Concept – Envisioning the Game

You have a clear desire to make a game, and you've dedicated at least some resources to moving forward. This is a good time to talk to other organizations that have made games. Their advice will be useful throughout the process. Next, you need a concept. The concept is the high-level view of what your game will be like to play and how it is played. Don't get too caught up in intricacies of design—the concept is the elevator pitch, with supporting information to back it up.

Even if the game will actually be developed by an outside partner, it's useful to have a strong concept even before approaching them—or you'll need to develop one in collaboration with them. Going through the process of developing a concept focuses your priorities. If you can express your game idea as a concept, you'll have made the important first step in deciding what impact you'd like to make and on what audience.

Issue vs. Concept

An issue alone is not a concept, any more than a topic alone is a story. For example, if you're addressing the issue of global warming, a story about global warming could be anything from a news article on the disappearance of the North Polar ice cap to a science fiction novel in which a devastated world works desperately to reverse climate change.

Games have a similar range of possibilities. The issue is the content, or the what. Your concept must also include the how, i.e. how the issue is represented and how players engage with it. A concept for a game about global warming could be:

- A global economic, ecological, and climactic simulation in which you try to guide humanity to a sustainable future, such as Balance of the Planet (www.erasmatazz.com/free.html) by Chris Crawford;

- A card game in which different policies are represented by cards, such as Climate Challenge (www.bbc.co.uk/sn/hottopics/climatechange/climate_challenge), a BBC-funded game by Red

- Redemption; A live-action game for classroom use in which players take on roles of different countries negotiating a climate change treaty.

For any game, a concept usually entails some idea of what the expected gameplay is like—what the players represent, what they do, what they're striving to accomplish—as well as the theme. If a game is being created to support a change agenda, the concept should additionally touch on what kind of change is hoped for and how it might be achieved.

Methodology

Developing a game concept that serves your organization's goals with compelling gameplay is a complex and creative task. Just as there's no one right way to write a story, there's no single correct method for developing a game concept. One best practice for brainstorming is to involve people from a diversity of backgrounds—content experts, game developers, game players, staff, and stakeholders from across the organization.   Find a way to spark the conversation and get your ideas on paper for discussion, debate, and iterative development.

In the accompanying video, Mary Flanagan of The Tiltfactor Laboratory takes conference participants through a "Grow–A–Game" card–based brainstorming exercise. Participants generate game concepts based on three randomly drawn elements: an existing game, a social "value," and a theme. This is one of many ways to structure the process. Here are some other possibilities:

  • Look for the central conflict in the issues your organization deals with, and build a simulation around that conflict.

  • Select a set of mechanics from other games and imagine how they might be combined in a novel way.

  • Select a particular game genre (e.g., real–time strategy, level–based puzzle game) and imagine how to apply its fundamental systems to the issues your organization is concerned with.

  • Start with a compelling title and work to build a game that dovetails with it.

  • Imagine a novel user–interface element, and think about how a game could be built around it.

If you would like to use Grow–A–Game Cards to develop your game concept, they're available for purchase at www.valuesatplay.org

Game Characteristics

To work with any of the above methods, including Grow–A–Game, you need a grasp of some basic game characteristics—specifically, mechanics, genres, and platforms. This understanding will do more than support concept development—decisions on these issues determine your game's complexity, cost, and how well it achieves your goals. They also impact your marketing, distribution, and business model. Beginning with the end in mind is a useful mantra as you envision your game.

Game Mechanics

Games are based on actions. Game mechanics describe what players do while playing. Most games involve overlapping combinations of more than one mechanic. For instance, adventure games almost always combine a mechanic like "explore unknown territory" with "collect items."

Game creators think about mechanics in different ways. On one hand, a very abstract set of core mechanics (like a set of building blocks) is used to define and study what games may have in common with each other, or to identify appearances of entirely new forms. On the other hand, people can describe an individual game's mechanics for the purpose of distinguishing it from other games with obvious similarities. If you wanted to identify mechanics that Monopoly shares with other games, you might point to "roll (dice) and move" and " hold stocks." If you want to describe the unique experience of playing Monopoly in terms of its mechanics, you might instead say "move around a board representing a city" and "buy and hold deeds for properties."

When brainstorming your concept, you need not be quite that specific. You want to determine what players do, but need not get into details of specific actions and interface elements. If you were creating Monopoly, you might describe the action as, "players will try to build monopolies by buying

properties they visit." It is extremely useful, however, to have a sense of what mechanical options might underlie such a statement.

More importantly, familiarity with mechanics helps you conceptualize gameplay that is consistent with your goals. If you create a game nominally about social justice, but players score points and win by evading opponents and stealing resources, actions undermine content. Some designers in the field have been known to say, "the mechanic is the message." This is a loose way of saying the gameplay or set of mechanics matches or mirrors the content.

Game Genres

Mechanics are highly interrelated with game genres, or styles of gameplay. The mainstream market for digital games currently supports a variety of genres—first-person shooters, simulation, real-time strategy, role-playing, sports, and massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). Many other game genres have proven viable, especially in niche markets, and may be worth considering.

Players may approach certain genres with preconceptions and preferences. This is something you can work with—both ways. You may seek a genre that meshes naturally with your issue and your goals, where the gameplay and the content work in concert. Or you could also make an impression by working within a genre that has an obviously dissonant relationship, as in the case of a shooting game with an anti-aggression message like September 12th (www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm) or a shooting game created to help fight cancer like Re-Mission (http://www.re-mission.net/site/game/index.php)

The most appropriate genre for your issue may not be one of the most popular. To explore the variety of game genres in more detail, take a look at:

- [Wikipedia's entry](www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_genres) (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_genres) on videogame genres

- [Moby Games](www.mobygames.com/home) (www.mobygames.com/home), a compendium of virtually every videogame ever published

- [Jay is Games](www.jayisgames.com) (www.jayisgames.com), daily reviews of casual games

- [Play this Thing!](www.playthisthing.com) (www.playthisthing.com), daily reviews of "indie" games

Is there a system that your issue maps on to, e.g., simulation, role-playing, or serious abstraction? It's probably not worth making a game unless something integral to your issue lends itself to some kind of system, which we define as a group of interrelated variables which form a complex whole. Cities, the human body, weather, government, war: These are all complex systems that have been effectively modeled in a game environment.

Game Platforms

The platform is the device on which a game is played. For digital games, platforms include home computers; home console systems such as the Wii, Playstation 3, and Xbox 360; handheld console systems such as the Nintendo DS and PSP; and mobile devices such as the iPhone, Blackberry, and other types of PDAs and cell phones.

Home computers have been the platform of choice for games for change, due to lower cost and greater accessibility. PC games are open platforms, which means anyone can create a game, without needing to partner with a console manufacturer. PC games can be distributed on disk, via download, or simply played online in any web browser. To date, most games for change are free, but you may choose to charge a fee, depending on your business model.

As the field evolves, there are other models emerging you may want to consider. Alternative Reality Games (ARG)s, for example, are event-based games played partially online and partially in the real world. Hints and clues are revealed on websites or in other media, and players respond in the real world, often coordinating via online forums to solve the puzzles presented by the game. Most ARGs are funded as promotions for other media, but several are issue-based games like World Without Oil (www.worldwithoutoil.org) and Superstruct (www.superstructgame.org).

Games for mobile devices like PDAs and cell phones are an increasingly interesting option. Development costs are low, and the potential reach may be far greater than computer games, particularly in developing countries. For more detailed discussion of platform technologies, including costs, refer to the Production guide.

Examples: Games About the Middle East

Two recent games about the issue of the Middle East illustrate the range of possibilities for game concepts. When developing the concept for Peacemaker (www.peacemakergame.com), Impact Games had the following goals:

- To approach the subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from an even-handed perspective

- To impart a sense of the problem's intractability

- To allow players to achieve peace, even if with difficulty

- To use real world, historical events in the course of the game

Their concept: a strategy game in which you play as the Palestinian president or Israeli prime minister, facing authentic dilemmas, and making decisions with authentic consequences. Players "win" by achieving high positives with both the Israeli and Palestinian populations.

By contrast, when Serious Games Interactive developed a game on the same issue—Global Conflicts: Palestine (www.globalconflicts.eu)—they approached it from a very different perspective, in some part shaped by a particular resource at their disposal: an existing 3D game engine. Their game concept: a role-playing game which put players in the role of a journalist from Europe or America, experiencing disturbing events, and under pressure from both sides to take up their cause. The idea behind the game was to provide outsiders an experience-based understanding of the central issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through their virtual encounters with people living in the region and the situations they face.

These two games explore the same topic, issues and themes. Different concepts, however, support different perspectives and yield very different player experiences and ultimately different impact in

the real world. To identify what impact you want to have, you may want to begin with a theory of change.

What Is Your Theory of Change?

As you begin to envision the components of your game experience, you will also be thinking about how the game fits into the larger picture of your organization's mission and activities. Ideally, these two aspects will have a great deal of conceptual overlap. To aid in this alignment, you might want to consider the way your organization's mission and activities are grounded in a theory of change, either explicitly or implicitly.

For those who do not use this terminology, a Theory of Change is a specific, measurable description of a social change initiative that forms the basis for strategic planning, ongoing decision making and evaluation. It provides a roadmap to get you from here to there. This roadmap can be read by others and shows that you know how to chart your course, which is helpful with constituents, staff, partners, and funders.

The methodology used to create a Theory of Change differs from other approaches in a few ways:

- It starts with what you want to achieve, rather than what you are doing.

- It shows a causal pathway from here to there by specifying what is needed for goals to be achieved (e.g. you might argue that children attending school a minimum number of days is necessary if they are going to learn).

- It requires you to articulate underlying assumptions that can be tested and measured.

A Theory of Change can provide both guidance and inspiration. If you conceive of change as the outcome of a particular set of goals and actions, you are on the way to translating those goals into a game.

Conclusion

The concept is the big picture, a high-level view of what your game will be like to play and how it is played. Situate your concept within your organization's theory of change and be sure to integrate your issue —the what—with the mechanics of gameplay—the how. Remember that the mechanics are the message. Also remember to begin with the end in mind, considering strategies or marketing, distribution, and business model. Talk to other organizations that have made games for advice as you work to answer the following questions:

- What is your organization's theory of change?

- Does your issue have something that be thought about and represented systematically?

- What kind of system does your issue map on to?

- What will gameplay be like? (What do the players represent, what are they are striving to accomplish and how will they go about it?)

- How will users interact with the system to gain insight or experience pleasure?

- What genre is your game?

- On what platform(s) will it be played?

A fully fleshed-out concept document (www.gamesforchange.org/toolkitflash/Media/PDF/Ayiti %20Document%201.pdf) for the game Ayiti: the Cost of Life is available in the Case Study section of the Toolkit.