

Enduring Play Season Episode 1 Transcript: Using UX Strategy to Put Players First with Celia Hodent, PhD

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Transcript

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Computer Voice

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Initializing Enduring Play Podcast Season One Engine. Decompressing Audio.
Synchronizing Waveforms. Reticulating Splines.



Computer Voice

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Launching Podcast Lobby.



Cheryl Platz

▶ 0:15

Welcome to the Enduring Play Podcast, where we explore what it takes to
create games that don't just survive, but thrive. I'm your host, Cheryl Platz.
I'm a video game developer who has played many roles during my decades
in industry. Producer, game designer, user experience designer, writer, voice
talent, and now Creative Director.



Cheryl Platz

▶ 0:34

In this first season of the podcast, you'll hear from a selection of the veteran
game developers who generously spent time with me as I conducted
research for my book, the Game Development Strategy Guide. In this book,
I'm seeking to give people at any stage of their game development career a
holistic perspective on modern video game development. What's a live
service game? How do you reconcile which monetization strategies you



Chat with Enduring Play Season Episode 1 Transcript: Usin...

need? How do you deal with the unexpected behavior of massive groups of players when you let them loose in your game?



Cheryl Platz ▶ 1:02

Today's conversation was very energizing for me. I had the chance to sit down with User Experience strategist Celia Hodent, Ph.D. User experience is a discipline that transcends games, but is closely related to game design, that seeks to make technology better adapt to what we know about how humans think, perceive, move and behave. Celia may be best known for her two very successful books on the psychology of video games, one of which is called the Psychology of Video Games and the other, The Gamer's Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game Design. Even if you're not familiar with Celia's work, you've probably played Celia's work. She's worked at major companies like Ubisoft, LucasArts, and Epic Games.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 1:43

Even if you're not a user experienced practitioner, there's something in this episode for you. We explain how user experience contributes far more than wireframes, which are basic mockups of user interfaces often associated with ux. Too many opinions on your team? We talk about using UX strategy and research to help you with decision fatigue. Struggling with video game monetization? We talk about the ethics of video game economies and game design. Let's get into the Game.



Computer Voice ▶ 2:07

Player 1: Cheryl Platz Player 2: Celia Hodent, PhD. Podcast Level: Start.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 2:16

Celia, I have been really deeply inspired by your work, not just for the community, but the books you've put out your talks and today we're going to get into some of the really, really interesting details about what makes people play. Thank you so much for joining me today.



Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 2:31

Yeah, my pleasure. Thanks for having me, Cheryl.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 2:33

Would you be willing to give our listeners, a tour of how you got to this point in your career as a UX strategist?



Celia Hodent, PhD



2:40

Sure. So I have a PhD in psychology that I got in France because I'm French. And then I started to work in the video game industry at Ubisoft in 2008 or something like that. And I moved to Ubisoft Montreal, where I worked with the Playtest Lab and worked on franchises like Rainbow Six. And then I moved to LucasArts in San Francisco to boot the UX initiative there, because UX was a new term. There was definitely some stuff happening before that, but UX was not really a term that was used until then, at least in the game industry. And then after LucasArts got sold to Disney, I was like, this is when I moved to Epic Games in 2013 and I became the director of UX at Epic. So I worked on a lot of different titles, especially Fortnite, and I left Epic in 2017 and ever since then I've been doing some consulting work in freelance. That's me .



Computer Voice



3:46

Launching narrative cutscene: LucasArts and Epic Games.



Cheryl Platz



3:54

Celia's background includes two of the most influential gaming companies in history, one from the past and one very much from the present. To better understand how she's able to so fluidly speak to a broad spectrum of gaming experiences, let's take a moment to look at both of these companies. LucasArts is the second name of a company originally known as Lucasfilm Games, and you probably know Lucasfilm as the originators of timeless stories like Star Wars and Indiana Jones. Lucasfilm Games was founded in May 1982 by George Lucas, and in 1990 the video game division was rebranded as LucasArts. Ironically, Lucasfilm Games did not have the rights to Star Wars games at the time it was founded.



Cheryl Platz



4:34

In an interview with PC Gamer, Lucasfilm Games alumni, Ron Gilbert said, "if we had been able to make Star Wars games, it's probably all we would have done." Instead, Lucasfilm Games went on to create quirky and original cult

classic games like Maniac Mansion and Sam Hit the Road. In addition to the first ever graphically massively multiplayer online game Habitat, which was released as an online service for the Commodore 64. Of course, LucasArts eventually went on to assume development of a number of Star wars games, including the role playing game Star Knights of the Old Republic and the massively multiplayer Star Wars Galaxies, Epic Games is best known to consumers for shipping Fortnite, one of the most successful multiplayer experiences on the market, with seven game modes that include its classic Battle Royale and a sandbox creative mode But Epic is also the company behind Unreal Engine, which powers many of the world's most complex AAA video games. Epic has taken this influence into the courtroom, and even non gamers may have heard Epic's name in the same sentence with Apple during a protracted battle over App Store payment policies.



Computer Voice ▶ 5:38

Loading. Podcast Level 1 the evolution of User Experience in Video Games.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 5:45

I'm glad you mentioned the whole turning point of UX in gaming. You know, mentioning that we didn't really have the term UX in gaming. I was trying to capture that a little bit in my writing. Talking to my editor, she asked was it really true that UX didn't exist in gaming around the time? And I said yeah, well, we were a little bit behind.



Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 6:04

We're still a little bit behind mind you, but yeah, we're catching up slowly. Oh yeah, UX is a recent term as well, you know, if compared to human factors or interaction design. And you have a lot of folks, especially at Microsoft, that were trailblazing human factors in the game industry. But yeah, it took a while to really get picked up and be more at the strategy level. And still we're still not there yet. But that's the thing I'm trying to push for.



Cheryl Platz ▶ 6:35

So that's a great segueway. Your title has morphed from User Experience Director to User Experience Strategist. And I would love it if we could talk a

little bit about what that means and how it's different from some of the other roles you played in your career.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 6:46

Yes. So when I talk about UX now, people do understand what UX is about, at least they've heard the term. But a lot of time they narrow it down to either just play testing the game at some point or just UX design and sometimes even just UX design for the UI. So it's narrowed down to these concepts and definitely play testing and UX design and ui, all these are important. But it's just some elements of UX. And UX in a nutshell is really putting placing ourselves in our players shoes. So users, this is what we mean by user experience. Like people who use the product, not people necessarily who buy the product. Like sometimes on Facebook, the users are not necessarily the payers, the buyers, the customers. So there's a difference there. But in the game industry, usually the people who pay for the product are the users, so they are the players. They say that it's simplify that and we put ourselves in their shoes so that the experience that we want them to have, the experience of, I don't know, a challenging experience on puzzle game or on. On platforming game. Like the sort of thing that we want players to. To feel and to experience. We want to make sure this is what they actually experience in the end.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 8:06

Tell me more about that. What do you mean by making sure that's what they actually experience in the end?

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 8:11

To accomplish that, we'd need to really change our mind the very beginning and not think of making the game in a silo just the way we want. But always, you know, we do our thing. We have ideas and we prototype those ideas. But very quickly we want to make sure our. We're going on the right track and we're on the right track with this game. And so we always like, put the player at the center to verify our hypotheses, what we call ideas and opinions. We treat them as hypotheses all throughout the development process and. Yeah, and that we need to have that mindset from the very beginning and all throughout the development process and even after a

launch. So, yeah, that includes playtesting and UX design and UI and all that. But much more than just that.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 9:03

Tutorial level, providing clarity with curiosity.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 9:07

What you describe speaks to me on a very deep level because, you know, as a user experience director myself, starting at Riot Games and then at Scopely and now in my current role as a creative director, every time I come in, there's the same sort of vibe. Hey, we're really focused on wireframes, but there's so much more we could do in user experience than wireframes. How do we get there as an organization? And you're there at the forefront helping people move that conversation earlier in the process. And the language you were using was hypotheses. I often talk about leading with curiosity. How have you found success in framing what those hypotheses can be and how they live next to game design early in the process?

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 9:44

Yeah, well, I mean, in my career it was clear very, very early that a lot of people have opinions on the games they're making and most of the time these are not the same opinions. So it's just like opinion land all the time. And on top of that you have executives that have, of course, another layer of opinions and they all think they can design the game. So I know no game designers really struggle with that. So I don't want to come in on the team with another layer of opinion. And this is not what we do.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 10:16

What we do is we help with all those opinions and say, okay, this is: with the experience that you want to offer, this is the brain of people, like these people. They are definitely not going to be able to multitask, for example. So we know that there are constraints that we are aware of. It's allowing us to narrow down the opinions that are feasible or not. And then we say, okay, let's say there are three or two main opinions. How about we test them them? And so we transfer, we transform those opinions into hypotheses that we can test.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 10:48

And so breaking this all down for folks who maybe are not user experience practitioners, Celia mentions the brain of players. They're taking what we know about cognitive psychology, using it to rule out some of the ideas, and then the rest of the ideas are being narrowed down by the process of user experience research. Amazing.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 11:07

We did a lot of that when it was at LucasArts on Star Wars 1313 that never saw the light of day. I know we testing a lot of stuff instead of thinking, well, all players will have, you know, are very advanced and will need, you know, very precise sensitivity on the thumbstick. We test it. We have like a gym level. We were asking players to just like aim and shoot at targets as fast as possible. And we're checking are they overshooting or are they stopping short? And by doing those tests, it's allowing us to fine tune where would be a good default ascending for the sensitivity of the thumbstick. So opinions are here. We make art. So it's bound to be torn by a lot of firm opinions.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 11:54

And we are here to help the team define where, what makes the most sense for the experience they want to offer with the budget that they have in the time that we have, and for the things that we're not sure, we test and so that that helps. And so at the beginning, yeah, people are afraid that we're going to bring another layer of opinions. But as you start working with them and we demonstrate what we do and we test as soon as we can, it's actually. It clicks and people say, oh, my God. Yeah, it's actually helping because now we can make decisions faster and we make decisions based on data, not just on opinions.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 12:32

Thank you. That is so resonant. And I've been trying to figure out over the last couple of roles as a user experience leader, why is it that we are drawn to helping people broker these opinions? And I started to realize something that you've probably already realized deeply because we're trained in things like research and trained in things like that empathy for people is we can turn that internally to the company just as much as we can to players and

that kind of turns into the first step. Oh hey, we have these different opinions. User experience professionals can really listen aggressively and figure out what the situation is internally and then figure out what that means for our opinions about what players do and how to resolve them.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 13:14

Absolutely.

 Computer Voice ▶ 13:16

Loading. Podcast Level 2: Balancing Confidence with Curiosity.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 13:23

The other thing I really loved in your description is the leading with curiosity, the humility about players and their orientation with the game, which is something I just feel the industry needs more of. In general. I'm probably preaching to the choir, but when I worked on midcore games, my co workers would sometimes say things like, we don't need to teach the game. Players will learn by playing other games like us. I'm asking: "You did say you wanted to grow the game, right? You didn't just want to sell it to the same five people." And so I love the example of, well, we're going to go and figure out what the actual settings are to adapt to the people who are the full set of people who want to play the game.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 13:58

Yeah, we definitely need more humility across the board, something we need more as humans. But yeah, in the game industry it's difficult because when you're creating something you also need it's hard to lead a team if you don't at least transpire a little bit of you're never sure about anything, but you need to have confidence in where you're going to go. But this confidence should not be completely, completely blindsided by the fact that it's extremely difficult to make a game and you're going to be even more confident in an opinion or what you want to do.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 14:42

If you can actually test it early and you see that it's working. Because if it's not working, then can quickly shift and do something else or try something else. And sometimes it can actually give you new ideas that's going to make

the original opinion even more interesting and going to strengthen it in a way that you might not have thought of or maybe you would have thought of much later when it's a bit too late or more complicated or more costly to make any changes.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 15:12

Loading. Podcast Level 3 Constraint and Process as a creative gift

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 15:19

That new ideas piece is crucial. Something I find myself saying a lot to my teams is we want problems, not solutions, early in the process. Yeah, and that feels like shifting what we're confident about, being confident about finding problems worth solving. You know, my team comes in confident that we need a single player mode, then we've closed off all these other areas of exploration, but if we can go through the process you're discussing and listen to everybody and agree, do we agree that it's hard to learn how to play this game? And if we can agree and get confident on that, then you open up all this creativity and exploration. If one thing doesn't work out, then you're like, oops, maybe single player wasn't the way to do that. But we still agree that original problem is worth solving. So we're going to go try it differently.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 16:01

Exactly. Science, that's a good process. And sometimes the, you know, one of the things that I see a lot is in the game industry, like people are, don't necessarily want process because it's a creative industry and I get it. But a lot of artists go through a specific process so that they can create what they need to create. And so science and art are not, are not in opposition whatsoever. And it's through the process of the processes make sense, of course, are not necessarily good to follow. But here it's just to have a reality check every now and then. And creativity is also, you can be much more creative when you have constraints and knowing your constraints much better. It's allowing you to get, you know, get loose with your, your creativity.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 16:55

I am so glad you said that because something in the last year really clicked for me about process. Originally when I was leading user experience teams and games, I was like, I don't want to constrain my teams with process, I don't want to put them in a box. And then I realized that was the wrong frame, at least for the teams I've been working with because they were wasting all these calories figuring out how to work with each other or figuring out what's the right conversation at this stage. Who should I be talking to? And when I, as a leader it was like, oh, okay, right. What if we did this process?

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 17:26

What if we used these techniques? Overnight, suddenly my teams were like, oh, those are the techniques we should use at this stage. How about this fully fleshed out idea, ideation and how we solve this problem. And you know, it struck me that giving structure and constraint for parts of the process ended up being a gift and it allowed the creativity to start happening because my team wasn't wasting calories on the wrong problems. And you know, I realized, okay, I should have started doing that a lot sooner. And now I'm getting better as a leader looking for the right type of constraints to give my team to facilitate that creativity.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 18:01

Yeah, trying to find the right balance between like a good process that helps you move forward faster and more efficiently and bureaucracy. This is something you don't want to fall into. As you know, it's always. The difficulty is always finding the balance.

 Computer Voice ▶ 18:16

Podcast level paused. Begin Host commentary.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 18:20

In chapter 15 of the game development strategy guide Failure to Thrive, we talk about the several archetypes of common video game failure. Gameplay as gatekeeper refers to games that are too hard to learn, cutting off growth. You know, another one is chasing tail. It's copying leading games without strategic differentiation. For many of the failure archetypes I talk about in the

final chapter of the book, the techniques, the UX strategy techniques that Celia describes are critical to preventing that failure to thrive.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 18:56

Loading: Podcast Level 4 Failure to Thrive

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 19:01

And I'm so excited that you are like pushing for this across, across different companies. They need to hear this from you. We need to see more companies doing this because we don't like seeing games fail. We don't like seeing games struggle.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 19:14

No. And sadly we are seeing this a lot and over and over. So yeah. And the process is not necessarily going to save you from a failure, but for sure it's going to increase your likelihood to get a success or if it's a failure, to find it out much sooner before all this money is sunk in it.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 19:39

Yeah. Because failure is often not binary. It piles up over time. You can catch that one system that starts tipping everything over and fix it. And if you can do that early, then things might turn out a lot different.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 19:53

Loading podcast Level 5: Self-determination theory.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 19:59

Let's shift gears a little bit. One thing you mentioned was your very industry defining role of working as UX director on Fortnite, which is a gift that is given quite a bit to people over and over again. One of your interviews that I thought was really interesting was a conversation you had with Newsweek about the importance of squads on Fortnite and how that fulfilled this human need for self determination. I wondered if we could talk a little bit about that.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 20:25

Sure. In the UX world we look at a lot of things. We look at usability. Can the game, can people understand how to play the game? You were talking about can people learn to play the game fast enough? So that's usability. But we're looking also at what I call engageability. Can people be engaged in the game? And so we have a lot of theories to help us.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 20:46

But there are two main types of motivation that we're looking to. It's extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is very important and like the goals and the rewards and we're going to do something because we want that reward, et cetera, and we'll keep moving. So that's an extremely important part to design. But we look also at stuff like we call like self determination theory because it's one of the most popular theories for intrinsic motivation.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 21:12

Mind you, not everybody agrees, but it's very useful, at least as a broad guidance. So the three main elements for self determination theory is competence, autonomy and relatedness. So competence is the sense of progression. The theory says that you are going to be more intrinsically motivated to do an activity. If this activity satisfies your sense of competence, it means that you feel that you're progressing.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 21:35

So let's say that you want to learn a new language or music instrument or you start a new job. And if you're feeling, of course, you know that you're not going to be a master immediately, you are expecting that the more you pour your efforts into it, the more you're going to progress. And you, you would get some feedback from your teachers or your boss that you are actually okay, you're getting better and you're learning all these things. It's awesome. So that's the feeling of progression.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 22:01

Autonomy is, you know, making meaningful choices. And also self expression, I would put that in there and relate to this and relate to us is really important because we are a very social species. We would not have

survived at predators if we had not cooperated. We'd have been dead and would not even have this conversation today. So we're really good at thriving.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 22:21

We thanks to that. And so it's a profound human need to collaborate or to compete as well. But anything, any activity where we can be together and build something together and win together and also be complementary for one another. It's very important. That's why some of the most popular games are multiplayer.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 22:42

And yes, they can be competitive. There's a lot of emphasis in that, especially in our Western society. But collaboration is really important. So if, if you're playing in a squad, yes, you can compete against the other squads, but you're cooperating within your own squad. And this is really strong.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 22:59

And this is something that we love to do. And so that's why that's, to me, it's really important when you have a battle royale mode to also offer a squad mode in the battle royale, not just like the last person standing, but the last squad standing can appeal to many more people because they want to win with their, their friends and other people and not just by themselves.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 23:20

That's a really interesting point there at the end, you said appeal to many more people. Something that's come up again and again in my career: Subtle changes or additional new lenses for gameplay can vastly expand the number of people who are going to get joy from a game. And it doesn't mean you have to make your game for everybody. Yeah, but if you are coming in and if we all agree, our problem is we want the game to be accessible to lots of people and interesting to lots of people. Like you're describing. Not everybody loves head to head competition.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 23:45

No.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 23:46

And they can't describe when they don't like it. They just don't like it. So I loved this. Hey, when you see the squads thing in Fortnite, it's speaking to this innate human need, connectedness and relatedness, this piece of self determination. People might not be able to describe it, but that's why some folks might just feel that's where they're home. More in a squad than in head to head competition.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 24:07

Yes, absolutely.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 24:08

And of course that's what fuels guilds and everything else.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 24:12

Yeah, yeah.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 24:13

And, and not all games have to be that way. But you know, if you have a battle royale game with only one person standing is winning for sure. You're gonna have one person happy and 99 other people not super happy about it. Now if you do a squad now, it's just you're gonna have more people happy and you can have both so that you can have a mode. You're just like one person standing and you have a mode with squads. I mean, if you're doing a battle royale mode, it's not really much more work - well, it's a little bit more work. As I was saying it, I was like, well, that's not true. But you always have to look at the cost benefit, the cost of thinking, matchmaking for squads versus just 100 people without making squad versus the benefit, the appeal and the most interesting thing for the gameplay.

 Computer Voice ▶ 25:09

Podcast level paused. Begin Host commentary.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 25:14

The conversation about squads transitions back into one of the most important moments in my conversation with Celia. If you have been looking

for insight into why games fail or why it seems like the industry is wobbly, I want you to press record in your brain and really listen to what Celia is saying here. Because there are so many games that I have worked on that I have looked at that suffer from the problems that Celia is about to describe. It is so easy to chase the shiny ideas, but the art of UX strategy, of creative strategy in games is in finding the ideas that serve the gameplay and that is what helps games thrive in a world of infinite possibility. How do you choose the possibility that is most likely to succeed?

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 26:12

Loading podcast Level 6: Prioritization and strategic scoping.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 26:20

We're always thinking like that way because we, we can do anything, but we can't do everything. I love this, the saying, it's very true. And you don't want to do everything with your game. You want to do the things that are really serving the gameplay and serving the players that you are targeting. And so the UX process and the UX mindset and strategy is also very much about defining what are those priorities and defining, okay, where do you want to challenge players?

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 26:52

Because if you add this mode or if you add this feature now, you're creating different kind of challenge. Is this really serving gameplay? And what are the costs and benefits of adding this feature? And so that's always a great conversation to have. I love thinking about prioritization because a lot of things in the game industry, it's actually about cutting what is actually superfluous.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 27:14

And a lot of projects that fail is because they don't cut or they, they, you know, they're like, "oh, this, this game is like, just came out and it's super popular and they have this feature. We should definitely add this feature, this system in our game." And this is because it takes many years and for many games to build up. We end up, you know, with that monster. It's not really like trying to patch with the new things that we saw in the, the new games,

but it's not really necessarily serving the pillars of the game. And so I see a lot of problems with this.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 27:49

I had this career sort of window where I worked at the Gates foundation, which is not gaming. But, you know, when you're doing grant making, you have to have a theory of change. You can't just like give people money. Like, they have to have a theory of what they're going to do with it. And I think about theory of changes a lot now in games because I remember early in my career, we, we're creating worlds. We have all this power inside this game. And then you give that power to everybody on the team and you have all this enthusiasm and suddenly I've got people coming and they're like, I could literally make an emulator that will play Asteroids in this arcade cabinet in this game and I'm like "I love your energy. What is the way that that's going to make the game better? And why is that worth burning you out overnight for like three nights? And the QA cost of verifying that and everything else?" And asking people the why.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 28:38

Yeah.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 28:39

That intentionality makes, makes so much sense. So much of it is about petting and picking the right order to do things.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 28:46

Yeah.

 Computer Voice

Loading: Podcast Level 7: Minimum Viable Gameplay

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 28:55

And it's very. We always talk about the MVP and that the story is always taken and isn't.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 29:02

Example is, is Amazon. You know, they didn't do everything at the beginning. They focused on selling books and this is only once this was proven and, and working well. Then they started to add all these things and it became the monster that is today. But you don't start with the monster.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 29:19

You start, you start small. Well that makes sense. And you, you focus and then once this is proven. Yes. Then then you can expand. So I love this idea. You know the, a true mvp. You know the, the minimum viable product. What is your minimum viable gameplay for. For your game that makes the most sense.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 29:40

And, and then yes we, we can have all the modes and all these things and, and and become the, a big platform and then we can add the metaverse and all that and do esports. But we don't start there. We start with the, with the, the first target that we have and just make this good. Make this good. If it's a game about collaboration, we can start with a single player mode.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 30:01

Yes. Like for example, Fortnite. Yes, the multiplayer mode is much more popular today than the PvE mode. But by starting with the PvE and demonstrating that this is working, then we can define a PvP mode that will serve those gameplay pillars. And it's actually hard to find, you know, finding a PvP mode that's going to make sense for a game that is about combat and building.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 30:31

It's not easy. But if we start with things that we master a bit more like PvE, this is a bit not easier. But there's less unknowns to manage then we can from that from the lessons that we had by iterating on this then at some point the team can say okay, if we do that sort of PvP battle royale, that actually could work and that could serve building. But you don't get there immediately. You get there because you did all the prior work. That actually seems a bit more boring to do that work. It's just like really try to demonstrate the main gameplay loop demonstrate that the pillars work

together like combat and building and exploring. But that was new back then having combat and building at that level. And so that's also why the UX process is great for innovation if you want to innovate. It's actually sometimes I think that oh, "you Just have a great idea and you just do it? It's like Ta-da!" But a lot of time it is just like painful work and it's just like iterating. You fail and fail so many times until yeah, you get that spark. But. And it happens because of all the work that was done before. So yeah, yeah, ux.

 Cheryl Platz  31:53

Yeah, ux! And UX gives us frameworks to move through time, move customers through time, but move ourselves through time. I talk about that a lot too. One of the biggest misconceptions about UX is that it's about specific points in time, like screens, when I'm frequently reminding folks that one of the biggest values we provide is to talk about the players or the customers movement through time. Like flows, how they transition through things. I wrote a whole chapter about transitions in my first book, Design Beyond Devices. And the same applies to looking at organizations. A movement through time of an organization, their movement through the process.

 Computer Voice  32:35

Loading level eight, Chasing Tail Lights.

 Cheryl Platz  32:40

One of the things you said a little bit earlier that also triggered me was the we're doing the thing that the other game does and I have definitely seen in big AAA games, that phenomenon. Oh, that studio is doing that. We're going to go build that same feature with no leading with curiosity about whether or not we think it worked for them. Like, yes, it's in their game. Do they like it? And I've even seen that play out internally. I remember when I was working at Riot as director of User Experience and head of the UX craft there, there was one team that wanted to do something that Valorant was doing with their UI and they were ready to just plow forward. But when we asked Valorant about that feature, Valorant's team was like, no, no, no, no, we don't like that, don't do that. Right. And there's so many of those hidden

traps that you'll never know about in the industry because rarely do you get to ask the game you're copying whether or not they like the feature you're copying. When you look at the shiny AAA game, you're like, well, they're doing that. That must be going well, that must be a good idea. You do not know that they went through a one way door and it's in the game, but they hate it.

 Celia Hodent, PhD  33:47

Yeah, yeah, no, and to be clear, if you feel that it could work by any means, try, but try with purpose. Like you were saying, why? Why would it serve the gameplay if the answer is, well, it could actually serve the main gameplay and you know, serve what we're trying to do, then try. But don't go all in and don't do it just because the others are doing it. Ask yourself why and then test and see how you can do it. If it's really serving the gameplay, then the how is also going to become very important because how you do it, you can make it or break it at that level.

 Cheryl Platz  34:26

The other skill I work on with my teams in that space is opti-pessimistic thinking, which I talk about in my first book. What is the worst consequence of success? Oh yeah, yes, that feature exists for them. What might it have caused that they did not think about? And what would the unintended consequences be for us? There's a feature in many live service games that allows you to pay to skip gameplay. What is one unintended consequence of paying to skip gameplay? Introducing the ability to skip gameplay. You've now devalued your gameplay to players. You're sending a literal signal to players that content is not worth playing. Nah, that's boring. Don't play that. Just, just get past it. Players notice that.

 Celia Hodent, PhD  35:14

Yeah. And it really depends on on what you want to do. And it depends also on on your target players. I mean it's much more common in Asia to have the system just like you know pay to win is is not as much frowned upon in Asia than it is in in the west. And I mean there's no one answer possible but you have to.

 Celia Hodent, PhD  35:36

Yeah, just like like you I you talk about consequences I love. So I, I, I usually talk about cost and benefit and yeah, the consequences is part of the cost and we add that. "What are the benefits of adding this for the players?" Sometimes it can be accessibility benefits and this is very good to have. But what is the cost? And sometimes the cost can be ethical as if your game now is paid to win, you have some, you know, ethics considerations to have on your game as well.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 36:08

Loading: Podcast Level 9 Ethics and Perception of Free to Play Games.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 36:17

One thing I'm reflecting on is the impact that free to play games have had on perception of value of games. Do you have any thoughts on whether we're on a one way journey as far as like players valuing paying for their time because like moving from bottom box product to live services. I observed this change in the way players talk about spending from I bought a game to like oh God I spent money on the game. Like it like it's, it's almost not all players bring that but it's an interesting new sort of psychological tape.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 36:50

Yeah.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 36:50

Is it should be free and if it's not free then I'm, then I'm cheating or.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 36:54

Yeah, yeah, it did change though. Well, changing expectations, you know, like 15 years ago no one was expecting a game to be free on Windows. You have like. But yeah, that's a great question. And we have to be careful with this one because games are costly to make and people you know, can lose their job or if we set the expectation that, that a game has to be free or if it's not free, then we're thinking about okay, what is my labor on this game and how, you know, am I paying money to remove some labor or is it. We're doing. It's just changing a little bit the framing. I don't think it's changing that many things.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 37:46

Just shifting the cost and benefits. Like the benefit of, for the players, for putting the players shoes. The benefit of having free games is that, that you're not paying upfront A game just based on marketing of the game that can sometimes not be super truthful about what the game is about. And just on the hearsay before that we were paying aim. Like I remember when I was a kid and you know, there was no Internet whatsoever.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 38:12

I was buying a game based on the art of. On the COVID on the box. And that was not very truthful to the game for sure. And so I bought games. I don't understand why I could not play it. And then because no Internet is. So that was a different type of problem. And today the problem is a little bit shifted. We are more informed about a game. But now the problem is that when we are playing a free to play game, there are mechanics that are in there so that we retain and that we convert.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 38:48

And sometimes it can be fair enough because making a game is not, not cheap. But sometimes, yeah, we fall into, well, you know, practices that to me are not necessarily ethical is putting pressure for people to pay. And that can be a sort of pressure that can, can be really difficult for players to manage, especially young players. So I don't know if it's answering your question per se, but it's definitely something that we need to think of because yeah, it's changing the rapport that we have with the game. And we can easily fall into practices that are not fair for players because it's putting a lot of pressure, especially on kids like minors, people under 18 that don't have a fully developed brain that can help them manage their frustrations.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 39:46

So we need to think about that.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 39:47

I think about one of my favorite quotes from Jurassic Park: "Life finds a way."
Like: "kids find a way."

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 39:54

Yeah, they will find a way.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 39:56

I love when anyone says, kids don't play my game. Good luck with that!

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 39:59

Well, to be fair...

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 40:00

Yes, you should have gates to prevent that. And also they try, they find their way. Ideally, you are preventing kids from getting in, but regardless, there are going to be people who are, as you say, not fully developed, immature adults who are in there confronted with things, and that's a lot of responsibility. And to be confronted with one game choice by game or not by game, that's not so bad. But to be confronted every moment with choices about purchasing, that's a lot to balance.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 40:33

Yeah.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 40:34

It reminds me of my time as a producer when I would joke, if you wanted to harm video game producers, just lock us all in a room and tell us if you'll let us out when we pick where to eat lunch. Because we had to make so many decisions all the time that when we had to make them for ourselves, we're like, I. I don't know. I can't. I have no more decisions to make.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 40:53

The mental load is. Is too heavy. Just like, no more decisions. Yeah, I definitely can feel that in my life.

 Computer Voice ▶ 41:03

Loading Narrative Cutscene the Yellow Paint Meme.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 41:10

Yellow paint on a digital ladder doesn't sound controversial out of context, but the concept divided the video game development community for months in 2023 and 2024. According to knowyourmeme.com, players on social media had passively noted that games like Resident Evil 4 seemed to be marking interactive objects with swatches of yellow color, seemingly to draw attention to these objects, and the discourse spiraled to the point where a ladder smeared in yellow paint has become a viral symbol of how challenging it is to direct player attention in 3D interactive spaces. Some players find the use of obvious visual aids in their games insulting or distracting, which makes sense if you've examined the nine motivators of play from the first chapter of my book, the Game Development Strategy Guide. One of them is immersion, another is mastery, and yellow paint interferes with both of These.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 42:02

Loading podcast level 10 The Yellow paint Problem

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 42:07

Another thing we talked about when you and I were getting ready for this chat is a very persistent meme over the last year or two in the video game industry, which is called the yellow paint problem.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 42:19

Oh, it's only a problem for certain people because it's working very well, actually.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 42:28

So I wanted to get a chance to talk to you about your perception on this perception problem, because this started with a couple of players tweeting about, hey, it's not very graceful. It's not good design if you have to splash a bright yellow color on a ladder to get people to see it.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 42:41

But when you start looking at how brains work, especially when people want to be led in an immersive environment, it's not really as simple as all that.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 42:50

Yeah, yeah. It all boils down to again, what is it your game's about? Where do you want to challenge players? If your game is a first person shooter, action packed, it's all about, you know, coordinating, shooting at bad guys and just do that.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 43:06

This is where you want to challenge players is finding the bad guys and bad girls and just accomplishing your stuff. So the challenge is going to be more in reflexes and, you know, twitch skills and stuff like that. Now if players need to go somewhere and they can't find where they need to go, what you're challenging is visual attention for navigation. Is this what your game is about? If the answer is no, it's not really about this, then the yellow paint can help players find where they need to go next faster and so they can go right into the next combat, which is what your game is about.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 43:48

That's why you need a UX strategy. You need to define where you want to challenge players. I love to take the example of God of War because God of War, very successful game and a lot of people love this game. Especially the art direction is praise and everything. The health packs are beams of green in the environment that otherwise look, you know, try to be very realistic and greedy. You know, it's God of War and then, you know, and. And Kratos is pissed. You know, it's just like how to destroy all these nefarious gods and stuff. So it's gritty. Yet the health packs in the environment are extremely easy to see.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 44:27

It's just beams of green and the environment is more like brownish and it's just gray. Because it's not a game, it's not a Where's Waldo game. The challenge is not in spotting the interesting thing in the environment, which is a visual attention challenge for the players. It's about tactics and it's about understanding how the guy you're trying to destroy works and how to kill it. It's not about find the health packs in the environment. Anytime players have to find stuff in the environment to either pick up something or to know where to go. What you're challenging is visual attention. So is this what your game's about? Is it? Do you want to add a Where's Waldo kind of challenge

or Where's Wally depending on where you live, sorry, To your gameplay. If the answer is yes, then okay, maybe we should be more subtle. Yeah. You have games that are challenging visual attention. You have games where I have to explore. Like sometimes in Zelda you have things like, oh, the cracks in the wall. It's not in your face. It's so visible, but it's not in your face. Because Zelda is about exploration.

 **Celia Hodent, PhD** ▶ 45:34

But even in a game like Uncharted, which is also about exploration, they give hints about the yellow paint here to help you navigate when you need to go. Because it's just hard and you have a 3D world but represented on a 2D screen to know where to go. It's actually like challenging much more than you think players. So again, where do you want to challenge players? Because if you want just have them to have fun in a very fast paced action and shooting and everything. Yes. Put the yellow paint in there so that the players can go faster to where they need to go and have fun with your game.

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 46:14

And to your point earlier, if someone's struggling with "Should I yellow paint?" Lead with curiosity and let the players tell you what's fun. Thank you. Because it's. You boil it down so well, just like, hey, find the point of your game and then everything else kind of falls into place. Baldur's Gate 3 love that game. Inventory management. I do not love the inventory management in those games. Trying to move individual objects between characters for missions take takes a disproportionate amount of my effort. And that's what the game is about.

 **Computer Voice** ▶ 46:50

Loading: Podcast level 11 presence for 3D Virtual spaces

 **Cheryl Platz** ▶ 46:56

And you also bring up a really interesting point about cognitive science and how we process space. That came up when I was interviewing Jesse Schell for my first book, Design Beyond Devices and talking about extended reality. Because the concept of presence and the concept of how the brain

processes digital 3D is really complex. If you talk about AR and VR and how the brain processes information, a lot of the data we normally need to process a map, we don't get from a 2D minimap.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 47:26

Absolutely.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 47:27

So if we as designers just assume that that's enough, that's not how the hippocampus works.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 47:32

Players might need more help.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 47:33

Yeah, no. And again, if you think it's going to work, fine, I would object. And I think it's not going to work. But let's try. Try. You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe let's try and we try. And usually that's what happens.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 47:48

Because usually we start more subtle. We start with lighting and contrast and people waste too much time. And again, if this is not what we want players to waste time on, then we're going to add the yellow paint. But we might not start with the yellow paint. But usually through play testing we see, okay, it's just they're spending too much time.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 48:08

They're wasting their time. It's not fun for them and we don't care about that. Let's add the yellow paint so they can go faster to the next thing. That is fun. So again, cost benefit.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 48:18

And some games have done this gracefully by saying, well, okay, our game is about combat narrative. And for some players, they also enjoy the wayfinding. So we'll make it optional. And then players can tell us whether or not the wayfinding is part of the game. You can opt into wayfinding help and then it becomes an accessibility thing that lets more people play. Of course,

then you had to figure out whether people could find that setting. But that's just, you know, that we make whole worlds. There are so many options. One thing I've found is we take for granted how willing players are to just sort of tunnel into the context of the game. And once you're tunneling, you everything else is easy to ignore, even if it's a supposedly obvious ladder.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 49:01

Yeah. And some people think like a lot of people that care about lore. Some people do, definitely. So we should have stuff for them. Most people don't. And so again, you know, what are you gonna. Either you're making a game about lore and this is what your game is going to be about. You're doing Dark Souls and it's going to be difficult and you know you're going to punish players but. But players are consenting for this. They know what's going to happen.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 49:25

It's upfront and they know what they're signing off on. It's a very different story than making a game where you don't know that it's going to be painful for you to find the. Which fucking ladder you need to take to get to the next level. And you just want to shoot people in the face. It's a, it's a different contract that you have with players. I just, yeah, just respecting players time and also, you know, allow them to consent if they, if they want to suffer in your game. It would be a good, a good.

 Computer Voice ▶ 49:55

Loading final boss level: ethics for economy in video game development

 Computer Voice ▶ 50:03

We're just about. out of time, but I know you said that it was important that we talk about game ethics, especially the ethics of game economies. So let's dig in.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 50:15

What's going to be important if we want to stay a medium that is making art? Because I know it's an industry and we need to make money and that's fair enough. But we also always craving for that recognition that for example, cinema has and we don't. But the problem with the new business model, it

can be a bit difficult to hold on to our values and what we're trying to do when we need to look at retention numbers and conversion numbers. And again, I'm not saying that because we have free to play games, we can't make art anymore.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 50:50

I'm not saying this at all. But what we have to do is to make sure that the pressure that we put on players stays fair so that we can earn money while still not compromise the art that we're making and that we. I think you know, I'm talking about on behalf of everyone, but I'm hoping it's a representative of what everybody feels in the game industry. Like we want to make art and we want to make sure like art and, or just good gameplay. Like make sure that people have fun with our games and they find the game interesting.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 51:23

And so we just have to keep that in sight. And again, for the cost benefit, if you add something to put some pressure so that people come back or they're going to pay again, ask yourself what's the benefit for me in terms of business but what is the cost in terms of players time, money and also pressure? What is the sort of pressure we're making? I'm just going to give you one example. I think it's fair to reward the players to come back.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 51:55

Like you give them a loot. That's a good reward that we give them and it might encourage them to come back to get the reward. It's a different story to punish players who don't come back. If they don't come back the day you want them to come back and therefore they lose their streak or they're not getting like the super amazing thing, it's never gonna come back. Now you're putting a different type of pressure on players that starts to be unethical.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 52:24

And so we need to think about nuances like this. And definitely we need to make money. It's making games is really hard. So we need to keep in mind, you know, the business model and the business goals. It's always part of UX strategy to also keep in mind.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 52:37

Yes, we put players in the first place in the center of what we do. But yeah, we're not ignoring business. Like, we know we have a specific budget, specific time, specific constraints, and we need to reach a specific business goal. And so we keep that in mind. But it's really important to always ask ourselves, what does that mean for players and what sort of pressure we're putting on whom?

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 52:59

You know, are we talking about kids? Are we talking about adults? You know, what, what does that mean and what does that mean? Because for a kid, the pressure is very intense and adults who are making the games don't necessarily realize that. So that's a conversation that we need to have more.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 53:14

Totally aligned with that. You know, I go back to the Nintendo ds, one of the first consoles that had time as a concept, and Nintendo, remember, I thought it was such a cute little game simulator game. I'm allergic to pets and, you know, and. But there was a death in my family and I couldn't log in every day. And I came back and my dog was just in a state. You know, fleas, angry. And yes, that is an accurate simulation of a pet. But it stuck with me for a long time because it changed my relationship with that game. I was willing to make myself vulnerable to that game, and it made me feel like a bad person for having a life event.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 53:52

And that was back when there were less games competing for attention. And now there's so much going on. And I see this mindset you're talking about, well, we just have to make it so our people will stay regular and stay all the time. But it's not realistic to assume life's not going to happen to players. And if you make it so painful that when life happens, it's no longer fun to play. You have lost the battle. They will go play something else which will welcome them with open arms and free gifts. You have to be like the cool aunt or uncle that's like, yeah, I haven't seen you in three months. I don't care. Come hang out, hit the fridge.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 54:21

I'm going to add to it this, let's say, like, let's take Tamagotchi. It's the end, it's the central part of the gameplay to take care of the, of your pet. But even Tamagotchi, if you don't take care of your pet and it dies, then at some point it's gonna rebirth. You don't have to buy a new Tamagotchi to get a new pet. It's, it's, it's, you know, it's like the Phoenix. So again, is it, is it central to the experience that you want to offer or is it just a pressure point that you put on players to bring them back? Because yeah, it's gonna work up until one point and it's, it's ethical.

C Cheryl Platz ▶ 54:55

So I'm glad you brought that up. I'm very aligned and have been there in that fight inside companies like are we sure this is the path forward with varying levels of success when we're talking about these high pressure tactics. And as you say, there are almost no right answers in games aside from don't exploit kids and be transparent about what you get for your money. But being intentional and understanding your impact on people, I'd love absolutely more of that.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 55:23

Be intentional. And that's why you need the UX process, because it's helping you be intentional in all what you do. And even if it works like you had a success, if you didn't really have a good UX process, you don't necessarily know why you had that success. And so it's hard to reproduce same thing. You fail and then everybody's going to come with their opinions of why you fail.

C Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 55:43

And everybody knew I knew it would fail. That's in hindsight. That's what you call that in hindsight bias. It's just helping understand and why things succeed and why of course we cannot analyze everything. It's. There is a part of chance and there's a part of randomness definitely like in anything. But it's really helping, you know, do your post mortems and a much clearer way and to have intention and have, you know, at least be able to ask better

questions in the future if not having the answers. But at least if you don't get the answers, you'll get a way to ask better questions next time.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 56:17

It's always built into UX that we don't know everything. We should measure what actually happens in the world and learn from it. So it just comes full circle in the end. But with the UX strategy, part of it is like would you like to make smarter decisions and maybe have a better chance of success instead of just flinging things at the wall? We could help.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 56:36

Yeah. And it's going to make you iterate much faster if you do.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 56:38

Yes.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 56:39

And it turns out I think the industry doesn't want to spend \$100 million on a game game.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 56:44

If we can make it, you know, cheaper and faster that why not do that. Because then you can make more games.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 56:51

Yeah. Or just pay people more, or keep your studio open?

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 56:57

WHAT! That's outrageous! <sarcasm> I would never do such a thing. I know you mean pay the the shareholders more. What are you talking about, Cheryl?

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 57:05

I know.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 57:06

What world are you living in?

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 57:08

Oh geez. They're gonna come for me now.

 Computer Voice ▶ 57:11

Loading final podcast level links and followup.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 57:16

Thank you Celia. This has been so much fun for me. If people want to follow you afterwards, how would you recommend they do that?

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 57:22

celiahodent.com , it's super easy.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 57:26

I'm on Blue Sky CeliaHodent and on LinkedIn. CeliaHodent. Like straightforward, very usable. Try to eat my own dog food. I guess we say in English.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 57:37

I love this expression. I love it.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 57:39

The Games UX Summit 2025 is coming up.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 57:42

Yes, it's going to be in September in Antwerp in Belgium.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 57:46

There are two days of UX professional talks on September 8th and September 9th, and that's called Summit. And then there's an optional day of master classes on September 10th.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 57:56

We're super excited to bring it back in person. The point is having it every year by different hosts, so it's moving around. So this year is going to be in Europe and that's going to be fun.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 58:06

Head to game uxsummit.com for more information.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 58:09

Or you can always find the show notes at enduringplay.com.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 58:13

I'm wishing you a very successful conference and thank you so much again, Celia, so grateful for your time. This was a very fun conversation.

 Celia Hodent, PhD ▶ 58:22

Thank you for having me.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 58:24

If you enjoyed Celia's insights, don't forget to check out how her thoughts were featured in context in the Game Development Strategy Guide, my new book from Rosenfeld Media. It's now available for Pre order from rosenfeldmedia.com or your favorite online bookseller.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 58:40

Pre orders received on rosenfeldmedia.com before our release on September 16, 2025 will receive 15% off.

 Cheryl Platz ▶ 58:47

I'm your host, Cheryl Platz, reminding you to join me next time for another conversation with one of the experts for my book as we explore what it takes to create video games that don't just survive, but thrive.

 Computer Voice ▶ 58:59

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