Building games is one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences I can think of. Taking pure imagination and making it come alive is absolutely addictive—a creative process so immersive and consuming that you’ll start craving it when you haven’t done it for too long. Some people think the fun is in playing the game, but, for a few special people, creating and building the environments in which other people play causes mere gameplaying to pale in comparison. If you’re reading this book, you are probably one of those special people who have that compulsion to create, and, with your creation, entertain.

Designing your game is the first step on your journey toward bringing your dream to life. Remember, many designers have come before you and failed to deliver. The game design world is like an iceberg: Only a small number of successes have peaked above the frigid water to shine in the sun. These successes are what happens when a great design meets a great team. The rest lurk in an underwater graveyard, rotting slowly in the company of a million other badly designed failures.

To avoid this watery fate, you’ll have to be smart, imaginative, tenacious, and driven. You’ll need to take a look at those successes and pick them apart like a scavenger bird, ripping out their guts to learn how they managed to get on top of the heap. You can learn from the failures as well, stripping them of their once-bright promises and glinting hype to peer at their ugly, ill-conceived gameplay so you can say to yourself, “I will not follow this path!”
In this chapter, you'll learn the following:

- The basic knowledge you need to begin designing a game
- How to empower the player
- System design
- Different forms of challenges and how to build them
- Pacing and flow
- The beginning, middle, and ending of a game
- Some tips on how to make your games better

The “Fun”damentals

Making games can be a humongous power trip. Having the ability to create what can amount to rat mazes for humans can lead some designers to grow egos the size of a large continent. They lose sight of the core fundamental, which is that games are about one thing: entertaining people. This is the first and most important thing to think about when you’re making any kind of game, whether it’s a teensy mod or a huge, 250-hour RPG. In making a game, you become an entertainer, not a puppet master bent on world domination. As such, your primary concern should be the happiness of your audience and not satisfying your unfulfilled need to punish those who annoy you. You have to make your game fun.

Fun

Fun is the first thing people think about when they hear the word “game.” Fun is a simple word, easy to spell, and everyone agrees on what it means. However, the things that people consider fun are as individual as fingerprints. Some people might like hang-gliding, some enjoy going to the mall, some enjoy watching sports, and some enjoy data-entry jobs. Although two people might agree that something is fun, if you get a group of 10 people together, you’ll start having problems.

Games are supposed to be fun. People expect them to be sources of entertainment and delight, a source of diversion to distract them from a less-than-perfect existence. The game industry employs thousands of testers and spends millions of dollars a year in market research, trying to determine what people think is fun. So far, no one has really narrowed it down enough to create a magical “fun” formula that guarantees success time after time.

As a future level designer, you’ll want to make your levels fun. Although you might not be able to please everybody, there are some ways to hedge your bets.
**Know Your Audience**

Unless you’re making mods that only you are going to play, you’ll be making your game for other people. These people will have definite opinions as to what is and isn’t fun, and they’ll completely pass you over if you don’t consider those opinions when making your game. Knowing your audience can be an easy task if you’re making a game that isn’t exceptionally innovative, such as a first-person shooter (FPS) or a real-time strategy game (RTS). The further you get from the accepted genres, the harder it will be to find your audience. There are exceptions, of course. Sometimes companies create a genre out of whole cloth, much like Maxis did with their wildly successful game *The Sims*.

To *know* your audience, you have to *find* them. Again, it can be pretty simple to find your audience if you’re making a game that belongs to an established genre, especially if that genre has an online multiplayer component to it. You can frequent Internet message boards and chat rooms dedicated to games similar to the type of game you want to design to see the opinions of people who play the games like the one you want to create.

Another good place to find people talking about what they like and dislike about games are game review sites and magazines, like Gamespy.com and *Computer Gaming World* magazine. One site that I’d recommend is Gamerankings.com. It’s a portal site that gathers links to all kinds of game reviews. You’ll be able to find as many opinions on what’s good and what’s bad as you can handle.

Once you find your audience, pay attention to what they like and what they don’t like. This will give you tremendous insight into what to do and what *not* to do when designing your game.

A word of warning: As you start looking for opinions on message boards and chats, remember Sturgeon’s law: 99% of everything is crap. For many, the only reason to write anything about a game, positive or negative, is because they have very strong feelings about it. They might not be looking at the game in the most balanced way. A lot of game reviewers can also let their feelings get away from them. Remember, these people are trying to describe why a game is or isn’t “fun,” and “fun” is a slippery thing to define. Always keep your own counsel, and when you read something that seems highly emotional, try to get what you can from it and move on to the next opinion. Remember, you’re trying to make a game that *many* people will enjoy, not just one or two.
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