In the Beginning, There Is the Designer

Magic Words

Would-be designers often ask me, “How do you become a game designer?” And the answer is easy: “Design games. Start now! Don’t wait! Don’t even finish this conversation! Just start designing! Go! Now!”

And some of them do just that. But many have a crisis of confidence, and feel stuck in a catch-22: If only game designers can design games, and you can only become a game designer by designing games, how can anyone ever get started? If this is how you feel, the answer is easy. Just say these magic words:

I am a game designer

I’m serious. Say them out loud, right now. Don’t be shy — there’s no one here but us.
Did you do it? If so, congratulations. You are now a game designer. You might feel, at this moment, that you aren’t really a game designer yet, but that you’re just pretending to be one. And that’s fine, because as we’ll explore later, people become what they pretend to be. Just go on pretending, doing the things you think a game designer would do, and before long, to your surprise, you will find you are one. If your confidence wavers, just repeat the magic words again: I am a game designer. Sometimes, I repeat them like this:

Who are you?
I am a game designer.
No, you’re not.
I am a game designer.
What kind of a designer?
I am a game designer.
You mean you play games.
I am a game designer.

This game of confidence building may seem silly at first. But it is far from the silliest thing you will do as a designer. And it is terribly important that you get good at building your confidence, for doubts about your abilities will forever plague you. As a novice designer, you will think “I’ve never done this — I don’t know what I’m doing.” Once you have a little experience, you will think “My skills are so narrow — this new title is different. Maybe I just got lucky last time.” And when you are a seasoned designer, you will think “The world is different now. Maybe I’ve lost my touch.”

Blow away these useless thoughts. They can’t help you. When a thing must be attempted, one must never think about possibility or impossibility. If you look at the great creative minds, all so different, you will find they have one thing in common: They lack a fear of ridicule. Some of the greatest innovations have come from people who only succeeded because they were too dumb to know that what they were doing was impossible. Game design is decision making, and decisions must be made with confidence.

Will you fail sometimes? Yes you will. You will fail again, and again, and again. You will fail many, many more times than you will succeed. But these failures are your only path to success. You will come to love your failures, because each failure brings you a step closer to a truly phenomenal game. There is a saying among jugglers: “If you aren’t dropping, you aren’t learning. And if you aren’t learning, you aren’t a juggler.” The same is true for game design: If you aren’t failing, you aren’t trying hard enough, and you aren’t really a game designer.

What Skills Does a Game Designer Need?

In short, all of them. Almost anything that you can be good at can become a useful skill for a game designer. Here are some of the big ones, listed alphabetically:

• Animation — Modern games are full of characters that need to seem alive. The very word “animation” means “to give life.” Understanding the powers and limits
of character animation will let you open the door for clever game design ideas the world has yet to see.

- **Anthropology** — You will be studying your audience in their natural habitat, trying to figure out their heart’s desire, so that your games might satisfy that desire.

- **Architecture** — You will be designing more than buildings — you’ll be designing whole cities and worlds. Familiarity with the world of architecture, that is, understanding the relationship between people and spaces, will give you a tremendous leg up in creating game worlds.

- **Brainstorming** — You will need to create new ideas by the dozens, nay, by the hundreds.

- **Business** — The game industry is just that, an industry. Most games are made to make money. The better you understand the business end of things, the better chance you have of making the game of your dreams.

- **Cinematography** — Many games will have movies in them. Almost all modern videogames have a virtual camera. You need to understand the art of cinematography if you want to deliver an emotionally compelling experience.

- **Communication** — You will need to talk with people in every discipline listed here, and even more. You will need to resolve disputes, solve problems of miscommunication, and learn the truth about how your teammates, your client, and your audience really feel about your game.

- **Creative Writing** — You will be creating entire fictional worlds, populations to live in them, and deciding the events that will happen there.

- **Economics** — Many modern games feature complex economies of game resources. An understanding of the rules of economics can be surprisingly helpful.

- **Engineering** — Modern videogames involve some of the most complex engineering in the world today, with some titles counting their lines of code in the millions. New technical innovations make new kinds of gameplay possible. Innovative game designers must understand both the limits and the powers that each technology brings.

- **History** — Many games are placed in historical settings. Even ones placed in fantasy settings can draw incredible inspiration from history.

- **Management** — Any time a team works together toward a goal, there must be some management. Good designers can succeed even when management is bad, secretly “managing from below” to get the job done.

- **Mathematics** — Games are full of mathematics, probability, risk analyses, complex scoring systems, not to mention the mathematics that stands behind computer graphics and computer science in general. A skilled designer must not be afraid to delve into math from time to time.

- **Music** — Music is the language of the soul. If your games are going to truly touch people, to immerse, and embrace them, they cannot do it without music.
• **Psychology** — Your goal is to make a human being happy. You must understand the workings of the human mind or you are designing in the dark.

• **Public Speaking** — You will frequently need to present your ideas to a group. Sometimes you will speak to solicit their feedback, sometimes you will speak to persuade them of the genius of your new idea. Whatever the reason, you must be confident, clear, natural, and interesting, or people will be suspicious that you don’t know what you are doing.

• **Sound Design** — Sound is what truly convinces the mind that it is in a place; in other words, “hearing is believing.”

• **Technical Writing** — You need to create documents that clearly describe your complex designs without leaving any holes or gaps.

• **Visual Arts** — Your games will be full of graphic elements. You must be fluent in the language of graphic design and know how to use it to create the feeling you want your game to have.

And of course, there are many more. Daunting, isn’t it? How could anyone possibly master all of these things? The truth is that no one can. But the more of these things you are comfortable working with, however imperfectly, the better off you will be. This is another reason that game designers must be confident and fearless. But there is one skill that is the key to all the others.

**The Most Important Skill**

Of all the skills mentioned in the previous section, one is far and away the most important, and it sounds so strange to most people that I didn’t even list it. Many people guess “creativity,” and I would argue that this is probably the second most important skill. Some guess “critical thinking” or “logic,” since game design is about decision making. These are indeed important, but by no means the most important skills.

Some say “communication,” which starts to get close. The word communication has unfortunately become corrupted over the centuries. It once referred to an exchange of ideas, but now has become a synonym for talking, as in “I have something to communicate to you.” Talking is certainly an important skill, but good communication and good game design are rooted in something far more basic and far more important.

Listening.

The most important skill for a game designer is listening.

Game designers must listen to many things. These can be grouped into five major categories: Team, Audience, Game, Client, and Self. Most of this book will be about how to listen to these five things.

This may sound absurd to you. Is listening even a skill? We are not equipped with “earlids.” How can we help but listen?
By listening, I don’t mean merely hearing what is said. I mean a deeper listening, a thoughtful listening. For example, you are at work, and you see your friend Fred. “Hi, Fred, How are you?” you say. Fred frowns, looks down, shifts his weight uncomfortably, seems to be hunting for words, and then says quietly, without eye contact “Uh, fine, I guess.” And then, he collects himself, takes a breath, and looks you in the eye as he determinedly, but not convincingly, says a little louder “I’m, uh, fine. How are you?”

So, how is Fred? His words say “He’s fine.” Great. Fred is fine. If you are just “surface listening,” you might draw that conclusion. But if you listen more deeply, paying full attention to Fred’s body language, subtle facial expression, tone of voice and gestures, you might hear a very different message: “Actually, I’m not fine. I have a serious problem that I think I might want to discuss with you. But I won’t do that unless I get some kind of commitment from you that you really care about my problem, because it is kind of a personal issue. If you don’t want to get involved with it, though, I won’t bother you with it, and I’ll just pretend that everything is okay.”

All of that was right there, in Fred’s “I’m fine.” And if you were listening deeply to what he said, you heard it all; clear as a bell, plain as day, as if he’d said it out loud. This is the kind of listening that game designers must engage in, day in and day out, with every decision that they make.

When you listen thoughtfully you observe everything and constantly ask yourself questions. “Is that right?” “Why is it that way?” “Is this how she really feels?” “Now that I know that, what does it mean?”

Game designer Brian Moriarty once pointed out that there was a time when we didn’t use the word “listen,” instead we said “list!” And where did this come from? Well, what do we do when we listen? We tip our head to one side — our head literally lists, as a boat at sea. And when we tip to one side, we put ourselves off balance; we accept the possibility of upset. When we listen deeply we put ourselves in a position of risk. We accept that possibility that what we hear may upset us, may cause everything we know to be contradicted. It is the ultimate in open-mindedness. It is the only way to learn the truth. You must approach everything as a child does, assuming nothing, observing everything, listening as Herman Hesse describes in *Siddhartha*:

> To listen with a silent heart, with a waiting, open soul. Without passion, without desire, without judgment, without rebuke.

### The Five Kinds of Listening

Because game design is such an interconnected web, we will be visiting and revisiting the five kinds of listening, and exploring their interconnections throughout this book.

You will need to listen to your **team** (Chapters 23 and 24), since you will be building your game and making crucial game design decisions together with them. Remember that big list of skills? Together, your team might have all of them. If you
can listen deeply to your team, and truly communicate with them, you will all function as one unit, as if you all shared the same skills.

You will need to listen to your audience (Chapters 8, 9, 21, 22, and 30) because these are the people who will be playing your game. Ultimately, if they aren’t happy with your game, you have failed. And the only way to know what will make them happy is to listen to them deeply, getting to know them better than they know themselves.

You will need to listen to your game (most chapters in the book). What does this even mean? It means you will get to know your game inside and out. Like a mechanic who can tell what is wrong with a car by listening to the engine, you will get to know what is wrong with your game by listening to it run.

You will need to listen to your client (Chapters 27–29). The client is the one who is paying you to design the game, and if you don’t give them what they want, they’ll go to someone else who does. Only by listening to them, deeply, will you be able to tell what they really want, deep in their hearts.

And last, you will need to listen to your self (Chapters 1, 6, and 32). This sounds easy, but for many, it is the most difficult kind of listening. If you can master it, however, it will be one of your most powerful tools, and the secret behind your tremendous creativity.

The Secret of the Gifted

After all that fancy talk, your confidence might be fading already. You might be wondering whether game design is really for you. You might have noticed that skilled game designers seem to have a special gift for the work. It comes easily and naturally to them, and though you love games, you wonder if you are gifted enough to succeed as a designer. Well, here is a little secret about gifts. There are two kinds. First, there is the innate gift of a given skill. This is the minor gift. If you have this gift, a skill such as game design, mathematics, or playing the piano comes naturally to you. You can do it easily, almost without thinking. But you don’t necessarily enjoy doing it. There are millions of people with minor gifts of all kinds, who, though skilled, never do anything great with their gifted skill, and this is because they lack the major gift.

The major gift is love of the work. This might seem backward. How can love of using a skill be more important than the skill itself? It is for this simple reason: If you have the major gift, the love of designing games, you will design games using whatever limited skills you have. And you will keep doing it. And your love for the work will shine through, infusing your work with an indescribable glow that only comes from the love of doing it. And through practice, your game design skills, like muscles, will grow and become more powerful, until eventually your skills will be as great, or greater than, those of someone who only has the minor gift. And people will say, “Wow. That one is a truly gifted game designer.” They will think you have the minor gift, of course, but only you will know the secret source of your skill, which is the major gift: love of the work.
But maybe you aren’t sure if you have the major gift. You aren’t sure if you truly love game design. I have encountered many students who started designing games just to see what it was like, only to find that to their surprise, they truly love the work. I have also encountered those who were certain that they were destined to be game designers. Some of these even had the minor gift. But when they experienced what game design really was like, they realized it wasn’t for them.

There is only one way to find out if you have the major gift. Start down the path, and see if it makes your heart sing.

So, recite your magic words, for down the path we go!

I am a game designer.
I am a game designer.
I am a game designer.
I am a game designer.