Glossary for Game Designers

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Typically, game glossaries are written for gamers. This glossary is written for game designers, which means it has many entries that apply to game design (but not game marketing, or video game production).   It still has many entries of interest to gamers in general. Furthermore, it is intended to cover both tabletop games and video games.

(Note: I use "computer games" and "video games" interchangeably to refer to PC, console, and handheld gaming.)

AAA list games-- these are video games that we see advertised frequently and sold in a great variety of non-games stores such as Best Buy and Wal-Mart. Their budgets are generally $20 million or more (much more for MMO's). The most successful ones sell many millions of copies. The most successful pay-to-play MMO has over 11 million subscribers.

Abstract--Bearing no relation to/connection with the real world. Checkers, Go, and chess are abstract. (Chess is supposed to have reflected warfare at some distant date, but that reflection has been lost over time.) Although Monopoly really has nothing to do with the real world, it is intended to represent real estate dealings and is not regarded as an abstract game.

Accessibility-- an accessible game is easy to learn to play, though not necessarily easy to master. Chess is an accessible game that is hard to master.

Video games are often accessible, as players don't even need to read rules to play.

Adapter (a player type)–Some people play a particular way regardless of which game they're playing. The adapter is in between the planner and improviser. He or she likes things to change a fair bit from time to time or moment to moment, but still wants to be able to plan ahead a few turns or a few minutes as the case may be.

Agent-- in game usage, an agent is a middleman between game creators and game publishers who helps arrange a deal and takes a percentage of the revenue.

AI– artificial intelligence. A video game can be ruined by weak artificial intelligence because the computer opponent(s) will present no challenge and no resemblance to human players. A solitaire tabletop game provides a computer opponent of sorts, but it cannot possibly be sophisticated enough to be called an AI.

Analog–something that has a continuously changing range of values or measurements, as opposed to digital where there are discrete values that jump from one to another. A slide rule is an analog computer.

Analysis Paralysis-- a player presented with too many decisions, or too many plausible choices for a decision, may effectively "freeze up" and do nothing for quite a while. In a turn-based game analysis paralysis slows down the game for everyone, and can be quite unpleasant for the paralyzed person. Many games, consequently, are designed to avoid this situation of too many decisions or too many plausible choices.

Anticipatory Conflict--this kind of conflict is even less direct than indirect conflict. It occurs when one player makes a choice, commonly a selection of something, in order to prevent another player from making that choice–deliberately anticipating the other player's intentions.

ARGs– Alternate Reality Games. Games that intrude into the real world in some significant way, for example one of the early commercial ARGs emailed players and even placed phone calls to them in the real world as part of the game.

Art– games are "art" in the broad sense, but the players don't care.   People who are not hardcore video gamers, and often not video gamers at all, often think of video games as "works of the hands" (which Dr. John Sharp calls mechanical arts) rather than "works of the mind" (which Sharp calls liberal arts). The latter gets a lot more respect as "art" from the general populace. Anyone who understands games realizes that they are works of the mind, but most non-gamers don't understand games, tending to lump them in with "kids' stuff".

A few games may be "high art". In that sense, "Art is about changing the world; entertainment is about leisure." (Ian Bogost).   And some players may care about that.

Asymmetric–in games, starting positions that are not identical. Historical war simulations will be asymmetric.

Atmosphere--a story or history that a game ostensibly represents, so that the game may provide a feel for the story, but it actually has no effect on how the game plays or how it's constructed. This is as opposed to a theme which does have an effect on how the game plays and how it's constructed. The game Monopoly is so far removed from the real world that now we would say it has an atmosphere rather than a theme.

Auction or Bidding Game--a game in which a principal mechanism sees players bidding

against one another to achieve some end. Bidding could be purchasing goods, it could be securing a particular order of play, or it could be for some other purpose.

Avatar–something, usually some form of an electronic character but possibly just a token, that represents the player of the game within the game. Avatars are very common in video games but can also be seen in boardgames, for example the tokens in Monopoly. A game becomes more personal and probably more involving when you can see yourself, especially if "you" can be killed.

Balance --see "play balance".

Bell Curve–Also called a normal or Gaussian curve. This curve represents a probability distribution where some events (near the top of the curve) are much more likely than others (near the ends). The roll of a sum of two dice is a bell curve. Game designers must understand simple probability such as this.

Beta (beta-test)–the term often used to refer to the game that is still in play testing stage. Sometimes we also talk about alpha testing which comes before the beta-testing.

Blind-testing–a form of playtesting where the designer is not involved, so that the players are playing a game just as though they had bought it and taken it out of the box. For tabletop games this is the ultimate test of the rules.

Books about game design–- there are dozens of books about game design. Most of them are about video game design, written by people who have been involved in video game production, and actually say little about the **process** of game design, devoting much space to analysis of games and to marketing of video games. There are also a few academically derived books about games, where you can see such things as 80 pages devoted to defining what "game" means. [In the book that this glossary will be a part of, I intend to briefly review many of these books.]

Borrowing–- virtually every game designer borrows ideas from other games of other game designers. Sometimes they don't borrow but appear to because they've had the same ideas that many other people have had. Virtually all games are built upon what has come before, so don't worry if you find yourself borrowing an idea from here, and an idea from there.

Camping–In video game shooters, staying in one well-concealed, easily-defended place in order to shoot lots of competitors without being vulnerable. This is often regarded as "unsporting" if not unmanly, yet if players can succeed by doing this, some of them will.

The more general expression of this is "turtling".

Cards–-as a tool in the game designer's toolbox, cards provide potentially colorful but normally hidden information. Games using a standard 52 card playing card deck are typically games of hidden information, as opposed to traditional boardgames which are typically games of perfect information. Event cards in boardgames can provide a great deal of variety and replayability. Video games can incorporate the equivalent of event cards, but rarely do.

Card-driven Game–(CDG)   A two-player wargame in which play is dominated by cards representing historical events, and enabling a player to do certain things. Without the right card(s) a player may not be able to attack at all. Each player has a hand, and the deck may be shared, or there may be a separate deck for each player. (This structure varies occasionally, of course, e.g. more than two players.)

Casual game– video games that provide a short, episodic experience, and which people play to relax rather than to "beat the game" or prove that they're bad-ass gamers, are usually called casual games. Versions of solitaire played with playing cards are casual games. Casual video games are much less expensive to make, and usually less expensive to buy, than AAA games.

CCGs– Collectible Card Games. Players purchase randomly arranged sets of cards and sometimes trade cards in order to construct decks that they use to play against one another, usually in a two player game. Many of the cards break the standard rules of the game temporarily by virtue of some special power. The manufacturers continue to create new cards that gradually render some of the old cards useless or pointless. Sometimes older cards are actually banned because they have proven to be too powerful. A game session itself is relatively short; much of the interest in the game comes from the meta-game of building specialized decks of cards to take advantage of the special powers of specific cards.

Challenges– many games are a series of challenges, which may be physical or mental. Single player video games are challenges devised by the designer and posed by the computer. Typical tabletop games are devised by the designer to enable players to challenge one another. In every case there must be some action a player can take to meat the challenge. Some people would go so far as to define a game as a series of challenges and actions.

Chaos-- the more chaotic the game is, the more it changes from turn to turn or from minute to minute, whether this change is caused by other players or by non-player factors

including sheer randomness. The more chaotic the game is, the more it favors the improviser player type; the less chaotic, the more it favors the planner type.

Character class– in role-playing games, the profession of a character that helps define what he or she can and cannot do.

Chrome-- additional rules, often accompanied by pieces or cards, that add to the atmosphere of a game or help implement the theme. At the same time "chrome" makes the game more complex. Leader pieces and leader rules in a wargame can be a form of chrome. Insofar as the computer keeps track of details, it's more practical to add chrome to video games than to tabletop games.

Cinematic–a movie inserted into a video game to help advance the narrative. Now largely displaced by cut scenes.

Clarity– an important characteristic of any game, but especially of game rules, is that they must be clear to the player. If players don't understand what to do or don't know why they do it then they're less likely to play the game correctly and they're less likely to enjoy it. While video games have no written rules, the mechanics of the rules are enforced in the software, and if these are not clear then the game will be less enjoyable.

Classical (player style)– This player tries to know each game inside-out. He wants to learn the best counter to every move his opponent(s) might make. He takes nothing for granted, paying attention to little details which probably won't matter but which in certain cases could be important. The Classical player does not avoid taking chances, but he carefully calculates the consequences of his risks. He dislikes unnecessary risks. He prefers a slow but steady certain win to a quick but only probable win. The Classical gamer concentrates on eliminating errors rather than on discovering brilliant coups.

Collectible Games--There are other kinds of collectible games using collectible chips or collectible chess like pieces, or some other item, and some collectible card games don't actually have cards that you can hold in your hand because they are done purely in online video.

(Another meaning of "collectible" refers to people who like to collect games about certain subjects. The game is not regarded as collectible less all the components, even the cardboard left over after cardboard pieces are punched out, is still with the game.)

Commercial Viability–many novices design a game which is practically unmarketable, that is, is not commercially viable because very few people will buy it. This is frequently

because the game uses components that are easily found at home. E.g., it's really hard to sell a game that uses only a standard deck of cards, or a game that uses a standard chess set. The rules are going to become available to people online in some way, so if the components are easily available at home most people aren't going to buy the game, they'll just use what they have at home. Yet there **are** a few commercial games that derive closely from traditional card games but change components slightly (Sequence, Wizard).

Complexity–while some designers of video games may argue that complexity contributes to a feeling of authenticity or immersion, many other designers would say that complexity is undesirable, certainly true in most tabletop games. Frequently a novice game designer will make things unnecessarily complex. A major objective of a game designer is to remove complexity that is not necessary to the quality of the game.

Contest--any activity that can be timed, that one person can do faster than another, can be turned into a contest, but contests are not necessarily games and often are not. I've known people who type like crazy for 10 minutes and whoever typed the most words "wins". It is a competition, but not a game. There is no aspect of game design to this contest. A race may be a contest except that all participants are on the same field of play at the same time and can at least slightly affect one another; and there may be some aspects of game design to a race, which is a reason why NASCAR etc. keep tweaking the rules.

Convergence-- this word has many applications, but in the realm of games it refers to the way that video games are coming more to resemble tabletop games and tabletop games are coming more to resemble video games. For example, some video games are now designed for multiple sides were people play against other people, whereas some boardgames have become much like multiplayer solitaire, more like puzzles than games.

Cooperative Games– the primary purpose in a cooperative game is for all of the players to collectively beat the game. Occasionally there is a traitor and the traitor is against the other players. These games are much easier to do with the computer than on the tabletop thanks to the power of the computer to provide opposition, but the advantage of the tabletop version is that all the players are sitting around the table, making cooperation simple.

Copyright-- law that protects a particular expression in words or pictures. Others cannot legally copy that expression, but they can use the ideas expressed, because game ideas cannot be copyrighted. Artwork, photographs, and other visual means of expression can be copyrighted. The law has changed so that now a person has copyright in whatever they create as soon as they create it.

Creativity–- creativity is an important but small component of game design. Most of the work involved in the game is fairly straightforward thinking and problem-solving. This is not to say that it's easy, but it does not involve a great deal of creativity. Novice game designers often have a confused idea that game design is all about creativity, which is very far from the truth.

Cut Scene– a video created using the game program rather than a separate video editor, and inserted into the game to advance the story. As computers and game software have become more powerful cut-scenes have replaced more expensive cinematics.

Deadline– the date by which something needs to be done (see milestone).

Development (1)– in the world at large, development in relation to computers means computer programming. In the game industry development refers to all of the tasks that the game creators accomplish. I prefer to use the term game creator rather than game developer to make it absolutely clear that programming is not the principle activity in video game creation.

Development (2)–in the tabletop game world a developer is someone assigned by the prospective publisher of a game to further modify and refine a game after it is received from the designer. The developer may function like an editor of a book, or he may in effect be a co-designer of the game.

Depth–- this generally applies to games where thinking is a major activity if not the major activity of the players. A game with little depth is easy to play well, whereas a game with a lot of depth requires a lot of experience and study to play well. Chess has a lot of depth. Monopoly and most other traditional family games have very little depth.

Design Document– if the video game has passed beyond the pitch and game concept/treatment stages to actual pre-production, then the designer(s) will write fairly long documents describing all the details of the game, so that artists, programmers, sound people, and others can actually make the game. Ideally these people read the game design document, but in practice they often don't and simply ask the designer. Ideally the document is revised to reflect changes in the game, but often this doesn't happen. Game studios are moving away from very long game design documents because they delay the game production as a whole.

Dice-fest–- a game dominated by dice rolling--**lots** of dice. Examples Risk, Axis and Allies, Yahtzee, some role-playing games. Oddly enough, there's not a similar term for games with many chance elements that are not dice, for example cards.

Digital–something that has discrete values that jump directly from one to the next as opposed to analog where values are a continuously changing range of possibilities. Dice are, technically, digital.

But I have to concede that most people equate "digital" with electronic", just as they equate "computer" with electronic even though analog computers (such as slide rules and artillery ballistics calculators) preceded electronic computers.

Direct Conflict-- this occurs when one player does something with the forces he controls for most or all of the game that immediately affects forces that another player controls for most or all of the game.

Downtime--time when a player is not actually participating in the game, as in between one turn and the next. This is uncommon in video games where simultaneous play is the norm. In modern games a lot of downtime is generally regarded as a flaw.

Drafting game--a game where a principal mechanism is choosing a role or other function or item before someone else chooses it--like drafting college players for professional sports teams in the US, or for fantasy sports leagues.

Education-- it is not necessary to have a degree of any kind to work in the game industry. I suspect that will no longer be true by 2025. What the game industry wants is educated people, but not educated in the sense of having degrees, rather educated in the sense that they want to learn and are always willing to learn more. These people will look up a word when they don't know it, they'll find out how to do something when they don't know how, which may involve teaching themselves how to do it. They won't whine "I haven't been trained to do that". The game industry has no place for slackers or people who expect to have their hands held.

Euro Game–There are so many different definitions of "Euro game" that any attempt to characterize the entire category is likely to lead to sometimes strident disagreement. A very broad category of board and card games first made popular in Europe that de-emphasize winning and tend to avoid direct conflict in favor of indirect and anticipatory conflict. Some Euro games have been characterized as multiplayer solitaire because there is so little interaction between the players. Another well-known definition is simply "family games on steroids".

Experience– especially in the video game industry, game design improves with the experience of the designer. In the tabletop game industry it's possible for someone to

design just one game but come up with a classic, such as Blokus or Pictionary. In general though, experience helps make game designers better designers.

Family Game--a game that is sufficiently accessible and transparent, usually lacking depth, that groups of adults and younger children can play together. There are usually mechanisms of some sort that make it possible for Junior to win occasionally, or for mom and dad to let Junior win without appearing to do so. Many of the traditional games people know, such as Monopoly, Sorry, the Game of Life, and so on, are family games.

Filler game--a fairly short and easy-to-play game that can accommodate a range of numbers of players so that it can be played while waiting for other players to show up, or after some players have left the gaming session.

Fluidity --extent to which the game circumstances change over time. In a highly fluid turn-based game, at each turn the player will be faced with a significantly different situation. This makes it difficult to plan ahead, putting a premium on improvisation. See chaos.

Fog of War– in real warfare leaders rarely know exactly where the enemy is, how many there are, or what their capabilities or intentions are. This is the "fog of war". In traditional boardgames most of this information is obvious to the opponent. In card games most of this information is hidden from the players. In typical computer games the computer hides most of this information from the players.

Game--a play activity with both rules and goals and some semblance of intelligent opposition. Many things that we call games are more properly called puzzles, for example the card game Solitaire and the video game Tetris.

Game Design–a combination of problem-solving and creativity used to create the framework, structure, and mechanics of games. In video games, game design also involves a great deal of communication with the people who actually make the software. Making and marketing the game is not part of game design, though very important to the success of a commercial game. Game design has little to do with visual arts and **nothing** to do with computer programming.

Game Development–see "development".

Gameplay–- gameplay is the heart of any game. What happens?   What does the player DO? Is it interesting or enjoyable (or both)?

Game Production–the entire process of creating/making a game, from beginning to distribution. Sometimes confused with game design.

Game Concept/Treatment–a description of the game or game concept, one to several pages long, designed to interest those with funding (often publishers) so that they will support the game. There may be a shorter concept document and a longer treatment document that generally are used after a successful "pitch".

Gamy or gamey–a play or strategy in the game that seems to take advantage of the rules without following the spirit of the game or the theme of the game. In some circles this is perfectly acceptable, in other circles this is frowned upon.

Gaussian Curve–see bell curve.

Genre– the subcategory of games with fairly well-defined methods and appeal to players. In tabletop games this usually refers to the general structure, for example card game boardgame role-playing game. In video games this usually refers to the types of challenges in the game. First-person shooters are a genre, as are real-time strategy games and platformers.

Graphics–-the visual aspects of a game, particularly art. Graphics are important to selling a game, but the best games are enjoyable even if the graphics are very simple. For most players graphics are very much subordinate to gameplay.   Successful tabletop game prototypes rarely have high quality graphics. Video gamers may be more graphically oriented than tabletop gamers. See also prettiness.

Hard-core gamers– people for whom playing a game is an end in itself, who are ego-involved in their game activities, and who (sometimes) feel they are better than other people in some way because they're gamers. They usually spend a great many hours playing video games. To some extent we could use the word "fanatics" as a substitute.

Hobby Games–- board and card games designed for game enthusiasts who like to play games designed for adults, not for kids. (Adult in the sense of mature and responsible, **not** in the sense of pornographic.) Some hobby games are wargames, but most are not.

Ideas– every game involves ideas, but specific ideas are not as important as how those ideas are put together. A new idea is very rare, in games or in anything else. An idea that is new to you is probably one that dozens if not hundreds of people have thought of before. It may have been used in games many times before, you just don't know those people and those games. In other words "ideas are a dime a dozen", and nobody pays for

game ideas, they pay for the execution of ideas in games. Novice game designers often have the notion that they can come up with a great idea and someone else will make the game for them and they'll make tons of money from it. Nothing could be further from the truth. (Occasionally someone will pay for a **toy** idea, but usually they want to see a working version of it.)

Immersion–feeling like you're really into the game, as though you're really "there". Often, hardcore video gamers and many role-playing gamers feel that immersion is very desirable, while players of abstract games may not expect any such thing (though they can become very absorbed in a game).

Improviser (player type)-- an Improviser likes a game where circumstances change quite noticeably if not drastically between the times he can act, so that he has to improvise what he does as he goes along. There is little opportunity for planning ahead in such a game. This is the opposite of the Planner player type. Example: in some respects poker is a game for improvisers, though in other respects there is a long term view and long-term plans are possible.

Incremental– something that changes slightly each time as it is done many times. In programming, incrementing a variable often involves adding one to it each time it is used. In game design you incrementally modify your game in order to make it better in light of playtesting results.

Indirect Conflict-- this occurs when one player' s directly controlled forces affect another players indirectly controlled forces or capabilities, or vice versa. One or both players may only temporarily have indirect control of the indirect forces. For example, one player of a civilized nation causes barbarian invaders to attack another civilized nation control by another player. The barbarians are the indirectly controlled force. A common example is use of an Event Card that causes some harm to another player's forces (famine, confusion, and so forth).

Intellectual Property–(IP) Identifiable characters or stories that can be owned by an individual, company, or institution, and hence cannot be used by others without paying for a license. Some intellectual property, for example the Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, or Mickey Mouse, is very valuable. Ownership is generally characterized by copyright or trademark, much more rarely by patents.

Iterative– something that is repeated over and over, probably with small changes. Game creation and especially play testing is iterative.

Kingmaking --if a player believes he no longer has a chance to win, but is then able to decide which other player wins (by virtue of how he plays), this is said to be king-making. Applies only in games with more than two players.

LARP--Live Action Role-Playing. Players actually dress up in a LARP and possibly use props like padded swords or Nerf guns. While some regard this as juvenile, the players are usually adults. Non-violent LARPs may be something like a mystery dinner or weekend improvisational theater.

Leader Bashing --ganging up on the leader in a game to try to prevent him from winning. This is a natural way to play, but if the design makes it too easy, the game suffers severely, as players try to lurk in second or third place in order to jump into first at the end of the game after others bash the leader.

Level Design-- many video games have multiple levels, stages, missions, or episodes of play. These are often designed by subordinate game designers called level designers. This has nothing to do with visual art although some level designers may provide concept art. It is much more common in video games that the level designer writes scripts, small programs, to help individualize the level, then that he creates graphics.

Levels-- this term is used in many ways dating back to original Dungeons & Dragons, where level could refer to the experience level of the character or to the level of a dungeon, which roughly translated to the difficulty level for adventurers in that part of the dungeon (difficulty level matches to experience level). In video games, level usually means a stage or episode or mission that a player completes on the way to completing the entire game.

Marketing– a game can be excellent to play but not sell very well if there is a marketing failure. Or the game just may be difficult to market, as most abstract games are. Timing has a lot to do with this. A game that might sell very well two years from now, or two years ago, might be a failure today.

In the video game industry there is very little respect between game creators and the marketers. The creators feel that the marketers don't understand the game and are only interested in "flash and trash", in a soulless feature list. Often the senior producer of a video game project spends a lot of time fending off unreasonable requests from Marketing to change the game.

MDA–Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics. A common way of looking at game designs. The mechanics (rules of the game interact with the player(s) in dynamic ways, resulting in

making some impression on the player (feelings, thoughts). Some games originate with mechanics, some with aesthetics (what you want the player to feel), some with dynamics (what you want the player to be doing).

Mechanism or mechanic-- game rules (or game programming for video games) generally describe methods by which the game moves forward, and these methods are the mechanics of the game. For example, rolling two dice and moving your token the sum of the roll around the board is a game mechanic (Monopoly). Moving one piece on an 8 x 8 square board according to the movement capability of the piece is a mechanic in chess. In video games mechanics result in challenges that players take actions (such as moving a joystick or pressing a button) to overcome.

Metagame--the game above the game, the game that takes place between games. Much of the interest of collectible card games is the metagame as players try to collect the right set of cards to make a deck that is very difficult to beat. Sometimes many game considerations influence how someone plays, for example they don't want to offend their spouse who is also playing, or they know that such and such opponent is a frequent liar and use that information to make decisions within the game.

Milestone– the contractual date at which certain elements of a game should have reached a defined state. If a video game studio misses the deadline, at best they will not get paid, at worst the game will be canceled.

Miniatures Game–a form of gaming using a tabletop and dozens of small metal or plastic painted figures and vehicles. The minis are generally required to be in groups to form coherent units. (Skirmish games may use miniatures, as well.)

Minimax Strategy--playing to minimize your maximum loss (or maximize your minimum gain). This is the mathematical game theory ideal of how one should play a game. You assume that the opposition is a perfect player or players and act accordingly, which may involve using chance to decide exactly which particular strategy should be used because there is no certain best strategy. Hence "Yomi", reading the intentions of the other players, is not part of minimax.

MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online) Games--The key to MMOs is persistence and numbers. You play a character in some fictional or historical setting along with thousands of other players, and you continue to play that character for months or even years. In some games, what the players do affects the setting; in others the setting is the same for every player as they go through the game. Most games can be played solo but the more

dangerous challenges require large groups of players to succeed. Some MMO's have a monthly fee, others can be played for free.

MUDs–Multi-user Dungeons. This is perhaps the original form of online game, text adventures played through a server. In other respects they resemble MMOs.

Non-digital Games–another term for tabletop or non-electronic games. I don't use it because, strictly speaking, many tabletop games are digital rather than analog insofar as they involve strictly discrete numbers rather than continuously changing ranges.

Non-electronic Games–A less mellifluous term for tabletop games or "non-digital games". Technically, non-electronic is broader than tabletop but for practical purposes they amount to the same thing.

Normal Curve–see bell curve.

Novice/newbie/noob/noobie–someone with little or no experience in the game being played, or possibly in game playing in general.

NPC–Non Player Character. This term applies specifically to characters in role-playing games that are controlled by the referee or game master. It can also represent all the forces that the game designer controls and the players do not.

Organized--as in organizing your game design efforts. If you're only designing one game you might get away with being disorganized. If you want to be a professional, you'll be working on many games at the same time except when there's one video game in production that actually consumes most of your time. You will have to organize your ideas, your thoughts, your testing, or you'll lose a lot of important data and information.

Party Game--a game well-suited to use at parties, where people like to play games that help elicit laughter, that are easy to learn to play, and that don't require concentration. The game usually accommodates a wide range of numbers of players. Apples to Apples is an example.

Patent–a strong form of protection of specific kinds of intellectual property that costs thousands of dollars. A patent is supposed to apply to a particular expression of an idea in some kind of device/invention, but the US patent office has become very erratic in its application of the law. Games are almost never patented. A sure hallmark of a novice game designer is that he or she gets a patent for their game (which has often not been

playtested thoroughly). Software tools made during the production of a video game are sometimes patented.

PBM/PBEM--(play by mail/play by email). Some tabletop games can be played by ordinary mail or email, with the assistance of various aids such as Cyberboard and Vassal for mapping or dice rolling. Play-mail chess and Diplomacy, for example, have existed for decades. This is not the same as a game having an electronic, online version.

Perfect Information–in games of perfect information the only data hidden from an opponent is a player's intentions. Chess, go, checkers, and many other traditional boardgames are perfect information games.

Perfectionism– the intention that everything should be perfect when one finishes a job or project. Often a perfectionist ends up taking a very long time in order to make sure everything is perfect. Game designers cannot be perfectionists, for a game is never "done". At some point you recognize that additional improvements will not be worth the time required, or you reach a deadline that you cannot get around.

Petty Diplomacy Problem --as named and described by R. Wayne Schmittberger, this is a situation, usually in the three player game, where a player who feels he cannot win can decide which other player wins through his actions. See kingmaking.

Pharming--In MMOs, playing the game repetitively (for example, waiting for a monster to spawn, kill it, wait for it to spawn again, kill it) so that you can build up levels or loot, then sell the account to someone else for actual money.   As a designer you should ask yourself, if it's possible to **easily** do this, isn't there something wrong with the game?

Planner (player type)-- a Planner likes a game where circumstances don't change much between his opportunities to play, so that he can plan well ahead. He also likes games with perfect information or nearly so because that helps him be able to plan ahead. Chess is a game for planners.

Platformer. Video game genre in which a principal activity is running, leaping, and jumping, often from one platform(like a ledge, but sometimes in the middle of the air) to another. Sometimes the platforms move.

Play Balance -- a balanced game is one that is "fair". Each player should have an equal chance of winning even in asymmetric games, that is, games with unequal starting positions. When the "game" is actually an interactive puzzle, as in many single player video games, a balanced game is one where the reward is commensurate with the effort and skill

expended by the player. It's instructive to note that chess is not a well-balanced game, because whoever plays first has a much better chance to win, even though the positions are otherwise symmetric.

Player Interaction--when the action of one player immediately affects at least one other player's situation then there is player interaction. Good games usually, but not always, have a high degree of player interaction.   Some people would say that player interaction is the whole point of games.

Playtesters-- people who play an unfinished game in order to find ways to improve it. It is not necessary for the playtesters to be experienced players, or to even care about improving the game, as long as the designer can observe what needs to be improved. Nonetheless, a playtester who understands games and how games are designed can be very valuable to a designer.

Playtest/Playtesting-- playing a prototype of a game to try to find ways to improve it. Sometimes play testing in video games is used to work out the bugs in the game; proper play testing is intended to improve the design of the game, not just to make sure that it works exactly as it was designed to work.

Pitch–a brief, usually oral, description or presentation of a game or game concept designed to elicit support from people who have funding (usually publishers) to persuade them to support or publish the game. An "elevator pitch" is the two sentence version of this, the kind of thing you could say to someone during an elevator ride or just in passing. A successful pitch is often followed by a longer written game concept/treatment.

Power-up– in video games, some item or other element that can be picked up that confers a usually temporary increase in capability on a player character.

Prettiness– many people like pretty-looking games, but prettiness has virtually nothing to do with player interaction or good gameplay. Many novice designers spend a lot of time making their prototype pretty. This not only wastes time, it can discourage the designer from changing the game because he or she has put so much work into making it pretty. Publishers of tabletop games will supply their own prettiness, and do not expect it from the designer. In video games, successful studios add the prettiness to the game after they've put in sufficiently good gameplay.

Probability--the likelihood that something will happen; this can often be calculated, for example that seven will be the sum of the roll of two dice on average one time out of six

(6/36). Someone who cannot calculate probabilities is often at a disadvantage in games and certainly in game design.

Prototype–- an unfinished version of a game suitable to be playtested and modified.

Publishers– companies that manufacture and distribute games. These operate much like book publishers, except that sometimes the creators of the game are full-time employees of the publisher.

Puzzle–There are many definitions for this, hinging on rules, solutions, and opposition. An activity, sometimes incorrectly called a game, where there is a goal and no semblance of intelligent opposition. While some puzzles have rules, they are more like guidelines or conventions; if you don't follow them, so what? Of course, an electronic form of a puzzle can enforce its rules. (Think the card game Solitaire in its many forms.)

Formal puzzles have a unique solution, and once you've solved the puzzle there is little point in playing further. Many single player video games are interactive puzzles, some with a single solution where there's no random factor, some (which include randomization to avoid complete predictability) with "optimal ways to do things"–dominant strategies and tactics. Games, in contrast, cannot have "solutions" because of the unpredictable and infinitely-varying influence of the opponent(s).

Race--the more general meaning of the word race would be working to achieve something before anyone else can. We'll confine the term "race" to an attempt to arrive at a location before others who are attempting the same thing at the same time in the same place, with some small opportunity to hinder opponents. For example a horse race, a Formula One or NASCAR race, a sprint race in Olympic track and field. (The high jump or polevault are contests, not races.)

Random--occurrences in a game over which none of the players have any control, generally governed by luck/chance such as a card draw or roll of dice.

Real-time–continuous play without turns, so that there is never a pause in the action. This is typical of video games.

Real-time Strategy game–a genre involving command of a large force, involving collection of resources and construction of factories and units, that is played in real-time (as opposed to turn-based).

Replayability--tabletop games are ordinarily designed so that they can be played many times, over and over, and still be enjoyable. There are exceptions on the tabletop, and often video games are designed to be played just once or a few times (hence you "beat the game"). For the players, obviously, for a game to be highly replayable is a good thing.

Resource Management--collection and allocation of various goods in order to create other goods or factories or some other commodity. Some games are primarily resource management games. Many economic games include resource management, of course.

Romantic (player style)– The Romantic looks for the decisive blow which will cripple his enemy, psychologically if not physically, on the playing arena. He wishes to convince his opponent(s) of the inevitability of their defeat; in some cases a player with a still tenable position will resign the game to his Romantic opponent when he has been beaten psychologically. The Romantic is willing to take a dangerous risk in order to disrupt enemy plans and throw the game into a line of play his opponent is unfamiliar with. He looks for opportunities for a big gain, rather than to maximize his minimum gain. A flamboyant, but only probable, win is his goal. The Romantic is more likely to try to "get into the head" of his opponent (Yomi), to divine which strategy the opponent will use and play his own strategy that best counteracts it.

RPGs--Role-Playing Games. Players take on the role, usually of some person in the millieu of the game. This is a matter of imagination not of physical action as in LARPs. In some RPG's a person pretends that he is the character and plays as if he were in that situation. In others the player is expected to be an actor and do what the character would do in a particular situation.

Rules– all games have rules. In video games rules are expressed through the mechanics of the game as enforced by the software. In tabletop games there are actually written rules that the players must understand. One reason why video games have become so popular is that no one has to read the rules.

Rules Lawyer--a player who wants the rules of the game to be absolutely enforced, but who is often thought to be looking for unearned advantages through manipulation of the rules. Occasionally you may encounter a person who goes one beyond this, usually based on the very odd and essentially impractical notion that if rules don't say you cannot do something, you can do it.

Sandbagging--pretending to be less capable or in a worse position than you really are. This is particularly useful in games with more than two players, so that you are less likely to be subject to leader bashing or kingmaking. An important difference between

sandbagging and turtling is that the sandbagger may be "lying low", while the turtle may not care whether other people can tell that he's turtling.

Sandbox–this video game term describes a game where players are free to do more or less as they please rather than follow a linear story. This is a recent development in video games as computers have become more powerful and less able to handle more details and options.

Science–- game designers use a form of the scientific method. As they playtest and modify their games, they analyze what is not working well, hypothesize what might fix the problem, and then experiment through further play to see if their hypothesis is correct. Their control in this case is how the game worked without the changes.

Video game programmers who have been through computer science education sometimes think of themselves as scientists or engineers.

Self published-a game published by the designer, usually resulting in financial loss. Some tabletop game publishers began as self-publishing entities. Self-publishing is easier for video games thanks to electronic distribution through Xbox Live, Steam, and similar avenues. At worst you can set up your own website and distribute your video game through it.

Service Mark– this is a legal protection of some written or oral phrase that helps identify a company. Trademarks protect titles and names of companies, service marks protect taglines and catchphrases.

Shooter. A genre with a principal activity of shooting at enemies and blowing stuff up. May be first person (you see what the eyes of your avatar see, so you don't see yourself) or third person (you see your avatar as well as his or her surroundings).

Simplicity–arguably, games ought to be simple; as the typical objective of a game as opposed to a puzzle is to have the players play the other players. Adding complexity to the system is often unnecessary. Even video games that appear to be quite complex can be reduced to a simple essence: the obvious case is a shooter, which amounts to "shoot things and blow things up". "Simplistic" ("characterized by extreme simplicity; naive") is something quite different from simple/simplicity.

Simulation (also,"sim")-- a game or training exercise or software that is intended to represent significant aspects of some reality--it "simulates" a part of reality. Vehicle "sims" are intended to allow the player to drive a vehicle just as he would the real thing.

Skirmish Games–Tactical games, usually for two players, that usually use small numbers of miniatures, e.g. Heroscape. The miniatures generally can act individually rather than in required units.

Social (Networking) Games–this relatively new category of games is played on social networks such as Facebook and MySpace. They are at the extreme of casual games. They are very, very easy to play but designed to force players to come back day after day. They are usually free to play but have options enabling the creators to make money.

Solo (Solitaire)– playing a game by yourself, playing all the sides. Most tabletop game designers play their prototypes solo before they ever ask someone else to play. This enables them to catch the biggest problems and fix them so that other people can enjoy the game more. Video games are generally played solo by their creators once a prototype is available.

Solitaire Game--A solitaire game is one designed to be played by just one person. Often it is actually an interactive puzzle rather than a game.

Spawn–Initial appearance of something, usually a monster, in video games,   When a character-avatar is killed it usually re-spawns (reappears) somewhere.

Story-driven game–A game intended to be played primarily to "see" the story. Final Fantasy games are an example, as are some kinds of role-playing games.

Styles of Play– there are many, many different styles of play in game land. Many people do not even play to win a game, having many other motivations. But some styles of play can be identified and are included in this glossary.

Studio– a group of people who have come together, usually formally in a company, to create video games, is usually called a studio. Some studios are also publishers, but most pass the finished game to a publisher to actually distribute and sell. In that respect studios are much like novelists and authors of other books.

Strategic-- strategy involves long-range plans and things that occur to affect the war, well before a battle takes place.

"Supposed to be"–as in "the way it's supposed to be played". Never assume people will play a game the way you want it to be played; assume they will play it the way the rules/software allow them to play. E.g., if you don't want people to "camp" in a shooter video game (stay in one well-concealed place and shoot people) then you have to figure out

how to make that, if not impossible, then impractical. As long as camping allows a player to be successful some players are going to do it.

Symmetric–in games, starting positions for all players that are identical. This is unlikely to happen in a simulation.

Tabletop Games– my preferred term for what are sometimes called non-electronic or non-digital games: games that are not video games.

Tactical--tactics involve what you do while a battle is taking place and just before, as opposed to strategy which applies to the war as a whole.

Teamwork–- tabletop games can be created without a lot of teamwork; video games almost always require teamwork, especially the AAA list games that involve more than 100 people working on the game at a time. Tabletop game design focuses on the game; video game design often focuses on having the team work together toward a common goal.

Techno-fetishism– a defect of some game design that focuses so much on technology that the gameplay is sometimes forgotten. Often this is done in the name of "immersion" (see next entry).

Technological Immersion– the ideal of technological immersion is the Star Trek holodeck, where you could be playing a game and feel exactly as though you were there. Videogame makers often try to use technology to achieve this end. It **is** possible to have immersion without technology, for example in a role-playing game. It just requires more imagination from the players.

Theme--a story or history that a game is attempting to represent. The theme should actually mold what happens in the game and how it happens, as opposed to an "atmosphere" which provides the appearance of something but has no substantial effect on how the game plays.

Tile-laying Game-- tiles are fairly large, usually square or hexagonal, cardboard game pieces that are laid on the table in a connected manner according to a set of rules. More expensive materials may be used, as in the original tile laying games, Mahjongg and Dominos. Carcassonne is the preeminent modern example.

Toy--something that you play with that has no rules or goals, you just do whatever you want with it.

Traditional Games– traditional games are games that have been around for decades that most people know of even if they haven't played. Chess and Go are two of the oldest; more recently we've had commercial traditional games like Monopoly, Clue, Game of Life, and Sorry.

Train/Railroad Game-- a game in which either trains are preeminent, or where laying out a network of railroads is preeminent.

Trademark– a form of intellectual property protection that applies to titles and names of companies. The simple form merely involves adding the letters TM after the title or name, which cost nothing. The stronger form of protection, registered trademark, is represented by the letter R in a circle:®. Trademark registration costs several hundred dollars.

Transparency -- in a game where there are better and worse ways to play, a transparent game will reveal the "secret" of good play to a player by the end of the first game played. The player will think he knows what to do to win the game. It may turn out it's a little more complicated than he thinks, but often times it is in fact pretty clear what to do even though it may be hard to do it well. A game that is not transparent, such as chess, requires many plays before the player even realizes some of the possible strategies available.

Trial and error– video games are made so that a person using trial and error, which amounts to guessing what to do next. They can succeed because they can keep going back to their save point until they guess right. In tabletop games if you use trial and error you'll probably lose the game; you can't lose a video game if you're the only player. Much of the difference comes from the fact that many single player video games are really a form of interactive puzzle. Puzzles that have solutions are perhaps more amenable to use of trial and error than games where there are intelligent opponents.

Trick-taking-- in cards, a game such as Bridge in which players take turns playing one card each, usually with one suit designated trump (any trump card defeats any non-trump card) Usually players must play the same suit as the first card of the "trick".   The highest card takes the "trick".

Turn-based–dividing the action into player turns that usually follow one on another. Typical of board and card games. Rarely seen in AAA list video games.

Turtling-- in a game with more than two players, it may be to a player's advantage to "lie low" and not participate in conflict, waiting for the others to exhaust themselves so that

the Turtle can then move in and win the game. Some games make turtling easy, while others effectively prevent this by design. "Camping" is the shooter form of turtling.

Unpredictable– some random factors any game may be unpredictable while others can be predicted through the use of probability. For example although dice are often used in combat in tabletop games, it is possible to predict outcomes in some ways and so have some control over what happens next. Other occurrences may be caused by factors that the players cannot use to calculate probability, or there may be so many different possibilities that a probability calculation is of little use.

User Interface–- the means by which the player interacts with the game. Typically we speak of user interfaces in connection with video games, but tabletop games have a user interface as well, which can include dice, tables, player layouts, boards, cards, and so forth. The best game in the world can be ruined by a poor user interface. If it's hard for the players to take actions in the game, or to figure out what's happening, then they're likely to be frustrated.

Virtual Reality– use of technology to create a realistic semblance of something, with the Star Trek holodeck serving as the ultimate goal. A typical virtual-reality application allows you to "walk" through a building or natural setting as seen on a screen or screens that may even surround you. We are still a long way from the holodeck.

Volatility--the extent in a game to which your arrangements (and plans) are not subject to change caused by circumstances or by other players. The more volatile the game, the greater influence circumstances and players can have on your situation.

Wargame--a game representing a war, usually a two-sided battle or a larger war which might have more than two sides. Direct conflict is almost always present in wargames.

"Yomi"--David Sirlin coined this term which means "reading" in Japanese, to represent the way that some game players can seemingly read the minds and intentions of their opponents and act accordingly even before the opponent acts. Obviously, someone who can do this successfully ought to be a great game player.

Zero-sum-- a situation where one player can only gain by taking away from another, so that one player's gain is another player's loss. The sum of the whole does not change. Games that are purely zero-sum approach triviality, so we have to look at major aspects, usually involving unit acquisition and loss. Even then, most games are not zero-sum, though in a two player game it really doesn't make a difference because whatever you can do to improve your situation naturally harms the other player's situation. The classic zero-sum

game is Diplomacy, where there are 34 supply centers and each unit must have a supply center to exist. The only way to gain more units is to take supply centers, and consequently units, away from someone else. Even here, though, a unit may be temporarily destroyed as a result of tactical operations.

For a glossary with more but shorter entries, covering video game production as well, see Tom Sloper's at http://www.sloperama.com/advice/lesson28.htm

List of acronyms:
AI– artificial intelligence
ARG–alternate reality game
CCG–collectible card game
CDG–card driven game
FPS–first-person shooter
IP–intellectual property
LARP–live-action role-playing
MDA–mechanics dynamics aesthetics
MMO–massively multiplayer online
MUD–multiuser dungeon
NPC–non-player character
PBM/PBEM–play by mail/play by e-mail
PC–player character
RPG–role-playing game
TCG–trading card game (sameness ECG)