Chapter 2

What Is a Game Designer?

So you want to be a game designer. What exactly is a game designer, and what does a game designer do? This chapter will explain what game designers are, what they do, and what you have to learn to become one. It will also give you some step-by-step projects to help you get started designing games.

The Game Designer

Let's start by defining what a game designer is. A game designer is the person responsible for developing a game concept into a plan of development for a game. The plan is called a game design document. This plan is the blueprint of the game and is used by the development team to create the game.

In a lot of ways, the game designer can be compared to an architect. An architect defines every aspect of a building, from the way it looks to how it is wired. Likewise, the game designer defines every aspect of a game, from how it looks to how it will be created.

Crafting a great game takes dedicated work and a passion for games. The best game designers are those who not only love to play games but love to study them as well. A good game designer should have the following attributes:

- Loves to play games
- Is a creative thinker
- Understands the game development process
- Is good at solving problems
- Knows how to have fun
- Knows how to work
- Is dedicated to creating great games

This list may not contain every attribute of a good game designer, but it does contain the most important ones. If you don't have every attribute on the list, don't worry—you can work on it as you go. Just look at the list as a goal for aspiring game designers. As you read this book and gain experience in designing games, you will soon find you are becoming competent in most areas of the list. Let's take a closer look at each attribute.

Love to Play Games

Gamers can generally tell if the designer loves playing games by playing the games that he creates. A good game designer needs to have love for his work. He needs to spend time playing games, because he needs to understand the game-playing experience. It is the game experience that you are designing for when you design a game.

Games are different from many other types of entertainment in that they are active. When a person plays a game, that person is involved in the entertainment. This involvement is what makes games so interesting for so many people. The more the designer can get the player involved in the game, the better the game experience will become.

The best way to learn about the game experience is to experience it. But don't just limit yourself to one type of game. You might like to play shooters or fantasy role playing games, but limiting your playing time to just those types of games will not give you a very broad base of game experiences. I have often found that playing games outside of the ones I really enjoy can give me ideas for making better games.

Creative Thinker

Game design is a creative process. Without creativity, games can become stale and boring. The game designer must be a creative thinker. Creative thinking means that the game designer is able to solve problems creatively. The designer is also able to make connections between seemingly unrelated topics or subjects to come up with something new and innovative.

Creativity is the essential in game design, but it needs to be tempered with good game sense. Some game designers get so involved in doing something no one has done before that they forget that the game needs to be fun for the player. There may be good reason that no one already created that game. It may not be any fun. The best way to work with creative thought is to channel it toward something useful.

Creative thought channeled by knowledge and good game sense can become a powerful tool in the hands of a game designer. The process kind of works like this:

1. The designer is presented with a problem.
2. The designer studies the problem to gather as much information as possible.

3. When the designer feels that the problem is understood, then she or he goes into a free form creative exploration. The exploration is where the designer searches for ideas from any and every source imaginable.

4. The ideas are written down as they come, without any judgment. That will come later. The exploration stage may take some time.

After creative exploration, the next phase is to channel the creativity. All of the creative ideas are organized. During the organization phase, the designer will have a chance to evaluate the ideas and categorize them into different levels of usefulness. This is the analysis phase, which is important because it puts the creative ideas into perspective based on practicality. The best ideas are those that are both creative and practical.

After the analysis phase, the designer should have a list of ideas to solve the problem, but the work is not done yet. The last step is to choose the best idea and convert it to use in the game. This step may take more creativity and analysis. The idea will need polishing and refining to get it to work in the best way possible. Figure 2.1 shows the creative progression chart.
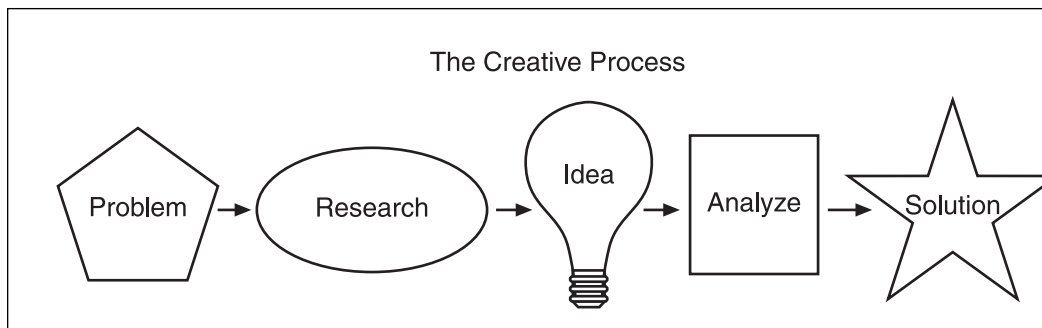

Figure 2.1
Creative thinking needs to have structure to be effective.

This chart should be viewed as a guide, not as a rigid system. The point is that the best ideas are those that combine great creativity with solid practicality. You should practice the concept. Think of some problems you see in games. Go through the creative process defined by the chart in Figure 2.1 and see what kind of solutions you come up with. You just might be able to solve some problems and in the process come up with some good ideas for future games.

The Game Development Process

To be a good designer you have to understand how games are made. You might have the greatest idea ever conceived for a game, but with no solid knowledge of game development the idea can't progress. Progression of the game idea to a game comes only when the designer understands the process and knows how to get to the next step.

Game development requires the skills of a number of highly talented people working together for months, if not years. Some development teams are as large as 100 people, but most are smaller and number around 20 individuals. Each person brings a certain skill set to the group. The designer needs to understand the role each person plays in creating the game. It is a little like the composer of a symphony. The composer needs to understand each instrument, even if he or she doesn't play each one. Like the composer, the game designer needs to understand each facet of development, such as programming, art, animation, sound, and so on

After the game is developed, the work is still not done. The game has to get to the players, which requires extensive work from another team of specialized people. These people create the packaging, do the marketing, get the game to the retail outlets, and then sell the game to the players. Figure 2.2 shows the basic process for creating and selling games. It is broken down into four major categories: concept, pre-production, production, and product.
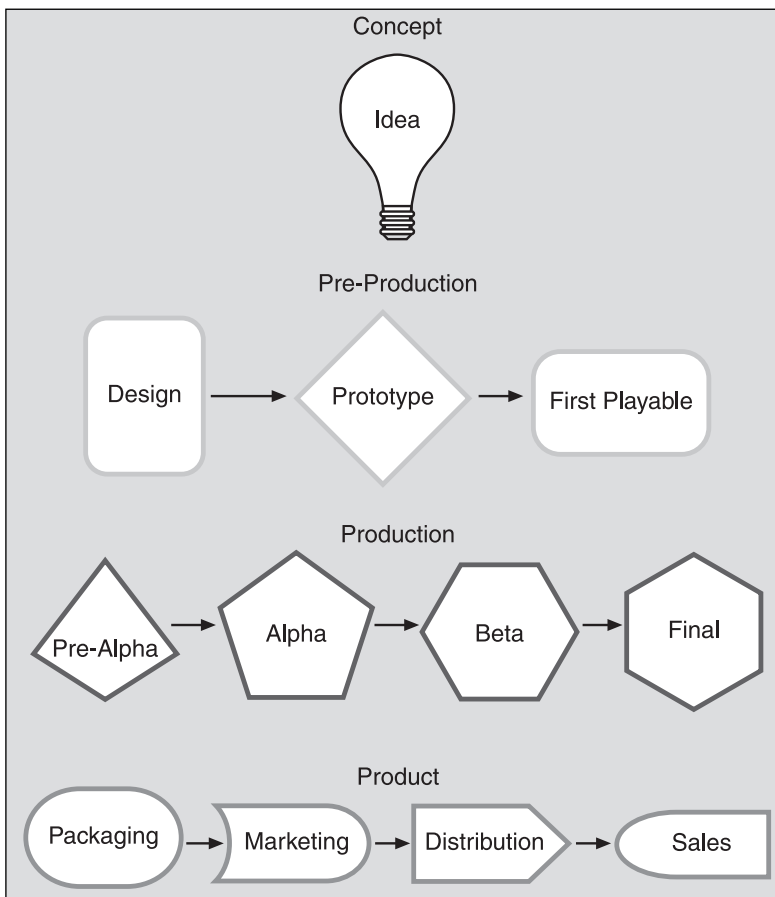

Figure 2.2
The process for creating and selling games includes four major categories.

Concept

The concept phase of game development is the idea phase. It is where the designer jots down the idea for the game. It usually results in a basic concept document of anywhere from 1 to 10 pages of game information. It is not a full design document but rather a brief explanation of the game.

Most aspiring game designers have got this stage under control. They have one if not several game concepts. Some are well defined and documented with drawings and charts. The problem is that they can't get past this stage to the next one.

Pre-Production

The pre-production phase is the foundation of the game. It is where the game design document is created. During the pre-production phase of the game development, the designer takes a leading role in day-to-day operations.

The pre-production phase generally has three distinct stages: design, prototype, and first playable. Each stage has a purpose. The design stage is where the design document is created and the production plan for the game is generated. The prototype is where the development team takes the design and creates a rapid prototype of the game. The purpose of the prototype is to give everyone an idea of how the game will look and function, but it generally has very limited playability. The last stage is the first playable. The first playable stage is a limited playable version of the game. The purpose of the first playable version is to be a proof-of-concept of the game. In other words, the first playable version shows how the game plays.

Production

The production phase is where the game is developed. It is in this stage that the game is built, tested, and brought to a final product. This is the longest and most costly of all stages of development. It includes the development of all the game assets, implementation of the assets into the game, programming the game, and testing the game.

During the pre-production phase of the game development, the designer takes a leading role in day-to-day operations. During the production phase, the leading role is that of the producer, who manages the day-to-day affairs based on the production plan. The designer's role during the production phase is more of a problem solver. When unforeseen problems with the design occur, the designer works out those problems with the development team and updates the production plan with the producer.

Product

The product phase is not always considered to be part of game development, but it is important for the designer to understand the whole picture, so it is included in this section. The designer is not as involved in the product phase because there are new games

that need to be designed. However, the designer often will be consulted on things such as packaging and marketing. It is also important that the designer understand how the game will be sold to the consumer. All of these things affect the sales of the game, which affect the budget for the game.

Solving Problems

Earlier we went over the creative process, which is related to solving problems. Solving problems is a specific skill that designers need to have in abundance. The creative process is a good way to approach the solving of problems, but it is not the only way. Many problems require more than creative thought. They may also require research, experimentation, and compromise.

Many problems in games have already been solved in other games. If it is a problem in your game, chances are it is also a problem for other games. Research is a great tool for solving problems. Once you have a well-defined problem, do some research to see if that problem was solved in other games. Find out what they did to solve the problem and see if their solution will work with your game.

Games are usually at the forefront of technology. The designer often has to go out into uncharted territory when developing a game concept because of the constant pressure to always find something new and unique. Therefore, as a designer you also have to be a bit of a scientist. Many times the solution to solving the problem of finding something new is unknown, and the only way to find out if a solution will work is to experiment with it.

Sometimes there is no adequate solution to a problem. Either the technology is just not robust enough to handle the game as designed or the planned solution just isn't fun. In those cases, the designer has to find a viable compromise. In other words, if what you thought would work just doesn't, what else will?

A big area of compromise in games is between graphics and technology. Ever since the beginning of game development, there has always been pressure to have the best game graphics possible. It is easy for the artist to create great-looking models and scenes, but if the game technology can't support them, they might as well not even try. The compromise is in doing the best possible graphics within the technology limitations of the game.

Is It Fun?

The key ingredient for any successful game is what is called the fun factor. The fun factor is very hard to pin down. What is fun for one person is not for another. Some people love to sit for hours doing matching games, while matching games drive other people crazy. Some people love a fast-paced first-person shooter, and others find that the first-person perspective makes them sick. About the best a designer can do is to make the game fun for its intended audience.

The intended audience for a game is the basic group of people that the game is targeted toward. For example, if the game is targeted toward business travelers waiting at airports, a fun game may be an interesting puzzle game. On the other hand, if the game is targeted to young teenage boys who love head-to-head competition, a fun game might be a sports game that they can play over the Internet.

By defining the intended audience, the designer can narrow the requirements for fun to a specific group of people who have common traits. Once the group is narrowed down, the designer then can start to work on understanding what that group feels is fun. Some of the best game ideas come not from professional designers but rather from the people who play the games. The designer should listen to the audience, much the same way a comedian listens to them in a monologue. The comedian listens for the laughter. When the audience is laughing, the joke was a success with the audience. When the audience is not laughing, the joke didn't work. The designer needs to watch the target audience playing games to see what they enjoy.

Often a game designer will get stuck in the trap of designing games that are fun for himself. The industry is riddled with what I call nerd games. These are games that are very fun for a very small group of people, namely the guys who develop games. The game designer needs to remember that in most instances what is fun for a sophisticated game professional is not fun for the average consumer. And likewise, what is fun for the average consumer may be very boring for someone who plays games all the time.

Some of the biggest problems occur in designing games for children. Children often have limited motor skills (the ability to control fine small movements of the body), causing them to have problems with sensitive game controls. They also have differences in their attention span. A six-year-old child is very different from a nine-year-old child. Designing a game for a three-year-old is a lot different from designing a game for a twelve-year-old. For one thing, most three-year-olds don't know how to read. The designer needs to study the intended audience as much as she or he studies games.

Do You Like to Work?

The aspiring game designer will soon find that designing games requires a lot of work. The good news is that most of the work is fun, so it is not as hard to do as let's say digging ditches or washing cars. Although, some people may like digging ditches and washing cars so that may not be the best example. Aspiring game designers tend to like working on games more than almost anything else.

Even if you like the work involved in designing games, you will find that it can get tedious at times. Some of the work can get downright boring. I have yet to find the creation of asset lists to be an inspiring event.

Just to give you an idea of what I mean by game design being a lot of work, let's take a look at some of the jobs a game designer has to do.

Writer

A game designer is a writer. Designing games means writing a design document, some of which can be very extensive, with several hundred pages of information.

Artist

Although being an artist is not necessary, the game designer must be able to sketch well enough to give the concept artist direction on creating the art for the design document. Even non-artists can learn to sketch. If you don't draw well, try taking a couple drawing classes.

Graphic Designer

The game designer is responsible for the look of the game design document. The concept artist may do the actual graphic design, but the game designer is the one who has to come up with the direction for that design.

Programmer

Game designers are not necessarily programmers, but they do have to design how the game works, which is the basis for the programming of the game. They also have to design the game within the limitations of the hardware and software, which also takes technical knowledge.

Manager

Designers manage the design team. The game designer is the leader of everyone involved in the creation of the design document. This means that the designer is in charge of several individuals and has to manage their work, including things such as budgeting, work schedules, and team relations.

Salesperson

Game designers have to sell their ideas to a number of people. They are responsible for presenting the game idea to everyone involved in the game. Most of the time, the people who are funding the development of the game need to have the game idea explained to them. The designer is the person who has to do the explanation. In larger game companies, upper management requires reviews of the games. The designer is the one who has to convince management that the game is good and progressing on schedule.

Researcher

Games are always trying to push technology in some way. The designer needs to stay abreast of the latest technology. This usually requires extensive research. The designer also needs to be current with the latest trends in the market.

Game Tester

A good game designer is a good game tester. Every aspect of the game design has to be tested to make sure the game is good. The only way to know if a game design is good is to test it.

Communicator

Good game designers are good communicators. The whole idea of creating a game design document is to help everyone involved in the game understand what the game is and what to expect when it is finished. The designer will find that he or she will often have to explain the game to any number of people. The more high profile the game, the more the designer will have to communicate.

Needless to say, there is a lot to do as a game designer. These are just a few of the many jobs a game designer has to do when creating a game. There are probably more, but this will do for now.

Dedication to Games

A good game designer is dedicated to the craft of making games. He spends countless hours studying games and game development. It is a passion for great games that drives the designer to create better and better games.

A dedication to games means that games are important in your life. If you enjoy games but don't really think of them other than as a form of entertainment, then game design is probably not for you. Games are very complex. Understanding them to the point where you can successfully create them is a job that takes more than just an interest; it takes years of dedicated work to master the media.

The game designer should do more than just play games. Playing games is a great way to learn more about them, but it doesn't give the designer the understanding that is necessary for coming up with great game designs. The designer should study and analyze games. The designer should spend time just thinking about games. The designer should imagine new games and play them in his or her mind.

A good practice is to keep a game design journal. The journal is kind of like an artist's sketchbook. In the journal, the designer writes and sketches game ideas. If you plan on being a designer, keeping the journal with you is important because you never know when a great idea will come around.

Getting Started

I am sure you are anxious to get started, so let's get going on some game design. We are going to start on something simple and then move on to a few more complex exercises. Okay, here is your first assignment.

Assignment

A hardware company is looking for a fun puzzle game for its Web site. They have asked you to design something that is simple yet fun. They want the game to use products found in a hardware store, such as tools, bolts, nails, and so on. The game should be easy to play and learn.

There's the assignment. Short, sweet, and to the point. Now what do you do?

Research

The first thing that you need to do is learn about hardware stores. Get a pad and a pencil and go down to your local hardware store. Wander around and see what is inside. Think about the items and write down some game ideas. You might not get any good ideas right away, but keep working at it until you have at least five game ideas. You need at least that many to start narrowing down your options. Make sure that there are some significant differences between your ideas. You need to put some thought into this. If all your game ideas are basically the same game with only minor differences, you really only have come up with one idea.

When you get back from the hardware store, set your ideas aside and do some research into puzzle games. You may have some already on your computer or on some of your game systems. Take some time and play a few puzzle games to refresh your memory. In your notepad, write down an entry for each game you play and why you found it fun or why it wasn't fun. Don't worry yet about your game—just spend some time analyzing some games.

If you don't have any puzzle games around the house, try looking on the Internet. There are several places that have puzzle games. Many of them will let you play them for free. Try some of these games and see if there are any that you like. Write down an entry for each game.

Another good source for information on games is to look at the game review Web sites. These reviews are helpful because they have information on many games that you might not be able to find and play. Look up puzzle games and read the reviewer's impression of the game. You can also find game reviews in game magazines, if you have any.

Create

You should be ready to start the creative task of coming up with a game idea. If you have done the work in researching as outlined above, your mind should be filled with information on puzzle games and hardware stores. Now you can apply some of the knowledge you have gained creatively thinking of some games.

Get out your trusty game design journal and start working on some ideas. Give each idea about a page in the journal. Write short game descriptions and make some sketches of how you think the game will look and how it will be played. Don't worry about feasibility yet. You need to get the ideas coming. You will go through an analysis phase later, so it is better to just think of ideas. If you start to analyze your ideas now, you will slow the creative process and may not get the one good idea that will be the winner you are looking for.

It might be a good idea for you to return to the hardware store. Putting yourself in the environment is often a great way to spark some innovative new game ideas. While at the store, you should take the opportunity to talk to the people who work there. Get some insight from them on what customers do while in the store. It might also be a good idea to just spend some time observing people.

Okay, this next step may sound a little crazy, but try it anyway. It is time to do some creative combinations. Sometimes to be creative, you have to stretch things a little bit. Thinking outside the box is what some people call it.

Start thinking of places and things that are seemingly unrelated to a hardware store. Say, as for instance a city park or a bakery. Try putting the two seemingly unrelated things together to see if any new ideas come up. Sometimes the most amazing things happen when we take a look at unrelated things. The formal wear store has hardware in it. In fact, they probably couldn't do business without it. The bakery uses items from a hardware store as well.

Now here is the real fun part of the process. Think of things people do. Puzzle games are repetitious activities. Think about the activities that people do every day. Think about work, sports, school, entertainment, and so on. Apply each activity you think of to a hardware store. What would it be like to play golf with items found in a hardware store? What would it be like to play volleyball inside a hardware store? What about eating out with items from a hardware store? Would it be interesting to try to use items from a hardware store to build something?

I hope you are having fun with this project. If this is hard for you, try loosening up and not putting so much pressure on yourself. Games are supposed to be fun. Creating them should be fun, too.

By now you should have several pages in your game design journal filled with game ideas. It is now time to move to the next step and sort your ideas.

Analyze

Now it is time to really get to work. You need to take your game ideas and start working with them to see which ones are good and which ones you need to discard.

Just because you discard a game idea for this project does not mean that it is not a good idea. It may just not work for this game. That is why it is a good idea to keep the journal. There may be a game in the future that will be perfect for something that you discarded on this project.

It is often useful to rank your ideas in the important areas of the game to see which ones are better suited to the project than others. Figure 2.3 is a screen shot of how the game ideas might be ranked using a spreadsheet. The ideas are listed in the leftmost column, and the ranking categories are listed across the top. In this example, only five categories are chosen to keep this process simple. Some games may have many more categories.

Figure 2.3
Use a spreadsheet to rank the game ideas.

The categories chosen for rankings are fun, unique, graphics, simple to learn, and fulfills mission. The designer, projecting as best as possible how they will turn out in a finished game should rank each one.

Fun

Fun is a measure of how much fun the designer feels the game will be when finished. You have to imagine playing the game. Does the game seem to be fun?

Unique

How unique is the idea? You need to rank the game based on whether the game is doing something that other games don't do.

Graphics

Will the game look good? This one is a little harder to judge, but it is still important. You have to imagine how the game will look on screen. Will it be attractive? Can you think of a way to make this game look good?

Simple to Learn

How complex is the game? Will it be easy for the player to pick up and play, or will it need to have extensive instructions?

Fulfills Mission

Does the game fulfill the mission of a puzzle game that uses things found in a hardware store? How well does it fulfill that mission?

In Figure 2.4 the rankings are filled out for each category.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	Game idea	Fun	Unique	Graphics	Simple to learn	Fulfills mission	Totals	
1	Game idea	Fun	Unique	Graphics	Simple to learn	Fulfills mission	Totals	
2	Idea 1	3	2	7	1	9	22	
3	Idea 2	5	3	5	2	8	23	
4	Idea 3	2	1	6	3	3	15	
5	Idea 4	7	5	4	2	6	24	
6	Idea 5	4	3	3	4	3	17	
7	Idea 6	9	4	6	5	7	31	
8	Idea 7	2	2	7	3	5	19	
9	Idea 8	5	3	5	7	8	28	
10	Idea 9	1	1	4	8	7	21	
11	Idea 10	0	5	5	4	7	21	
12	Idea 11	9	3	3	6	4	25	
13	Idea 12	5	2	2	7	8	24	
14	Idea 13	8	5	1	3	9	26	
15	Idea 14	3	3	4	5	1	16	
16	Idea 15	8	4	3	6	2	23	
17	Idea 16	2	2	6	5	5	20	
18	Idea 17	7	2	4	7	3	23	
19	Idea 18	3	3	5	3	7	21	
20	Idea 19	8	2	7	6	3	26	
21	Idea 20	4	5	3	4	7	23	
22								
23								
24								
25								
26								
27								
28								
29								

Figure 2.4
Fill out the rankings for each idea.

These are only a few of the considerations a designer might have for creating a game. Others are cost, difficulty to develop, available technology, available resources, and file size, to name just a few.

The rankings should be weighted by the importance of the category to the success of the game. Weighting a category means that more points are possible for items that are more important. In this case, a new line is added to the spreadsheet to show how the categories are weighted. Notice in Figure 2.5 that fun and fulfills mission are both equal in importance and are weighted the highest, followed by simple to learn, graphics, and unique. This is a subjective call. Every game will be different in what is most important and what is least important. Figure 2.5 shows the ranking line with the possible points for each category.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
	Game idea	Fun	Unique	Graphics	Simple to learn	Fulfills mission	Totals
2	Possible	10	5	7	8	10	40
3	Idea 1	3	2	7	1	9	22
4	Idea 2	5	3	5	2	8	23
5	Idea 3	2	1	6	3	3	15
6	Idea 4	7	5	4	2	6	24
7	Idea 5	4	3	3	4	3	17
8	Idea 6	9	4	6	5	7	31
9	Idea 7	2	2	7	3	5	19
10	Idea 8	5	3	5	7	8	28
11	Idea 9	1	1	4	8	7	21
12	Idea 10	0	5	5	4	7	21
13	Idea 11	9	3	3	6	4	25
14	Idea 12	5	2	2	7	8	24
15	Idea 13	8	5	1	3	9	26
16	Idea 14	3	3	4	5	1	16
17	Idea 15	8	4	3	6	2	23
18	Idea 16	2	2	6	5	5	20
19	Idea 17	7	2	4	7	3	23
20	Idea 18	3	3	5	3	7	21
21	Idea 19	8	2	7	6	3	26
22	Idea 20	4	5	3	4	7	23

Figure 2.5
Along the top are the possible points for each category.

Using a spreadsheet is helpful because you can easily total and compare ideas with it. The column on the right of the spreadsheet is the total number of points for each game idea. Figure 2.6 highlights the totals column.

Game idea	Fun	Unique	Graphics	Simple to learn	Fulfills mission	Totals
Possible	10	5	7	8	10	40
Idea 1	3	2	7	1	9	22
Idea 2	5	3	5	2	8	23
Idea 3	2	1	6	3	3	15
Idea 4	7	5	4	2	6	24
Idea 5	4	3	3	4	3	17
Idea 6	9	4	6	5	7	31
Idea 7	2	2	7	3	5	19
Idea 8	5	3	5	7	8	28
Idea 9	1	1	4	8	7	21
Idea 10	0	5	5	4	7	21
Idea 11	9	3	3	6	4	25
Idea 12	5	2	2	7	8	24
Idea 13	8	5	1	3	9	26
Idea 14	3	3	4	5	1	16
Idea 15	8	4	3	6	2	23
Idea 16	2	2	6	5	5	20
Idea 17	7	2	4	7	3	23
Idea 18	3	3	5	3	7	21
Idea 19	8	2	7	6	3	26
Idea 20	4	5	3	4	7	23

Figure 2.6
The right-hand column contains the totals for each game idea.

It should be very easy to see which games have the most potential. Figure 2.7 shows the game idea with the highest total and the one with the second highest total.

Using this method, you should be able to select two or three game ideas to analyze further. The idea here is not to make the final decision, but rather to get the list down to two or three ideas that can be developed into game concepts.

Figure 2.7
Two games with the highest point totals

In most cases the designer is not the person who chooses the final game idea. Most of the time the person or persons who make that decision are the ones who are paying for the game. In this case that would be the hardware store executive. The designer should present two or three game ideas to the hardware executive, who then will make the choice based on the concept document.

The Concept Document

The concept document is a 1–10-page document that briefly states the basic game concept. It will usually have a few pieces of concept art to help the readers better visualize the game. It may also have some charts or graphs to explain parts of the game that might be hard to express in written form.

Every concept document is different because the game and the purpose of the document are different. If the document is going to a major publisher for review, it should be a formal

document with extensive work on its design and appearance. If it is an internal document, it may not need so much formality.

Regardless of who the document is going to, there are a few common elements that should be in every concept document. They are as follows:

- Game title
- Game platform
- Game genre
- Basic gameplay
- Basic premise
- Main characters (if any)
- Cost to develop
- Time to develop
- Development team

Game Title

The game title is the working title for the game. A title has to go through a legal check to make sure it is free to use. Most companies want to trademark a game's title. This is a job for attorneys. About the best a game designer can do is come up with a working title for a game concept.

Game Platform

The game platform is the machine the end user will be playing the game on. For example, the assignment for the puzzle game project is an online game. Its platform is online PC systems.

Game Genre

Game genre means the type of game. In this case, the game is a puzzle game. There are several common names for genre in the industry, such as RTS (real-time strategy), FRP (fantasy role playing), RPG (role playing game), racing, fighting, FPS (first-person shooter), sports, adventure, simulation, puzzle, and hunting/fishing.

n o t e

Sometimes it is useful to give the reader of the concept document a point of reference. Some games may not fit nicely into any specific genre. It is often helpful when dealing with these types of games to find existing games that have similarities to the game being designed. In the concept document, the designer can mention the existing games and then explain why the new game is similar and how it is different.

Basic Gameplay

It is important to explain in the concept document exactly how the game will be played. What will the game view be? Will it be first person or third person? What does the player do in the game? How will the player control the game? How does the player advance through the game? How does the player win the game? Is there more than one play mode? All of these questions and more need to be answered in the basic gameplay section of the concept document.

The basic gameplay section of the concept document is usually the longest. It is often accompanied with artwork and charts.

Basic Premise

The basic premise of a game is the underlying story as it relates to the game. Some games, like adventure games for instance, may have an elaborate premise, whereas others, like puzzle games for example, might be very simple. The premise is the reason for the game, or in other words, it answers the why question about the game.

Main Characters

If the game has any characters, they should be explained in the concept document. Most documents will also include a sketch of the main characters. If the game does not have any characters, this section can be left out of the document.

Cost to Develop

The concept document should have some estimates of the cost of development for the game. At this stage the exact cost for development is hard to define. The designer needs to take into account as many factors as possible and come up with a range that the development costs will fall into. For example, a game might work out to cost in the range of $1.2 to $1.5 million dollars.

Time to Develop

Related to cost of development is the time it will take to create the game. This is critical for some projects because there may be a specific date by which the game needs to ship. To come up with an estimated time to develop the game, the designer has to do a preliminary production plan. We will talk about production plans later in the book.

Development Team

A very important consideration for anyone looking at a concept document is the development team. The development team needs to have the ability to complete the game. It is one thing to come up with a great game idea. It is another to actually be able to create the

game. The designer needs to include in the concept document information on each of the key team members, including their education and relevant game development experience.

Writing the Document

Now that you understand what a concept document is, try writing one for the puzzle game ideas that you just created. Do the best job you can. If you are not a good artist, see if you can get a friend to help you with the art. You should be able to handle the rest on your own.

Start by taking the list of topics in the concept document section of this chapter as your table of contents. You may need some subsections under the basic gameplay and the basic premise. Do the best you can. It will be a good practice for you as you work your way through the rest of this book.

Try to make the document look as professional as possible. If you can, make the document's appearance similar to the game concept. At a bare minimum, give the document a nice title page that includes a picture from the game.

Once you have completed the concept document, you are finished with the first exercise. How do you feel you did? Did you enjoy the work? What was fun and what was hard?

Character Design

For the next exercise, you will be designing a character for a game. This is a little different process from designing a full game. Some games are so large that several people have to work on the design. A typical assignment for a designer on a large game might be to design a character for the game.

Exercise

Design a character for a fantasy game. The character should be the female heroine. She should be beautiful and strong. She will be one of several characters that the players can choose from in the game.

The process for designing characters is both a visual and a written exercise. In a design document there is both a written description of the character and a graphic to show what the character will look like.

Research

As in the previous exercise, start by doing some research. One of the toughest jobs of the designer is getting ideas for good characters. Designing a good character takes a lot of work. Sometimes you might have several ideas, go through dozens of sketches, and still not have just the right character. So where can an artist look for inspiration for characters?

One of the best sources for human characters is to observe your surroundings. Sometimes the best inspiration comes from normal day-to-day observance of people. A good practice is to go to a public place with a sketchbook in hand and draw. Figure 2.8 shows a page from a sketchbook dealing with everyday people in a public place. The sketches are done very quickly with very little emphasis on detail. Most people don't hold a pose for very long, so the object is to get some quick general impressions.

Figure 2.8
Quick character studies from everyday life

note

Some people become uncomfortable if they know someone is drawing them. If a drawing is recognizable as a specific person, you should always get permission. Unrecognizable, quick sketches usually are not a problem. A good way to avoid problems when drawing in a public place is to wear sunglasses. Sunglasses prevent direct eye contact with people, making it less obvious who you are drawing.

Another great source for inspiration for characters is to look at the work of other artists. There are many great examples of characters in great masterpieces of art, comic books, movies, and other media. All of these media have great examples of character design. One of the best ways to be the best is to learn from the best. Study how other artists dealt with and solved the problem of designing a character.

Copying great masterpieces is a long-standing tradition in art that goes back to the Middle Ages. However, the copying should be done only as a study and never as an original piece of artwork that the artist uses for a commercial purpose.

Creativity

Once you have gathered the information from the research stage, you can start work on creating some characters. The idea here is to get just the right character for the game. Use the clues in the exercise assignment to break down what you need. Now take a look at the reference material you have gathered. Write some quick descriptions of some characters that might work for the design. Do about 12 different descriptions. Try coming at the problem from several different angles.

Each description should be about one paragraph long. The following is an example.

Description

Aloena is a princess of the forest kingdom Fairwood. She is tall and athletic. She has long hair that she typically keeps tied back behind her head. She is a spell caster and carries no physical weapons because they just get in her way. She practices forest magic, which is a school of nature magic. Her skin is fair, and her eyes are green.

Aloena is about 22 years old and has been trained in woods lore by the best trackers in the kingdom. She is proud of her accomplishments, yet she is pleasant to be around. She loves to sing and play the flute.

Does the description give you a pretty good feeling for the character? Can you picture her in your mind? Each of your descriptions should give enough information that if you gave it to an artist, she or he would be able to create a good looking character just from what you have written.

Create a quick sketch of each character to go with the description.

Analyze

Once you have your character descriptions, it is time to select the one you feel will be the best for the game. Set out each description and pick the one you like the most. Ask a few of your friends to give you their opinions. If you want to create a selection grid similar to what you did for the first exercise, go ahead and give it a try.

Selecting characters is often a very subjective process, and there are no hard rules for what you do. Just eliminate each character one by one until you have only one left.

The Character Design

The character design is usually a one-page document that has your brief character description and a rendering of the character. If you don't draw well, have an artist friend draw the character picture. Figure 2.9 shows the character from the description.

The character shows confidence and strength by her stance, with her legs braced apart and her arms at a ready position. Her jewelry shows her to be a woman of substance, as does her embroidered tunic. She has an athletic, elongated build.

Now just put the character description and picture together and you have completed another exercise. Are you starting to get the hang of how to design games?

Summary

So what do you think of being a game designer so far? I hope you are having fun.

In this chapter, several important aspects of being a designer were covered. You should now have a good idea of what a game designer does and what a game designer is. You should also have a good understanding of the attributes of a good game designer.

Figure 2.9
The character sketch should match the character description.

Hopefully you followed the exercises in the chapter. If you did, you will have learned about designing games and designing characters.

In the next few chapters you will be learning about creating a game design document of your own. Each chapter will cover a specific aspect of creating a game design document. In this chapter we covered the game concept document. I suggest you take some time and create a game concept document for the game you will be designing as you go through the book.