

Game Design: Steps to Publish an RPG

This will be the first item in my “The Process of Design” series on my site. I am a relatively young designer, but I believe that I have gotten a decent grasp on the overall process for successful game design. I have learned a great deal concerning design due to the excellent designer and podcasting communities and I appreciate their assistance. This appreciation had led to my little series which aims to provide some good foundational information for new designers.

Disclaimer; I don’t claim to be an expert, nor even to play one on TV. These are my questions, opinions and workflows which may not suit your particular purposes. Even then, I hope that you can find some benefit from this post.

The Dozen Steps and 65 Questions for Designing a Game

I tend to break up my game design process into a set of twelve arbitrary steps. Each step provides me with a different set of questions which will inform the final outcome. Each of these questions may be an opportunity for me to step back from a design and consider producing a more limited game. Not every game needs to (or should) be a boxed set with an offset print run in the tens of thousands. I use many of these questions to guide me in determining how much effort and expense a particular project warrants.

Step 1: Initial Inspiration

This first step is the easiest; I usually carry out this step once every month or two and dump the results into a text document for a later date. My muse is a fickle mistress, but her gifts can lead to greater things.

1. What themes, moods or genres are inspiring this new design?
2. What narrative principles, storytelling techniques or other dramatic elements would be appropriate for such a game?
3. What procedural mechanics or other “crunch” would you use as a seed for this system?

Step 2: Market Research

Never skip this all important step; this is where you find out if some kind soul has already written your dream game. Dreaming of a game of amnesiacs seeking to regain their lost memories with improvisational-theatre inspired mechanics? Just buy "[A Penny for my Thoughts](#)" and you can devote three years of your life to other pursuits. Market Research can also allow you to find your competition and learn from those products.

4. What are the essential elements of your concept which make your game unique?
5. Does a similar game exist? Would that game be close enough that full development of a new game would be unnecessary?
6. Could you hack or modify an existing game/system to meet your needs?
7. Is there any significant external audience for the game, or is it simply your play group? No need to formally publish something if it will only be appreciated by your own home group.

Step 3: Scope

How broad in scale, complex in detail and expansive in theme will your project be? Will it be a light and tight universal system? Will it instead be a heavy, mechanically rich and detailed simulation of the French revolution? This question will inform you one the amount of time that you would need to commit to the project during the design project. If the scope is too great, you may need to pare it down and reduce your overall workload.

8. How much mechanical complexity is necessary and appropriate for the game concept? This is the question of Crunch.
9. How much narrative structure and fiction is necessary and appropriate for the game concept. This is the question of Fluff.
10. How many different books do you plan for your core game? A single stand-alone book, a pair of them or more?
11. Approximately what length of book are you aiming for? Pick out existing gaming books from your shelves to make your estimate.
12. Is there a time pressure for producing your project?
13. Are you willing to write and design after a full day's work?
14. Are you willing to write and design on your days of rest (non-work days)?
15. Are you willing to quit your day job for this project? This is a trick question; if you are listening to my advice then you are definitely not ready to quit your day job. There's a scarce minority of full time game designers and they are far greater women and men than I.

Step 4: Finances

Money makes the world go round. If you have a bit of initial funding, you are far more likely to be successful in your design project. A successful project can in turn fund future projects or even give you enough profit for a cup of coffee if you are lucky.

16. Do you have any external sources of funding? This could be a grant, a tax refund, pre-orders or other similar mechanism.
17. Have you considered using a service such as [Kickstarter](#) which would allow you to raise some funding prior to production?
18. How much are you willing to contribute personally to the project?
19. Are you willing to pay for commercial software for your game production?
20. Are you willing to pay for other professional services in your design? (More on this in steps 6-9)
21. Are you aiming to make a profit for this game? If the answer is no, consider releasing it for free in PDF format.
22. Are you willing to take risks with some funding, or are you taking the more conservative and lower risk approaches? These are explained in Step 10.

Step 5: The Actual Game Design

Yes, this is a step. This is where the foundation of the game is built and you produce your first draft. The game won't be ready for sale yet, but you will at least have enough of a structure for testing and revision. This is where you make your critical decisions which will shape your particular game and make it worth playing.

23. What are the core principles of your game? Try producing a one-line mission statement which you can come back to when you have problems and make your decisions to align with that statement.
24. What is the balance of Dramatic compared to the Procedural content? Does the game focus more on **why** things happen, or on **what** happens?
25. What is the depth of simulation you are aiming for in this design? Heavy verisimilitude, or light cosmetic touches?
26. What is the depth of narrative structure and what type of narrative are you aiming to support? Heavy story arcs with defined end conditions or completely undirected exploration of a setting?
27. What is the depth of strategy and does this depend on perfect mechanical balancing? Is it a deeply strategic game where battle maps and careful optimization of resources is necessary for victory, or is mechanically resolved conflict an afterthought?
28. What is your audience? What makes your game unique and memorable enough that your audience will pay good money for your game as opposed to the competition?

Step 6: Playtesting

This is one of the most critical steps in game design and often one given insufficient attention. Unlike almost all other forms of creative media, Roleplaying Games depend on often intricate mechanical systems. The only way to determine how those systems function is to playtest and this is also one of the only ways to detect any emergent properties produced by your game.

29. How many alpha playtests will you have? Alpha playtests in my jargon refers to basic testing of the game structure. These are necessary to see if the underlying premise of the game can be managed with the core of your system. Good friends and your regular play group are ideal for this testing.
30. How much stress testing will you have? After your alpha playtests, you need to have some individuals intentionally try to break your game system while following your rules as written. You know any engineers or any exploitive rules-lawyers? This is where they can help you the most.
31. How many Blind playtests will you have? This is the stage where you give your draft game to someone else with no additional verbal or written explanation and ask them to run a game. Ideally you would provide a sample scenario and they would record the session for you. When you run your own game, you will **reflexively** patch over many mistakes, or make snap judgements which are unsupported by your text. Blind playtests will expose these problems for you. Rules-averse players are ideal for these blind playtests as they will ask the most useful questions and force the GM to try to locate the answer.
32. Will you have an open beta test and/or a closed one? This allows you to polish the game and catch some of the left over artifacts from previous iterations. English majors, literature buffs and militant grammarians are best for these tests.

Step 7: Editing

This step tends to be performed in parallel with Playtesting. Each test will reveal more problems which need to be cleaned up in the editing process.

33. How much time do you plan on spending on revising the core elements of the game design? This is correlated to the number of alpha playtests, amount of stress testing and the outcomes of the Blind playtesting.
34. How much time do you plan on spending on editing the organizational structure of the game, so as to optimize the text's capabilities as an instructional text and as a reference text?
35. How much time do you plan on spending doing revision of the text for clarity of prose and correct grammar? This is traditionally referred to as line editing.
36. How many friends, if any, will you ask to read through the text to spot errors for you?
37. Are you planning on hiring someone to do design editing, structural editing or line editing?

Step 8: Layout

This step can be a challenge for some, or a breeze for others. Layout is generally the process of turning a basic word-processed game into a final, visually attractive and easy to read page of gaming book. It can involve insane amounts of work, expense and head-ache. That said, some rare individuals are comfortable enough with the technologies that they do this task professionally. Respect the graphic designer.

38. What format will the book be in? Optimizing layout for a PDF on a widescreen computer monitor is quite different from an 8.5" x 11" printed book. You need to nail down your form factor at this point.
39. How fancy do you want the layout to be? If the layout is sufficiently simple, it might even be possible to manage with a word processor alone and avoid the extra expense of full layout software.
40. Are you planning on doing the layout yourself, getting a friend to do the layout for you or hiring someone to lay your book out?
41. If you are doing the layout, do you want the expensive industry standard software of [Adobe InDesign](#) or [QuarkXPress](#) ? Alternatively, do you want to try to learn the open source and free competitor called [Scribus](#) ?

Step 9: Art Direction

During the layout process, a series of blank spaces were left waiting for some artistic masterpieces. Since we don't want to disappoint the fans, it's time to add some visual art. The key sets of questions revolve around what kinds of art you wish to incorporate.

42. What are your limitations in terms of art; can you use colour or are you limited to greyscale? Black and white? Only shades of red?
43. Are you restricting yourself to a specific art style which would be appropriate for the game system? Sumi-e brush art might be perfect for a Samurai game, but wouldn't necessarily fit a classical Norse-inspired fantasy game.
44. Will you produce any of your own art? This could be in the form of pencil sketches, traditional paintings, digital photography or vector images.
45. Will you use public domain art? It is freely available for any purpose and any photographs produced by the government of the United States of America are automatically released into the public domain. Project Gutenberg also has a series of images you can appropriate.
46. Will you use Creative Commons art? If so, you will need to pay attention to the specific license used. Any "Non-commercial" creative commons art cannot be used for your project if you are planning on selling your game. The "Share Alike" clause can potentially force you release your game under the same licence. It may be possible to contact the owners of the CC art and acquire separate permissions.
47. Will you buy rights for reuse of existing art for your game? This would be relatively economical.

48. Will you commission original art for your game? This is particularly appropriate for the cover of your game. This will be relatively expensive, though if you contact relatively young artists fresh out of school you may be able to negotiate noticeably lower rates.

Step 10: Production

This is how you transfer a digital file into something in other people's hands. This can be a digital file (with almost no costs for production) or a printed dead-tree variant which would incur some expenses.

49. Are you going to restrict yourself to digital content such as PDF's and/or the various e-book formats?
50. Will you print a very small number, or are you highly risk adverse? If so, use a Print on Demand service such as [Lulu](#). These POD services will print each copy individually, charge the customer and ship it to the customer. The margins are very low in this fashion and the quality can be variable, but there is no expense up front.
51. Will you print a small number of copies (50-500)? In which case, try a Digital Printer who could fulfill those volumes. There will be up-front costs, but the margins will still be better than Lulu.
52. Will you print a large number of copies, at least 500 if not 1000? Assuming you are certain that you can sell enough copies and your financing is solid, this can get you the best margins and the lowest per-unit cost. Highest risk option among them though, so beware.

Step 11: Sales and Distribution

Once you have the books produced, the question is how you will perform the mighty ritual of transforming product into cash. This is typically done by shipping a book to a customer who then sends you money.

53. Will you sell them personally? It's the best option for you financially, though it takes a great deal of effort on your part to fulfill and engage customers.
54. Will you sell at conventions? This incurs additional costs as booths can be pricy, but you are surrounded by gamers and you can run demos.
55. Will you sell through some fulfillment house such as [Indie Press Revolution](#)? They take a notable cut, but handle distribution for you and definitely boost your overall sales even if your profit per book suffers.
56. Will you sell directly to retail stores? That will require some careful negotiation and you will have to provide them with a discount in the 40-50% range off of the MSRP (cover price).
57. Will you sell through standard distribution? Extremely unlikely if you are listening to my advice as you usually only get a very small amount of cash per book sold. If you do manage to get traditional distribution however, you will get your book in thousands of hands which certainly isn't bad.
58. Will you be selling internationally? If so, how will you handle little things like customs, tariffs and other export-related issues?

Step 12: Marketing and Support

This is the final step for any product that you might sell; ensuring that people know about it and helping your fans out with your game. Not only does this encourage future sales, but it also makes you feel all warm and fuzzy as you realize you have fans that enjoy your product.

59. How much transparency will you provide? Will you publicize your quarterly sales, or will you keep your design and financial workings private?
60. Will you pay for advertisement?
61. How will your average gamer hear about your game?
62. When you receive a negative review, will you argue against it, or will you thank them respectfully for their feedback and consider it for future revisions? This is a trick question by the way....
63. How much support are you willing to provide to your customers?
64. Will you use a blog, a wiki and/or a forum?
65. Will you release your product under one of the Creative Commons licenses?

I hope that this structure and at least some of the questions can inform your future design mastery. Feel free to link to this document, print it and/or mail it to your political enemies. This text is released under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#)



Jason Pitre

Genesis of Legend Publishing