

GAME THINKING

BLUEPRINT



Game Thinking

Build a product people love— and come back to, again and again

When you first set out to create your MVP or prototype, how do you decide what to include—and what to leave out? It's a tricky question—and getting it wrong can slow your progress to a crawl.

Getting it RIGHT, however, can dramatically increase your odds of success. I've worked on dozens of innovative projects—and each time, we wrestled hard with this question. In **The Innovator's Cheatsheet**, you learned 3 powerful habits that lead to successful innovation. And in the **Customer Discovery Playbook**, you learned how to gather insights from exactly the right early customers before you've written a line of code.

Game Thinking Power-Tools

Now, I'm going to equip you with a set of **Game Thinking Power-Tools** that will help you build the right MVP—for the right customers—in record time.

Once you start using these tools to apply the customer insights you've gathered to your core product design, our minimum feature set will come into focus—and your MVP process will rev up and accelerate.





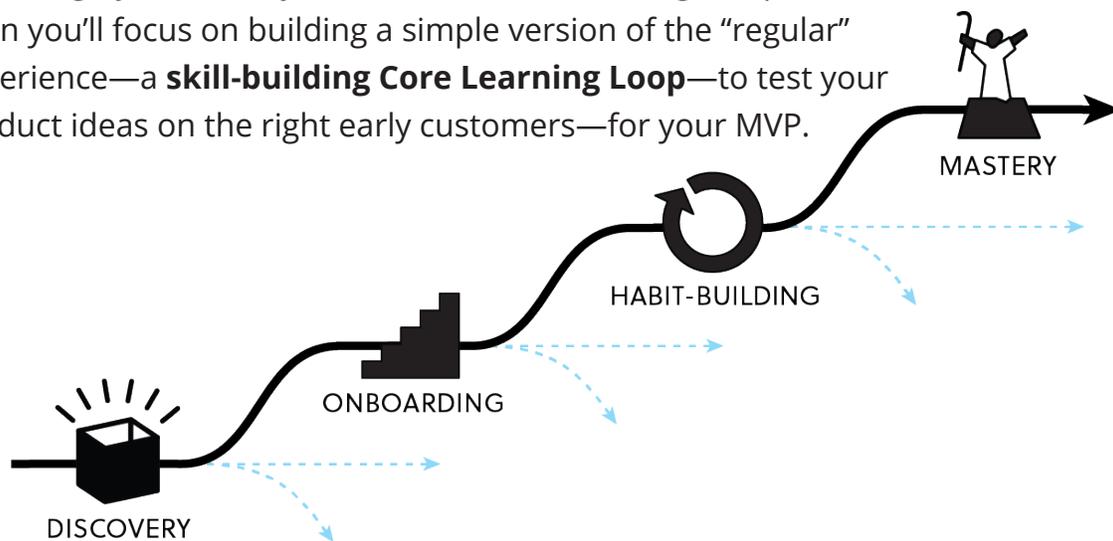
GAME THINKING POWER-TOOL 1

4-Stage Mastery Path

First, you'll sketch out your customer's end-to-end experience as a 4-stage Mastery Path—focusing on how their **needs & goals change over time**. This sets you up to **design for skill-building**—the essence of good game design.

Using this tool, you'll think through your customer's experience as a **visitor**, a **new-comer**, a **regular**, and finally an **expert** or **enthusiast**—and design your core systems to move them along this path.

Then you'll focus on building a simple version of the “regular” experience—a **skill-building Core Learning Loop**—to test your product ideas on the right early customers—for your MVP.



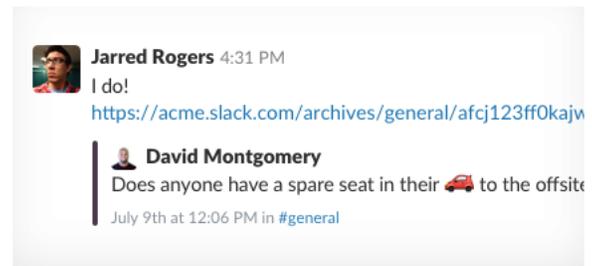
I'll bring this approach to life using Slack as an example, and show you how that team created a breakthrough enterprise hit with a coherent Mastery Path and a simple, compelling Learning Loop.

In case you don't know—Slack started out as the bare-bones in-house communications tool for a distributed team building an innovative co-op multiplayer game. When that game failed financially, Stewart Butterfield—the team leader—pivoted and turned their in-house tool into a better, faster team communications product.

Stage 3: Habit-Building

Good onboarding doesn't stand alone - that would be like icing without the cake. Habit-building is "the cake"—the repeat experience—the Core Loop—the hook that keeps your regulars coming back.

Once they've learned the ropes, people need something compelling to pull them back—some **pleasurable, repeatable activity** that gets better over time. In Slack, habit-building revolves around customization. Once you learn the basics, and get comfortable with reading and responding to updates from your team, you start to discover the layers of customization built in. You tweak your notification settings, try out some emojis, and check out the channel integrations. You start to make it YOURS.



Stage 4: Mastery

It might seem like habit-building is the end goal for driving engagement. But if you **design your customer's journey as a path towards Mastery**, you'll unlock the true secret of long-term engagement.

This is the Elder Game, as we gamers call it—the experience that's earned by your enthusiasts & experts—your best customers. Don't neglect to give these something to stick around for—because if you play your cards right, the value they create will trickle down and enrich your offering for everyone.

Slack does this so well BECAUSE it's built to be a customizable, extensible environment from the ground up. Once you do master the basics, you can create and customize your own Channel, write your own Bots, and even integrate your product into the Slack ecosystem for others to use.

That coherence—that through-line of customization—is a big part of what makes Slack so darn pleasurable to use.

Now it's your turn: Think about your project - the one you're working right now. You're gonna sketch out your current thoughts about your customer's Mastery Path.

What do my most important early customers need to learn during **Discovery**?

What are the most important skills to develop / things to learn during **Onboarding**?

What repeatable, pleasurable activity will pull them back for **Habit-Building**?

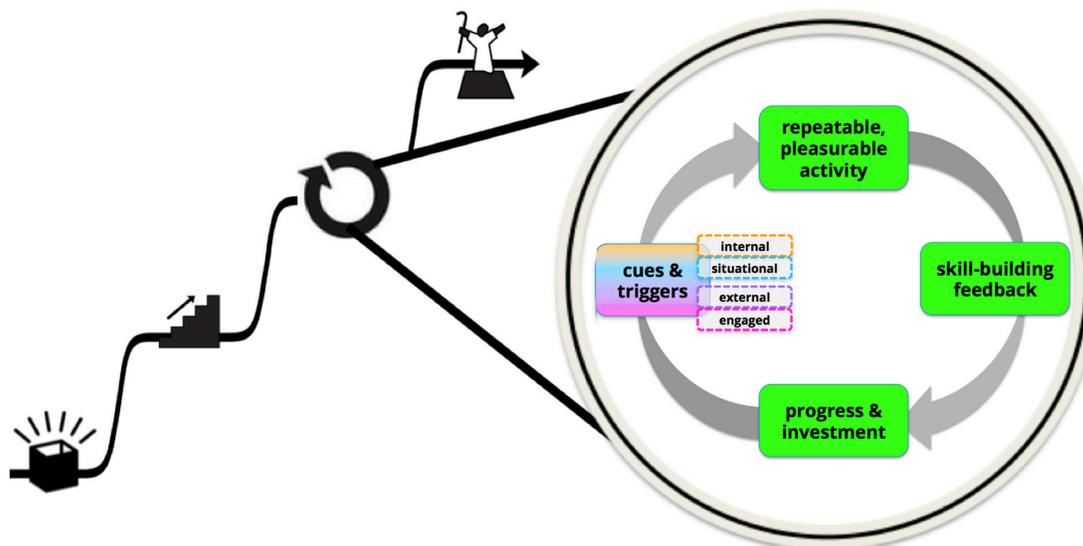
What powers, access, roles, or privileges can they earn/unlock for achieving **Mastery**?



GAME THINKING POWER-TOOL 2

Learning Loop

Now that you understand how your customer's journey unfolds, let's zoom in on the habit-building stage, and design your Learning Loop. That's a gaming term that refers to the set of activities, feedback and choices that a player engages in during a play session. This powerful model is not just for games—it applies to ANY product, app, service or system with the potential to evolve over time as the customer becomes more skilled at using it.



Repeatable Pleasurable Activity

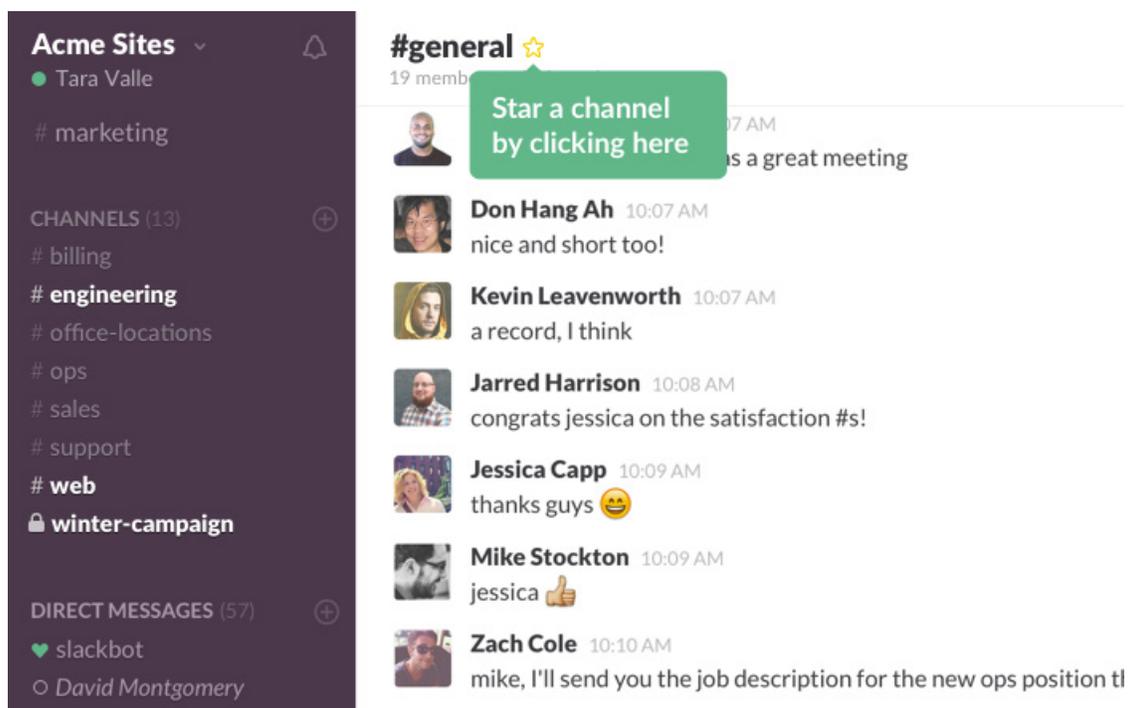
The beating heart of your Learning Loop is a repeatable, pleasurable activity that pulls customers back—triggered by some emotion—some internal urge or need. Without that, it's tough to drive long-term engagement.

In a Mario game, that repeatable core activity is running, jumping and collecting coins. In Rock Band, it's playing a song with your friends. And in Slack, it's reading and responding to updates from your team.

Simple, Coherent Feedback

Feedback is fundamental when you're bringing your Learning Loop to life. Once you've identified a core pleasurable activity, you need to provide feedback to let players know if they're on the right track—and help them improve.

Every complex system starts as a simple system that works—and the simplest coherent system is a feedback loop. So ask yourself: what type of feedback will help my Super Fans get BETTER at the core activity in my system?



In Slack, the feedback loops are simple and familiar—you've read all your messages, you've caught up with your channels—and Slackbot drops hints about customization options and advanced features once you've mastered the basics. Which is a loop inside a loop.

What's missing here? There aren't any points, level or badges to clutter up the interface—just a lot of customization options that help you create the product YOU love. Again—an experience that's consistent with the through-line.

Progress & Investment

That brings us to progress & investment. Once you've got a simple feedback system that helps you get better at something, layering on progress mechanics and an investment path makes sense.

Sometimes it's seamless—like In Slack, where you make progress by customizing your environment and building new things—a path to mastery that's more similar to Minecraft than to Yammer.

Additional Settings

Email Preferences

[expand](#)

Slack can send email notifications when you're away so you don't miss a beat. You can also decide if there are any additional updates you'd like to receive.

Highlight Words

[close](#)

We'll send notifications automatically when someone mentions your name or sends you a direct message. If you'd also like to be notified when someone mentions a specific word or phrase, add it to your highlight words list and we'll make that happen.

Separate words or phrases with commas. Highlight words are not case sensitive.

[Save highlight words](#)

Or in a complex game like Rock Band, there are multiple ways to make progress: you can beat your own score—play harder songs—play at a harder level—play bigger arenas—and collect cooler clothes & instruments. But these aren't just layered-on progress mechanics; what makes it work is that everything takes place in a coherent setting and narrative that we understand—playing in a band, getting better, and then having new opportunities open up. And that's the secret to creating a compelling experience that people love—and come back to.

Now it's your turn: Let's apply these ideas to YOUR project. What's your Core Loop?

What's the **internal trigger/urge/need** that drives someone to seek out my product?

What's the **repeatable, pleasurable activity** that pulls someone back regularly?

What **simple feedback system** will help someone get better at that activity?

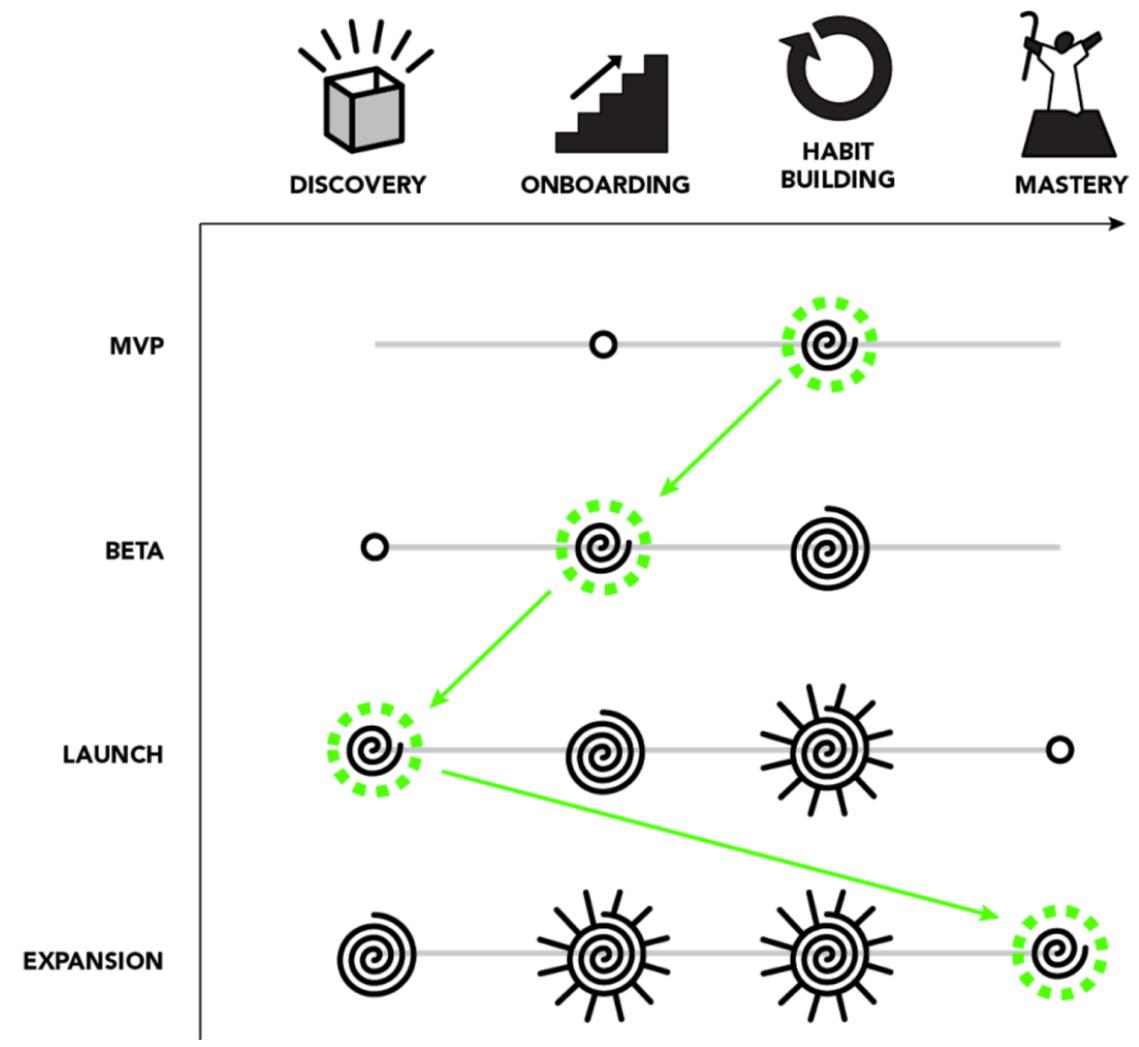
What type of **progress and/or investment path** leads someone towards **Mastery**?



GAME THINKING POWER-TOOL 3

Game Thinking Roadmap

Now let me show you how this all fits together into a Game Thinking Roadmap. This matrix gives you a **timeline for iterating your product to life**. Along the top, you'll see the 4 stages of your customer's path to mastery. Down the side, you see the stages of product development—from MVP thru Beta and Ship.



When you're first bringing your innovative idea to life, focus on your Learning Loop—the habit-building experience. At this stage, that's FAR more important to get this loop working than to create onboarding or mastery. As you scale your development towards Beta, you'll build out and develop the other stages as well—using this chart as a guide. This is how great games and products come to life.

A few years ago, I was frustrated—and a little heartbroken—when I failed to get a brilliant young entrepreneur I was coaching to focus on his app's Learning Loop. Instead, he got seduced by the **siren song of beautiful onboarding**—and decided to ship that onboarding experience as his MVP. Lots of people tried the app—but hardly anyone stuck around, because there wasn't any compelling reason to return. Don't let this happen to you.

Unfortunately, I see this all too often—but the teams who actually produce hits don't operate that way. Instead, they stay focused on “finding the fun” (as we gamers call it)—that core value, that **pleasurable repeatable activity that gets people to come back**. If you get that right FIRST—you can build from there, find success, and start to drive long-term engagement.

-Amy Jo