better than I ever could.

Tip #17

Think holistically: lore, art, music and sound are as important as mechanics.

It's all *content*, all food for players' hungry minds...

18 BILLION BILLION
UNIQUE, EXPLORABLE PLANETS

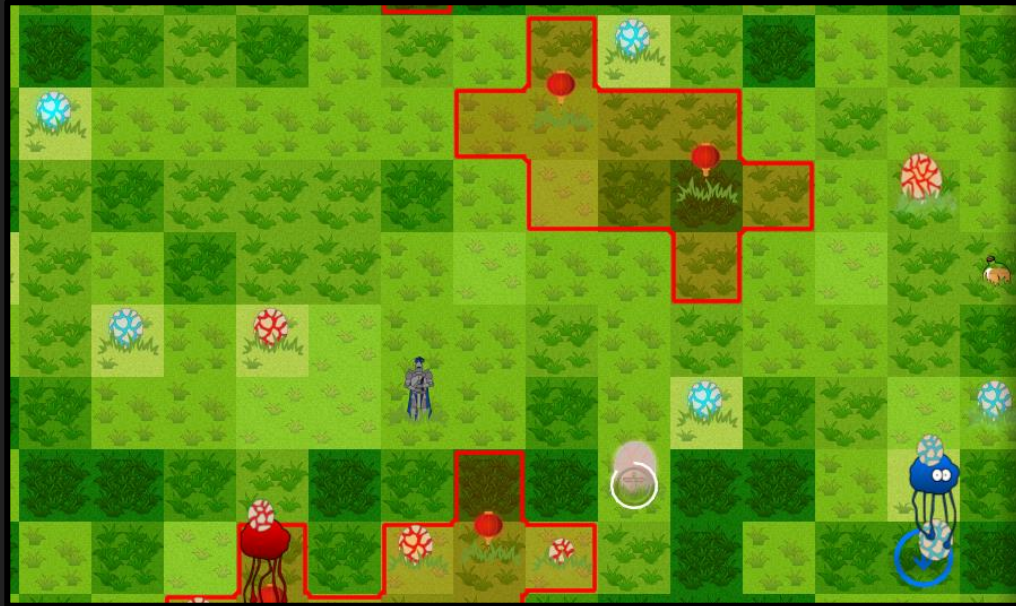The videogame that features the most usable firearms is Borderlands (Gearbox, 2009) which includes 17,750,000 usable weapons with different components, elemental effects, ammunition, damage multipliers and manufacturers

GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS
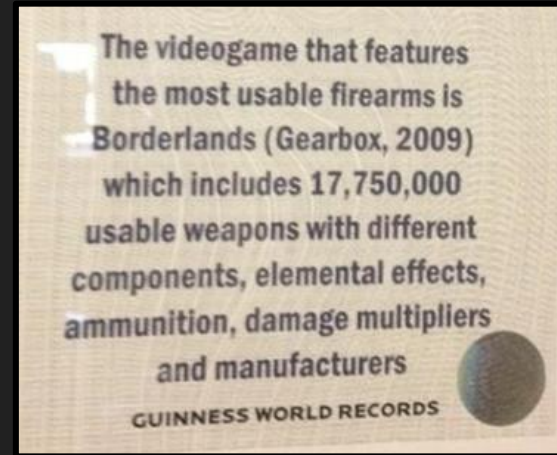
… but not all content has the same nutritional value.

Content that requires no new thought adds nothing: it's *all data, no entropy*.

If you want to add entropy, look for places where you can turn an *"always"* into a *"sometimes"* in your players' go-to strategies.

Tip #18

Not all content is created equal: add things which call strategies into question.

Be careful to *question* though without *invalidating!*

New content should not entirely deprecate the mental models player have worked so hard to build.

Iterating is fun, but *revolution* is scary.

Tip #19

When making changes, bear in mind the hours players have spent theorycrafting.

Tip #20

If your talk goes over-time nobody will be able to ask you difficult questions.