

**The eLearning Coach Podcast #53**  
**ELC 053: Creating Long-term Engagement with Game Thinking**  
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Connie: Hello, learning people. I feel like our industry has become so much more open-minded in the past few years. In this spirit, I'd like to take a closer look at how creatives innovate early on in the world of product design. That's why I'm speaking with Amy Jo Kim, author of Game Thinking, innovate smarter, and drive deep engagement with design techniques from hit games.

Connie: Amy Jo started her career as a neuroscientist and eventually became a social game designer, community architect, and start-up coach. She works with start-ups and game studios worldwide to help them accelerate innovation and create compelling experiences. I think that quite a few of her methods may help you innovate in designing learning experiences. As always, for links to the resources we discuss, and a transcript, go to the show notes, which are at [theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/53](http://theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/53). Here's our conversation.

Connie: Hi, Amy Jo. Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

Amy Jo: It's great to be here.

Connie: You wrote a very awesome book on game thinking and I really dove into it. Can you define game thinking for the audience, and just briefly describe the method?

Amy Jo: Absolutely. Game thinking is the art and science of engaging your customers on a path to mastery. Game thinking is all about helping your customers reach their goals, in a nutshell.

Connie: As far as instructional design goes, we have so many models, but I was attracted to your approach because people are finding that design thinking and agile models are opening up new paths to solving problems. Can you describe your method? You essentially have five steps.

Amy Jo: Absolutely. That's a great way to think about game thinking, is it's something that synthesizes and extends these modern models. Game thinking really blends elements of design thinking, and lean agile, and systems thinking critically, which design thinking doesn't address at all, and game design, the core ideas. It blends all of those together.

If you're familiar with design thinking, you know that design thinking has five steps. By the way, design thinking is a renamed way of talking about user centered design. Design thinking is fundamentally user centered design. I want to first establish that if you hear those two terms, they're really the same thing.

Design thinking is a language and structure on top of that. It's not really a new thing, but one of the great things design thinking did is really put together a language and a framework that was very usable, which is so important.

Connie: Right. I teach design thinking workshops and apply it to learning experience design. Without that framework, the tools, and the language, it would not be as accessible.

Amy Jo: Those five steps make it usable. Now, the five steps of design thinking are based around the double diamond approach. The reason I'm bringing it up is this is where game thinking came from, and this is a great way to anchor your five steps.

Back in 1991, the British Council of Designers put out a paper on the double diamond approach. What this really is, the double diamonds are problem space and solution space. It's expand, branch out, and then contract. That's what makes it a diamond.

Connie: Right.

Amy Jo: The key idea of the double diamond of approach to design is that you start in problem space. You start by really understanding problem space. You expand, you look at all the opportunity, and then you contract, you narrow in on some very ones.

Then, when you're in solution space, after you've done that in problem space, you then expand, you look at multiple possible solutions, and then you contract, and you decide on a solution that you're actually going to pursue, build, et cetera.

The interesting thing about this approach to design, and about this 1991 report, is that this is about design across multiple industries. Industrial design, interior design, digital design, architecture. This process I just described is what the really good designers do in all those disciplines.

Fast forward to design thinking. Design thinking has five steps that map on top of the double diamond approach. Game thinking has similar steps, but they are geared toward creating long-term engagement in your experience. If you are just doing really short-term things, if you're just doing a marketing campaign, or something's meant to be a fad, game thinking's overkill. In many ways, design thinking is as well. Game thinking embraces the empathy aspect of design, big time. Again, that's user centered design.

The five steps of game thinking are hypothesize, empathize, design, play test, and validate. That terminology integrates design thinking and lean agile as well, along with game design, because play testing comes out of game design, versus just testing.

Connie: Great. Now, can you talk a little bit about every one of those five steps?

Amy Jo: Hypothesize is how you run smart, high-learning experiment. Any good experiment starts with clear, testable hypotheses, period. So, you say, "What is it we need to learn at the very beginning?" I have a tool called the MVP canvas, that again, has things in common with the lean canvas, and with the business model canvas, but is very specific

to building and creating an MVP, or minimum viable product. Hypothesize uses the language of lean start-up and agile, clear assumptions, clear testable hypotheses. So, that's step one.

Step two is empathize, very similar to design thinking. If you know and love design thinking, you're ahead of the game. Game thinking introduces an idea that is not in design thinking, that's more specific about who you empathize with. This comes out of innovation theory, and innovation practices that work. If you're not doing anything innovative, this is less relevant. You can still use it, it's still great, but if you're selling Lay's potato chips, then you're doing a slight spin and you're releasing a new flavor. You don't need this.

This is really about building something compelling for people that isn't just a copycat of something else. When you're empathizing, the more that you're building something innovative, the more this is important. You don't just want to empathize with your target market. You want to find, and really surface habits of a narrow slice of your audience that are your hot core, early market, or early adopters who have a burning need, not the every bodies, but the people who really need it yesterday.

The super fans is one of three key pillars of game thinking that goes beyond what you've heard before.

Connie: I can really see the advantage of empathizing with that small slice of super fans who really need the learning experience, or performance support that we are designing because of how much we can learn from them.

Again, it's all organized around, how do you create a delightful, innovative experience that really hooks your customers long term?

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Then you get to design, and that's the bridge, which is once you empathized, you've surfaced key existing habits and unmet needs. You can turn that into a design, but again, you're not designing waterfall style with, okay, we're just going to build this, and here's the speck, go build it. You're designing your core experience and your path to mastery, not all the details, just the vision.

That's where we use a framework in game thinking called the customer journey. Now, you've probably heard about customer journeys before.

Connie: Sure.

This is a journey to mastery. There's four steps: Discovery, onboarding, habit-building, and mastery. We use that framework and job stories from research to then plot out the customer experience at high level in a way that's coherent and makes sense, and has a clear narrative path. I don't mean narrative, you're writing a novel, I just mean on day

21, it makes sense to the person using it, to your user, to your customer, what's going on. There's something going on that builds on what happened before.

Connie: Right.

Amy Jo: There's many ways to do that. You can do that with mission design. You can do that with unlocking content. You can do that with unlocking challenges. You can do that with just the way you're designing the experience. You're not going to get a coherent, evolving user experience by just sprinkling points on. It's really about designing the core activity that the customer is engaging in, and how those play out, versus surface mechanic.

Connie: That is so true and relevant. Many of us have been guilty of sprinkling points on, as you say, to add a little gamification, and then we discover it doesn't really motivate people in the long term.

Amy Jo: That's correct. It's much easier to do that. It's quick and easy, but it doesn't work. It might work short term. Extrinsic motivators can often lead to a short-term bump in stats and various stats and metrics that you're measuring. That's really well-established, but longer term, it doesn't motivate.

Connie: Right.

Amy Jo: What we're talking about, well, if that doesn't work, what does work? This is what does work. So, we talked so far about three steps: Hypothesize, empathize, and design. Hypothesize and empathize got you through the first diamond in the double diamond approach. You've really been in problem space, and when you hypothesize, you make hypotheses both about problem space, and about solution space, which is part of how you start to go, these are different, and I'm going to link them up, and that's how I'm going to get a good result.

Amy Jo: Then, design is the sort of pivot point between the two diamonds. We use the customer journey framework with the mastery path, and also the core learning loop framework, and also the social action matrix. All of these are very powerful tools that you can use to design the customer journey so you have a vision of it, a shared vision of it, just at kind of a high level. That's the design phase.

Then, the next phase is to play test. That's where you prototype something, you create some sort of artifact that you're going to get feedback on. Now, what that artifact is depends on the stage you're at, depends on the tools you have to work with, depends on the timeline, all that stuff.

This is really about failing fast, and eagerly, and learning. That's what it's about. It's not about designing the thing, and putting it in front of people and having them say, "How beautiful." This goes back to hypothesis testing. It's like, what is the hypothesis we have that we need to test, that we've identified as high-risk? Which is that step one, and what is the fastest, cheapest way to learn what we need to learn, and to iterate quickly?

The word, "play test," sometimes people stumble over it. I've given talks to product managers where some of them took me aside and say, "Play test makes me uncomfortable. Why don't you just say test?" There's actually a reason because running a test usually means testing the UI, or testing to make sure the features work.

Those are important things to do, but there are tests that you can do long before you're testing the UI that test the core idea, and whether people are motivated, and whether the journey makes sense to them, and whether the mental model makes sense to them. You can test all of that with storyboards. You don't need to build a thing, and it's so much smarter.

I consciously use the word, "play test," not that everything is play, but one of the things that games are incredibly good at, game developers who know what they're doing bring their products to life from the inside out, from the core learning loop on outward. They do it through play testing, they do it through building version of not their onboarding, but the day 21 experience, the thing that people are going to do the most.

Connie: Interesting.

Amy Jo: How did Mario come to life? It came to life, first you make Mario walk, and then you make Mario climb, and then you make Mario jump, and then you say, oh, what if he jumped into this thing that had a shower of stars come down? Et cetera, et cetera.

You don't start with the whole thing, you start with the core activities, the things that people do the most, and you make sure those are pleasurable, and then you build from outward. It's called finding the fun in game design. That can be applied to any product. It doesn't have to be about fun. It doesn't have to be about that. It's about how you build long-term engagement, how you find out what's motivating to people, how you then design for it, how you make sure that what you're designing fits into people's life so they'll actually frigging use it. If you build something and it doesn't fit into people's current habits in life, you've just created huge friction.

Connie: Right.

Amy Jo: Issues like that get surfaced during game thinking. When you design that and then you prototype, your prototype might be sketches, it might be storyboards, it might be clickable mock-up, could be a working hack together game, it could be any of those things. It could be, if you're further along, a six-week pilot test, a longitudinal test. It could be any of those things. But you define, okay, well, what do we need to test, specifically, and who do we need to test it on? This goes back to that empathize step.

In this process, if you can find a small handful of five to seven people that actually are your hot core early adopters, and they're articulate, and you make sure that they can actually give you good feedback, you prescreen them. You've got it. It's like, who do you test on? That's who you test on? You've calibrate them.

The data that's generated from a play test on those people, or those series of play tests on those people is far more usable in clean data than testing on everybody.

Connie: Right.

Amy Jo: That's part of the whole way that you get really good results in a short amount of time. You run a play test, or two or three, means a lot of times you iterate and run several on your early adopters, then you take that data, synthesize it, and you validate your ideas. You say, what's working? What's not working? Are we building the right thing? Are they motivated? Is the core activity hooking them? Is the mental model making sense? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That's all in the validate.

In the validate step, you've got clean targeted data from the right people on your highest risk assumptions as you're bringing your idea to life, and the whole thing's a loop, and then you can start in again and say, well, okay, we're going to now run more play tests, or maybe we go back to design and do some changes. Maybe we go and actually expand our early adopters, they're working really well. Have each of them invite two friends into this private group and we'll run an alpha test.

Once you've been through these five steps once, as with design thinking, it's a loop, and you can loop back to different steps, and you can become very sophisticated at how you do it. That's really game thinking in a nutshell.

The three ideas that are different and more powerful than design thinking and agile, and all of that, are the idea of super fans, the slice of your early market that speeds you up and gives you great data for fast iteration. Two, the idea of a path to mastery, and really thinking about what that looks like, thinking about how the day 30 experience and the day 60 experience, what that's like, and how you've helped your customer become more awesome, become who they want to be.

Then, the learning loop, the idea that you actually are not manipulating your customer with intrinsic trinkets and points, that's fine if it's mapping the path to mastery in a meaningful way. It doesn't work when it doesn't have meaning. The important thing is the feedback that helps your customer get better at the thing they're there to get better at. That's far more important than any of those intrinsic motivators.

When you use the intrinsic progress markers to reinforce the progress that someone's making, and the learning that they're making through the core activities and the feedback they're getting, then you have a winning combination.

Connie: Thanks so much for that introduction to game thinking. I imagine some people who are listening might be thinking, I have to create compliance training for everyone. It could be something like HIPPA law, or data security, electronic data security, something like that. They may be thinking that they don't have an opportunity to find super fans. What advice would you give them?

Amy Jo: A few things. One of my close associates who works in Malaysia with a lot of employee engagement issues deals with this a lot, this issue with compliance training. Let me put it this way, if you're in a situation where whoever's managing you is not giving you any freedom, or any time, or any ability to do a good job, and actually solve the problem you're being asked to solve, I can't really help you because that's a problem with your structure. In that case, your boss needs to get educated.

What you can do, the question really is, are you a leader or are you a follower? Even if you have a job, you can still act like a leader. If you consider yourself a leader, if you consider yourself someone who wants to always get better at their craft, and actually solve the problem at hand, then there are several things you can do in that kind of situation.

One is you can fill out the MVP canvas, and you can use strategic thinking no matter what. Nobody can stop you from being strategic. Nobody has to give you permission to be strategic. I am a big fan of stepping up and just deciding to do the thing that is higher level than your job level. Right? Just do it.

Connie: True.

Amy Jo: Don't ask, just do it. That's where the Game Thinking book is an incredible resource for that. The MVP canvas, you have everything you need there. Just read about it and fill out the canvas. Let's say that you go, okay, I don't know exactly what problem space is. Make some hypotheses. The whole point of it is write down your assumptions. If you don't know, write down your wrong assumptions. Right? Then, start gathering data and update your assumptions. Nobody can stop you from doing that.

The low-hanging fruit is start to think strategically about problem space, solution space, say, okay, who do I think the early adopter slice of these people is? Great. Who are the people who have the greatest need for it? Maybe it's actually the executives who need everyone to take the training. Maybe they're the ones who have the need. That's certainly part of the equation, but what about ...

The people who have a need for it are the people that have to take the training, that maybe their customer facing and they have to really know. There's going to be some people who need that training more than others, even though everyone has to. Among those people, maybe there's people that are cognizant that they need the training, and that would like to partner with you, and they really wish it was more effective, and they'd love to help you make it more effective. Those are the people.

Connie: Okay. I think that's a workable solution. The way it fits in so well with learning experience design, in terms of an unmet need is that our goal is to make things relevant for people. One of the ways we make things relevant and useful is to fulfill their unmet needs.

I also wanted to say, I really like the concept of hypothesizing. We tend to define the problem space and do a certain amount of analysis, and research, and gathering

information. But looking at it like a scientist, and hypothesizing, it kind of inspires creativity, and I think that can work really well for us to think of it in terms of a hypothesis, that we have to disprove quickly, and find a way to prove it, ultimately, or to change the hypothesis.

Another way that I see it applying so well is we, too, are looking for mastery. All that cognitive science research is saying that space learning is most effective for long-term retention. When you talk about coming back in day 10, day 20, day 30, we fail people in my industry, by doing these one-time interventions.

Those are just some of the ways that I think game thinking can be used and applied to learning experience design.

Amy Jo: Awesome. Yeah. Well, as learning professionals, this is your bread and butter. Game thinking, at its core, is really about how you create an effective learning architecture for your users. We're talking about building a learning architecture. I think that's why it resonates so much and why so many learning professionals use this approach, including Karl Kapp, who's my dear friend and colleague. It's because learning is about mastery. Learning is about, where am I going with this? Right?

Connie: Absolutely.

Amy Jo: Even compliance training. You're trying to master something. All of us have had the experience, I think, as learners, as well as learning professionals, just as learners and students, of being engaged on an effective path to mastery, say, in a classroom when we were younger, or on a training. You can tell when somebody is like, oh, yeah, I understand what I'm learning, I'm into what I'm learning. I understand where this is going. That's an effective path to mastery.

Connie: Right, right.

Amy Jo: We've all also had the experience, I bet, of an ineffective path. First of all, all the lightweight gamification where you're like, okay, I'm doing this thing, it's kind of annoying, and I'm earning points for answering questions. Why? It's not meaningful. What's meaningful is you actually have to do the hard work to structure the learning.

For instance, when people say to me ... Because I know everyone loves their game mechanics, I love my game mechanics, too. The more sophisticated I get as a product designer, the more I realize, don't start with mechanics, that's not what it's about. Start by saying, what does the customer aspire to become on some level, even with compliance training? The customer aspires to become compliant and confident the customer aspires to go from annoyed and insecure to confident. Yeah, I know this stuff. Right?

There's always an emotional journey. How can I take my customer on that emotional journey? Then the mechanics support that. If you're going to start with the mechanics and you're a learning professional, much more effective to start with something like



progressive missions versus points. If you really want to solve your problem, say, okay, I need to do this compliance training. What are the introductory missions? Missions is just another word for activities, or actions, or string of actions with a beginning and end. That's a mission, right?

Connie: Right.

Amy Jo: What are the beginner tasks that I want to get someone going so they feel confident and get them a little bit of achievement, just achievement of, yeah, I know this. What are the beginning tasks? Okay. What are the tasks, or missions, or whatever it is, or the content, that now builds on what they just learned?

Connie: Yeah, that's basically how we design. We just don't call them missions unless we've got some kind of challenge or game.

Amy Jo: That's harder than sprinkling some points on the interface. That's learning architecture. Good games do that. Call of Duty does that. Halo does that. World of Warcraft does that. They put a really good learning architecture into it. That's part of what makes it fun.

Connie: Yes, and learning experience designers are good at structuring learning because we do it all the time.

Amy Jo: I would really lean on that then. Here's the punchline, to embrace smart game thinking, which also, everyone who loves gamification, come on in, this just adds to your tool kit. If you want to embrace this, what you want to do is put progress metrics aside for a moment. Don't start there. Start by thinking about the session one, session two, session seven, session 10, if you want to think of it that way.

Think about beginning tasks, intermediate tasks, advanced tasks, think about structuring the content and the task to build on what people have learned. Maybe think about if you're testing them, do progressive testing, give them a few things to do, and then do a mini test, rather than having one big test at the end. That's another way to make it feel more pleasurable and to create more of a loop, have packages of content plus a little quizlet to reinforce the idea. Things like that.

Then, if you have the ability to suggest things to your boss, see if you can find a small project to apply game thinking to. Don't try and boil the ocean. The larger your company, the worse idea that is. Don't go in there and say, we have to change everything. Find a small project, apply game thinking to it, run a super fan survey, just follow the steps in the book. Use this design framework, run some really early play tests with sketches or mock-ups, et cetera. Try it on a small project. Find an internal champion who can help you do it.

Then, find a project where you can get some tangible results that are likely to succeed. To introduce this into an organization, you need to get some small wins. You're going to need to do some failing along the way. Part of all this early prototyping, et cetera, is

your first ideas are not always going to work, especially around structuring. The sooner you learn that, the better.

Frank Lloyd Wright says, "You can use an eraser on the drafting table, or a sledgehammer on the construction site."

Connie: I saw that quote. That was a good one. The more modern methods of doing LX design, use prototyping. Many people are already right there. The paradigm shift is bringing people back. People don't want to go back into their Learning Management System and re-sign in, but then again, there are many people who are motivated to take courses, to improve their skills, to get ahead, and it's not hard to get them to come back. In addition, there are many ways to support people at work that don't involve courses.

Amy Jo: Let me just give you one key suggestion.

Connie: Sure.

Amy Jo: If you want to bring people back. Find a way to, one, identify a subset of people so you can get your arms around it. As I taught before, understand as much as you can about their existing habits and lifestyle, and any pain points, friction points, and unmet needs. That is going to give you the biggest key to bringing people back.

We can talk game mechanics until the cows come home, but piggybacking on people's existing habits, something that either replaces the habit or is next to it, before or after it ... Let me give you an example. A really concrete example.

I had a client last summer doing something in a similar space, they're in the corporate space, but they had training, and they had testing, and all this stuff, and they wanted to make it much more longer term. We did the study, just as I told you, just as I'm recommending, and they said, oh, we can't find the right people. It turned out we did. It was kind of hard, but we found them.

Then we interviewed them, we did these deep dive interviews, really specific about super fan interviews, about their habits that were relevant to what we were studying. We discovered something really interesting. Everybody says they don't have time, blah, blah, blah, blah, for training, but a lot of them had long commutes, often either a carpool or public transit. This is in Europe, a lot of public transit in Europe.

They were on their phone, and we said, oh, my God. If we really made this completely mobile centric and really designed it for that commute, we could dry the habit. Nobody had had that idea before we had that realization. After we did that, the whole thing took off. Think about what existing habits they have that you could nestle into.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Context and habits are a good thing for us to pay attention to, that's for sure.

I was curious when I saw your background in neuroscience, I was wondering how that helped you understand product design, and games, and use your engagement. Did you think in those terms, or was it just how you perceived the world?

Amy Jo: Probably the latter. I mean, that's a great question. There's several ways that my background in neuroscience and psychology impacts me as a product designer. One, you already noticed, which is to think like a scientist. I have a PhD in behavioral neuroscience, and an undergraduate degree in experimental psychology.

From experimental psychology, I learned a lot about motivation and about also just how to read through research, figure out what's real about research and what's not. I learned a lot about behavioral psychology. I learned a lot about the limits and the powers of behaviorism, operant conditioning, very, very relevant to gamification, using intrinsic rewards to shape behavior, that's operant conditioning in psych. That was great background.

Then, studying neuroscience was also great background. One, having a PhD means I really understand the scientific method. I've run a lot of studies myself, but I also know how to do research, and I know how to do formal research that gets published in journals. I also know how to do quick and dirty research that still has value, meaning there was a clear hypothesis, and then we're going to get the data.

The thing about it, I'd say, to think like a scientist, part of it's about methodology, a lot of it's about attitude.

Connie: Interesting.

Amy Jo: One of the things I learned in graduate school about science was by counterexample. When I first got to graduate school, I had a job in a research lab run by a guy who was an MD PhD, working at the medical school at University of Washington. Great job, but I started collecting the data, running the experiments, blah, blah, blah, and he was funded by a drug company. We started getting data that was interesting, that didn't look like the results the drug company wanted, and he told me to throw out the outliers and just make the data look like what his funding source wanted. It was like an arrow through my heart. Certainly, it crushed my idealism about science because I knew what the data was because I collected it. So, I went, oh, I get it. Stuff I'm reading in journals.

That taught me, look who funded the research. Right? Which is always a good thing to do.

Connie: Always.

Amy Jo: Second thing I've learned, though, was what think like a scientist really means. It means you're willing to be wrong. It means look at what's in the data, not just what you want to see. If you decide that you're going to put on that scientist hat, I think of it as putting on the white lab coat, and think like a scientist, and what that means is, one, make your hypotheses, but really be willing and excited to be surprised and possibly profoundly

disappointed by your data. That is the only true way to be a scientist. That's when you go, oh, this is not what we thought. At that moment, you just saved yourself so much time and money if you're a product designer.

Connie: So much. Failing fast is great.

Amy Jo: I mean, but you have to do it in a smart discipline way. Doesn't mean you don't have vision, doesn't mean you don't have core creative ideas. It means you test them, and it also means you really bring in the voice of the customer in a disciplined way from the very earliest stages.

Connie: That brings me to the question, if you could just name a few criteria for the kind of feedback that you're looking for. What would you say to that?

Amy Jo: The feedback that you want is from people that are really going to use it, and that are as high-need as you can. You need from real high-need, self-defined high-need customers.

Early adopters have three qualities. Let me list out the three qualities of early adopters. These are super valuable because they'll help you structure any questions you ask, et cetera. The three qualities are one, they have the problem you're trying to solve. Two, they know they have the problem.

Connie: That is a good one.

Amy Jo: It's a huge one, and it's top of mind. You don't have to convince them. A lot of sales, a lot of marketing is about how to lead people down a path and convince them they have a problem. In here, you don't want that for these people. You want people for whom the problem is top of mind. Then, three, here's the kicker, the most important. They are actively trying to solve the problem. They are taking steps in their life, and that's where you get the most valuable early hot core customers.

You want your early adopters to be action-oriented. That's a huge deal, huge deal. You do not want early adopters who are the right people, but they would never show up to a test that you're going to run of the stuff. You want action-oriented people motivated to solve the problem.

You also want them to be articulate about their own inner working. I have a three-step process where you run a survey, it's a screener, it's a six questions screener. It's very different than every survey you've run. You do that to start to get the people that are the right group, and then you speed interview them. The speed interviews will tell you if they're articulate. It'll give you a lot of clues about whether they're worth an hour of your time in a play test. They'll tell you if they're articulate, and it can really speak to their own motivation.

There's nothing worse than running a survey and finding people that on paper look, oh, my God, it's a perfect play tester for us, work really hard set up the play test, you've got a note-taker, you've got someone to run it. It's not trivial. You've got it to create an

artifact for the play test, the person comes in, maybe you're paying them, maybe you're not, and it's like pulling teeth to get anything useful out of them. That's not what you want, that's not useful.

There's usefulness, there's appropriateness, which is those three things about those early adopters, that's the appropriateness of the person. There's usefulness. Are they articulate about their own self, and their motivation and emotion? Then, the third thing is, are they available?

Connie: Right, like executives, yeah.

Amy Jo: Sometimes what I do, especially when group brings me in or does a program with me is what you can do with executives, you don't run them through this funnel, but there's a structure that I also like to use in this process, the informational interview.

Another thing that you can do is with say, an expert in the space, or an executive, who's the person who really needs the clients to work, or an HR executive who really understand where employees get stuck, you can do an informational interview where you structure three, four, five, really targeted questions, and get the executives you can get. Right? But you can supplement what you learn from the users of the system with stakeholders, and experts with informational interviews. That can be very helpful as well. One of the hardest things about interviewing is what not to ask.

Connie: Good point. I know we're running out of time, so let me just ask you one more quick question that I just think is so important, and it has to do with creativity. For people who have to be creative on demand, it can be very difficult, and we have to do that a lot. I was wondering what are some of the most interesting, or fascinating, or fruitful ways that you've seen people or teams unlock their own creativity?

Amy Jo: One of my favorite methods for unlocking creativity is creating multiple alternative hypotheses. I mentioned earlier the MVP canvas. I iterated this a lot, it really just came out of my own needs working with game studios and start-ups, and global brands, which is my clients. It's really hard to get people to think about hypothesis-driven testing. When we're saying, okay, we're trying to build something to get people to come back over and over again, we really need to learn about the customer, and we really need to say, okay, given this customer and what their needs are, this is what we think we want to build, but let's force ourselves to come up with two alternative hypotheses for what we might build, or what a competitor might build that might be a simpler or cheaper way for our customer to solve that problem.

If you get a group of people together, whether they're executives or just your team or whatever, and you use the canvas to brainstorm, and you say, our goal is to come up with multiple parallel hypotheses for each of these, and you say to people, 100% a lot of these are wrong, and it's okay for them to be wrong. We just want to put them down on paper so we can test them, or we can look at them and say, throw that one out, that's wrong.

Once you give people permission to be wrong, and write down a snapshot of their current thinking so they can then do a bunch of great work together, and in eight weeks or 12 weeks do the same exercise and see how far their thinking's come, I think it's giving people permission to be wrong and asking them to generate alternative hypotheses to what we might want to build, to who our early adopters might be, to what unmet need they have. That can be very freeing.

It can also, frankly, be very practical as you set yourself up to run the right experiments to build a successful learning experience.

Connie: Yes. I like that idea. It's similar to something I use in my design thinking workshops, and maybe my next one, I'll try using your MVP canvas and see how that works.

Amy Jo: Awesome. That would be wonderful. You make sure to tell me.

Connie: Okay. I want to thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it, and it was so nice to meet you.

Amy Jo: Awesome to meet you, as well. Thanks for having me on.

One last thing, once a year, we run an eight-week online masterclass that's open to individuals worldwide, that helps you put these ideas into practice and gives you weekly hands-on coaching from myself and other illustrious coaches, including Karl Kapp. He's one of my guest coaches in our program. We run an eight-week game thinking masterclass, and the exciting thing for you and your audience to know is that this year, because of the interest we've had from the learning community, we're going to have a sub track within the masterclass that's about leaning and education that has Karl Kapp and Mimi Ito, and Michael John from UCSC, and amazing leaders that are working actively in adult education.

If you're at all interested, you can go to [gamethinking.io](http://gamethinking.io), and sign up for or mailing list, and then you'll be sure to hear about it.

We're now in the fifth year of running that. It's completely virtual, completely online, and we are opening up a special track for learning professionals.

Connie: I will be sure to add a link to it in the show notes. Thanks again.

I hope you enjoyed this episode. In Game Thinking, I like the focus on long-term engagement, and a path to mastery. Let me know what you think about applying hypothesize, empathize, design, play tests, and implement to your learning experience design work in the comments at [theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/53](http://theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/53).

You'll also find the show notes and transcript there. Until next time, take care.