



Tips on Writing Your First Game Design Document

A Game Design Document (GDD) is a vision document that indicates why your game is appealing, what thematic beats your game will hit, and how you plan on achieving that. It is a reference point for individuals and teams to refer to when they get lost, or hit on a nuanced debate that needs resolution. As everyone has their own way of writing their own GDD, the document below is styled like an FAQ.

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How long should the document be?

For starters, a reasonable target is two to four pages. In the professional world where team size ranges from 10 to even over 100, with development plans between three to six years, a typical GDD would be 10 to 20 pages long. Obviously, you're just one person with only six weeks to work with. It would make practical sense to keep your document shorter and simpler than a professional one. Besides, professional GDDs need to note topics that wouldn't be nearly as relevant to you, such as the marketing and business value of the game. Do note that in the indie and hobbyist world, the length of a GDD varies wildly. Many carry over the length and details from the developer's professional experience, but *Journey's* GDD is [infamously just a single diagram](#), while TVGS executive director, Taro Omiya, likes to keep his plans to only a sentence or two long.

Can I add pictures, music, and other media into the GDD?

Absolutely! There's no reason to limit your GDD to only text. As mentioned earlier, some indie GDDs are almost entirely composed of pictures. Commonly, level design diagrams, user interface workflows, and sometimes even controls are drawn by hand than written out through text. Feel free to fill out details that you think requires images, sound, or animations to better convey that idea. For examples, check out: gamestorm.tumblr.com.

Oh, no! Things didn't work out as I have planned! Should I update my GDD?

Yes, definitely! A GDD is expected to be a living document: it is meant to be consistently updated as new information comes in. In fact, should one encounter a problem where an aspect of the game proved to be more difficult to implement than originally planned, it is recommended to change the GDD and the trajectory of the development to

accommodate for this bump in the road, rather than spending too much time trying to solve said problem. Time and your own sanity is more important! Beloved games and features have sometimes been born from bugs in a game, such as how bullet juggling in early development version of *Resident Evil 2* gave birth to the *Devil May Cry* series, or how playtesters enjoying the buggy cop car AI in a generic racing game convinced Rockstar to turn it into *Grand Theft Auto*. Embrace your mistakes (it's a feature)!

What topics should I cover in my GDD?

Remember all the answers from above: every game is different, and everyone has their own style of writing their GDD. We'll list some topics one can cover, but remember, they are all merely guidelines!

Title of the game.

- Advice from Taro: most professional companies use code-names when referencing their projects. Similarly, Taro recommends code-naming your game first, then come up with an actual title near the end of development when you have a more complete picture of what it's about.

Brief description of the game.

- A description of the game to make the reader excited about it. Since the later sections of the GDD will detail specific aspects of the game, this part doesn't have to be especially thorough.
- Advice from Taro: might be a good idea to fill this section in last when writing your first draft, since it's essentially a summary of what the document is about.

Creative "guiding lights" for the game.

- A short collection of bullet points (~5 or less) outlining key elements of your game's creative vision. Guiding lights are the pillars of your game concept, the high-level aspects that you expect to remain consistent; the idea is that, if you were to alter them, you would be creating a fundamentally different game.
- The purpose of guiding lights is to help you orient the design, and make it easier to evaluate new ideas in terms of whether or not they fit the original creative vision. Introducing new design ideas later on that violate the guiding lights, or are disconnected from them entirely, may dilute your concept or lead to feature creep.

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- Advice from Jamey: your list of guiding lights should be concise and memorable enough that you can keep them in mind at all times, and use them to help guide creative decisions over the course of development.

Scope of the game.

- “Scope” is the intended limitations of the game’s development. List out how many people are working on the game, how long each person can work on it, what the team’s budget is, etc. This is also a good place to list the target average play-time of the game.

Theme and mood of the game.

- Describe the intended overall experience here. Write something more than just, “fun:” describe whether the experience is going to be harrowing, thrilling, thought-provoking, brain-teasing, philosophical, comedic, serious, relaxing, stressful, colorful, bleak, twitch-based, forgiving, scary, etc. Feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.

The game’s target audience.

- Describe the audience you’re making the game for. For example, “to those who love *Tetris*.” Feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.

Platforms the game will be on.

- Is it going to be a downloadable, web-browser, mobile, or console game? List out the platforms you plan on putting the game on, and the priority of importance. Obviously, this section can be very brief.

How to play the game.

- A section to list out what controller configurations (e.g. keyboard & mouse, console gamepad, etc.) will exist for this game, and which button/stick will be mapped to specific actions. Feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.
- Note: for context-sensitive action, e.g. “press A to talk, flip a switch, open a door, etc.”, just write “context-sensitive action.” If there are multiple buttons with context sensitive options, use numbers, like “context-sensitive action #1.” The context and action mapping can be described in the next section.

The rules of the game.

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- Commonly known as “game mechanics,” the rules of the game section lists interactions the player can make, and interactions other elements of the game can make to the player. There are a few different approaches to this:
 - Start brief, listing only the bare essentials first, then later updating the document to list out more mechanics as a greater theme emerges during development.
 - Start thorough, listing everything one can think of, and with it, a priority value indicating how important each mechanic is. The document is later updated to remove mechanics that either clash with the game’s themes or is too difficult to implement.
 - The hybrid of the two above methods.
 - This is also a good section to list out (or as some game designers prefer it, a grid or flowchart) any “systems,” or interactions of two or more game mechanics colliding with each other. For example, bombing a wall could open a new passage, but could *a/so* alert the enemies where your location is thanks to the loud sound. The list do not have to be thorough, but if there are any planned, it’s recommended to list a few examples.
 - As usual, feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.

The aesthetic style of the game.

- “Aesthetic” encompasses any presentation-related aspects of the game, from graphics, art style, music, sound effects, special effects, text, scripts, voice-acting, menus, to even the reactiveness of controls (e.g. how long it takes for game to react to a button press) and haptic-feedback (e.g. rumble). What mood should all of these elements strive for? How does the listed aesthetic genres fit into the theme of the game? Feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.

References.

- A list of games, artworks, music, etc. used as reference to build your game, and why they’re an inspiration. Feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.

I need to put more into my GDD!

The topics below are even more detailed and, while useful, are not of as high of a priority in getting the first GDD completed.

Schedule.

- A section to list out some goals (known as “milestones”), and when you’d like to achieve this goal. Feel free to be as brief or as detailed as you want for this section.
- Note: this section is most likely going to change a lot! Do not feel bad if you’ve missed a deadline in this section. Everyone is poor at estimating.

List of assets.

- “Assets” are any files -- images, music, sound, code, movies, etc. -- that are to be integrated into the game. It doesn’t have to be thorough, but it might be a good idea to list essential assets, what their file name will be, and where it’ll be used to in the game.

Menu navigation.

- Most games start with a menu screen. It’ll be a good idea to list out a flowchart of how one navigates the start screen to begin the game, or adjust its settings.
- Similarly, this is also a good section to list out any menus in the game, such as the pause menu, buying items from stores, and the credits. List the flowcharts on how to operate these menus as well.

Level design diagrams.

- If there are levels in your game, it might be a good idea to draw out what each level will look like. A level design diagram should look like a map, with symbols indicating where elements, triggers, and enemies (if any) are placed. The visual features of the diagram can be kept simple and merely an outline of geometric shapes indicating where the walls or platforms are. For 3D games, level design diagrams are often top-down topological view of the map.
- Advice from Taro: the best tutorials are ones where the level itself demands the player to learn and master a new mechanic. Nintendo is well known for designing later levels first, then approaching tutorial levels last. That way, the

level designer will have a better understanding of how that mechanics work before designing levels that have the player practice a single mechanic.

What other resources are out there?

There are plenty of resources, templates, and references online! Below is just a couple:

- [Pixelprospector's big list of game design tools](#)
- [Gamestorm's visual GDDs](#)
- [Jamey Stevenson's game design lesson materials](#)
- [The Anatomy of a Design Document](#)
- [GDD Template from Chris Taylor](#)
- [GDD Template from Benjamin Stanley](#)