

Enduring Play_ S2 E12 Bonus Ep... in Game Dev with Cheryl Platz

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Game development, Live service, User experience, Player safety, Layoffs, Game design, Prosocial play, Digital third-place, Motivators play, Community building, Game industry, Cultural representation, Prototyping, Venture capital, Gaming trends

SPEAKERS

David Ventura, Adanna Nedd, Steve Bromley, Timothy S. Davis, Tim Cullings, Joe "joemag" Magdalena, Cory Tsang, Jo Cronk, Amy White, Eric Kabisch, Celia Hodent PhD, Cristina Amaya, Enduring Play Computer, Yesenia Cisneros, Caerie Houchins, Tamara Knoss, Whitney Beltrán, Cheryl Platz, Christopher "Mav" Maverick, Lindsay Barnett, Desirée Rincón, Carlos Figueiredo, Joanie Kraut, Amy Kalson, James Deighan



Enduring Play Computer 00:00

Initializing Enduring Play podcast: recap engine seasons one and two. Decompressing audio, synchronizing waveforms, reticulating splines. Launching podcast lobby.

C

Cheryl Platz 00:15

Welcome back to Enduring Play, the podcast where we explore what it takes to make games that don't just survive, but thrive. I'm your host Cheryl Platz, video game developer, author, professor, just video game person. And today, I'd love it if you join me for a celebratory bonus episode where we look at the year in gaming since the launch of this podcast and my book, The Game Development Strategy Guide, while welcoming in new listeners coming in from our recent finalist designation at the 2026 Signal Awards, the story I want to tell today is the story of an industry lying in wait, tons of potential unrealized, a world that's moved on without seeing how much we've evolved, a world that takes us at our worst without meeting us at our best, a world that's actively avoiding the use of the term gamer for some pretty peculiar reasons. How can we reclaim our story and slow the continued decay of the development experience? Today's bonus episode gives new listeners a chance to get introduced to what this podcast has to offer, while resetting our perspective as returning listeners after a very eventful summer. Things have gone worse than expected in recent months than some prominent games analysts originally predicted. What can you, as someone who's still trying to survive, do about it? In this refresher on what's top of mind, we will cover topics like the accelerating layoffs, studio buyouts, public perception of gaming as a pastime, trends in player safety in pro-social gaming, and revisit the motivators of play for my book. This is unlike our normal episodes in that it's a solo episode, but this gives me a great chance to bring in clips from all of the 21 episodes we've done so far and bring them together into themes. And then, don't worry, in season three, which is coming soon, you'll get all new guests, all new perspectives as we continue to push forward to try to see how we continue to create games that thrive. But for now, let's head into our single-player experience, and stay tuned to the end for a discount code for the game development strategy guide and information about the launch of season three of this podcast.

E

Enduring Play Computer 02:16

Player one, Cheryl Platz, podcast level start.

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Cheryl Platz 02:21

Tobias Schultz, an associate professor of academic esports and company esports at the University of Agder, posted a story to LinkedIn on October 1 that sums up almost everything I've been talking about in the last year on this podcast. Loading podcast demo level video games as an escape from. He talks about how Mike Tomlin, former head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers, recently posted a YouTube tour of 12 years of self-expression work from Minecraft that started when he wanted to learn about what his children were playing in middle school. He kept playing long after his kids left, claiming the game let him detach from the realities and pressures of life. Gameplay motivated by immersion and comfort, and based on the level of detail, probably motivated by mastery too. Tobias points out that his university educates folks on four core competencies built by Minecraft: spatial visualization, engineering and logic, project management, and creativity-those sound pretty useful, don't they? It almost explains why so many of my guests over the past year have described getting their start as a leader in gaming. Let's drop in on a conversation that we're about to have in season three about this very topic with Christopher Maverick, aka Mav, who is an assistant teaching professor at the University of Pittsburgh. The enthusiasm is palpable.

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Enduring Play Computer 03:45

Loading clip, season three preview, Christopher Maverick, or Mav, teaching assistant professor, University of Pittsburgh, digital narrative and interactive design.

C

Cheryl Platz 03:59

There was a story about Mike Tomlin playing Minecraft.

 Christopher "Mav" Maverick 04:02

Tomlin's Minecraft City, real quick. Mike Tomlin was for the last decade and a half the head coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pittsburgh's the city I live in. A lot of good, a lot of bad with Mike Tomlin. He a lot of complaints that come with being the first black coach of a renowned sports team. Aside from all that, when he started coaching, his children were very young. So he, as a way of interacting with them and doing something fun with his kids, he starts like playing Minecraft with them because he had like five-year-olds and six-year-olds. So like they played Minecraft together, and then 15 years went by, and now those children are in their 20s, and Tomlin has since retired from coaching. So he put out a video last week as we record this of just like his son talking to him about, okay, Dad, let's show your Minecraft city, and it's the city of Pittsburgh, built to the brick, fundamental. Just absolutely amazing. He has gone through and constructed on his own server, just like every hotel. He he he's on the first episode. He's just wandering through and explaining how he did the lighting infrastructure on on. And I mean, this is a video that's an hour and a half long, and he's like, "Oh, this is episode one. I've got a whole city to do. And it's literally just like his decompression time originally with his kids, and then his kids grew up and they did something else. So his decompression time over the last decade and a half has just been building this massively intricate city. You know, now he would say, "I'm a football coach. I'm not a programmer. I'm not a developer. I'm not a designer. He, I'm not a gamer, but he is. He built a world, like he built a virtual world all of himself, and it's so amazing. And and like if you if you haven't seen it,

 Cheryl Platz 05:51

I'll just put it in the show notes.

 Christopher "Mav" Maverick 05:52

Yeah, yeah. It's it's so just incredibly beautiful that this person who just again originally to connect with his kids, and then later just his meditation is just his decompression time over the last decade and a half has been to build a thing, and it's so incredibly beautiful.

 Cheryl Platz 06:09

But Coach Mike Tomlin played in creative mode because the controller was a barrier for him, despite his vast cognitive capabilities, and that's an important reminder for us as we look at the ever shifting landscape of gaming. Consoles are more expensive than ever. Smartphones remove the physical control metaphor entirely. Laptop gaming is entirely different than desktop gaming, but we don't really have a language for which games are friendly in which context. And these problems are not unique to the older generations. In fact, season two, episode two guest Adanna Nedd spoke about her experience trying to expose elementary school students to game controllers.

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Cheryl Platz 06:46

Loading clip, season two, episode two. Games researcher Adanna Nedd.

A

Adanna Nedd 06:52

I spoke to an elementary school class a few years back. I was like showing them like talking about game design and level design. And for an example, I brought my Switch so they could play like Sonic One, so they could like run through a level, and then after I would have them draw out a level with crayons. And the interesting thing was that even though a lot of the kids recognized Sonic as a character, they didn't know how to use controllers because they're so used to tablets. So when I'd show them a controller, whereas someone who's like game for a while, I know, like okay, A to jump, B to roll, B to do the speed roll, things like that. A lot of newer gamers don't.

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Cheryl Platz 07:28

But no matter how established the game industry is, you and your game are always one download away from being someone's first game in your genre if you take the time to design tutorial, onboarding, and accessibility experiences correctly. I am constantly reminding devs who have been around for several decades that the assumptions we used to hold about what expectations players had for our experiences have fundamentally changed. Keep that in mind as we look at all of the trends that have been following us this past year.

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Cheryl Platz 08:01

Loading tutorial level. What's a live service?

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Cheryl Platz 08:05

Let's start by acknowledging the elephant in the room. Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite are huge part of the past, present, and future of the industry. But how large? Do you really understand how big those games are, or do you just hear their names a lot and push them aside? Let's check in, since this is both a recap and a welcome for new listeners. We have a chance to take it all the way back to the core. What's a live service game? Because that's one thing all three of these games have in common: they are massive live service games, and when I teach my class on video game business, I describe traditional video game release business models, which typically offer a single one-time purchase for an entire game experience, and are sold via an ownership or perpetual licensing model. The key really is that these experiences are designed to end, they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Maybe they have a sandbox mode, but they're not designed to change indefinitely. And in general, they are self-sufficient. They might check the internet to make sure you're licensed, but they are a self-contained experience. And ideally, you can play them when the game is launched, or 10 years later, it doesn't matter because it's built as a self-sustaining experience and not a service. It's a bit more complex in practice than theory, but that's a good starting point. Live service games frequently release content to players. They almost always include some form of multiplayer component, largely because multiplayer drives more engagement and sales, and they may have competitive gameplay, but that's not required. They may be offered as a standalone game, as games as a service model, or they might support extension with user-generated content (UGC) games as a platform. Most of the experiences people are having in Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite are generating. By people who are not employed by those companies, folks as young as kids creating interactive worlds that other people can engage with. You've got content moderation at real time and scale to try to make sure that these interactive experiences reflect your brand. For our purposes, it means that generations of gamers, hundreds of millions of players, have grown up with the expectation that their digital worlds respond to their existence. They expect to have agency in their worlds, and that is why self-expression and companionship and education have become the modern motivators of play that I describe in the first chapter of my book.

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Cheryl Platz 10:42

Loading podcast level one, the big platforms in play. Roblox was released in 2006. It is almost old enough to drink in the United States as a platform, and Minecraft was released in 2011. Fortnite released in two waves, single player in July 2017 and Battle Royale in September 2017. Apologies to literally everybody who's an adult because I'm going to make you feel old for a second. The 13-year-olds who played Roblox when it released are 33 now. Live service games are literally generational. Their kids are playing the same games that they did. Like it or not, these games are the training ground in which an entire generation of gamers has been forged. Owen Thornton at the University of North Carolina performed a recent demographic analysis of the Minecraft ecosystem over time, and their data shows average monthly users or MAU has held above 200 million users per month since 2024 on Minecraft, with a huge spike in daily active users in 2024, 55 million from 25 million the previous year.

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Enduring Play Computer 11:49

According to Thornton: The explosion in peak DAUs between 2023 and 2024 suggests a fundamental shift in user behavioral patterns. Rather than treating the software as a casual, intermittent entertainment application, a massive cohort of players transitioned to utilizing the platform as a daily digital third place—a persistent social infrastructure decoupled from physical geography.

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Cheryl Platz 12:14

There's that third place term again. We discussed it several times in season two when talking about the rise of companionship as a motivator of playing games in season two, episode 10, Desiree Rincon from Goldstar Gamers shared how Minecraft is helping children who are mourning the loss of their parents connect meaningfully.

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Enduring Play Computer 12:33

Loading clip, season two, episode 10, Desiree Rincon, head of brand strategy for Goldstar Gamers.

D

Desirée Rincón 12:41

Video games is something everyone can relate to. So we basically kind of come to their level and reach them in a medium that they understand fully. They play video games, and in doing so, they play with each other. They oftentimes will talk to each other. We run this Discord where we have community days, we play video games together as a community. We have a dedicated Minecraft server. The kids will go into this Minecraft server and build monuments to their parents.

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Cheryl Platz 13:12

That story still takes my breath away, and it's been months. Of course, this is still a fraction of Roblox's monthly active users or Mao and daily active users or DAO. Roblox daily active users has shrunk considerably since 2025, but still averages around 123 million players as of Q2 2026. But compare that to industry bastions like Fortnite, with a daily active user count of just one or 2 million players, not 100, or World of Warcraft, which sees a DAO that sometimes drops under 1 million players. And look, you do not need to be the biggest experience in the world to be quality. But why is this important? Because the scale and flexibility of these experiences has shifted player expectations, and it is an indication of what's currently motivating players. Episode six: Eric Cabisch, who was an early design leader at Scopely, Roblox, and VR Chat, expresses his cautious optimism for the continued growth of these platforms and what they mean for the industry.

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Enduring Play Computer 14:15

Loading clip, Season One, Episode Six: Eric Cabisch, former Vice President of design, VR chat, and Roblox.

E

Eric Kabisch 14:24

The the the the hunger for creativity and experience and connectedness that can be games or interactive virtual environments and experiences can afford to people is like that's not going to go away. And so I think I think we are seeing some shifts that are going to be durable, but but I I'm optimistic, optimistic while also being compassionate to a lot of people who are probably not feeling very optimistic right now.

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Cheryl Platz 14:52

Loading podcast level two, the transformative power of user experience in games.

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Cheryl Platz 15:00

But for those of us making the games, it's important to remember that these monoliths did not show up overnight, and these thriving games are the result of many methodical, intentional decisions, often iteratively developed over time, as is evidenced by this conversation from season one, episode one, with Celia Hodent PhD, who was the UX director of Fortnite back in the day. But before that, let's get a quick refresher on two terms you're going to hear a lot in the next clip.

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Enduring Play Computer 15:31

Podcast level paused, loading tutorial level, PVE and PVP.

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Cheryl Platz 15:37

PVE and PVP are two terms used to differentiate different types of gameplay. PVE is player versus environment. You, as a player, are playing against the system in some way. The environment being the system, often non-player character enemies or something like that. In this case, Fortnite has a PVE mode called Save the World, which is a cooperative action slash building campaign where you cooperate with up to three other players to build and craft and defend against AI monsters called the Horde. PVE is often contrasted with PvP, player versus player. Many online games handle this by differentiating the servers. Warcraft realms are differentiated by whether they are PVE or PvP. This is a great way to make sure that your game satisfies multiple motivators of play. Some people want to play cooperatively. Some people really want to compete. Now Fortnite does this with Battle Royale, which allows you to cooperate with the team while competing against other player-controlled teams. And yes, it's a little annoying. Those two letters sound so similar in English.

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Enduring Play Computer 16:42

Loading clip, season one, episode one. Celia Hoden, PhD, former UX director, Fortnite.

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Celia Hodent PhD 16:50

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? 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 first target that we have, and just make this good. If it's a game about collaboration, we can start with a single player mode. 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 and demonstrating how 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 a PvP mode that's gonna make sense for a game that is about combat and building. It's not easy, but if we start with things that we master a bit more, like PvE, so this is a bit not easier, but honestly, there's less unknowns to manage. Then we can, from that, from the lessons that we had by you know iterating on this, then at some point the team can say, okay, if we do like that sort of PvP and battle royale, that 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 is actually seems a bit more boring to do that word. It's just like really try to demonstrate the game, the main game playlude, demonstrate that the pillars work together, like combat and building and exploring. But that was new back then, you know, having combat and 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 it's things sometimes to think that oh you just have a great idea and you just do it and start da da, but a lot of lot of a lot of time is just like painful work and it's just like irritant and you fail and fail so many times until yeah you you get that spark but it happens because of all the work that was done before, so yeah, yeah, UX.

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Cheryl Platz 19:07

While Celia walked us through the concept of user experience strategy in season two, episode three, user experience researcher Steve Bromley explained how important the context of use is to determine how successful a game will be in reality.

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Enduring Play Computer 19:23

Loading clip, season two, episode three. Steve Bromley, user researcher.

S

Steve Bromley 19:29

You play mobile games yourself. That is not going to have people's full attention. They're unlikely to have audio on. For most games, they're probably doing something else at the same time, and then it would be easy to fall into that trap of trying to run a usability study, where you do just put someone in front of the first-time user experience in a very refined setting that isn't actually realistic for their real context. Some of the things that learning that pushed me towards is understanding the value of doing studies and playtests in players' own homes or going to see. Context of use that was quite big when I did a lot of work on VR titles as well, where you can think about actually the physical space in which people are in is very unique to their context and their living room and their living situation. And testing it in a lab where everything is perfect doesn't necessarily represent what real life could be.

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Cheryl Platz 20:19

But you don't have to take their word for it. While user experience didn't really exist when I started my career in gaming in 2003, it's becoming more well accepted as a sister of game design. And this quote from Yesenia Cisneros, a senior producer who spoke to us at the end of season one, demonstrates how other disciplines see the value of user experience in games.

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Enduring Play Computer 20:43

Loading clip, season one, episode 10. Yesenia Cisneros, senior producer.

Y

Yesenia Cisneros 20:52

I feel like one of the things I've learned is definitely relying heavily on your UR team, user research, and so they actually know a lot more than you think. I've worked at places where user research kind of gets frowned upon. They're like, ah, whatever. We'll take, we'll listen to their feedback, but we're not going to do it. And every place I've worked at, they usually have been right about the feedback that they give to us early on about our our game because they they know what's trending, what's not landing well, what the issues are, what people in the community overall are talking about other games, and so that is something I learned during the release of product is that user research and community management are very valuable in terms of helping develop your game, and you should consider them as part of the development team because they have a different perspective than you do working in the trenches. They're on the outside; they can kind of see the the big pictures.

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Cheryl Platz 21:54

These conversations amplify the perspective I developed as a user experience director of video game development teams, and that is that user experience is a critical part of your game development team in modern times. Yes, game design is there. Yes, they have some similar skills, but in a well-oiled team, game design and user experience designer are complementing each other.

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Enduring Play Computer 22:15

Loading podcast level three: the renewed relevance of classic gaming aesthetics.

E

Enduring Play Computer 22:22

The low fidelity graphics of Minecraft and Roblox have primed a new generation to be more accepting of classic video game graphic esthetics, and that has led to a generation of games that really just embrace like 16 bit art, pixel art, but also the resurrection of games that come from a different era, which we heard about in season two, episode 11 of this podcast. Playground production CEO Lindsay Barnett obtained the rights to a beloved franchise, Backyard Sports, which had died, company was gone. All they had were the old games, and they reverse engineered them with the help of a retro game studio, Mega Cat Studios. Let's listen to a little bit of our conversation about how they did that as they prepared to build a new live service game inspired by that content. Loading clips, season two, episode 11. Lindsey Barnett, CEO, Playground Productions. James Deegan, CEO, Mega Cat Studios.

L

Lindsay Barnett 23:33

Almost two years ago, when I was able to acquire the rights to the brand, I did not know that any retro titles would be able to come back. I thought that they were completely gone, and when I met Mega Cat, they were able to do something that I thought was impossible, which is CD-ROM hack and reverse engineer and really rebuild the retro titles to make them playable on modern devices. And I thought, hey, we'll release Backyard baseball 97 for fan service, and some people will like it. But I did not expect for it to become the number one game on mobile. It knocked off Minecraft from the top spot. I didn't expect it to become a top release on Steam.

J James Deighan 24:17

You know the the hardest part of the relaunched was we had no access to source code. What we had were fragments of make file chain components, and we're doing RAM sniffing. We're seeing what's loaded into the memory at a given state, and then basically shifting and forcing new things to get loaded and to expand the memory. Just a lot of very meticulous technical work with some reverse engineering and assembling corners of the globe. We'll say pieces because the software was built in this scum engine that was popularized by Lucas Arts, you know, many many years ago, and we were able to reach out to many many industry colleagues and corners of the retro gaming community to find little clues and little pieces that. Software development and game development, you have the benefit of things like error logs and crash logs and compilation logs and all these things that you can point back to and extract clues and breadcrumbs that can better inform. Okay, here's what's happening here. But you know, being able to make these games playable on modern devices was a one of the hardest things that we've ever done ever.

C Cheryl Platz 25:21

In my discussion with games researcher Adanna Nedd in season two, episode two, we hear about the preference for this kind of game from a gamer's perspective, from someone who's choosing lower fidelity games.

E Enduring Play Computer 25:36

Loading clip, season two, episode two, games researcher Adanna Nedd.

A Adanna Nedd 25:41

We're hitting the point where, in the past 2030, years of games, one of like the biggest ways to show what a game was doing was that it was doing something new. Whether it was like through the graphics, the music, and a lot of that console, or as I'll say, like between that was like, which has the best graphics, which game looks the coolest, how does it feel? Because we went from games like Doom, and now we have stuff like every game has 3d models and colors. Everything gets interesting because we've hit the peak of realism, where everything looks so realistic. It's like, okay, we spent all this money developing, making it all look realistic and super responsive. Now, where exactly do we go from here? Now that you can't really show that as a selling point anymore, because now, like with every a lot of AAA games being super realistic, very interesting. As someone who played a lot of Nintendo games, which are a lot more stylized and not necessarily realistic, and I think what's really really interesting is now, especially now that indie games are becoming more popular. I know Stardew Valley just turned 10 years old, and it has very simple, very pixel art, but still very beloved because people love playing these types of games.

C Cheryl Platz 26:46

But even if you're not adopting a classic aesthetic, taking a page from classic game development techniques helps your game be respectful of people's data, and that's critical in a world where you might not have access to a Wi-Fi connection. In season one, episode nine, my former coworker and current UI UX unicorn Tamara Knoss discussed our shared experience working on Game Boy and Nintendo DS launch titles.

E Enduring Play Computer 27:16

Loading clip, season one, episode nine. Tamara Knoss, senior technical UI designer.

T Tamara Knoss 27:24

What you're saying is bringing up so much stuff for me. As someone who started on GPA, the whole game has to fit in a two megabyte cart. Have fun, 10 hour games on a two megabyte cart. Amazing. But it's that whole aspect of because I grew up in the industry in that very keeping things small and tight and limited, and then moving to AAA, and it's just look at all this waste. Artists making art that is like 10 times the size it needs to be, and like that's taking up space on the person's device. It's okay for when they're working on console or like desktop, like when it's a PC. But we're talking about somebody's phone, and you like keeping in mind that the amount of inefficiency in desktop games and then porting them to mobile is mind-boggling and painful, and it's a debate that I've had with people where they're like, "Oh, but but phones are updating all the time, but it's also about how much when people are trying to download over Wi-Fi. But it was one of the things as I made the shift from going from GBA to desktop or console is just how extravagantly wasteful with their resources people tend to be.

C Cheryl Platz 28:28

And some developers are waking up to this reality. In early 2026, the PC install size for HELLDIVERS 2 dropped by 85 percent, dropping from 154 gigabytes down to just 23, which saves 131 gigabytes of storage.

C Cheryl Platz 28:47

Loading tutorial level: PC data duplication.

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Cheryl Platz 28:52

When you see huge download sizes, you may be looking at a game that's duplicating its data to deal with the problems presented by mechanical hard drives, as opposed to solid-state hard drives. Most modern consoles use solid-state drives and don't have this problem. But older PCs and larger discs may still be mechanical in nature. Mechanical hard drives are like record players, where if you picture the needle on the record player, it takes longer for the needle to get from one end of the record to the other than it does for it to move back and forth between two tracks that are next to each other. So if there's data that needs to be accessed a lot, developers just copy it and put it all over the place on the record, so that the needle's not slinging itself around wildly, taking up a bunch of extra time. Especially important in performance-based games. But what's so exciting about this precedent is that HELLDIVERS 2 showed that it's actually not making that much of a difference to do the duplication, at least on PC. So I can't wait to see what other studios innovate in this space.

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Cheryl Platz 29:53

Loading podcast level four, reclaiming the gamer tag.

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Cheryl Platz 29:59

A key step in the recovery of our industry is reclaiming our narrative and expanding what it means to be a gamer and to be a game in the eyes of the media and the general public. There's no shortage of reporting about the rough edges of the gaming industry, where we fall short, where things have not gone as well as they should have, and where we've been slow to adopt the right amount of safety, you know, Roblox got a lot of attention this year for finally getting to certain levels of mandatory facial age verification and age-based account tiers that were really long overdue, based on some of the harms that people had reported. Better late than never, but still. And anytime that stuff is reported, it shines light on the things that have happened before, scaring some people away from gaming in general. When the entire media cycle is about how your children must be protected from the games they are playing, it's easy to think that the games are the enemy. But Carlos Figueiredo, our guest from season one, episode two of this podcast, and director of player trust and Safety at Mojang Studios, home of Minecraft, had this to say, which gave me hope about the future of internet gaming.

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Cheryl Platz 31:09

Loading clip, season one, episode two. Carlos Figueiredo, Director of trust and safety at Mojang Studios, and co-founder of the Thriving in Games group.

C Carlos Figueiredo 31:20

And then we are selling ourselves short as well as game developers and and player safety professionals because it's we are talking about something in that in the big picture is a small part of communities like people can say all sorts of things you know like when we look at the internet we can say there's a there's a lot of of negative things that happen on the internet, you know it's it's true, but we also have to remember some of the bias that we have as human beings that we pay a lot of attention to negative things, right? Like it's - we we do put a big weight on negative experiences.

E Enduring Play Computer 31:57

In September 2026, the first ever Thriving in Games Summit was held in Helsinki, Finland, at Supercell headquarters. Kristelle Lavalley, the head of global teen well-being at Discord, gave a speech that really inspired me about the narrative gap between what we know about the values of organized play for kids and what parents understand the value of gaming to be. We have this huge opportunity to connect the dots and help those outside the gaming industry understand the real and tangible benefits of gaming, how it brings people together, how it improves skills, and how much more diversified gaming has become in the past decade or two. Games of today are far more nuanced than the games of 30 years ago. For their part, Kristelle and her team at Discord are working on a player's guide pilot to help provide resources that are free for parents and organizers to use to help support kids in their path towards organized gameplay, and Kristelle described this as an attempt to activate gaming's place in culture through better public understanding and stronger relationships with the people around players. This totally resonated with me. Kristelle's point, which I completely agree with, is that public understanding of the value of gaming is part of player well-being. What adults believe shapes what they support, and what institutions believe shapes what they fund. So, it's on us to reclaim our narrative and define how we want those around us to see us. Let's hear from season two, episode 10 guest Desiree Rincon about her lived experience connecting with people around the world while recovering from cancer.

E Enduring Play Computer 33:50

Loading clip, season two, episode 10. Desiree Rincon, head of brand strategy for Goldstar Gamers.

D**Desirée Rincón 33:58**

That's what I was doing. I was playing video games. I was bedridden for a time frame, and and it was like my platoon who was playing games with me online during my recovery, and we would set up like little land parties and play Call of Duty. And I met my best friend sitting in the internet cafe. I was playing Half Life, and he was playing Fable, and we started geeking out over each other's games, and then looked at each other and said, "Did we just become best friends? And he was like, "Yep. And and our love language to each other, even now, like like 20 years later, is literally like the Steam Winter Sale. That is how we send each other Christmas presents.

C**Cheryl Platz 34:40**

While PC Bangs are still popular in Asia, internet cafes are hard to find in the states and some other regions, which leaves digital third spaces like Minecraft and Fortnite to pick up the slack for discovering your people. There is so much room for people to be gamers. Gamer is a factual statement of time spent, and the more we, as an industry, can reclaim this, the more our gamers will find us and each other, and the discovery problem will get easier. And there are so many great examples that are surprisingly resonant, even with mainstream folks. Just take the example of backyard sports from the last episode in season two, Backyard Sports is a series of digital games that actually happens to teach people how to play sports in real life, and thus prepares them for real life interactions with their peers. And how do you know it worked? Because their partnership with a real world sporting goods store actually moved the needle. Here's Playground Productions CEO Lindsey Barnett talking about that very phenomenon.

E**Enduring Play Computer 35:47**

Loading clips, season two, episode 11. Lindsey Barnett, CEO Playground Productions.

L

Lindsay Barnett 35:55

Because what I think people really resonate with about the backyard sports games is not like oh these were just great games. What they resonate with is it represents a part of their childhood in which the best thing that you could be is a kid, and the best job that you could do is play. And for a generation of millennials who grew up with that as the value system from the game to just have fun being a kid. I think that is what people are really resonating with today. Is it's celebrating that? It's celebrating a spirit of play and just having fun. And we really need a lot more of that. And our hope now is our new game has has multiplayer. So we're hoping that families play it together, and even with our backyard derby demo that we just launched, we've seen so many families sitting together and playing, and then going outside and playing. And that's, I think, a really important distinction between the backyard games and others. Is we love that these games actually encourage everybody to get outside and play. We did a partnership with Wilson, which has Wilson, Louisville Slugger, and Evo Shield, and they said that it was one of the best-selling days of Little League and T-ball equipment that they can remember in company history. And I thought that that was such an important thing to say: Wow, people played our games and then bought merchandise from Wilson that had our characters on it, and then went outside and played baseball with their family. That is cool to us.

C

Cheryl Platz 37:35

It actually hits me hard when a student tells me I don't think of myself as a gamer, and then they list off a ton of games they play, or they tell me I'm not a gamer, but I did just go and buy a vintage console and I play games all the time. What does it mean that people don't identify as gamers but play games all the time? Is that a problem for us? Even though more than half of the U.S. population played games in 2025, an e-marketer study titled "U.S. Gamers by Generation 2025" found that only 23% of those players self-identified as a gamer. Is this a problem? Gamer used to refer to someone largely devoted to gaming on a PC or console, but now there are entire esports devoted to mobile gaming. Where does the line end? On the other side of the coin, maybe it's totally normal and fine that so many people playing games don't see themselves as gamers. But if you're only building games and marketing games to gamers, then you are only addressing 23% of the addressable gaming market. So either we need to encourage more folks to join us at the gamers' table, or we need to broaden our messaging and are welcome to accept that games are for everyone. What about the other 75% of game players who might choose your game as their first next step into a deeper world of gaming if you set them up correctly, if you welcomed them, if you reached out to them? Where this gets uncomfortable is if you're taking shortcuts like saying we don't need to market outside of Steam, or we don't need a tutorial. People will learn this by playing some other game. Games offer education. Games offer connection without judgment. Games offer skill development. Games offer escape. Games offer comfort. They offer so much, but we have to get them to the people who don't understand they value. But I am here to tell you: if you are spending hours a week gaming, you are a gamer. If you are going out and buying vintage consoles, you are a gamer. A gamer is someone who games for enjoyment. There is not a group of people who gets to determine who is not a gamer, who is a gamer. You are a gamer.

E

Enduring Play Computer 39:37

Loading podcast level five: the enduring power of prosocial play.

C

Cheryl Platz 39:43

The story about Mike Tomlin discovering a love of play through connecting with his family in Minecraft reminded me of comments I got from my Carnegie Mellon MBA students earlier this year, who told me that learning about the motivators of play from my book helped them. Redefined their sense of self as a gamer and reconnected them to a love of gaming they'd grown away from. For a variety of reasons, we as an industry have lost stewardship over the narrative of what it means to be a gamer and why it's a good thing. Mainstream audiences hear plenty about the negative experiences, but not enough about the ever-growing variety of good ones. I was a guest on a podcast earlier this year and listened to someone tell me they weren't a gamer, but they had gone out of their way to go and buy a vintage Game Boy and games for it. Why is it that someone would spend that much time and effort to acquire games and game consoles, but still not call themselves a gamer. Why do so many people self-select out of the communities we spend so much time trying to bring them into? But let's hear from Carlos Figueiredo, the director of player trust and safety from Mojang Studios, who create Minecraft, on these digital-first communities and what they mean to players.

E

Enduring Play Computer 41:04

Loading clip, season one, episode two. Carlos Figueiredo, Director, Trust and Safety at Mojang Studios.

C Carlos Figueiredo 41:13

I've heard many stories of people who are partners now who got married after meeting in games. Right? I think we we've all become very acutely aware of this specific value of games in the last four years, right? You know some really powerful things. Like I can tell you a story from the Club Penguin Times that never left me. It was a kid who wrote us and basically said they they were going through cancer and and they were in the hospital, so they were they were there, and they felt like Club Penguin was the the only way that they could really be themselves without judgment, right? So you know because you have the the player avatar, and then nobody's going to judge you for your appearance because you're a penguin like everybody else, right? They basically said it was the way that they were able to connect with other people in that situation, right? So I think when we talk about that, we have to broaden our perspectives against again, right? Like that point I made about bias. We have to try to see the world through the lenses of other people. This idea of some people might be, you know, really value that opportunity to connect with others because of whatever situation they have going on in their lives, right? And I want to be careful here too, because that I'm not I'm undervaluing the analog friendships, right? Because again, I think it's all life, right? Like if if we make too much distinction in my mind between digital and analog, I think we we might miss some points, and I think it's I mean so important at least from my perspective personally to to have those face to face relationships and you know deep rich friendships and all those things. But at the same time, I don't think we should dismiss the depth and importance of belonging to an online community, right? Because that's important too, and that's an element. And nowadays, oh my gosh! Like you can have a friend who is across the ocean, and you play games with, and you might have some really deep conversations with that person, and maybe you tell them things that you don't tell anybody else, right?

C Cheryl Platz 43:18

But what does it look like in practice when people have meaningful experiences online. Well, because these platforms are generational, we can find out it's not just Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite that are generational. Games like World of Warcraft have also been around for decades, and in fact, multiple guests have talked to me about how World of Warcraft has played a key role in their evolution as leaders. So let's hear from Season Two, Episode Four guest Christina Amaya about how World of Warcraft was her first gaming leadership experience.

E Enduring Play Computer 43:57

Loading Season Two Episode Four, Christina Amaya, Event Manager and Co-founder, Latinx in Gaming.

C**Cristina Amaya 44:07**

Gaming-wise, my first community, like officially, where I kind of had a leadership role. I was playing World of Warcraft, and I had my own guild called the Furious Kittens, and we co-kind of raided with another guild because we were small. There was like 12 of us. There was another guild we joined partnership with called Parental Advisory. So I think we were like 16 to 18 year olds hanging out with like 25 to 30 year olds who definitely thought we were weird. But whatever, like they played with us. It's so funny now that I think about it. So Furious Kittens was mostly my high school friends, and then some random friend I made from like I don't know I was like questing by myself all the time. Everybody else was just like on a different level than me, and by that I mean better than me. So I was always just a little bit behind. So I met somebody who was like, "You need help with this dungeon, and I was like, "Oh my god, yeah! And his name was Tyler. I still remember him. He's out of Canada. I don't know. I've always been looking for him. Ever since that time, I've never found him. So we were all pretty young, but the rest of the guild was really good, and my heels weren't too bad. I mean, I was doing it off a Dell laptop, and with like 2000 and like seven or eight or six, but we were pretty good. And people wanted to raid more when we were online from the Parental Advisory Guild, and so their leadership, which I think were like 232 year olds. We're like, oh my god, you guys are trying to steal our people, and I was like, it is not that serious. So I'm like, on between homework, like, please, please chill. But it was definitely a time.

C**Cheryl Platz 45:31**

The original World of Warcraft came out on November 23, 2004, a day I remember because most of my game development team called out sick that day, and it's probably going to happen again. Because on november 4 of this year they're releasing a new version of World of Warcraft, and you know what? It's probably going to be a wonderful moment for the games industry. That release moment was energizing, and it brought these pro-social experiences that launched careers, no matter what you see in the media, games are the third space that are connecting multiple generations of people day in and day out, and not just kids, but people of all ages. Yes, kids like the kids from Gold Star Gamers coming together to mourn the loss of their parents, but also you know people like Christina who continue to game in adulthood and are going to go download World of Warcraft as soon as it comes out, and people like Mike Tomlin who use games like Minecraft not just as a social tool but as an escape.

E**Enduring Play Computer 46:36**

Loading podcast level six: the real state of the industry in 2026.

C

Cheryl Platz 46:44

Video gaming is still seen as a gold rush post-pandemic. I don't think any of us have fully come to terms with what it meant when the pandemic shut the world down, and games like Animal Crossing landed perfectly positioned in a moment when we needed companionship most. Meanwhile, Riot Games came in and pushed Valorant out the door, giving gamers looking for competition and mastery a fresh new way to connect with each other in that moment. But they were able to do so thanks to years of runway they'd already burned in preparation for takeoff. The rest of the world didn't know about that preparation. All they saw was the timing. In season one, episode seven of this podcast, Caerie Houchins, who is formerly a senior engineering manager for the global launch of VALORANT at Riot Games, talked about that very experience of launching VALORANT into the pandemic.

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Enduring Play Computer 47:31

Loading clip, season one, episode seven. Caerie Houchins, former senior manager of engineering at Riot Games.

C

Caerie Houchins 47:39

I had a team, a very small team at the time. We had to find a way to adjust scope accordingly, try to keep some kind of semblance of work-life balance, and get this out of the door. Because you know, while the development team on Valorant was getting the game ready to launch, we're out here trying to say, okay, well, we've got to be able to protect the servers on the back end when this launches. They couldn't launch without us, you know. So that means we were down to like four people at Riot that could prevent the launch of VALORANT at the time. We crunched. We unfortunately we had to crunch for about two and a half months, but because the schedule had been moved up, you know, it was interesting. There's a lot of negotiations, a lot of talking to everybody, a lot of working with different producers and engineering staff all across the entire AAA studio, and you know, at the end of the day, we we we made it happen, and we were able to launch this thing in the middle of a pandemic where we're all working from home, and we didn't think that we didn't even know how to do that at the time. So you throw that in with everything else, and it was it was amazing.

C

Cheryl Platz 48:41

A wonderful success story, but it points out that games that looked like overnight successes during the pandemic were building on years of hard work and momentum. 10s of 1000s of gaming projects and investments were launched, chasing the success of a moment we'll never get back. Even if tragedy were to befall the planet again, and let's hope it doesn't, the world has changed and our tastes changed too. It would take something different to connect us this time in a world without Twitter, without the same TikTok algorithms, where micro communities and organic discovery have led to the rise of Hangout games, sometimes referred to as friend slot. In season one, episode six, I talked to Eric Cabisch, who had been a design leader at Roblox and Scopely and VR Chat. And right before his departure at VR Chat, he spoke about how the industry was changing and how the headwinds were really making it quite challenging.

E

Enduring Play Computer 49:35

Loading clip, season one, episode six. Eric Kabisch, former Vice President of Design, VR Chat, and Roblox.

E

Eric Kabisch 49:44

I think it's... it can be a difficult industry, right? So I think having your eyes wide open, especially currently with all the dynamics that are happening in the industry, right? There's a sea change happening underneath us. I think that's been a that's been a continual process, but I think there's. Really, interest changes that are happening now. Being real down to earth that it is jobs, like it is in interest of developing and gifting people with experiences that are that are joyous and some of the most we are custodians often to some of the most deeply passionate users of any sort of software products out there, and that can be really enriching, and it can be really stressful, and it can really, if if your head is in not in the right place, and you're not listening to feedback in a way that is kind of distancing yourself as the shepherd of that experience from what you're hearing, like make sure that you're talking to people, understanding the industry, understanding the pros and the cons.

C

Cheryl Platz 50:47

And that tone is reflective of where we are: 10s of 1000s of layoffs a year, year after year, an industry stuck in contradiction, making tons of money but bleeding people and studios as if none of that's happening at all, on one hand, I am humbled and honored when I hear stories about how my book and podcast have helped real developers reach new audiences inspired by the motivators of play, or how they successfully use the content to land a career lane switch. For example, someone who moved from level design to production-that's the content working as intended, helping us collaboratively rebuild the best of the games industry out of a prolonged period of chaos with concrete tools, case studies, and insights. And that's why I have been burning the midnight oil, doing this podcast, the book tour, doing college lectures, whatever I can to help get the word out. But it's also a terrible time to be attempting such a feat because the games industry continues to thrash in its transformation. Amir Satvat's keynote at Gamescom revealed that his original estimates for layoffs for 2026 were unfortunately optimistic. He had told GamesIndustry.biz in December based on his previous observations to expect 7,500, but due to conditions that nobody can control, his prediction is now a little under 15,000. As of August, the exact total already exceeds his original prediction at 10,140, which is actually higher than all of 2025. The pain is accelerating, not decelerating, and many of my guests have felt the pain directly, some more than once. Let's hear from Christina Amaya, who I spoke to at the beginning of season two, who actually spoke to me right after a layoff impacted her work.

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Cheryl Platz 52:35

Loading, season two, episode four. Christina Amaya, event manager and co-founder Latinx in gaming.

C

Cristina Amaya 52:45

You know, so my very first real big and official layoff was in 2020 when I worked at Google and I was working on Google Stadia. I was a contractor there, and I got laid off. You know, early on in the year because our events budget went from really big numbers to zero, and there was no need for me, right? And I remember I used to be so defined by my career, right? I used to be like, oh my god, this is you know this is who I am. If I don't work at these big huge companies, I'm nobody. Like I really genuinely thought that about myself. And each layoff because I've been through a couple, you know, events isn't stable. Marketing itself is usually the first cut, right? People don't necessarily sometimes see the value of events, so always the first gone. And having just gone through a layoff last week, I can tell you it's it's stressful. But now, as time has gone on and I've aged, I feel stressed because I need to make money, right? But I'm no longer like, will people still think of me as important in the industry? Will people still talk to me? There are people, by the way, who will not even acknowledge me still, right? But that's fine, right? Because ultimately, like, I decide my value and I decide, you know, what I'm bringing to the table. And sure, they, I have taken a step back and thought about what do I want next, right? At this last job that I just had, while I was looking, I was like, I really need to feel connected to the team, to the people, and I'm really proud to say that I got exactly what I wanted. I liked every single person I was talking to, like I haven't left on bad terms. I miss them, you know. Starting Monday was weird, not having a bunch of emails from them, but I I'm glad I did it, and I don't regret it. So I'm really grateful for that.

C

Cheryl Platz 54:28

And the nexus of pain is the big studios. We've seen major contraction at Xbox this year, and a large number of studios previously assumed to be safe under the wing of a platform owner were divested. Compulsion and Double Fine were forced to go indie. Undead Labs and Ninja Theory were sold, but counterintuitively, those studios fared pretty well job-wise. Only 350 of Microsoft's 3,200 announced layoffs came from that pool. Bethesda, ID, and Obsidian were all hit hard-names many gamers are deeply familiar with, but that familiarity was. Enough to protect those employees. And to be clear, it doesn't matter how big the layoff is; it's traumatic to the people involved. With such a large studio already done with their layoffs, Xbox notably, what could be behind the revised layoff predictions? Where are the other 5000 layoffs lurking? While it's not called out specifically, it's quite possible fears of layoffs loom large following the leveraged \$55 billion buyout of Electronic Arts, home of gaming giants The Sims and EAFC.

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Enduring Play Computer 55:31

Loading tutorial level: leveraged buyouts.

C

Cheryl Platz 55:36

Leveraged buyouts are a specific form of financial transaction where a company is purchased but forced to earn back the debt used to purchase the company, concerns are high because the interest alone on the \$20 billion in debt added to EA's balance sheet comes to \$1.8 billion a year. Tech Insider pegs the company's fiscal year 26 operating cash flow around \$2.5 billion, which doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room, especially given an October 7 report from Gamedeveloper.com. Basically, the buyout triggered a condition in previous bonds that allows the bondholders to demand immediate repayment, totaling 1.5 billion right off the bat. Any potential funding gap will create unforgiving conditions where only the safest, largest-margin plays with lower headcount will thrive if that company wants to survive, as they have no other mathematical choice.

C

Cheryl Platz 56:28

So, one of the biggest gaming platforms divested a raft of studios this year, and one of the biggest publishers experienced a leveraged buyout that will fundamentally change its operating model going forward. What on earth can we do about it? Surely, venture capital can save us from this problem. What if I told you they were part of the problem? Our season one, episode five guest, Whitney Beltrán, an award-winning narrative designer who has also been a studio head, laid this out in exceptional clarity for us.

C

Cheryl Platz 57:01

Loading clip, season one, episode five. Whitney Beltrán, award-winning independent narrative designer.

W

Whitney Beltrán 57:09

Game success is a hit-based- We're a hit-based industry, right? Like movies, where a game can be a hit, and no one really knows why. To be honest, like some games are hits, and some are not. And games that are not hits means that the studio has no cash to go forward and do the next thing. And so, what VCs expect is a 10x 10 times return in five years. That's their modus operandi, right? And so, that doesn't work with the type of thing that we do. It's just on a fundamental level, like big AAA games, they take seven years to make, right? And sometimes game revenue is kind of like a lognormific incline, where you're not going to get 10 times return in five years, but you may get it in seven, or you may get it in 10, especially if it's a live services game. But also, what I've noticed is VCs get real nervous about their money, and they will pull out of a game project sometimes in the middle of a game project because they don't understand how games are made and what games look like in the middle of process. They look terrible. They look horrifying. You're like, this is not a game, and it can be that way up to six months before release, right? Where it's just like this is not coming together, and so because of how we work, and because things really come together in the end before shipping, you know, you'll be a past prototype, and it'll be time for your B series funding. And your funder will be like, "We don't understand this. This looks terrible. No, and then your game is canceled, and it's just totally unreasonable. And they're not educated in how to you know how we make games, most of the time there are game-specific VCs that understand much better. But on the whole, a lot of the wreckage we've seen out of the last two years has to do with what venture capital is doing to games. You know, 10,000 layoffs in one quarter was a result of bad economy, right, and interest rates going up, and then all the VCs freaking out because they're like, "Oh no, we're not going to make 10 times the return in five years, so that means we got to bail. They're just two systems that are fundamentally different, and it causes a lot of damage to developers.

C

Cheryl Platz 59:16

As I often say, multiple things can be true. Venture capital can be great. Can get a studio from zero to 60 very quickly. It also flooded the market after the pandemic, and many game studios weren't ready for this 10x model. And we have some signs of hope because some prominent game developers are moving into the VC sector and may be able to give better context about what good development looks like when evaluating progress. But if you are looking to engage with venture capital, you need to go in with eyes wide open. It's not a magical solve. If all goes well, I do expect a good conversation about the future of venture capital and gaming later in season three. So stay tuned. Loading podcast level seven. Supporting each other in crisis. One thing that I have said to others after experiencing my layoff is: find your community before you need them. The game development community is more important than ever. We need each other, and there are so many important stories of microcommunities, of thriving indie communities, of people coming together to support each other when the companies are no longer there for them. Here's a story of the Seattle indies community and how their organization was able to help support the rise of Slay the Spire, one of the really great breakout indie success stories in the last couple of years from Mega Crit.



Enduring Play Computer 1:00:47

Loading season two episode five. Tim Cullings, Executive Director, Seattle Indies.



Tim Cullings 1:00:55

One of our biggest success stories was in his Slay the Spire local here in Seattle, and they they went through our process of like going to our events and working on the game and showing it and getting feedback and you know bringing it to six Seattle Indies Expo and demoing it there when it got rejected at PAX and you know other shows didn't didn't see the value in it and we had it first at six and you know, just to see the process could work for somebody on that level was really inspiring to me as an organizer to try to work harder to give those opportunities to other people.



Cheryl Platz 1:01:31

I have seen countless stories of game developers selflessly giving to the community when they are themselves going through crisis, like Desirée Rincón, who is currently working fractionally with Gold Star Gamers, but in her free time, when not looking for jobs, is working with ASGC, the Always Supporting Games Community, with Amir Satvat.



Enduring Play Computer 1:01:53

Loading clip, season two, episode 10. Desirée Rincón, head of brand strategy for Goldstar Gamers.

D**Desirée Rincón 1:02:01**

I joined that community. Well, in basically in its infancy, was didn't really exist when I met with Amir. Amir at the time was putting out spreadsheets with all the combined games jobs that were out there, in in the hopes that maybe he could offset some of these layoffs and get people rehired and by other companies in some way, shape, or form. He really, really wanted to do something more to bring more visibility to this ever-growing pool of people that were being laid off. I was one of those people. I am. I mean, I'm still unemployed and and really in dire need of a job, but I wanted to be productive, and I wanted to do something with my. I don't call it; it's not really downtime because I'm still applying for jobs. I'm still looking for work, but I wanted to do something to put a little love and karma out there. Because I mean, being laid off twice in the last three years is brutal. There's just no clean way to package it, and what got me through was basically treating layoff like a full time job. And so I tightened my network, I stayed visible, I reached out, I offered help where I could, and that's how I got connected with Amir. And I wanted to contribute even without a paycheck attached and help in some way, shape, or form. And the way that I could help was, well, I can draw. I can build web pages, and I can make. I'm a graphic designer. At least I have a bachelor's degree that says I am. So I said, okay, yeah, that's that's what I that's what I can help you with.

C**Cheryl Platz 1:03:35**

Or you can create your gaming communities yourself, like season two, episode four guest Cristina Amaya.

E**Enduring Play Computer 1:03:41**

Loading, season two, episode four. Cristina Amaya, event manager and co-founder, Latinx in gaming.

C**Cristina Amaya 1:03:50**

Speaking of third spaces again, in like American society specifically, we're kind of taught find your one true love and your partner, and that that's your best friend. You people say it in their vows and everything. That's your everything, and I think we're sometimes forgetting that we also need friends to fall back on for other things, people to rely on when things are tough. That's kind of why I'm always making spaces like that. I made that layoff job board, game industry job hunt. I made that because I knew what it felt like to go through a layoff. My role in the industry is not the most stable, so I think it was important to find a space and create it-not just for me, but of course, but for other folks that might need it.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:04:28

Loading podcast level eight, creating immersive worlds using authentic representation.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:04:37

This is simultaneously more important and much harder in current circumstances, where the industry continues to weigh people off, cut budgets, but at the same time fans are railing against AI "quote unquote" slop and looking for more authenticity. One of the natural outgrowths of layoffs is an attempt to take shortcuts to tell stories without those who are being represented. In the room, let's hear from Women in Games International CEO Joanie Kraut talking about one such example in her career. Loading clip, season two, episode one. Joanie Kraut, CEO, Women in Games International.

J

Joanie Kraut 1:05:17

Yeah, the very beginning of my career in games was working with a studio, and they just kept saying, you know, games for girls don't do well. And I was like, are they for girls or are they for women? Because there's a difference. What was your approach? How did you how did you create this game for for girls? Well, we had a bunch of the guys because it was an all male team read young adult books and try to get an understanding of how girls think. And I was like, "And you feel like young adult books is the best way to figure out how girls think?" And then they made a game based off of that. And no, like that's not. No wonder all of your girl games are failing. Bringing the right people to the table, having a a woman led studio create games specifically for women, having an LGBTQ plus led studio creating content for the LGBTQ plus community, we are seeing a much larger impact when it comes to to the stories and the narratives, and and there's such a diverse range of people within each of those spaces, you can't just say women. It's every woman has a different their story. You can't just say BIPOC people, and and there's there's so many people within each of these just you know one lump categories.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:06:37

One truth that we struggle with in the games industry is that when art becomes big business, designers are caught in the middle, and we need to find a way to speak the language of business to find the funding and support to realize our visions and do so in a way that advocates for players. That's where you get folks working on things like cultural technical design. Let's listen to Timothy Staton-Davis in season two, episode eight, talk about living at this intersection between design, business, and authenticity. Loading clip, season two, episode eight,



Cheryl Platz 1:07:13

Timothy Staton-Davis, cultural technical designer and creative director of Melanated Game Kitchen.



Timothy S. Davis 1:07:21

Based on like just like the social landscape in the world, right? Because I know for me in particular, like I just kind of I think it's been maybe about a year and a half or so that I started actually like offering this as a service for other creators or other studios, right? And so you know, there's other people who are colleagues who have been also doing cultural consulting for different things, like for example, Spider-Man, Marvel Spider-Man, like Miles and like Spider-Man 2, they had cultural consultation for like New York, right, and for also like getting like Miles's Spider-Man character correct and his family dynamics and stuff like that, you know, and building out quests and all that. And so, you know, I think in those situations, right, like the studio is like they understand that the fans want a accurate character and they want to make sure that they're represented correct to fit the comics, you know, largely correctly, and also feel like it's like real, you know, make it feel like true. So their focus was, I want a real New York, right? And I want a real New York and our characters to be real. And so they knew that they needed to find people to bring in to capture that essence properly, right? And there's a lot of proven case that there's a lot of value in that because when it's accurate, then the people who understand this character understand this world the best, you know, even for all of our, you know, books turned movies, books turned games, we see that when it's done well, accurate to the characters in the world, people will see it. People will spend money on it. But if it's not, people will trash it. They will not respect it as much. And so there's obviously a big value, but it's been a large thing of presenting it in the way is we're still kind of like in a battle of presenting it that it has value even though it's proven. There's still some kind of like dynamic with from the big business perspective that is not assumed or is not thought about initially. So it does take some work as far as like even on my part of like how do I present the information in a way that makes them understand what this does for their experience, and like why this is important, and why this ultimately like likely lead to more sales down the road, essentially. And it is like largely about some language adjustments for how I write things out in a way that tailored to different people or different businesses, or the description of okay the impact that is going to give for your company right and here's how this will fit in and is largely having to pitch it in that way every time still so is is tricky still yeah



Cheryl Platz 1:09:55

This cultural transcreation can happen at the individual level or at the company level, as we heard from David Ventura, who is the creative director at Ichigoichie Games, based in Sweden, helping both Japanese companies and Western companies understand each other.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:10:16

Loading clip, season one, episode four. David Ventura, Creative Director, Ichigoichie Games.

D

David Ventura 1:10:24

We have a very strong connection with Japan. You know, Ichigoichie is our company name. It means one chance in a lifetime in Japanese. I spent my formative years living in Japan, growing up there, both professionally and just like from a personal standpoint. And I believe that the Japanese, you know, they have this great way of taking technology or food or something from abroad and making it their own and reforming it and doing it in a different way. That's something that's inherent to that culture there, and I feel I want to embody that. So, like being able to take a European lifestyle, a European sense of values and sensibilities, and combine that with a both a Japanese one and also an American kind of like optimism and go getterness, kind of you know that that I grew up with being being born there. Marrying all these things together to form the best possible unique experience is something that's very interesting to me personally. So we take developers and publishers in Sweden and we help them with the Japanese market. We help them get to events. We help them you know give it consulting for like UI. How can you build a an interface or a game experience which is more amenable to the Japanese customer base, and the opposite as well? So we go to Japanese and we say we can tell you very much about you know what Western audiences are are looking for and how to take a Japanese game and bring it to a Western audience and have it succeed there as well. I mean, personally familiar with the business culture in Japan, you know, I know what levers are being pulled there and where they're coming from. It's not just knowing the words; it's knowing what's important to a you know a Japanese corporation and and what they're looking at when they evaluate things. And then the opposite for Europe. So helping developers and publishers in both of these places do better and have a more worldview is is part of what we what we work with.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:12:03

The business model that David describes also reflects another trend in the industry, which is co-development. David's studio makes their own games, but they also help studios make games of their own, and that's a way to weather the storms of the current industry. Loading podcast level nine, slowing down to speed. Just because the industry is suffering doesn't mean that process has to suffer. In fact, it's more important than ever that we slow down to speed up. That we prototype before we move forward. There are great examples right now of games that are succeeding that started with prototypes, like Dressmaker, which is shooting its way up the Steam charts. We talked with Jo Kronk in season two, episode seven, about the the role and importance of prototyping in game development.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:12:54

Loading clip, season two, episode seven. Jo Kronk, assistant professor, Digipen Institute of Technology.

J

Jo Cronk 1:13:02

Technical design. I'm kind of looking at it through the lens of just my previous work experience for the most part, and a lot of times when I was doing technical design type work, I was expected to be kind of this hybrid programmer designer who was mostly just writing a ton of code, but then also having like some say in design decisions. Rapid prototyping is something that I would get tasked with pretty often, and usually what we would end up doing is there would be some random design document somewhere that would be hopefully mostly complete, or at least complete enough to create a prototype from, and then I would just create this really fast prototype with you know not the most optimized code or anything, and then we would just try to get it done quickly so we could put it in front of people and figure out if we're even going to keep that feature or what. And I learned like really early on as a younger person not to spend a ton of time trying to make the code nice because half the time we would just turn around, be like, you know what? No, we're deciding to go in a different direction. Just throw all of that away. And the number of times I had spent like so many hours trying to polish this thing that was never going to live to see the light of day, yeah, it made me a lot faster to realize that, but the other thing that I feel like technical designers have to do, and something that I ended up doing at most of the companies that I worked at, was kind of becoming like a an interpreter between the engineering department and the creative departments.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:14:39

Now, as Jo implies, prototypes aren't idle objects; they are living, interactive experiences that a team has to interpret, and that can be pretty emotionally charged, especially when you're dealing with a client. And so, I really appreciated this perspective from season one, episode three guest Amy Kalson, who has been an executive producer at a number of studios, about constructive criticism in creative circumstances.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:15:11

Loading clip, season one, episode three. Amy Kalson, executive design producer, Meta.

A

Amy Kalson 1:15:18

He taught me the following phrase, which I think is a magical phrase. The phrase is, "That's interesting. Tell me more about that. And that's what you say when you're like, your emotions are like firing off like crazy, and you're like, "This is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. What the heck are they asking for? Instead of saying all of that, you just say, "Hmm, that's interesting. Tell me more about that. Because you can often get to the root of the problem if you do that. You can often like dig down and find out what somebody really wants versus what they're actually asking for, which are usually not the same things. And I also learned, you know, later on after Disney Friends, when I went to work directly for Disney on the publishing side, I learned try to not come in with solutions that aren't framed without context. So instead of saying like, you know, I've played your latest build and it sucks. And here's what you need to do to fix it. It's much more effective if you come in and say, "Okay, so I'm playing the build, and I'm seeing the following things. I'm seeing this. I'm seeing that. What are your thoughts around this? Like, what is your plan for fixing this issue? You know, I'm happy to give you some of the solutions that I thought of, but I'd love to hear more about what it is that that you guys are planning to do. And I find that if you start there, you're going to get a lot more information in the first place, but also it keeps it collaborative, right? I'm going to get what I need, you're going to get what you need, and we're going to really have a mutual understanding out of that conversation of what we need to do. I think that oftentimes when people come in and they just have the solution and they just have the fix, it's because they're stressed, they don't have a lot of time, they've got a million things going on, and I think it's easy to jump to those. You know, I just need this right now. But I think setting context, understanding the why of the request, is absolutely vital to getting what you really want in the long run.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:16:52

Working with intention and curiosity isn't just for the front end of the process with prototyping. Corey Jung and I talked about a lot of things, Sims toilets and The Elder Scrolls Online, but one story in particular spoke to me because it directly aligned to things I was seeing in my own day job, which was the value of breaking work up into smaller chunks. The way it magically decreases your bug count if you take the time to stop treating everything like a monolith, so let's hear from Corey.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:17:26

Loading season two, episode nine, Corey Tsang, former lead producer at Zenimax Online Studios.

C

Cory Tsang 1:17:35

Actually, this is a this is a story. I had a team. We had this huge backlog. I joined them. They had this huge backlog of work, and so what they would do is they would do the work, throw it to QA, do the work, throw it to QA, and then QA would bug it up. Of course, they had a ton of bugs, so but they were trying to get burned through this backlog. But then we'd have to reserve like 50% of the release to just fixing the bugs leading up to locking it, right? And so we took the stance of okay, here's how long these things should take. We're gonna break it into sprints. We did like two week sprints and said okay, you only have to get through this amount of work. And so they started taking their time to do it like thoroughly and maybe test their work a little bit more. And we saw a reduction overall in the number of bugs that we were creating, and that actually reduced it to about 30% of the schedule instead of 50% of the schedule. That actually gave them enough time that we started building more resilient tools and templates to prevent bugs from happening. And in the end, we ended up reducing the amount of time reserved for bugs to about 20% of the schedule. And we were actually able to do more, and so we burned through the backlog, and then all of a sudden, we actually had more capacity than we were the incoming velocity, which was really good because we had someone leave, and we actually had some tool changes, and the velocity dropped because of a lot of that stuff. But because we were so far ahead, like we were able to absorb it, mitigate it, and then carry on.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:19:03

This is basically a form of bug alchemy. You have a big pile of bugs, and instead of going fast, you go slower. You test chunks of them while you're going, and it takes less time. Why does this work? Because it works. I've seen it work. It's because when you keep flinging code changes at QA, it becomes impossible to tell what caused the bugs. It makes the fixes take way too much time. You have to keep stopping at checkpoints and make sure the code is good before you move on, that's the logic.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:19:42

Speaking of people leaving, you also need to slow down to agree on what your values are as an organization. And I know you don't think you have time, but when your people do not have clarity about what their job is, if they don't have clarity about the norms for how they can communicate about why they go to work every day, they leave for other companies. Even in these conditions, when they have that clarity, great creative things happen. Let's hear from Amy White at Fusebox Games about how that clarity is working for them.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:20:12

Loading clip, season two, episode six. Amy White, director of People, Fusebox Games.

A

Amy White 1:20:19

You know, in the almost three years that we've been here, we've had one voluntary leaver, and I'd like to believe that is because of you know the hashtag names usebox and everything that we've implemented. And like someone said something to me the other day, which is really interesting. Oh, do you think people just don't leave because they're too afraid to try and get another job? You know, given the industry at the moment, but I genuinely don't think that that's what it is. You know, I actually think since this new fuse box kicked in, people do genuinely show up. People do genuinely love working here, and you know, even when I'm chatting to, I spoke to someone in in Dev the other day, and they were just like, oh, you know, it's its integrity, isn't it? And like, oh yeah, collaboration. We still talk about the values now, and again, I think it it just drives home that real people focus of the business, and that's why people are attracted to Fusebox because it's not just a gaming studio; it's one that's actually run by people and passionate people. And yeah, I again, I'm probably showing it, but like, I just love talking about this kind of stuff because I've been at the core of it. And as I keep saying, if you don't have a people partner, then then yeah, you get one.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:21:30

Loading podcast level 10, drawing inspiration from the motivators of play.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:21:37

But let's bring it back to the motivators of play: fun, immersion, education, comfort, meditation, competition, companionship, self-expression, mastery. These nine motivators of play are dimensions through which you can view your potential gameplay to see if you're aligned with the shifting sands of player behavior, and in particular, the three modern motivators of play: self-expression, companionship, and education were boosted by modern phenomenon like the ubiquity of broadband, smartphones, etc. Let's start with education. Education is absolutely a growing motivator of play. We're all familiar with Duolingo, and which is you know, some people question whether it's a game, but it certainly has a game loop. But there's plenty of education going on in Minecraft. There's even a Minecraft for Education department at Mojang. If you were a fan of Club Penguin, it should give you hope that people like Carlos are the ones putting together experiences like the Cyber Safe game series within Minecraft to train kids and their families on responsible use of gaming platforms. The CyberSafe series is free. It's available in the Minecraft Bedrock Marketplace. Episodes take less than an hour to play, and when you hear Carlos talk about his passion for this type of games education, it really does fill you with energy for the future. There have been 80 million downloads of the free CyberSafe game since 2022, teaching concepts like digital citizenship and how to use critical thinking to navigate a world with AI.



Cheryl Platz 1:23:13

Loading clip, season one, episode two. Carlos Figueiredo, Director, Trust and Safety at Mojang Studios.



Carlos Figueiredo 1:23:22

This is one of the things that I'm deeply passionate about Minecraft. When I was applying for the job, I was in London in the UK for a educational conference. I had just like literally applied for the job, and I saw this booth, a Microsoft booth. There was a Minecraft education booth, and then I saw somebody from I think it was Cambridge. They were talking about how they use Minecraft Education to teach English to to kids who are learning English as a second language, right? And then you fast forward to earlier this year. I've been partnering with the Minecraft Education team for a while now, but earlier this year we released the the third game in the Cyber Safe series that's called Good Game, and we literally co-created a game about player safety, a game where the the player goes through the the scenarios of what is the right thing to do here if somebody's cheating or or if I see an inappropriate username, how do I reflect on my behavior? What are the tools that I can use? What's the role of a code of conduct and all that sort of stuff? And I can tell you, tell you, Cheryl, that this game has been played in this series, you know, millions of times, and teachers love it, and players love it, you know. Think about players like seven to 12 or so in schools, and multiple people around the world are adopting it. Like you know, their governments that are like saying we need to have this in the country, you know, like the educational program and in schools. It's also this. It's so much broader than dealing with the negative. It's about. Like how do we affect change, right? How can we go and create some change in terms of cultural change and empower empower people with the right digital skills?



Cheryl Platz 1:25:14

They did not stop releasing these cyber safe levels after my conversation with Carlos, season one, episode two. Cybersafe Bad Connection, released in February 2026, helps kids navigate how to spot online manipulation, protect their personally identifiable information, navigate online pressure, and use platform safety tools. Self-expression, companionship, and mastery are often interrelated. Challenge gaming, where players seek to outperform playing a game in conditions that are harder or different than originally intended gameplay. It's a form of self-expression-centered mastery. Rather than play like everyone else, these gamers look for their gameplay to reflect their individuality. This often shows up in your game as emergent behavior, and if you're lucky, you can treat this behavior as the gift it often is. This particular story from "joemag", former systems designer for Hearthstones Tavern Brawls is notable because it draws all three of these motivators together: mastery through leaderboards, self-expression through unique play, and companionship through collaborative play.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:26:14

Loading clip, season one, episode eight. Joe "joemag" Magdalena, lead game designer at Redux Games, former game designer Blizzard Entertainment.

J

Joe "joemag" Magdalena 1:26:26

I made one brawl, one that was we was kind of a it was we're calling it like a raid where multiple players could kind of hit on it at the same time and and do like masses amounts of of damage for it. And one or two players actually did figure out like not a fully infinite loop, but could figure out like with this right combination of units, you could do absurd numbers to to this boss, and you know we could set him to have like a million health, and they were figuring out ways to not do like 6070, 100,000 damage in like one round of it. But then like that created such a beautiful moment of people trying to figure out new ways that they could optimize that, and like, how could we like do it just a little bit there, just a little bit? Like, once they figured out like that, this was this like huge vector for doing more damage than I ever intended. But like now, it's like okay, now the challenge is more interesting. Now there's now people are like fighting to get up like a an old school high scoreboard, like to like just like get something silly with it. And so yeah, that was really like I said, just it was a simple like, oh, we didn't think about like how that card interacted with this card and and that makes you do able to do way more damage than we intended but like you've done something new you've done something interesting with it one benefit of that it it was a cooperative mode there was no we there was no way you could screw over someone else's experience there was no way you could could negatively make someone else's problem that's thing and if it was something that we came out in a way where it's like, oh, this is actually fundamentally making other experiences worse, yeah, we can bug it. We can we can we can fix it. We cannot fix it. We can come up with some way to kind of attack that symptom. But like, yeah, if it's a if it's something where it's like they're just having fun. This is non-competitive. This doesn't affect monetization. This doesn't affect any of these sort of things. They found a fun, weird, quirky interaction that helps them beat a boss, a boss that they themselves can set the health to whatever they want to. Like you, you are you are just you are just having fun in your own little room. We'll let that slide, and we'll you know you you you've done something as you said emergent gameplay and and creative use of mechanics. We would call it.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:28:19

Loading, final boss level, finding the thriving path forward.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:28:24

But the last example I'll leave you with pulls many of the threads we've discussed together into a final boss level for this episode. In this clip, Timothy Staton-Davis discusses work on Clock Out at 2, a self-described narrative rogue-lite visual novel in early development at Borderless Studios, which draws on the culturalization principles discussed earlier, to give players a first-person experience through the eyes of an Afro-Latina navigating the challenges of a modern workplace, which are especially heightened for many people living through this extended era of layoffs. Here's how Timothy describes their approach to the game. Loading clip, season two, episode eight.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:29:02

Timothy Staton-Davis, cultural technical designer and creative director of the Melanated Game Kitchen.

T

Timothy S. Davis 1:29:11

At some point, someone mentioned this feels like Get Out because I think Jordan Peele, as an example, has threaded that needle really well with his movies of presenting things that are very personal to certain groups of people, right? That maybe everyone doesn't notice or realize, but doing it in a way that's entertaining, scary, but also makes you be in that character's experience. And so, by putting yourself in that experience, which is very unique thing in the games, especially, you have to like choose actions to take and think about why they take those actions. Right, that process is hopefully enables that like kind of learning just by doing it. So that's the part that's fun and also challenging at the same time. Our inspiration initially was like leaning into the art aspect of horror aspect of it, and that's why I. Call it a thriller because it's not like a scary game per se, but it's got stuff that doesn't that's not right. You know, things are off. You know, and leaning into that kind of thing of like this is what it feels like to be in this situation. It feels creepy. It feels like you see things that other people don't see. And how does that affect your mental health when you know you tell someone this is who this person is, this is how they are to me, but then they never see it that way, right? And how kind of scary that kind of feels, you know. So we're leaning, kind of leaning into the art aspect of like making that feel kind of creepy and making characters see seem different than they actually are on the surf, and the team's done a great job messing around with that, like aspect of it, and the art style of that. You know, it's kind of like a very like 2d focused art style, not like a cartoon per se, but it's kind of got that vibe and kind of capturing that feeling of an ease, and so that that kind of helps a lot.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:30:56

Clock out at 2 seeks to be an immersive, narrative-heavy story that also serves as education and possibly catharsis for players who would not be able to get that lived experience otherwise. The folks at Borderless Studios are also living the modern indie game life, releasing prototypes and demos iteratively to the public, including a new demo that just hit Steam on September 29, 2026, after the Game Devs of Color Expo, reflecting the importance of engaging with our game development communities.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:31:23

Many things can be true. Motivators of play teach us that players are playing for different reasons. Not everybody is going to play for education. Some people just want to be comforted. But games like this, hugely transformational in the right hands. I've had people come into my Twitch community and tell me about a specific game in their past that helped prevent them from radicalization. Games can be gifts. Games can change lives. Just go read the comments on Dressmaker, one of the hot new games in the on the Steam charts, if you want to see how games can change lives. Amidst everything we're doing, games are still valuable. We just have to own our story. Just need to transform the way we're working. We need to transform who we think of as gamers to broaden our market and the opportunity in front of us, and to bring joy to more people. But it's worth doing. So let's keep working together to figure out how to get the industry back to thriving.

E

Enduring Play Computer 1:32:20

Loading final podcast level, links and follow up.

C

Cheryl Platz 1:32:24

Continue exploring the craft of game development with my book that inspired this podcast, the Game Development Strategy Guide, available worldwide from your favorite online bookseller or from my publisher rosenfeldmedia.com. Enduring play listeners can get 15% off at [Rosenfeldmedia.com](https://rosenfeldmedia.com) through december 15, 2026, with the code `ENDURINGPLAY2026`. You can use the notes from our computer to cross reference any of the clips you liked to full episodes from seasons one or two, and don't forget to follow us on your favorite podcasting platform because season three is coming soon. We're shifting to a biweekly model so that I can thrive in a more sustainable way while continuing to bring you this important gaming content. I look forward to exploring season three and four with you in the weeks ahead. We are also a finalist for two Signal Awards, and you can vote on their website through October 15, and in general, we welcome your comments, your engagement on LinkedIn, on Instagram at [Ideaplatz](https://www.instagram.com/ideaplatz), or at my personal LinkedIn, Cheryl Platz. Feel free to comment on posts about these episodes. It's great to hear from the community. I also have a free newsletter on LinkedIn if you enjoy these perspectives.

 Cheryl Platz 1:33:39
I'm your host, Cheryl Platz. Until next time, keep thriving.

 Cheryl Platz 1:33:46
Initiating final credit sequence.

 Cheryl Platz 1:33:49
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Cheryl Platz 1:34:32

Thank you to David Demma for episode quality assurance.



Cheryl Platz 1:34:37

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