Chapter One Summary - Role of the Game Designer

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the role of the game designer. This is an important topic because many people seem to think that a game designer must also be a programmer, artist, writer, or have some other skill. Part of the reason is that the job of the game designer is not as narrowly defined as game programmer or game artist. The game designer is, in one sense, responsible for everything.

So what is the role of the game designer? Clearly, the first responsibility is to design the game. But this chapter takes a higher level view of what the game designer should be doing during the game development process. Perhaps the most important thing the game designer should be is an Advocate for the Player. This means understanding the kinds of experiences you want the player to have when playing the game and keeping these in mind as the game development process takes place.

Using the expected player experiences as a primary benchmark against which the game is measured is what this book calls the “playcentric” design process. This means that as the game elements are developed and the game mechanics are designed, the player experience is one of the central features to be evaluated. This design process also suggests that an iterative design process must be used with extensive playtesting. The game will not be created first and then tested but will be playtested as each element is designed.

Along with advocating for the player, a good game designer will have the following skills:

- Communication – a good game designer needs to not only direct the game design processes but also be able to communicate with other members on the team. This communication should be two way and the game designer should always be open to ideas and input from other members of the team.

- Teamwork – a good game designer, unless they are the only person creating the game, must be good at participating in and fostering teamwork. Games require different people to provide content and structure to the game but all of these elements must fit within the game design goals and framework. The ability to work within a team of people is a critical skill for a game designer.

- Design and follow processes – a good game designer must be able to understand and create processes. Keeping the game development process on schedule often requires coordinating multiple sub-processes. For example, if art elements and game programming elements are not done then the game mechanics may be hard to test. Understanding how to create and manage interlocking processes is a critical skill.

- Coming up with ideas and understanding systems – good game designers typically are creative and can look at the world in new ways. Many times, games can be designed around what appear to be mundane activities but can result in engaging and fun games. For example, Papers Please is a game designed around stamping passports at a border crossing. The game Return of the Obra Dinn is designed around an insurance agent trying to figure out what happened on board a ship. These two games were successful because they created interesting and engaging systems of play around these two topics.

- Playing a lot of different games – good game designers can find good ideas by playing games. This requires the designer to play a lot of different games, some of which may not be games they normally “like”. Good game design can be found in many different kinds of games, from First Person games to Simulation games to Hidden Object games. Both modern and older games contain good design ideas. Good game designers are very eclectic in the games they play.
This book chapter also outlines the Playcentric Design process, which will be the way that the game design process is viewed in the book. The Playcentric Design Process includes the following steps:

1. Setting the player experience objectives. This consists of deciding on the kinds of experiences that you want the player to have when playing the game. You don’t have to create specific game systems or mechanics that will give rise to these experiences, but setting objectives at this early stage is very important. For example, suppose you want your players to get the experience of solving problems by managing resources. If you wanted to create a horseracing game that had resulted in this kind of experience you might give the player a limited amount of money and have them choose to spend it on a horse trainer or an experienced jockey in order to win a race.

2. Use Prototyping and Playtesting early in the design process. During the design process the game designer needs to validate what is being developed using prototyping and playtesting. A prototype can be an electronic game or part of a game using the designed mechanics or graphics, but it can also be a physical prototype resembling a board game. Playtesting is using people not involved in the game development process to check your progress. For example, suppose you are designing a horseracing game and you have included some resource management rules. You could test your mechanics with people in order to see if they like or don’t like the resource balancing mechanics. The important concept is that prototyping and playtesting should be included in the game design process early and used at each stage of the design process.

3. Iterate the process of creating a game system, evaluating the system through playtesting, and evaluating the system as a result of feedback. Iterating the process is very important to the game design process because if you are going to include prototyping and playtesting at each stage of the game design process you need to also have a way to fix the idea or game mechanic being tested. The further you go into the game design process before evaluating the game systems the more difficult it will become to fix the systems. If you create a complete game before playtesting, and then find that the playtesters hate the game, then you must either release a bad game or throw everything away.

Perhaps the most important thing that game designers must do is be creative when brainstorming their initial ideas. Try to create games that are not derivative of other games or games that may use classic game mechanics in a new way. Part of this is analyzing current successful and unsuccessful games to see why these games worked or didn’t work. This game analysis process will be an important task and will show up in future lectures.

Assignments:

A. Game Journal – Keep a Game Journal and record the following information on the games you play:
   a. Name of the game and the platform on which you played the game
   b. A short summary of the game.
   c. The type of Game Genre the game fits into (Game Genres are covered in later lectures)
   d. The defining Game Mechanics (Game Mechanics are covered in later lectures)
   e. The general Game Structure (Game Structure is covered in later lectures)
   f. The general Game Narrative (Game Narrative is covered in later lectures)
   g. Your impression of the game – explain why it was fun to play or not fun to play

B. Brainstorming Game Idea One – your idea for a game
   a. Describe your game
   b. Indicate what kind of game it would resemble (if any)
   c. List three challenges your game would make on the player
   d. List the kind of experience you want your player to have when playing the game.