Game Design Documents

Introduction

The game design document (GDD) is a highly descriptive living design document of the design for the game. Game design document is created and edited by the development team and it is primarily used in the game industry to organize efforts within a development team. The document is created by the development team as result of collaboration between their designers, artists and programmers as a guiding vision which is used throughout the game development process. (Wikipedia 2017.) In the case of serious game domain expert is usually within the process of making the game design document. The entertainment part has to be combined with the characterizing goals of the serious part. (Dörner, Göbel, Effelsberg & Wiemeyer, 2016.)

The game design document is not standardized and it depends on the case what is the extent and the format of the document. Game design document can be something between one-page design to more comprehensive documents including dozens of pages. High-level concept document or the brief game design document (BGDD) are other examples of game design documents that will be made in the early stages of the development.

Concept document

Concept document (or the brief game design document) is short, simple and informative document that is easy to approach. It is used both to support the game development and inform the stakeholders. Typical contents of document are:

- Game description
- Justification for the game
- Preliminary production plan
- Level design
- Goals & rules
- Game functionalities
- Game objects

(Ijäs & Viitala 2017)

There may be other details as well like, for example, description of player motivation, license, target customer, competition, unique selling points, target hardware and the design goals. However, it is important that document is not too long. The suitable length of the document could be, for example, 2 – 4 pages taking no more than 10 minutes to read. (The Legend of Johnny 2013.)

The game design document

Like the game design process, the making of game design document is an iterative process as well. The game design document is a living document that needs to be updated every time a new decision is made in terms of design. Comprehensive game design document may include following things:

- Background of the game
- Customer needs (especially for serious games that will be developed by order-basis)
- Specification and criteria of the game (especially if the game is serious game)
- Justifications for the game development
- The premise of the game
- Main objectives of the game
- Target audience
- Format of the game (board game, card game, role-playing game etc.)
- The game world
- Rules and mechanics
- Player challenges
- Levels (if the game includes levels)
- The look and feel
- Technologies
- Target platform
- Target market
- Marketing channels
- Budget framework

(SeGaBu 2017)

Several things justify the making of game design document. Firstly, the game design document helps the game design and development. The document acts as a nexus and hub to connect and list every aspect of a game including written descriptions, images, graphs, charts and lists of information. It is often organized by the features of the game, laying out how they will all fit together. Secondly, it may have a crucial role when seeking funding and later it helps the marketing of the game. Last but not least, updated game design document keeps everyone on the same page so developers and it helps to make sure everyone is working together. (Sayenko 2015.)

Common mistakes of game design documenting are making too detailed descriptions too early, ignoring deadlines, making wrong assumptions and printing the document. Most of those problems can be avoided if the document is written in stages using the agile way that allows changes all the time. There should be one person who controls the making of document. The readability, the clarity of language and visual aids are important features of good game design document. If the document is good, it is possible to play the game in one's mind. (Sayenko 2015.)

Sources

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