

The High Concept Document

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A high concept document is primarily a sales tool, although you can write one for yourself as well, just as a way of keeping a record of ideas you've had. Think of it as a résumé for a video game. The point of a résumé is to quickly convey a job applicant's qualifications and try to get him an interview with the hiring manager. The point of a high concept document is to try to get a meeting with a producer, the chance to "pitch" the game. It should communicate rapidly and clearly the idea of the game—to whet her appetite and make her want to hear more about it. It doesn't matter that you haven't thought through all the details. You'll almost certainly end up changing several of the features during development anyway. The real point is to convey how much fun the game is going to be.

A high concept document should be two to four pages long and should take no more than 10 minutes to read. The longer it is, the less likely it is that the producer will finish reading it. It shouldn't have a title page; the title and your name appear at the top of the first page, and the text begins immediately. Its most important material must appear on the first page.

In the sections that follow, we describe the key elements of a high concept document.

High Concept Statement

After the title and your name, the document should begin with no more than two lines that state the idea of the game. In a commercial environment, it is imperative that the idea be instantly comprehensible because everyone's most precious commodity is time. If the producer doesn't get the idea in a sentence or two, he's going to worry that the publisher's sales staff, the wholesale buyers, and, most important, the retail customers won't get it either.

Of course, there are exceptions to this, and those exceptions are often some of the greatest and most innovative games. In *Pac-Man*, for example, the player is a circle that eats dots and fruit and is chased by ghosts in a maze—not exactly an obvious idea. However, *Pac-Man* is an arcade game, which means that people can actually watch it playing by itself before they commit their money. If you're going to propose something really strange for a retail game, you need to be very good at explaining it!



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Features

The rest of the first page should be devoted to a bulleted list of the key features of the game. Each item should consist of two or three sentences, no more. Remember that unless you have included a concept drawing, your reader doesn't have a mental picture of the game, so this section needs to build one for him. It's much more important at this point to convey the game's look and feel than to give the details about how it works. You're not selling the game's internal economy or its AI; you're selling the player's experience.

Avoid letting the feature list run on to the next page, if you can. More than about 10 bullet points in a row starts to look like a mass of text to read and discourages the eye. You might want to put the items that you think are the most fun, the most innovative, or the most important in bold type, just as you would in a résumé.

Overview

In this section, beginning on the second page, you summarize the key commercial considerations about the game: what machine it's for, who would buy it and why, and what you're hoping that the game will achieve. Consider including any or all the following items:

- **Player motivation.** This is a short statement that indicates what the player is trying to accomplish in the game—his role and goal. This helps indicate what sort of person the player is. He can be driven by a desire to compete, to solve puzzles, to explore, or whatever.
- **Genre.** Indicate the genre of the game, or if it is a mix of genres, indicate that.
- **License.** If you intend for the game to exploit a licensed property, say so here. Also include any facts and figures about the property's popularity, recognition value, and appeal to particular markets—but no more than a sentence or two.
- **Target customer.** What kind of person will buy this game? If age or sex is relevant, indicate that; more important, tell what other kinds of games they like to play.
- **Competition.** Are there already games on the market like this one? If so, list their names and indicate how this one is different or better than they are. This section isn't absolutely necessary, but it can reassure your reader that your game isn't just a copy of something else.
- **Unique selling points.** What's new in this game? How will it stand out from what has gone before?

- **Target hardware.** Tell what machine the game is intended for. Also indicate whether the game requires or can make optional use of any special hardware or accessories.
- **Design goals.** In this section, list your aims for the game as an experience. Don't just say "fun"—that's too broad. Be more specific. Are you trying to provide pulse-pounding excitement? Tension and suspense? Strategic challenge? Humor? A heartwarming story? The ability to construct or create something of the player's own? For each item, indicate in a sentence or two how the game will achieve the goal.

Further Details

In the last section, you can include additional material that you think the reader will enjoy learning about the game. You might include notes about the characters, the artwork, the music, the plot, or anything else that might pique his interest. Don't add so much that it makes the document too long, however.

A Sample High Concept Document

The following is an old high concept document for a simple console or arcade game. It was written before the currently popular "extreme" sports games existed, so although this game was never made, some of its ideas did find their way into other games.

Street Football—2 on 2!

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High Concept

The game at its grittiest. No pads, no helmets, no refs, no field. It's just you and the guys, a ball, and a lot of asphalt. Choose up sides and go for it, two on two.

Features

- The point of view is derived from fighting games, with large, detailed players.
- You choose teams just like in real sandlot football, taking turns picking players from the neighborhood crowd. Each person has a different look, attributes, and set of skills. Not all the kids are available all the time.
- The "field" is an urban alley about 50 yards long. Sidewalks are out of bounds. Garbage cans, potholes, and junked cars create additional obstacles. Tin cans mark the yard lines.

- As in a fighting game, it's the personal interactions that count. Dodging, ducking, faking, jumping, diving, and tackling are all essential parts of the game. Certain players have special moves or abilities.
- Five pass plays, five running plays, and the field goal make up the whole playbook. Field goals and extra points are kicked through two guys holding their arms out and up like goalposts.
- Health meters show the players' level of injury and fatigue. If you lose a player, you can pick another one, but you forfeit two touchdowns.
- Rules are adapted for street football: You have four downs to get into your opponent's territory, and four more downs to score. Otherwise, you turn over the ball—no punting. No penalties except offsides, but expect a fistfight if it gets too rough.
- Lots of comedy touches: ball breaks a window—player flies into garbage can—player slips and skids on oil slick—van drives down alley and flattens football—little kid rides tricycle across the field—rival gangs appear and tag buildings, and then disappear—nerdy bystander gets called home to supper.

Player Motivation

Players pick teams and try to win a 20-minute game of street football. In tournament mode, two-player teams made up of all available players compete for the championship.

Genre

Sports arcade action with strong fighting-game overtones.

Target Customer

Sports arcade players looking for something new.

Competition

None

Unique Selling Points

- Fighting moves in a sports game
- Fighter-type personalities in a sports game
- Comedy in a sports game
- Team selection process

Target Hardware

Sega Genesis or Super Nintendo

Design Goals

Simple: Very simple play-calling combined with fighting-game controls makes this an easy game to learn and play.

Hot: Fast, arcade-style action. No timeouts, no players running on and off the field, no stats or halftime summaries: just raw football.

Deep: Because teams are made up of pairs of different individuals, lots of possible teams are available. It takes a while to find the best pairings, not to mention playing your way to the top of the championship tree.

Characters

Each of the characters has certain attributes that define how well he or she plays, and each player also has a relationship with the others in the group. Characters who are not playing can be seen watching from the sidelines, and the observant player will notice things going on that give hints about them. Here are a few possible characters:

Joey: All-American guy, a natural quarterback. Great passing accuracy, good scrambling, good pass distance, very good speed. Not a great receiver or blocker. Good stamina.

Butch: The bruiser on the block. Big and strong, hard to tackle, but slow. Great pass distance, but poor accuracy. A fair receiver. Excellent stamina. A loner, he usually stands by himself—he's not especially good with any other player.

Dana: She's lithe and agile, a good scrambler, and the fastest runner of the bunch. A good receiver and a fairly accurate passer, but her range is short. Fair stamina. Dana is Joey's girlfriend and stands with her arm around him, so they make a good team.

...etc....