

Chapter 7: The High-Level Design Document

All games start somewhere, usually with a burst of creative inspiration. But once the initial idea has taken root, it is time to share it. That means creating documentation for others to review. Most often, the first pages generated in the development process come together in what is called a High-level Design Document (also referred to as a Concept Document). Here's the structure we use in creating ours.

THE ONE-SHEET

The one-sheet, also called the Executive Summary, is up front in your design document. You may even find that you create a separate one-sheet or executive summary document of your game. The reasons for this are numerous. First, this is a fast way to pitch the game to busy decision-makers. Secondly, it allows everyone else who might be interested, or have input, to see an encapsulation of your vision. Perhaps most important, it forces you to figure out exactly what is the core gameplay experience you're creating.

Often, we'll start by trying to write the manual. If you can do this, and communicate all of the ideas that you hope to achieve in the game, then chances are good that your design is solid. You'll find that the longer and more detailed the document gets early on in the process, the more "idea drift" you are likely to experience (A one-sheet can be anywhere from one to five pages in length. Go figure).

So start by trying to write the one-sheet. The elements of the one-sheet are as follows:

TITLE

The title of your game. If you are not yet settled on a title, it is a good idea to include (working title) in parenthesis. Spend some time on this and really think it through, because your title is your opening salvo. It should be something memorable, and should tie into the main theme, action, character, or genre of your game. Will a catchy title be enough to sell your game? Of course not, but at this point it can do two important things for you: It can set the title (and by extension, your game idea) in the mind of your audience and it can draw them into your document.

GENRE

Some common genres are FPS (First-Person Shooter), Third-Person Action, Stealth, RPG (Role-playing Game), Simulation (Driving, Flying, etc.), Survival-Horror, RTS (Real-time Strategy), Platformer (sometimes called Hoppy-Jumpy), and Sports. Sometimes, your game will include more than one element from multiple genres. If so,

then call it a hybrid, so you have to list the genres that best describe the envisioned gameplay. Listing a genre is important, because, like film studios, developers often have a slot to fill, and they are looking for a specific type of game, or gameplay.

VERSION

Usually, we'll put a version number on our document, but not a date. Why? Anything with a date has a shelf life attached to it. If you submit a document in January, and it is reviewed by a publisher in May, it doesn't feel as fresh and new when a decision maker reads it. Also, it implies that a lot of time has fallen off the calendar since you first took the project out. By simply assigning a version number instead, you can keep track of the document, verify that your executive has the latest draft, but do so in a way that does not draw attention to how long

you've been shopping the project. Remember, everyone likes to think that they are the first ones to see a new idea, and that the idea is coming to them "oven fresh." Don't put anything on your document that can make it look stale. Note: this same note also applies to any "Header or Footer" that you choose to put on your document.

THE BIG IDEA

Put a brief synopsis of your content (story, character, worlds) and your gameplay here. In one or two paragraphs, describe the essence of the game experience.

CATEGORY

Similar to genre, here go ahead and list a few games that compare to your title. You might say: "Game X (your game) is a unique experience that combines the fast-paced action of Game Y with the open environment worlds of Game Z."

If you have a unique gameplay or content "hook," this is where you should feature it.

Also, is your game Single Player, Multiplayer (local, network, wireless or Internet), Cooperative, etc.? If it's Single Player, do you have a "campaign" (a series of missions or levels with a possible narrative storyline that progresses as the player advances through the game)? If so, this is where to put a brief description, and if possible, compare it to other games in the marketplace.

One final note: Never badmouth another game in an attempt to build up your own. Always make favorable comparisons, never negative ones. And try to pick games that are successful in the marketplace. It should be obvious that you don't want to say that your game is going to be a comparable to another game that has failed; yet we see this done all the time.

PLATFORMS

List the target platforms for your game (PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, PC, etc.). Note that each time you list a potential platform for your game, you will need to explain why it is important to release the game for that platform. Some games are better than others as multisku titles. If your

game is really optimized for a single platform, say so, and why.

LICENSE

If the game is based on a license (film, book, comic, etc.), describe the license here. Also, if the game is utilizing licenses (such as identifiable brands), name them. Finally, if this is an original intellectual property, briefly explain why it can become a license (lay out the foundations of the franchise). Remember that your reader is looking for more than a one-shot deal. Think about how can your game be more than a game.

PLAY MECHANIC

This is the core gameplay and control of the game. For instance, in a driving simulation, the play mechanic would be driving the car. However, this can go an additional step to include unique elements, such as crashing the car, upgrading the car, or using it to run over pedestrians. The play mechanic describes how the player interacts with the gaming experience, and how and why it will be compelling and fun for him to do so.

TECHNOLOGY

Provide a summary of the technology you plan to use for the game. If you are using middleware, list the engine and tools that will be employed. If the engine is proprietary, list its key features. Note that there are separate documents that will have to be included from the

engineering team that will fully detail

the technology for the game (often called a TDR—Technical Design Review). That is not anything that you need to worry about for this part of the document, though you should have an accurate description of the tech, and why it is the best solution to execute the game.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Who do you expect to play this game and why? You can describe a specific demographic, but it is more helpful to describe a type of gamer.

KEY FEATURES—USPS (UNIQUE SELLING POINTS)

Here, list the key elements of your game that make it unique. Think of these as the bullet points that would be listed on the back of the box. Keep this to about four to six features. You can describe more later in the document if you need to; for now, you are hitting the high points.

MARKETING SUMMARY

This is a quick list of why this game will do well in the marketplace when compared to others. Also, think of “hooks” that marketing people can get excited about because early on, they—more than almost anyone else—determine the viability of your project. If marketing doesn’t think they can sell your game, it doesn’t matter how groundbreaking you are, how many champions you have at the publisher, or how cool the lead character is. You’re dead in the water if marketing is against it.

Describe how the player will control the game and advance. Is the game “twitchy”? Does it rely on combos that will take a while a while to learn? Are there “skill levels”? Does the game have multiple play modes, such as shooting and driving? Are there any minigames? Is there an inventory system? Can you “level up” the hero character? And

so on.

As with the big idea, describe the core mechanics in as straightforward a manner as possible.

THE HIGH-LEVEL DESIGN DOCUMENT

Now we are into the meat of the document. Everything that has come before should be no more than three to five pages in length (and separate it from the rest of the document so that, if need be, it can be a “leave behind” that is independent from the rest of the High-level Document). As we move beyond the one-sheet, we start filling in the details, and providing more specifics about the envisioned game we want to create.

PRODUCT OVERVIEW

Reintroduce your core game concept, this time fleshing it out. If you have a lead character, this is also the time to start filling in their details.

THE CORE CONCEPT

Describe the main elements of the game. Include any and all of the following things that are relevant to your title, but don’t extensively detail them here (that will come later). Instead, show how each of these elements incorporates into the larger gameplay experience:

- Characters (Including the PC—Player Character)
- Worlds
- Gameplay
- Combat
- Hand to hand
- Weapons
- Movement

- Interactions
- Vehicles
- Story
- Realism versus Fantasy (Fiction)
- Controls

PLAYER CHARACTER

Now describe the player character in detail, and their journey through the game. Note that if you have more than one character that the player will control, describe them all here. What do you hope to accomplish in the relationship between the player and their character? How will you achieve this?

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION OF GAMEPLAY—AKA THE “GRABBER”

In this section, take a key set piece from the game, and describe it as if you were telling a story. Often, we’ll put the player-controlled actions in a different font, or bold them, to make them stand out from what the player is seeing on the screen. What you want to impart is the interaction/reaction dynamic (cause/effect) of the game, and how that manifests itself on screen.

The Grabber is also referred to as the hook. By that, we mean something that is intended to hook (or grab) your audience’s (or readers’) imagination. This is where a cool, over-the-top element or set piece from your game should go. Think how can intrigue people with the Grabber and leave them wanting more.

STORY

Here you provide a beat sheet of story and how it integrates with the key gameplay. Detail how the story enhances the experience. Key off the moments you explored in the Grabber.

INTERFACE

The interface is how your player(s) will interact with the experience. Describe the elements of the interface: Are they configurable by the player? Is the interface intuitive and easy to use?

OBSTACLES

List the main obstacles that the player as the hero must overcome to win the game. These can include:

- Enemies (thugs, cannon fodder, midlevel bosses, level bosses, end boss, etc.)
- Environment
- Scripted events
- Puzzles

INTERACTIONS

Describe how the player interacts with the game to advance through the experience:

- NPCs (communicating, controlling, etc.)
- Worlds (exploration, manipulation)
- Weapons (combat)
- Equipment (gadgets)

LEVEL WALKTHROUGH

Take the reader through one level of the game, describing all of the key action, and interaction that takes place. What will the player experience? How are gameplay and story integrated?

INTRO CINEMATIC (IF APPLICABLE)

Describe the intro cinematic that leads the player to the first part of the

game, or to the shell screen.

GAME SHELL (FRONT END)

Detail the game shell (start screen, load screen):

- Options—List the options available to the player (widescreen, sound, autosave, etc.)
- Load/Save—Describe the details of saving and loading a game.

CONTROLLER CONFIGURATION

This has to do with button mapping (assigning buttons on the controller to specific functions you can perform during gameplay). Note that this will often change during the development of the game, so just lay out your best version of the proposed controls (everyone realizes that these will change, but mapping a controller will also show you if you are thinking about too many complex interactions—if you can't map it, you can't play it). Also, if the player can custom-map the controls, detail that here.

CHARACTER ACTIONS

List the actions your playable character can perform.

- Movement. Describe how you control movement.
- Using Objects. List how you interact with objects.
- Character Interaction. Describe how you interact with other characters.
- Combat Description. As precisely as you can, list the elements and actions of combat in the game.
- H2H (Hand-to-Hand) Moves. Include a list of the various fighting moves that the player can employ during hand-to-hand combat if it is part of the game.
- Weapons. Detail of the main weapons you can use.

- Other Items You Can Control. These are items such as combat within vehicles. If this is your primary gameplay, then it should obviously be listed first.

EXPLORATION

Describe how the player moves through the world:

- Linear versus free roaming
- Advancing through levels
- Advancing the story
- Manipulation
- Using/taking objects (items)
- Setting off triggers

INTERFACE

This is a description of the user interface for the game:

- Components
- Inventory
- Items
- Weapons

DIRECT EFFECTS ON CHARACTER

Describe how the player utilizes, maintains, gathers, and loses health during gameplay. Also, if they are affected by power-ups, which can increase their abilities, describe how this works:

- Health
- Damage
- Armor
- Replenishing health and armor
- Character death
- Power-Up

LEVELS

In this part of the document, create a list of the levels of the game. Include how the player progresses from one level to another. Often, the number of levels is a direct reflection of the size/scope (ambitions) of the game. Keep this as realistically feasible as possible for the schedule and budget you are proposing as you describe:

- Descriptions by level
- Key enemies, NPCs per level
- Story elements

ART

If at all possible, attach any concept art here, including:

- Character designs
- Level maps
- Weapon/Item concept art
- World concept art
- Sample textures
- Sample interface
- Sample front end (game shell)
- Cinematics storyboards

CUT-SCENE AND STORY SYNOPSIS

Include a breakdown of the main narratives for the game:

- In-game (real time)
- Possible pre-renders
- Incidental (in-game) dialogue
- Event triggers that are story dependent

SOUND

Describe the sound needs for the game in as much detail as possible:

- Character sounds
- Enemy/NPC sounds
- Dolby digital 5.1
- Music
- Streaming audio within gameplay
- Using music and efx to set moods
- Licensed versus original compositions
- Vocal recording (voice-over) sessions and wish-list stunt casting (ideal actors for the roles)

DEVELOPMENT SUMMARY

If you are able, this is where you want to put a summary of the development process needed to complete the game. The summary would include things like:

- Preliminary schedule
- Budget
- Engineering acquisitions and schedules
- Personnel bios and resumes (of core team members)
- Risk Q-and-A (a list of questions and answers anticipating the most likely issues that will be raised by readers and decision-makers reviewing the document)

LOCALIZATION

This is the process of optimizing the game for other markets. Describe the complexity (or ease) of localizing your game. Cover the following:

- Overview
- Languages

- Text
- Speech (full localization)

CONCLUSION

This offers one last chance to pitch your game, and describe why it must be made.

Hopefully, this gives you an idea of all the elements and planning that go into dreaming up and presenting a video game. Next, we'll get more specific about the steps necessary to get into a script for the game.