publishing partners. The clearer the communication, the easier it is going to be to get your coworkers excited about your ideas. Got it? Good. Let's start writing!

WRITING THE GDD, STEP 1: THE ONE-SHEET

The one-sheet is a simple overview of your game. It is going to be read by a variety of people including your team mates and publisher, so you need to keep it interesting, informative and most importantly, short. It should be no longer than … you guessed it … a single page. You will find two examples of one-sheets in Bonus Levels 1 and 2. You can create them anyway you'd like, just as long as you include the following information:

- Game title
- Intended game systems
- Target age of players
- Intended Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating
- A summary of the game's story, focusing on gameplay
- Distinct modes of gameplay
- Unique selling points
- Competitive products.

Most of these terms are self-explanatory, but here are a few you may not know:

ESRB RATINGS[3]

The ESRB is a self-regulatory organization that enforces a rating system as well as advertising and online privacy principles for software in the United States and Canada. The ESRB's creation is similar to the comic book industry's Comics Code, which was created to enforce content and morality guidelines in conjunction with concerned parent groups. However, the ESRB's rating system more closely resembles that of the MPAA's movie rating system (G, PG, PG-13, R, X). Games are reviewed and assigned a letter rating according to content.

[3] The ESRB is the American rating system. There are several other international systems including the Pan-European Games Information (PEGI), the UK's British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), and Germany's Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK). Their age and content restrictions vary by country.

Currently, there are six ratings that can be assigned by the ESRB:

eC (Early Childhood): contains no material parents would find inappropriate.

E (Everyone): may contain fantasy, cartoon or mild violence, and infrequent use of mild language.

E10 (Everyone 10+): may contain more fantasy, cartoon or mild violence, and mild language and suggestive themes.

T (Teen): may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, and infrequent use of strong language.

M (Mature 17+): may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content, and strong language.

AO (Adults Only 18+): not suitable for people under 18—may contain prolonged scenes of intense violence, graphic sexual content, and nudity.

While the ESRB's guidelines are effective in informing parents what titles are appropriate for their children, there is stigma attached to some of the ratings within the development community and fanbase.

Many gamers consider eC to be for "baby games", as this rating most frequently appears on edutainment and licensed titles for young audiences. At the other end of the scale, no brick and mortar retailer in America will carry a game with the AO rating. It's the industry's equivalent to an X rating in film. Therefore most publishers and developers won't even consider making games for this rating and will take great pains to prevent their titles from having this rating[4].

Competitive products (or **"comps"**) are games that are similar to your game design idea that have already been released. Listing comps helps your reader understand what your game is going to be about. However, make sure that when you choose your comps you pick games that people are (a) very familiar with or (b) are successful. Publishers and marketers are very aware of how well or poorly a game sold. If you choose a comp of a game that did badly, a potential publisher may get scared off. Like I say, "always pick a winning horse."

Unique selling points (or **USPs**) are the "bullet points" found on the back of the box. As a rule of thumb, there should be around five USPs. (A number I developed when I realized you can only really fit five bullet

[4] This happened on The Punisher (THQ, 2005), where the player could curb-stomp and feed criminals into a woodchipper during interrogations. The scenes were so graphic that the developer changed the camera angles and displayed the action in black and white to bring the AO rating down to an M.

points on the back of a game box.) Remember "amazing graphics" and "awesome story" or "sequel to the award-winning game" don't count. All games should have or be these things (though only if it actually is a sequel in the case of the last one). Besides, gamers can smell that marketing BS a mile away. USPs should be the unique features that make your game stand out from the crowd. Here are some examples. Let the spin begin!

- Multiple gameplay modes, including 256-player cooperative gameplay.
- Over 1000 tunes from popular bands.
- Explore an open world and 200 levels that allows the player to go anywhere.
- Mow through your enemies using the blastinator, the skull-defiler, and the awesome fire-ant anguisher!
- Experience lifelike physics and groundbreaking special effects with the new Realitech engine!
- Download additional costumes and content over the Internet.

As you can see, USPs should get the reader excited about the features of a game without going into lengthy detail about them. Exposing more of that detail is what the ten-pager is all about.

WRITING THE GDD, STEP 2: THE TEN-PAGER

Now that you have completed you game outline, it is time to expand upon that information and flesh out the details.

The **ten-pager** is a "broad stroke" design document that lays out the spine of your game. The intent is for readers to quickly understand the basics of the final product without going into excruciating detail. Keeping your ten-pager interesting may be the most important part of your document. Remember, the people that are going to finance your game are going to be reading this. Be sure to provide plenty of visuals but keep them relevant. Don't go overboard with fancy fonts and ornate layouts. Readability is the key. Creating your ten-pager in PowerPoint or a similar program will assist you with formatting. This will allow you to present it electronically during a pitch meeting or print it out as a "leave behind" handout.

No matter which document you are creating, the goal is to make it interesting enough so your reader wants to continue reading it. Ask yourself as you write your ten-pager, "who is my audience?" There is a big difference between a ten-pager that is being circulated around your team vs one that is going to be presented to a marketing department. Here are some

examples of how you should skew the information in your ten-pager for each audience type:

Production Team	Marketing/Executives
Provide clear diagrams of gameplay	Show exciting conceptual images
Use short, punchy sentences	Text in bullet points form
Use specific terminology to get your intention clearly across	Use vivid, descriptive examples
Compare gameplay to appropriate games, even vintage titles	Use successful, modern games as comparative titles

While the above table shows two different audiences for a ten-pager, that doesn't mean you have to write two different documents. Just remember that both audiences will be reading it[5].

Keep in mind that the 10 pages of a ten-pager are more what you'd call "guidelines" than actual rules. Feel free to go over or under[6] the 10-page count as long as you succinctly communicate the basics of your game design. By the way, you will find an example of a ten-pager in Bonus Level 3.

THE RULE OF THREES

Before we start writing our ten-pager, here is a **very important rule of thumb**, that I use when creating a ten-pager:

THREE IS A MAGIC NUMBER

History has observed that all good things come in threes. Don't believe me? Observe!

- The Holy Trinity of Christianity
- The *Star Wars* trilogy (the original good ones)
- *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*
- Three's a crowd

[5] Then again, sometimes you might want to make a version that caters to one audience over another ... it never hurts to be prepared.
[6] Preferably under.

- Asimov's three rules of robotics
- *Three Men and a Baby*
- Getting to third base.

This rule will be coming up further on in this book, but for now, my point is that people like things in threes; especially when you are providing examples. The logic behind the **rule of threes** is this:

- The first example gives the reader an idea of what you are talking about, but can still mislead them.
- The second example gives the reader something to compare or contrast the first example with.
- The third example gives another example that can complement or contrast the other two, keeping your examples from feeling binary or contrived.
- Anything past three just gets too long and boring: never be too long or boring.

Now that you know the rule of three, use this power for good! When you are listing out your examples in your ten-pager, group them in threes. History will thank you.

TEN-PAGER OUTLINE

PAGE 1: TITLE PAGE

- Game title
- Intended game systems
- Target age of players
- Intended ESRB rating
- Projected ship date.

Game Logos: When creating your game title for your ten-pager, I suggest creating a placeholder logo. Choosing the proper font for your title allows you to convey the genre of your game quickly without the need for pictures.

Fun time! See if you can guess the game genres suggested by the fonts below.

Super Magic World

Very Fast Cars

Dude with Sword

PAGE 2: GAME OUTLINE

- Game story summary
- Game flow

Game Story Summary: Using your one-sheet's story outline as a starting point, flesh out your game's story. Keep in mind, your story outline still shouldn't be more than a few paragraphs long; but that shouldn't stop you from telling the beginning, middle, and end. Your readers will want to know if your hero ever rescues the princess! (He does.)

Game Flow: Briefly describe the flow of the game's action in the context of the locations the player will find themselves in. For example: "*Tomb Raider: Legend* is a third person action-adventure that finds archeologist Lara Croft searching the jungles of Bolivia to the mountains of Tibet for the mysterious Ghalali key; an artifact which may be the key to finding Lara's own long lost mother."

This brief game flow outline tells the player who they are playing (Lara Croft), the camera angle (third person), and genre of gameplay (action-adventure) as well as painting a picture of game locations (Bolivia and Tibet) and the player's goals (seek the Ghalali key and solve the mystery of Lara's mother).

Go ahead and list the environments that the player will find themselves in. Make sure you point out any special gameplay that may occur in these locations.

Other questions that should be answered by the game flow include:

- What are the challenges the player encounters and the methods by which they can overcome them?
- How does the progression/reward system work? How does the player grow as the challenges increase?
- How does the gameplay tie into the story? Does the player encounter puzzles that grant access to new areas when solved? Do players have to fight bosses that bar their progression?

- What is the victory condition for the player? Save the universe? Kill all of the enemies? Collect 100 stars? All of the above?

If your game doesn't feature a character, then concentrate on the environments the levels of play represent. For example, while the puzzle game *Peggle* has no main character, each level represents the challenges of a "Peggle Master" who lives in a particular location.

If you are working on a sports game, are there any special events like bowl games or stadiums that the player will compete in? If you are making a driving game, concentrate on tracks or races. The key is always to take the reader through the gameplay experience while creating vivid images of the game's locales and activities.

PAGE 3: CHARACTER

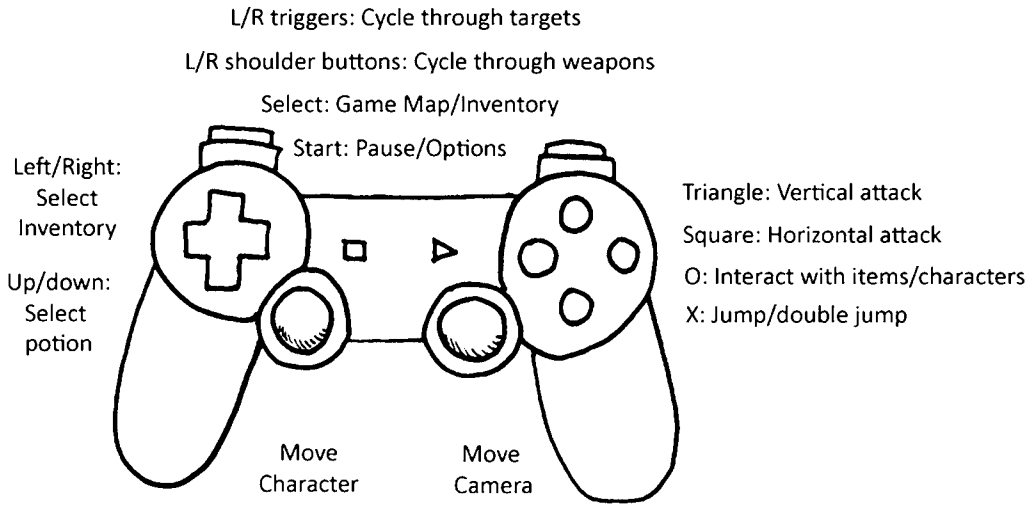
Up to this point, you have gone into some detail about the character the player is controlling (or the vehicle they are driving) in regards to the story. Here is where you want to highlight a few specifics about your character. Age, sex, and other "dossier"-style background material can go here … as long as you feel it does your character justice. Don't go listing your character's blood type if it doesn't add anything to your game. But if it does, then mention it.

Concept art is a must when dealing with characters. What does your character look like?

What is the character's backstory? How did they end up in this predicament? What is their personality type? How do they respond to the challenges in the game? For example, when I worked on *God of War,* we were constantly referring to Kratos as "brutal" and everything he did in the game, from killing enemies to opening treasure chests, had to reflect that personality.

How does all of this information about the character relate back to gameplay? Does the character have any signature moves, abilities, weapons or attacks? For example, Mario has his jump and stomp attack while Simon Belmont from *Castlevania* has his whip. What other gameplay does the character do? Driving, flying or swimming? Make sure you allude to every major style of play in your game.

Show a basic map of the character controls. Find an image of the controller (it's easy to find these online) that will be used to play your game, whether it's a mouse and a keyboard or a Wii Remote, and show where the controls are going to go. For example, here is a control map for a PS3 action game:



PAGE 4: GAMEPLAY

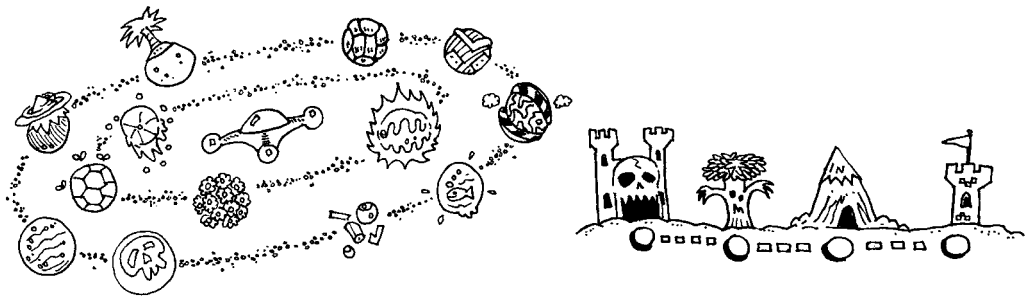
Remember that big list of gameplay genres from Level 3? Here is where you apply those game genres to your game. Start with the gameplay and detail out how the sequence of play is presented. Are there multiple story chapters? Or is your game divided up into levels or rounds? Are there any cool scenarios like driving while shooting or running away from a giant boulder? Call attention to them. Include your big set pieces, as they will get your reader interested in your game. Use your USPs from your concept overview here. Don't forget to outline any minigames, and include a short description and illustration. Diagrams are a great way to illustrate otherwise hard-to-imagine gameplay concepts.

Once you have written about your gameplay, go into detail about any platform-specific features. What game features capitalize on the platform's hardware? Does your game utilize a memory card or a hard drive or is it downloadable? Does it use a camera or a motion controller? Is your multiplayer mode played split screen? Cover these details because they will be important for readers to understand what technology requirements will be needed to produce your game.

PAGE 5: GAME WORLD

Present some images and descriptions of the game world. List out environments mentioned in the story. Provide short descriptions that outline what the player will find there. How do these locations tie into your story? What mood is being invoked in each world? What music will be used? How

are all of the locations connected within the game world as well as for the player? Include a simple map or flow chart diagram to show how the player would navigate the world.



It doesn't matter if your map is a path or a galaxy, as long as it shows the player where to go.

PAGE 6: GAME EXPERIENCE

There is a fancy German word, **gestalt**, which translates as "the whole" of something. Gestalt can be found being used by stuffy film and art critics to describe the overall feeling of a work of art or the ambiance of a restaurant. But don't let the term's fancy-pantsy-ness fool you; the concept of gestalt is fantastic when applied to video games. To make a game feel like a complete experience, you need to account for the feel of the starting screens, your cinematics, your music, your sound design, the camera … in other words, the whole, or the gestalt of your game.

So now that you know what gestalt means, what is the overall gestalt of your game? Humorous? Horrific? Thrilling? Hardcore? Foreboding? Sexy? How is this feeling going to be presented to the player from the very beginning of your product? Look to DVD movie menus and packaging (especially deluxe editions) as inspiration, as they usually do a great job of capturing the feel of the movie with just a little music, some fonts, and a few visuals.

Are there any special modes or interfaces for your gameplay? These can be special modes such as the "attack copter" gameplay in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* or Rubi's "Rage Mode" in *Wet*.

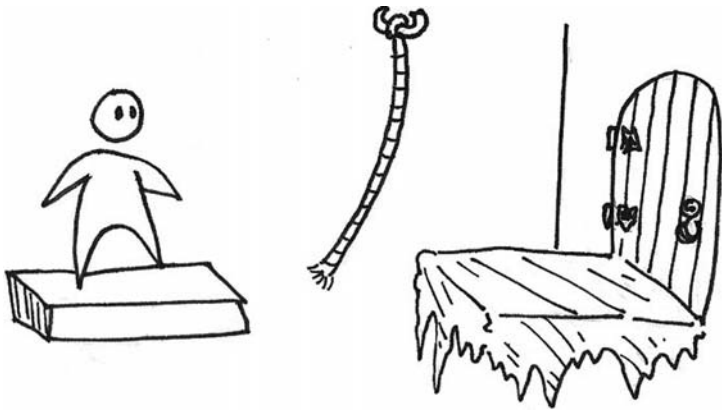
Here are a few other important questions about the game's experience you should answer for the reader of your ten-pager:

- What does the player first see when they start the game?
- What emotions/moods are meant to be invoked by your game?

- How is music and sound used to convey your game's feel?
- How does the player navigate the shell of the game? Include a simple flow chart diagram of how the player would navigate this interface. (You'd be surprised how many games have lousy interfaces because the team never thought about it!)

PAGE 7: GAMEPLAY MECHANICS

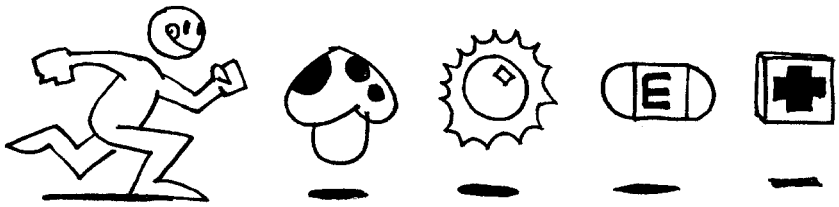
Terminology time! Learn these two valuable terms to sound like a real game designer! They are: mechanics and hazards. What's the difference?



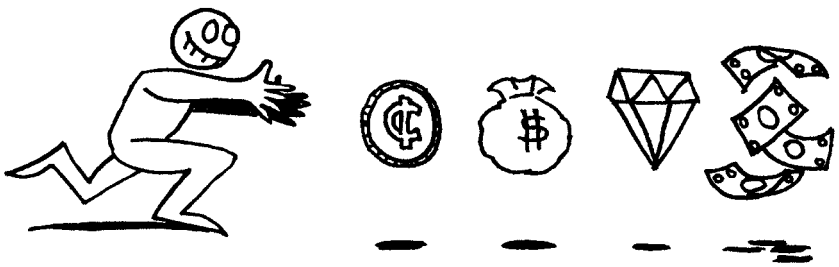
A **mechanic** is something that the player interacts with to create or aid with gameplay. Here are a few examples of mechanics to get you started: moving platforms, opening doors, rope swings, slippery ice.

A **hazard** is a mechanic that can harm or kill the player but doesn't possess intelligence. Here are a few examples of hazards: electrified platforms, spike pits, swinging guillotine blades, jets of flame.

Describe some (you don't need all of them; I find that three are sufficient at this stage of your outline). What kind of unique mechanics are in the game? How do they relate to the player's actions? How will they be used in the environment?



A **power-up** is an item collected by the player to help them with gameplay. Examples include: ammo, extra lives, invulnerability, and so on. While not all games use power-ups, you can still find them in many different genres of games from platformers to racing games. Provide some examples of your power-ups and what they do.

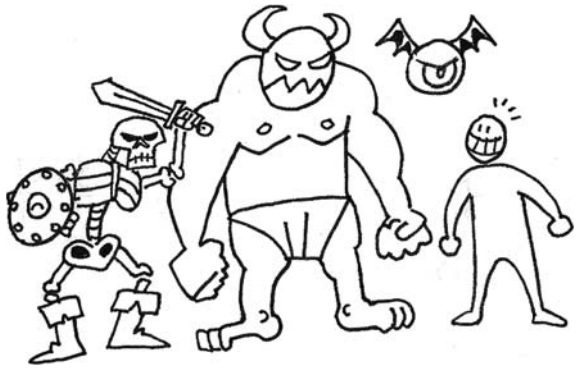


Collectibles are items that are collected (well, duh) by the player that don't have an immediate impact on gameplay. These can be coins, puzzle pieces, or trophy items. What does the player collect? What is the benefit of collecting them? Can they be used to buy items, access new abilities, unlock material later in the game? Will they earn the player trophies or achievements?

If your game has an economy system, then briefly touch on that as well. Describe how players will be able to collect money and buy things in the game. Briefly describe the shopping environment (is it via a store or a peddler, and so on).

PAGE 8: ENEMIES

If a hazard uses **artificial intelligence** (or **AI**), then it qualifies as an **enemy character**. What enemies do we find in the game world? What makes them unique? How does the player overcome them?



Boss characters are larger, more fearsome enemies usually found at the end of levels or chapters. Bosses are different because many of them have unique personalities. They are the villains of the story. Who are these boss characters? What environments do they appear in? How does the player defeat them? What does the player earn for defeating them? Your readers will want to know! Boss characters are fun and make for great visuals in your document. Show 'em off!

PAGE 9: CUTSCENES

Does your game have movies or cutscenes? How will they be presented to the player? Describe the method by which they will be created including (but not limited to) CG, Flash animation, puppet show[7]. Describe when the player will be seeing these—during the game, at the header and footers of levels, and so on. Make sure to mention any attract mode movies.

PAGE 10: BONUS MATERIALS

Hooray! We've reached the last page of our ten-pager! Here's where we talk about any bonus materials or unlockables that will encourage the player to replay the game. Give some examples of things the players will be able to unlock. What is the player's incentive to play your game again? This is where you would mention things like multiplayer, downloadable content, episodic content, and so on.

[7] Don't fear, we will be covering all of these terms later on in the book.

If you need to see an example of what a ten-pager looks like in action, then just jump over to "Bonus Level 3" at the back of the book. Don't worry; I'll be waiting for you.

THE GAME DESIGN DOCUMENT (AND THE AWFUL TRUTH ABOUT WRITING THEM)

Welcome back. Now that you have some meat on your game design's bones, it's time to flesh it out with a GDD. A GDD outlines everything that will be in the game. It's a very important document that the entire team will refer to during the production of your game.

Some people confuse a **game bible** with a GDD. Don't make this mistake. A show bible is a term taken from television production. The show bible's emphasis is on the rules of the world and the backgrounds and relationships of the characters. This is an important document to create, especially if information about your world and characters is going to be shared with other individuals (like those working on marketing materials such as websites, comic book adaptations, and merchandising) but remember that the game bible has nothing to do with gameplay. That's what the GDD is for.

The horrible irony is, even though it takes lots of time and effort to write a GDD, no one on your team wants to read it. Why? Because most GDDs are very long and intimidating documents filled with information ranging from the useful to the arcane. When I was writing GDDs, I found that everyone was interested in them, but no one wanted to take the time to read them. So, if no one wants to read my design, then why am I spending all of my time writing it?

Well, eventually YOU will need to read your own GDD. Creating documentation will help you as much as your team mates. If you keep the game "in your head" I guarantee there is going to be a moment when you have too much to keep track of and you will get overwhelmed or even worse, you will forget about your great idea like the gun that shoots fire ants.

Unlike scriptwriting for movies, there is no "official" form of what a GDD looks like. Each game designer usually finds what works best for them. For example, because I like to draw, I illustrated my design documents. I found that my team mates understood concepts quickly when I drew pictures for them. This is what a single page from my GDD looked like: