

WORKSHOP 02

Structuring a Game Design Document

02

From the one-page version to the full document — write only what helps someone decide something

Ada Arkhane Khaminkhrua

Where we are

Morning gave you the core. This hour makes it communicable. Tonight we find out whether it is true

01

11.00 – 12.00

Find the core

Core loop + design pillars

Deliverable: Loop Canvas

02

14.15 – 15.15

Make it communicable

Game Design Document

Deliverable: One-page GDD

03

18.15 – 19.15

Prove it is fun

Paper prototype + playtest

Deliverable: Tested prototype

Nothing you write this afternoon is a fact. It is a hypothesis waiting for tonight's table.

How this hour runs

Teaching 36 minutes · writing and peer review 24 minutes

0 – 5	Reconnect to the morning	Canvas on the desk, and the lunch assignment
5 – 13	Why the document exists	Three readers, two jobs, and the second-order design problem
13 – 27	The one-page document	Eight boxes, plus a worked example you can copy
27 – 36	Growing it into the full doc	Which section to write when, and how to keep it alive
36 – 50	Hands-on: write your one-pager	Fourteen minutes, timed, one page only
50 – 60	Read-back test and close	A partner reads it and tells you what they understood

WHY THIS IS HARD

**You cannot write an experience.
You can only write the rules that produce one**

Salen and Zimmerman call this the second-order design problem: a designer builds a system, and the play that emerges from it belongs to the player. Sylvester makes the same point from the production side — you author mechanics, the mechanics generate events, and only those events carry feeling. Your document therefore has to be precise about rules and honest about the fact that the experience is a prediction.

Who is this document for?

Write without knowing your reader and you will write too much while still failing to answer their question



Your team — they want to know what to build tomorrow

Programmers and artists are not looking for your philosophy. They want rules precise enough to implement without guessing, and a clear line between what is decided and what is still open.



You in three months — you want to know what you were thinking

The most forgotten reader and the most grateful one. Schell describes design documents as serving two purposes: jogging your own memory, and communicating with others. Record the reason for a decision, not just the decision.



Outsiders — they want to know why this game and not another

Funders, publishers, competition judges, prospective collaborators. They will give you about two minutes. That is why the one-page version exists, and why it is written last but read first.

Three artefacts, not one document

Each one has a different reader, a different lifespan and a different moment when it should be written



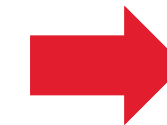
The one-pager

Written first, read first. Eight boxes.
This is the artefact that forces you to decide.



The design document

Grown section by section, only when a decision is actually needed. Never written all at once.



The living reference

One link the whole team opens. Dated, versioned, and pruned when features are cut.

The one-page document — eight boxes

Fit these on one page and you understand your own game well enough to start building it

01
High concept

One or two sentences, with no story summary

02
Genre, platform, audience

Lets the reader compare it to something they know

03
Core loop

Lift it straight from this morning's canvas

04
Three pillars

Also from this morning — the box that says what you won't do

05
Key features (3–5)

Only what the game cannot exist without

06
Art and audio direction

In words, not images. Real references encouraged.

07
The hook

Why this one, when ten similar games exist?

08
Scope and schedule

Length, team size, deadline — skipped often, read first

Box eight is what separates a student document from one written by someone who has shipped.

A worked example — the demo game's one-pager

Note that no box runs longer than two lines, and one box openly says it is undecided

HIGH CONCEPT

A first-person escape game where the player uses hearing instead of sight to decide when to move

CORE LOOP

Listen, choose a route, move quietly, the threat closes in — roughly 20–30 seconds per cycle

KEY FEATURES

Directional audio · a lantern that burns down every turn · a threat that remembers your routes

ART AND AUDIO DIRECTION

Degraded videotape image, light limited to the lantern, field recordings from a real village

GENRE · PLATFORM · AUDIENCE

Survival horror · PC on Steam · players 18–30 who watch streamers play Asian horror

PILLARS

Silence is the weapon · you lose by hurrying · fear comes from what is never shown

THE HOOK

A horror game that delivers information through the ears, built on Isan folk belief

SCOPE AND SCHEDULE

45 minutes to finish · team of 3 · prototype in 8 weeks · number of levels undecided

Writing the high concept

The formula: the player is X, must VERB, in order to Y, under constraint Z

WORKS

- Names what the player does before what the player sees
- Contains the core verb from this morning, word for word
- States a constraint, because constraint is where tension lives
- Readable aloud in a single breath

DOESN'T WORK

- Opens with the setting, the lore or the protagonist's childhood
- Leans on adjectives — atmospheric, immersive, gripping
- Describes the feeling you hope for instead of the system that causes it
- Would fit any other project in this room without alteration

Test: read your high concept to someone and ask them to describe what the player does. If they cannot, rewrite it.

Growing into the full document

Write a section at the moment it is needed to make a decision — not before

Section	When to write it	The question it settles
1. Overview and pillars	Day one	What are we making, and what will we refuse?
2. Rules and systems	Before that system is coded	What exactly are the numbers, states and win conditions?
3. Economy and progression	After the prototype survives a test	What does the player gain and lose, and when?
4. World, story, characters	Once the mechanics stop moving	What context makes those mechanics mean something?
5. Levels and teaching	Before real level building starts	In what order does the player learn the rules?
6. Interface and UX	Before final art	What does the player see, and at what moment?
7. Art and audio	When you start briefing or hiring	What exactly must someone deliver?
8. Tech, scope, schedule	Day one, revised monthly	Can this team finish this in this time?

Four habits that keep a document alive



Date and version it

The top line shows when it was last changed, so a reader knows whether they are looking at current thinking.



Mark what is untested

Tag every claim as tested, untested or undecided. Belief and evidence must not read in the same voice.



Cut what you dropped

Move cancelled features to a graveyard page with the reason. It stops new team members re-proposing them.



Keep one copy

One link everybody opens. No `final_v3_actual_latest` circulating in a chat thread.

HANDS-ON

14

minutes

One page only. Handwritten or typed.

If a box is unanswerable, write "undecided" and move straight on.

Hands-on: write the one-pager for your game

1. Start with the boxes you already have — the core loop and the three pillars
2. Write the high concept with the formula: player is X, must VERB, to Y, under constraint Z
3. Pick at most five key features, then cross out any the game could survive without
4. Write the hook by comparison to existing games, not by claiming novelty
5. Finish with scope and schedule — length, team size, deadline

Ground rules

- One page. If it overruns, cut content — do not shrink the font
- No more than two lines of world or backstory on the one-pager
- Circle every box you are unsure about. That circle is tonight's test list.

The read-back test

The cheapest and most brutal test a document can face. Eight minutes, and it never flatters you



Read in silence, three minutes

Swap documents with a partner. The reader asks nothing. The author explains nothing, however badly they want to.



Play it back, two minutes

The reader says what they think the game is, what the player does, and what the hook is. The author listens and writes.



Circle only the misses

If the reader got it wrong, the document is wrong — not the reader. Circle the line that misled them and fix that line alone.

Communicable, but not yet proven

1

A document nobody reads does not exist; write for a named reader

2

The one-pager is the hard version, because one page forces decisions

3

Everything in it is a hypothesis until someone who is not you has played it

NEXT — SESSION THREE AT 18.15

Bring the boxes you marked undecided.

Tonight they go on a table, and real people play them inside one hour.

FURTHER READING

Where these ideas come from



A Theory of Fun for Game Design · Raph Koster

The argument that fun is the brain's response to absorbing a pattern, and that boredom arrives at mastery. This is the foundation for treating repetition, not spectacle, as the design problem.



The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses · Jesse Schell

The elemental tetrad, the interest curve, and the lens of the essential experience — the sources for how we located the loop and how we phrased pillars.



Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals · Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman

The core mechanic, and the definition of meaningful play as outcomes that are both discernable and integrated. This is the test we applied to steps two and four of the loop.



Designing Games: A Guide to Engineering Experiences · Tynan Sylvester

Mechanics generate events, events carry emotion, and elegance means few mechanics producing many situations. This is why we worked on layers rather than adding features.