

The Game Treatment Document

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So you've shown your high-concept document to a number of producers or potential investors, and now one of them wants a meeting to hear more about it. (It can take quite a while before you find a producer who's interested enough to give you the time. Be persistent!) For that meeting, you'll normally bring along the key members of your development team and do a PowerPoint presentation showing the main features and concept art for the game. It would also be good to have some prototype code running that you can show; producers want proof that you can deliver. But after the meeting is over, people's memory of what you said will start to fade and get mixed up with impressions of other developers' pitches for their products. To keep your game fresh in the producer's mind, you need to give them something to remind them of it.

This is where the *game treatment* comes in. Like the high concept document, it's a selling tool whose function is to show off your idea in the best possible light. It's longer, though, typically 10 to 30 pages. The text and images should echo the content of the PowerPoint presentation. Don't try to cover all aspects of the game in rigorous detail; it's not the game's design script. The treatment should fill in a few of the gaps and answer some of the questions left by the high-concept document. This is the place for concept art, mocked-up screen shots, a little bit about the key characters, a brief description of the overall story arc, and anything else that's crucial to understanding what the game will look and feel like to play. You should also include an analysis of the competition and indicate the ways in which your game will be different—and better.

The treatment should be attractively produced: printed on good-quality paper and bound in a report cover with a clear transparent front so people can see the picture on the title page. You want the treatment to say "Pick me up!" to anyone who sees it lying around. Take copies of the game treatment to your pitch meeting, but don't hand them out at the beginning—people will flip through them instead of paying attention to you. Give them out after the meeting is over so that your audience will have something to keep. And be sure you bring enough copies for everyone—the more that are floating around the publisher's offices, the better.

What follows is a template for a game treatment. We don't have room to include an entire sample game treatment document here, but where it's helpful, we've included an excerpt from a hypothetical game treatment called *Psychic Warriors* to give you an idea of how it might read. Bear in mind that these excerpts are only partial, just to give you the flavor.



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Title Page

The title page includes the game's title and a short tagline to indicate what it's about. As usual, it should also give the author's name, the date, and any necessary copyright or confidentiality information. Don't overemphasize this material, however; you want it to look attractive and fun, not like a legal document. If at all possible, include a big color picture.

Psychic Warriors: Supernatural Combat Against the Forces of Evil

Executive Summary

Like the features list in the high-concept document, this is a one-page bulleted list of the most important things to know about the game. In effect, it copies all the best points from later in the document onto the first page. It doesn't matter that the text duplicates that found elsewhere; that's why it's called a summary.

- *Psychic Warriors* is an exciting new 3D action game from Foo Bar Productions. With an original and compelling storyline, *Psychic Warriors* combines paranormal and real-world combat against humans and huge morphing monsters. The psychic + military combat theme is not found in any product currently on the market.
- etc.

Game Overview

This is the first major section of the document, and it discusses what the game itself will be like. It is broken up into several subsections.

High Concept

The high-concept statement is identical to that in the high-concept document. You can include a little more introductory material here, however.

Diablo meets *The X-Files* in 3D.

A new threat has appeared on the streets of America: a mysterious drug code-named Indoctrinol. No one sent to investigate it has ever come back, and it's clear that something sinister is going on. To neutralize this menace, you're given command of a super-secret team of four psychic warriors—psychically talented and superbly trained individuals drawn from the Special Forces of the U.S. Armed Services.

Genre

This is similar to the genre statement in the high-concept document. Because this document is a little longer, you can afford to go into more detail—a short paragraph, if necessary—perhaps referring to other games that this game is similar to.

Mission-based small-squad action/tactical game combining psychic and real-world combat with a variety of weapons against humans and huge morphing monsters.

Hooks

A hook is any element—graphical, auditory, gameplay, storyline, theme—that will attract the player to the game and, you hope, keep her there. In effect, this section is the answer to the question “Why would anyone buy this game?” Don’t throw in the kitchen sink; choose your five or six best features to emphasize here.

- **Psychically skilled characters** go beyond usual military weapons. Many opportunities for exciting special effects here. There are no current competitors in this arena.
- **Third-person, squad-oriented perspective** permits simultaneous control over the team. This allows for interesting tactical behaviors such as covering fire and performing leapfrog maneuvers, which are more difficult to control in first-person games.
- **Morphing enemies** add visual variety and an element of suspense—is that a human or a monster in disguise?

License

If this game will use licensed property, indicate which one and how the game will exploit the features and public recognition value of the license. What you choose to include here depends a lot on the nature of the license. For example, in a driving game featuring sports cars, you’ll want to emphasize the performance characteristics of the actual car brands you’ve licensed. In a game based on a movie, you should talk about the characters and locations that appeared in the movie.

Gameplay Highlights

This section is a further list of elements that describe the experience of playing the game. Include anywhere from 10 to 20 different items. You don’t have to present detailed lists of characters, places, or objects at this point; just say what sorts of things and features you want to include in the full design.

- **Very large variety of animations**, to allow for a vast number of specialized activities.
- Many different **richly detailed environments** from around the world.
- **Intelligent situation-based movement** by AI-controlled characters, implementing proper tactics and muzzle discipline.

Online Highlights

If the game will include an online or multiplayer element, it will be useful to break it out into a separate section. Online play adds a whole new dimension to the game (unless it's online *only*, of course!) and brings its own challenges and rewards to both the publisher and the players.

- **Cooperative multiplayer play** via the Internet.
- **Web server offering matchmaking/team-assembly service** (à la *BattleNet*), tournaments, chat areas, and bulletin boards.
- **Unique missions available online** that are not provided in the retail product. A scoring system will allow for **competitive team play**.

Technology Highlights

This is where you talk about the great technology that your game will include, particularly anything innovative. If you're planning to license a game engine from a third party, name it here and indicate what it brings to the project. Don't go into programming details unless you're sure your audience will understand them; instead, discuss how the software will enhance the game. Technology doesn't necessarily mean only programming, either. Include anything that uses or requires advanced technology.

- **Morphing** polygonal enemies. Humans transform into hideous zombies and other monsters as they run at you.
- **Voice-recognition** of commands in single-player mode. In multiplayer mode, players can **talk to other team members live** using speakers and a microphone.

Art and Audio Highlights

If there are any special details about the art or audio that you want to include, do so here. Many games now feature soundtracks by rock or hip-hop groups, or dance tracks by famous DJs. These are obviously big selling points for the product, so be sure to mention them prominently. Likewise, if your art or animation includes anything special or unusual, point it out.

- Motion-captured animations drawn from **ex-Delta Force personnel** (for characters), **actors, dancers, and gymnasts** (for enemy humans and monsters).

Hardware

As in the high-concept document, state your target platform. If it is a personal computer rather than a console, also state the minimum configuration required to play the game.

Production Details

If you're writing a treatment as part of a pitch to a publisher, it's essential to say not only what the game will be like, but who will develop it and when, and what it will cost to develop. Good game ideas might be common, but good development teams are rare; the publisher will want to see evidence that you have the resources and experience to get the job done.

Current Status

Start by letting the publisher know where you are now. If you have actually begun some prototype work or proof-of-concept work, say so and indicate what features it contains. If the game is still no more than a gleam in your eye, leave this section out.

Completed prototype demonstrating military (but not psychic) game features. Includes:

- 3D landscape with moving water and foliage, bridges, buildings, vehicles.
- Player characters with visible differences, motion-captured animations, variety of movement modes.

Development Team

List the names and qualifications of your key people. Indicate what role each will play in the project. Don't include their entire résumés; nobody will read all that. Instead, give a one-paragraph synopsis of each person's history, including who they've worked for, in what position, and what games they already have credited to them. Include their education only if it's relevant and recent; producers are much more interested in knowing that someone has shipped a successful product than in where he went to school.

Don't include more than about six people here. If you have a big team, list only your managers and star performers.

Budget

Budgeting game development is a black art indeed and is far beyond the scope of this book. At this point in the process, without a signed contract, it's not worth trying to figure out a detailed budget—you can't know what everything will cost until you and the publisher have agreed on what all the game will include. However, you can give a rough estimate of how much you expect to spend overall. This lets the publisher know approximately how big your ambitions are. If you say \$500,000 here, they'll know you're talking about a small project; if you say \$5 million, they'll know you want to build a blockbuster.

At this point, nobody will hold you to whatever number you put down; it's only a guideline. The number that really matters will be the one in the contract.

Schedule

As with budgeting, there's no point in scheduling tasks in detail until you know what they're going to be. However, you can offer a proposed ship date for the product and some key milestones here, if you want to. Again, this information just serves as a guide to the publisher to indicate how ambitious the project is. The real schedule will be the one built into the development contract.

Competition

The section on competition was optional in the high-concept document, but at this point it's essential. A publisher will want to know what other games this product will be going up against in the marketplace, and how to position yours to beat them. Bear in mind that you're talking about a time 12 to 24 months in the future, depending on how long it will take to build your game. Games that are already on the market are unlikely to be its competition unless you expect their publishers to issue sequels or updates to them. The competition you need to list are the games that are under development at the same time as yours. Because they won't be advertised yet, you'll have to read the trade press and industry Web sites to find out what features they're expected to include.

For each competing product, list its name, who makes it, what machine it's for, and when it's expected to ship, along with a summary of its key features. Then indicate clearly what will make your game different from it and, above all, better.

Game World

In the last major section in the document, you can include anything else that's likely to get your reader fired up about the product. You've already discussed the gameplay, technology, and general features of the game, so this is the time to include background material that draws the reader deeper into your world.

Backstory

If your game has a story and characters, then presumably something has happened that created the game's primary challenge. Tell your reader briefly what happened in the days (or geologic ages, depending!) leading up to the beginning of the game.

The appearance of Indoctrinol has thrown America's national security apparatus into a panic. Everyone sent to investigate it has disappeared, including the elite Delta Force and Seal teams. It's clear that something special is called for. Searching the entire U.S. military, the government has found four—only four—superb soldiers who also have latent psychic abilities. After a few days of training, they're sent on their way: strangers to one another on a mission to the unknown.

Objective

What is the player's overall objective, the thing she is trying to achieve to complete the game? This doesn't have to be the "true" objective, however—the player can find evidence of a deeper and more serious problem as he plays.

Follow the trail of Indoctrinol back to its source, and wipe it out. This will take you to locations around the world, operating undercover to perform missions against Third-World dictators, drug lords, terrorists, organized crime, and anyone else who has anything to do with Indoctrinol.

Characters

If you've already defined the game's characters and they are important enough to help sell the game, include their names, pictures, backgrounds, and special abilities here.

Paul "Mayhem" Jackson

Psychic ability: Shield. Can project a protective shield around teammates.

Weapons: Chain gun, grenade launcher. Mayhem is a heavy-weapons expert.

Armor: Very heavy, which makes him relatively slow-moving.

Personality: Angry and ruthless over some event in his past.

Mission or Story Progression

Lay out the game's narrative arc as far as you know it. Document the twists and turns that the story might take, and indicate the way in which the player's success or failure will affect her progress through the game. For example, if the story is linear and the player must accomplish each scenario in order to proceed, say so; if it is branching, say that and explain how the player goes down one branch or another. Don't write a novel—this isn't the design script—but rather provide an outline for a novel, listing the key events in the plot.

In the single-player game, missions will progress from easy to hard as the team follows the drug back to its source. Initially dealing only with human drug dealers on a local scale, they will eventually take on smugglers, distributors, and manufacturers of the drug.

In later missions, it will become clear that there are demonic creatures among the humans, for reasons that are not initially clear. They will remain in human form for as long as possible, but when attacked hard enough, they will morph into their original demonic forms, huge and terrifying.

To combat these creatures, additional psychic training and nontraditional weapons will be provided to the team as the game goes on