

A Game Design Document Examination



I have written dozens and dozens of design documents and pitches. When I set out to include one in this portfolio, selection proved difficult. Instead, I've elected to share a simple design document outline, with a few examples from a pitch we made to Activision shortly after finishing *Spider-Man: Web of Shadows*.

Web of Shadows was intended to highlight our experience making fluid, extreme sport games (Tony Hawk meets Spider-Man). However, the enormous open-world scale and story commitments hindered our ability to focus on trick combination combat.

So we pitched a new game: ***Spider-Man Versus***, a deconstruction of previous titles, stripping play down to the quintessential battles in the hero's storied comic-book history.

Existing outside current film franchise and comic-book continuities, *Versus* seemed like a natural evolution of the brand. Free from narrative constraints, Spidey could be free to do what he does best: web up his most notorious enemies.

Why enthusiastically endorse a game design that dispels with the pleasantries of a story arc and elects, instead, to throw the hero unceremoniously into violent climaxes?

I suspect the blunt determination to cut out the rising tension and dénouement made it compelling. It wasn't trying to tell a tale, *Spider-Man Versus* was just trying to be an enjoyable, satisfying game. It was the Ramones doing the Spider-Man theme.

The Game Design Document followed a simple outline:

Executive Overview – 100 (or so) words explaining the game, highlighting the product as a unique opportunity in the current marketplace.

A snippet from Versus: A hero is defined by the adversaries he faces, the fights he picks. Choose from Spider-Man's most notorious villains and recreate their most famous confrontations, ripped from actual comic-book plotlines.

Versus was conceptualized as a catalogue of over fifty years of Spider-Man action. Our executive overview sought to capitalize on instantly transporting players into epic, satisfying battles with Spidey's greatest foes.

Key Features – The 5 or so bullet points that belong on the box. This is essentially a bullet list of the promises made in the Overview.

- *A bolstered combat and locomotion system (streamlined from our previous game)*
- *New mechanics tailored to specific adversities*
- *A huge set of objectives in each encounter to encourage replay*
- *A celebration of the Spider-Man license & an introduction of his history to a new audience*
- *Customizable and interactive levels, and a look that, thanks to the game's compact levels, would be the best looking Spider-Man game to date*

Competitive Analysis – Marketplace Comparisons. How does *Versus* compare to other hero games? How does it fit in the broader market? What is its core demographic?

I am a firm believer in deep preproduction research into any project's viability. Today, focus testing has stolen some of the spotlight from other methodologies of trend analysis and product assessment. I've participated in plenty of focus tests that have contributed valuable data, but they should not necessarily supersede other examinations of past and future trends. Also, there is something to be said for a hunch and artistic conviction in a sound idea.

Design Pillars – What are the basic principles behind this game? Why are we so dedicated to its creation?

This section often reads like a proud, ambitious manifesto. If there's to be dogma in a design doc, this is where one might find it.

Mechanics and Levels – What makes gameplay distinct? How ambitious is the game? Within this section, it's customary to walkthrough the complete game and find one particular section to describe in detail as a representative **vertical slice** of the game.

This section usually consumes the bulk of a well-defined game or app concept & can be used throughout production as a guideline of what the game is to be and serve as framework for the creation of the Technical Design Document.

This is the portion of the document where good producers shine. The best producers ask the questions everyone else is afraid to ask. These questions usually begin, "**Wait. Explain that to me again.**"

Artists and engineers may groan at what they perceive as naïveté, but these questions need answers. Experienced producers realize most people in the room only pretend to understand all the tech and terminology. I have created many templates that seek to draw out simple answers to simple questions. It's the best way to keep promises.

User Experience Framework – How does the player interface with the game? Is the loop intuitive? Does it withstand multiple plays?

Like the game itself, *Versus's* user interface was designed as a clean slate. It was to be as agnostic as store-self or online music menu.



Players selected a villain. Once a villain has been chosen, players selected from a series of comic-book covers, each representing a famous encounter with that villain. Once a battle was selected, players only needed to choose a difficulty and a historic Spider-Man costume (each representing a different set of mechanics). Next, fight. A results screen featuring player assessment data closed the loop.

Naturally, there were a few additional UX considerations (options/settings, save points), but the overall flow-chart was one of the simplest I'd ever created for a console game.

Art + Sound Design Style Guide – What are the artistic inspirations? What makes it distinct?

The dry minimalism of the user interface was to be countered by richness in the game-play aesthetic. Thanks to its compartmentalized design, *Versus* could dwell on getting the shadows, textures, FX, and animation precise and opulent.

Monetization – What are our expectations in terms of sales, based on research and similar genre game performance? Is there additional downloadable content? Are we considering in-game advertising and licensing opportunities?

This section keeps growing every year as new opportunities for monetization are realized. Downloadable content used to be a clunky endeavor and a hard sell. Not anymore. Gameplay and playing games (live-streaming, for instance) keep

finding new ways to make money. Still, I prefer offering quality for a fair price, upfront.

Self-Review – What do we want critics and players to notice?

Everyone's a critic. Allowing the creators take a stab at reviewing the imagined finished product while still in preproduction is a fine way to identify any pitfalls and highlight what's most important.

Timeline & Budget – What's it going to cost and how long is it going to take?

Yeah, this format is rather matter-of-fact, but it answers the questions producers and studios tend to ask. Also, although it might stray occasionally into hyperbole, the document remains pragmatic enough to serve as a realistic development guideline of what we promised and what we hoped to make.

Following any Game Design Doc approval, I'll try to dispel the contents into simple worksheets designers can use to help create levels (see below). Filling out this sheet provides all the needed information to proceed with map layout. It is, ironically, not unlike a handout I might provide in a writing class to assure that all story components are met. Perhaps Versus did not dispense with all storytelling, after all.

Cheers, Todd

PRELIMINARY GAMEPLAY WORKSHEET THINGY

BOSS & ATTRIBUTES (AI MECHANICS):	LOCATION (IS IT DETERMINED BY COMIC BOOK?)	APPLICABLE META-GOALS (DIFFICULTY, RULES, COLLECTABLE LIST):
	ENVIRONMENT HAZARDS/PUZZLES:	TOKENS ON / OFF HEALTH ON / OFF LASER NET ON / OFF STAN LEE RESCUE ON / OFF COP CAR ON / OFF NO TOUCH GROUND ON / OFF NO WEBS ON / OFF ETC.
COMIC BOOK REFERENCE (HISTORICAL RELEVANCE IN TERMS OF THEME, LOCATION, OUTCOME, SUBTEXT):	SECONDARY GOALS (BATTLE SPECIFIC GOALS TIED TO LOCATION, AI... BOSS DEFEAT MIGHT BE A SECONDARY GOAL.):	MAP
GAME TYPE & PRINCIPLE GOAL (DETERMINE COMBAT TYPE FROM TEMPLATE LIST. WHAT MUST BE COMPLETED FOR ADVANCEMENT?):	OUTCOMES: (UPGRADES, KNOWLEDGE... HOW MIGHT THIS FIGHT AFFECT PAST OR FUTURE BATTLES?):	