Glossary of Terms

Words and phrases every game writer should know

*Press **Ctrl+F** (Cmd+F on Mac) to search the document.*

THE NARRATIVE DEPARTMENT

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accessibility — Broadly speaking, the extent to which a system or product (i.e. a game) is usable and understandable by different audiences. More specifically, *accessibility* typically refers to designing with disabled users in mind - ensuring that games don't exclude particular groups of players and provide optional settings to adjust the experience accordingly. Common accessibility features include captions and subtitles, colorblindness modes, difficulty settings, and granular audio adjustments. To learn more, visit [Game Accessibility Guidelines](#) or [Accessible.Games](#).

achievement — Digital badges to be displayed on a player's online profile, awarded for completing some in-game accomplishment. Achievements can simply be extra recognition for progression in a game, i.e. defeating a boss, or they can be an added challenge, i.e. kill x number of enemies, beat the game in under x hours, etc. Some games have hidden achievements that can only be unlocked by discovering some secret in-game. Achievements can add replay value, give players a sense of pride, or encourage competition.

- Most platforms just use the word achievement, but not all - PlayStation, for example, calls them "trophies."

aesthetics — Traditionally refers to the philosophy and study of art and beauty. In typical modern usage, refers to the particular style of a work of art, especially in regards to visuals. In the *MDA framework*, refers to the emotional responses evoked in the player by a game - in other words, the particular way in which a game is fun.

antagonist — The character or force in a story that directly opposes the protagonist and tries to keep them from achieving their goal. Often a villainous character, but not always.

- In his book *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby defines the antagonist as the "opponent," who "should want the same thing as the hero."

AR — Stands for "augmented reality." Any experience where our perception of or interaction with the real world is altered (or "augmented") by digital media. For example, an app or game that lays digital visuals over the view seen by your smartphone camera, or a location-based game that places a virtual layer over real geography. Examples include *Pokémon Go*, *Ingress*, and *Zombies, Run!*

ARG — Stands for "alternate reality game." Refers to interactive, narrative-focused transmedia experiences that present themselves

as part of the real world, often going so far as to involve live, in-person challenges such as scavenger hunts. Usually community-focused, with players collaborating to solve puzzles and complete tasks. May or may not include digital elements. Most often created as a marketing campaign or supplement to another piece of media, i.e. a movie or video game. Famous examples include *The Beast* (promoting the film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*), *I Love Bees* (part of the marketing campaign for *Halo 2*), and the ARG leading up to the release of indie game *Frog Fractions 2*.

avatar — The character controlled by and/or that represents the player, usually designed or customized by the player themselves. Sometimes used synonymously with player character. Comes from the Sanskrit word *avatara* (literally, "descent") which, in Hinduism, refers to the material incarnation of a deity or their descent onto Earth. First used in the context of video games in 1985's *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, and further popularized throughout games and digital media by Neal Stephenson's 1992 cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*.

- Can also refer to a person's profile picture/image in an online community, i.e. Twitter or Xbox Live.

B

barks — Short bits of dialogue spoken or shouted by NPCs during gameplay. Can be used to communicate gameplay information to the player ("grenade!" or "I think I heard something…") or add character and texture to the world.

Bartle's taxonomy of player types — A system of classification for player types based on their motivations for playing games. Comes from a [1996 paper](#) by game designer and researcher Richard Bartle, who found that players could be sorted into four categories: achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers. [This video](#) by Extra Credits has a good explanation of the four types.

battle royale — A relatively recent game type wherein many players (as many as 100) fight until only one player (or team) remains standing. Examples include *Fortnite*, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, *Apex Legends*, and *Tetris 99*.

block mesh — see *greyboxing*.

boss — A special, more powerful in-game enemy, whose defeat usually results in narrative progression, access to a new level or area, and/or upgraded abilities. Boss encounters are usually presented as more grandiose in nature than the typical enemy encounter, and

may be bookended by unique cinematics or scripted events. Narratively, boss characters are usually villains - either the story's antagonist or one of their allies, for example. Classic examples include Bowser from the *Super Mario* series or Ganon from *The Legend of Zelda*.

branching dialogue — A system that lets players navigate in-game conversations how they want by choosing between different dialogue paths. Most frequently found in RPGs and narrative adventure games like the work of Telltale Games.

C

co-op — Short for "cooperative." Describes any game where players work together to achieve a common goal, as opposed to competing for success. An example of a kind of non-*zero-sum* game.

CRPG — Stands for "Computer RolePlaying Game." A subgenre of RPG that plays very similarly to traditional tabletop RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons, but adapted for play on PCs. The oldest kind of video game RPG. Usually played from a pulled-back, overhead or *isometric* perspective. Typically have less focus on action and visuals, and more focus on narrative and roleplaying. Notable examples include *Baldur's Gate*, the first two *Fallout* games, *Divinity: Original Sin*, *Pillars of Eternity*, and *Disco Elysium*.

cutscene or cinematic — Any sequence in a game that is non-interactive or minimally interactive, usually for communicating story information. Essentially, a moment where the game is a movie for a bit.

D

dating sim — A type of *visual novel* that focuses on developing romantic relationships with NPCs. Most popular in Japan but has found growing success in western countries as well, especially on mobile platforms.

developer — Can refer to either the company/studio that creates a game (e.g. Supergiant Games), or to any individual working on making a game, whether part of a team or solo (e.g. Susan O'Connor).

DLC — Stands for "downloadable content." Refers to any extra content (levels, game modes, cosmetics, etc.) that is downloaded and added to the base game after its initial release. Essentially the

modern equivalent of the "expansion pack." Can be paid or free.

dynamics — In the *MDA framework*, the interactions and relationships between different mechanics. In other words, how a game's rules and systems create interesting gameplay.

E

emergent gameplay — This refers to complex, unplanned player behaviors and experiences that arise from the interaction of simple game mechanics and systems. Rather than being explicitly designed or scripted by developers, these gameplay patterns emerge organically as players discover creative ways to combine basic rules, mechanics, and elements within the game world. For example, in a game like *Minecraft*, the simple mechanics of placing and breaking blocks can lead to emergent behaviors like players creating elaborate redstone computers, inventing new mini-games, or developing complex social structures on multiplayer servers—none of which were specifically programmed by the developers but emerged from players exploring the possibilities within the game's systems.

esports — Short for electronic sports, if that wasn't clear. Organized competitive gaming. Usually revolves around a few gameplay genres: fighting, shooters, *RTSes*, and *MOBAs* are the most common. Competitions can happen online or at in-person tournaments. Some of the most popular esports have official leagues and professional or semi-professional teams. Some current popular esports games include *League of Legends*, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *Dota 2*, *Fortnite*, *Rocket League*, and *Super Smash Bros.*

EXP — Stands for "experience points." A resource earned in RPGs and other genres by completing quests or other tasks, e.g. defeating enemies, collecting items, and so on. Earning enough EXP will allow the player or player character to *level up*.

F

flat — Describes a character with little emotional or personal depth, that does not undergo a significant change in personality through the story. The opposite of round.

FTUE — Stands for "first-time user experience." The first contact the player has with a game, and the impressions it leaves them with. A good FTUE draws the player in, is free of difficulty or frustration, ensures they understand how to play, and makes them want to keep playing.

G

GaaS — Stands for "games as a service." A relatively new term describing games that are designed to continually provide new paid content after launch. These games are also often called *live-service games.*

game engine — The software with which a video game is primarily built. Provides a framework and all the most important tools and base-level code used to construct a game - rendering, physics, file structure, animation systems, UI, and so on. Almost always used alongside other, more specialized software designed to complete specific tasks or create assets, e.g. 3D models, textures, animations, sound effects, etc. May be proprietary (i.e. developed by technical designers and others within the studio, for in-studio use only and possibly only for one game or franchise) or a generic third-party engine such as Unreal Engine or Unity.

game feel — A mostly colloquial term (popularized by the book *Game Feel: A Game Designer's Guide to Virtual Sensation* by Steve Swink) used to describe the tactile sensations associated with playing a particular game. Factors affecting game feel can include animation, sound effects, *haptics*, and responsiveness. Sometimes called *juice*.

game jam — An event where individuals or teams work to create or prototype a game within a short period of time, often according to a prompt or other set of restrictions. Can be as short as an hour or as long as a month, but most last around a few days, i.e. a weekend. Often used as a way to practice or learn game development skills, or to brainstorm and test new ideas. Most game jams are community-run events and can take place either online or in-person. Some professional game studios use game jams as a way of coming up with new concepts or giving employees the chance to try different disciplines.

- If you'd like to see a game jam in action, this documentary chronicles Double Fine Productions' yearly "Amnesia Fortnight" game jam.

GDD — Short for "Game Design Document."

genre — Can refer to either story genre, e.g. sci-fi, mystery, romance, or gameplay genre, e.g. first-person shooter, roleplaying game, visual novel. Sometimes a genre can be both - for example, the *Uncharted* series is action-adventure, both in terms of narrative and of gameplay - but usually they're separate aspects, e.g. horror first-person shooter or fantasy roleplaying game.

greyboxing/grayboxing or ***whiteboxing*** or ***block mesh*** — A practice in level design involving building prototype versions of levels for testing with little-to-no art, textures, or lighting. Usually made from simple, uncolored geometry, thus the name.

H

haptics or ***haptic feedback*** — Describes any hardware feature that provides physical, tactile sensation to enhance the gameplay experience. The most common form of haptics is controller vibration, or "rumble." Sometimes called "force feedback," although this technically refers only to resistance in the rotation of racing simulator wheel controllers.

HMD — Stands for "head-mounted display." A term referring to *VR* or *MR* headsets such as the Meta (Oculus) Quest, Valve Index, HTC Vive, or PlayStation VR.

HUD — Stands for "heads-up display." Refers to the onscreen visual elements during gameplay that communicate important moment-to-moment information about the player character's status or the game world - health, ammo, equipped items, status effects, navigational markers, etc. Part of a game's *UI*.

I

immersive sim — A genre (or design philosophy, depending on who you ask) of first-person games, pioneered in the 1990s by Looking Glass Studios and Ion Storm Austin, wherein players are encouraged to solve problems creatively using many different interlocking gameplay mechanics and systems. Most immersive sims combine elements of first-person shooters, exploration, stealth, platforming, and puzzle-solving. Early examples of the genre include *Ultima Underworld*, *Thief*, *System Shock*, and *Deus Ex*. More recent examples include the *Dishonored* and *Prey* (2017) franchises.

in-engine — Refers to a scene in a game that is rendered in real-time by the game, as opposed to being pre-rendered. Pre-rendered cutscenes are stored as video files in the game's data, and can often look better than gameplay (although with modern engines and more powerful hardware this is not always the case anymore). However, they can also take up a lot of disc or hard-drive space, so they are often compressed, which may make them look worse. Pre-rendered cutscenes also have the disadvantage of being immutable - you can't customize a scene to a player's particular experience, such as showing a customized character.

interactive fiction — Written text stories where progress and outcome are determined by the reader's choices and input. Often abbreviated as *IF*. Variants include gamebooks, which are physically printed works (most famously, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series); hypertext fiction, which involves clicking text options to move between passages ([Twine](#) games are the most common modern example); and the text adventure game, which tasks the player with typing commands to control their character and interact with the game world (early examples include *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Zork*).

isometric — A way of rendering three-dimensional spaces where objects look the same size on the screen regardless of how far they are from the "camera" - many classic-style RPGs and strategy games use isometric projection. Useful for having a wide view of an environment while retaining detail, allowing design to communicate more information to the player.

- It's worth noting that "isometric" means something different in video games than its traditional definition in math and engineering - [Wikipedia](#) has a good explanation

itch.io — A free-to-use online marketplace for downloadable games. Home mostly to indie games and projects made in game jams. The most common place for developers to upload and share their personal/portfolio game projects.

J

juice — See *game feel*.

K

I couldn't think of any terms that start with K.

L

let's play — Noun. A pre-recorded or live-streamed playthrough of a video game on the internet, often with player audio commentary. People who post let's plays are usually called let's players, whereas people who live-stream games are typically called streamers.

level — A single segment or area of a game, usually with a primary objective (and maybe some secondary objectives) that must be

completed before moving on to the next level. Levels and their objectives may be linear (e.g. make it to the end of the level), non-linear (e.g. find all the keys and then make your way to the exit), or open-ended (e.g. find the target and eliminate them however you see fit). Sometimes referred to as a "stage," "mission," "map," "board," or a narrative-derived term like "chapter" or "act."

- Alternately: In *RPGs*, a character's *level* is a number that indicates their overall ability and progress. Advancing from one level to the next in this context is called *leveling up*, and usually includes some reward(s): increased ability stats, points used toward upgrading certain abilities, etc.

level design — The discipline within game design involving the layout and shape of each level, as well as the placement of obstacles and interactables within it.

live-service game — See *GaaS*.

loot box — A virtual item containing a random selection of goodies, which may include cosmetic customization items, weapons or gameplay accessories, or in-game currency. Usually purchased or unlocked using real-world currency. Sometimes controversial for giving gameplay advantages (in some games) to those who can afford to spend more money, i.e. "pay-to-win" mechanics, and in some countries loot boxes are regulated under gambling laws.

M

mechanic — The exact definition can differ depending on who you ask, but essentially, a mechanic is any system through which the player interacts with the game and its rules and procedures. Some examples: jumping on an enemy in *Super Mario Bros.* defeats it. You can move and pass through portals in *Portal* to cross long distances. Filling an entire horizontal row in *Tetris* makes it disappear. Simply put, mechanics (and the dynamics between them) are what make a game, a game.

MDA framework — A methodology for understanding games that breaks them down into three elements: *mechanics* (the basic elements/systems of the game and how it operates), *dynamics* (the results of interaction between mechanics and the player), and *aesthetics* (the emotional responses created by the game and its dynamics). Comes from a [2004 paper](#) written by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek.

meta — Originally, a Greek prefix meaning "beyond." As an adjective, describes media that is self-referential or aware of its own cultural

context. As a noun, the "meta" of a particular game is the conversation surrounding and pursuit of optimal strategies for success - e.g. which characters are most effective in competitive fighting games.

- Not to be confused with Meta, the parent company of Facebook and the brand name for virtual reality headsets formerly known as Oculus.

Metroidvania — A subgenre of the side-scrolling platformer that focuses on exploration of a large, interconnected, often maze-like environment. Usually involves lots of backtracking and gaining access to new areas via new abilities. Named after the two codifiers of the genre: Nintendo's *Metroid* series and Konami's *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. Modern examples include *Ori and the Blind Forest*, *Hollow Knight*, and Nintendo's own *Metroid Dread*. Many non-sidescrollers take heavy influence from the Metroidvania genre, including many *Soulslikes* and other 3D action games like *Batman: Arkham Asylum*.

MMORPG — Stands for "Massively Multiplayer Online RolePlaying Game." Often shortened to just MMO. A subgenre of the *RPG* where many players coexist simultaneously in a persistent virtual world, with a heavy emphasis on social elements. Notable examples include *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, and *The Elder Scrolls Online*.

MOBA — Stands for "multiplayer online battle arena." A gameplay genre where two teams fight across a battlefield, with each player controlling a single character. Beginning as an evolution of classic *RTS* games, MOBAs have grown to combine strategy, action, and *RPG* elements. It is one of the largest genres in *esports*. Popular examples include *League of Legends*, *Dota 2*, and *Smite*.

mod — Short for "modification." A player-created alteration or addition to a video game, usually made using developer-provided software tools. Mods can be small alterations like an alternate skin for a character or small gameplay tweaks, or large additions like new quests, levels, or even entire standalone experiences built on the foundation of the original game. Common subjects of modding include classic first-person shooters like the *Doom* and *Half-Life* franchises, and *RPGs* like *The Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout*.

MR — Stands for "mixed reality." Any experience where the real and virtual worlds are merged together and interact with each other. Sort of the halfway point between *AR* and *VR* - the former is when the digital is layered atop the physical, and the latter is when a person is fully immersed in a purely digital world. For games in particular, the line between *MR* and *AR* is sometimes fuzzy, and the two terms may be used interchangeably or synonymously. Examples

of mixed reality in gaming include camera-controlled games for the Microsoft Kinect or PlayStation's EyeToy and its successors, and the small number of games available for Magic Leap's mixed reality glasses and Microsoft's HoloLens headsets.

- Microsoft has a series of headsets they call "Windows Mixed Reality," which are essentially VR headsets with cameras on the front. There are very few, if any, actual mixed reality gaming experiences available for them, however.

- Mixed reality can also refer to a method of showing people in virtual reality by using a greenscreen to overlay real footage with the virtual environment, often used in ads for VR games.

N

narrative design — Definitions vary from studio to studio and from person to person, but generally speaking, narrative design is the practice of bridging story and gameplay/design. Usually different from game writing in that it is about the execution and communication of the story, not the writing of the story itself. That said, many narrative designers are also writers, and vice versa - in fact, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

NPC — Stands for "non-player character." Any character in a game that is not controlled or directed by the player.

O

open-world — Describes a game with a large, open-ended environment for players to freely explore, as opposed to a more linear or directed experience. Open-world games are often also *sandbox experiences*.

outcome — The uncertain result all games end with, usually by one or more players meeting the *win conditions*.

P

platform — A catch-all term for whatever hardware and operating system a video game runs on. Examples: PlayStation 5, iOS, Google Stadia, Windows PC.

platformer — A gameplay genre focused on movement (especially

jumping), trying to make your way across obstacle course-like spaces. The classic, most influential example is *Super Mario Bros*.

player character — The character controlled by and/or that represents the player. Also known as the *avatar*, especially in cases where the character is created or designed by the player. Sometimes, but definitely not always, the game story's *protagonist*.

player fantasy — The specific experience the player wants and expects to have from playing your game, around which the entire game is built. (For example, "be Spider-Man.") The least flexible element of the story stack, which should be supported by all other elements.

premise — All the events and foundational narrative elements that happen before the story actually begins.

procedures — The actions and abilities the player uses to achieve game objectives, within the constraints of its *rules*.

producer — In game development, the person(s) who ensure things get done - with the proper level of quality, by the deadline, and within budget. Involves lots of logistics, task-management, and people-management.

protagonist — Definitions vary, but for our purposes, it is the character that goes through the most change throughout the story.

- In his book *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby defines the protagonist as the "hero," who "has the central problem and who drives the action in an attempt to solve the problem… but possesses certain weaknesses and needs that hold [them] back from success."

- It's important to note that the *protagonist* of a game is not always the same as the *player character*.

publisher — The company that ensures a studio/developer's game gets released for sale. May fund some or all of the game's development, and usually handles or helps with quality assurance, marketing, and distribution. Many of the larger publishers are also developers, or own several development studios whose games they publish. Examples include Microsoft, Sony Interactive Entertainment, Nintendo, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, and indie/arthouse publishers like Annapurna Interactive and Devolver Digital.

Q

QTE — Stands for "quick time event." Refers to any moment in a scripted sequence or cutscene (AKA outside of normal gameplay) where an input prompt appears (i.e. press a certain button once or repeatedly very quickly), usually with a short time limit. If the player fails to respond correctly in the allotted time, they receive some penalty - their character dies, or they miss an opportunity to deal extra damage to an enemy, etc. Often used during climactic moments in narrative-focused games to give the player something to do or to add tension during a cutscene. Sometimes frowned upon for being perceived as gimmicky, unfair, or uninteresting.

quest — A single self-contained sequence of tasks or objectives in a game, often tied together by a story. Commonly seen in *RPGs* and adventure games.

questlog — An automated running list of *quests* taken on by or made available to the player. Especially useful in large, *open-world RPGs* where quests can pile up quickly and become hard to keep track of.

R

real-time — Describes a game where events unfold actively over time on their own, rather than in a turn-based fashion.

resources — In-game items that are expendable and of value, e.g. currency, EXP, magic or ability points, etc.

roguelike or **roguelite** — A variant of the dungeon crawler genre that focuses on repeated attempts to make it through a randomly generated maze or sequence of levels. Upon death the player has to restart from the beginning, and the map is randomized again. Named after the 1980 PC game *Rogue*. Modern examples include *Spelunky*, *The Binding of Isaac*, *Hades*, and *Returnal*.

round — Describes a character who goes through significant change in personality or outlook over the course of a story. The opposite of a *flat* character.

RPG — Stands for "roleplaying game." A broad gameplay genre that refers to any game that takes significant influence from the mechanics of tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* - can include numerical character stats, experience points, leveling up, turn-based combat, etc. Often, but not always, take place in a fantasy or sci-fi setting.

- Distinction is often made between JRPGs (Japanese RPGs), which tend to have a large cast of pre-set characters and a linear narrative & gameplay experience, and western RPGs (i.e. those made in the US or Europe), which tend to favor player choice - custom player characters, an open world, many sidequests, etc.

- Sub-genres include the action RPG, strategy RPG, or *MMORPG* (massively multiplayer online RPG).

RTS — Stands for "real-time strategy." A gameplay genre in which players direct units across a map in real-time (as opposed to by turns) to capture territory or destroy enemy units or resources. Popular examples include *WarCraft*, *Command & Conquer*, *StarCraft*, and *Age of Empires*. Usually played on PC with a mouse and keyboard.

rules — Define the objects and concepts of a game, the players' abilities and allowable actions, and how the game reacts to those player actions. Usually baked-in to video games via their design and code, as opposed to traditional games where rules must be accepted and actively adhered to by all players.

rumble — See *haptics*.

S

sandbox — A type of game where gameplay is largely open-ended and undirected, giving players the opportunity to decide what tasks to take on and how to complete them. Often allow or encourage creative problem-solving, and can result in *emergent gameplay*. Many *open-world games* are sandbox games.

scripted sequence — A specially created one-off moment or scene that takes place during otherwise normal gameplay. Differs from a *cutscene* or *cinematic* in that the player retains at least some amount of control during the scene. Often used to thrust the player into exciting, climactic moments - a bridge collapses as you cross it, or an especially powerful enemy appears out of nowhere and grabs the player, for example. *QTEs* are often a form of scripted sequence.

side-scroller — Describes any game where the player character is viewed in profile, moving horizontally and/or vertically along a 2D plane. Most common in 2D *platformers*. Examples: *Super Mario Bros.*, *Metroid*, *Terraria*.

sidequest — A type of *quest* that exists outside the main story or questline. Can be used to add variety to the game or flesh out its world and narrative.

Soulslike — A relatively new genre descriptor that references the *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* series by From Software. Characterized by challenging, methodical combat (usually with lots of dodging), learning through repeated failure, RPG elements, and often a dark aesthetic/tone. Other examples include *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, *Bloodborne*, and indie titles that often combine Soulslike characteristics with those of other genres, e.g. *Metroidvanias* and *roguelikes* (see *Hollow Knight*, *Dead Cells*, *Salt & Sanctuary*).

speedrun — When a player tries to complete a game as quickly as possible, usually within specific parameters. Common speedrun types include 100% (completing every possible objective) and any% (simply getting to the end with no other requirements). Many games have large, passionate online speedrunning communities, where people compete to achieve the fastest times or work together to find new ways of improving times (which often involve exploiting glitches, bugs, and loopholes).

stats — Short for statistics. The set of numbers that indicate a character or item's abilities and characteristics. Found primarily in *RPGs*, but can often be found in other genres as well: strategy, fighting, sports, etc.

status effect — A temporary characteristic placed upon a game character that affects gameplay, i.e. being poisoned or having increased strength. Sometimes referred to as buffs and debuffs for positive and negative status effects, respectively.

Steam — The largest and most popular online marketplace & launcher for downloadable PC games. Owned by Valve Corporation, a developer known for creating game franchises such as *Half-Life*, *Portal*, *Counter-Strike*, *Dota*, *Left 4 Dead*, and *Team Fortress*, and more recently for creating hardware like the Valve Index VR headset and the Steam Deck handheld gaming PC.

story beat — A single moment of significance in a story that moves the plot forward. The smallest unit of structure in story. Not to be confused with the word "beat" as used in a script, which denotes a short pause during dialogue.

story stack — A tool that helps prioritize the different elements of your game, ensuring that everything works in unison to support the *player fantasy*. Arranged from least flexible to most flexible, the stack includes player fantasy, action, economy, world, and story. Taken from [this talk](#) by Jesse Schell, who took it from designer Jason Vandenberghe.

systems design — The discipline within game design involving the creation and tuning of individual mechanics and systems that form the backbone of the gameplay experience.

T

technical artist — A role that essentially bridges the gap between artists and programmers. Technical artists may create or work on the *game engine*, design and implement tools to make tasks easier, determine the workflow for art implementation, optimize lighting and shaders, etc.

turn-based — Describes a game where events unfold step-by-step, as each player or computer-controlled character takes turns executing actions. The opposite of real-time.

Twine — A [free piece of software](#) used for creating simple interactive fiction experiences. Can refer to the software itself or any of the experiences made with it (i.e. "Look at this Twine I made!").

U

UGC — Stands for "user-generated content." Refers to anything player-created in a game, e.g. custom maps or *levels*, *mods*, artwork, etc.

UI — Stands for "user interface." The visual elements on-screen that the player interacts with and convey important information - menus or button prompts, for example.

UX — Stands for "user experience." A field of design involving understanding how users interact with a product and making it as easy, painless, and enjoyable as possible. Game UX can involve *UI*, *game feel*/feedback, tutorialization, ergonomics, and more.

V

vertical slice — A small but fully completed section of a game, created during development as a preview of what the final product will be. Used as a proof-of-concept to show to investors and publishers, and/or a touchstone to guide the rest of development and keep the game to a certain standard.

visual novel — A type of game that consists mainly of written text and dialogue accompanied by illustrations of characters and backgrounds. Interaction and player choice are usually minimal, often restricted to occasional narrative decisions that branch the story in different directions. Most popular in Japan, but in recent

years have found popularity worldwide. Often combined with puzzles or other mechanics - see the *Ace Attorney* and *Zero Escape* franchises, for example. Many visual novels are also *dating sims*.

visual scripting — A way of programming a game using a visual interface such as a flowchart, rather than by typing out written code. Unreal Engine's Blueprints is the most high-profile example, but other *game engines* may use visual scripting as well, either through built-in solutions or third-party extensions.

VR — Stands for "virtual reality." Experiences that fully immerse the user in a digital environment, typically using a virtual reality headset (or *HMD*) and motion-tracked controllers. Early VR technology was used mainly for engineering, design, or military applications. The 1990s saw the first rise of VR for commercial entertainment applications, including VR arcade games and Nintendo's ill-fated Virtual Boy console. It wasn't until the 2010s that VR technology became good enough and cheap enough to give the average consumer high-quality experiences, marked by the releases of the Oculus (now Meta, after being purchased by Facebook) Rift, Valve and HTC's Vive, and Sony's PlayStation VR. Current VR offerings can be in standalone headsets like the Meta Quest, or tethered to a more powerful external device like a gaming PC (the Valve Index for example) or a console (the upcoming PlayStation VR 2).

W

whiteboxing — see *greyboxing*.

win state or *win condition* — The set of requirements that, when met, determine a player has won the game. Not all games have win conditions, e.g. many non-*zero-sum* games.

X

XR — Stands for "extended reality." A catch-all term referring to *AR*, *MR*, and *VR* experiences and the technology that enables them.

Y

Y can't I think of any terms that start with y?

Z

zero-sum — Describes any game where if one person wins, that necessarily means another person loses. It's called zero-sum because the wins (+1) and losses (-1) add up to zero. For example: soccer (along with many other sports) is a zero-sum game because one team will ultimately win and the other will lose. Non-zero-sum games include co-op experiences where all players work together to succeed, or games without a win state, i.e. games where the primary goal is to experience or uncover a story, creativity-focused games, or games without an end.

For more information, see the following, some of which were used as references for this glossary:

- *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* by Jesse Schell

- *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games* by Tracy Fullerton

- *An Architectural Approach to Level Design* by Christopher W. Totten

- *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller* by John Truby

- *The Game Narrative Toolbox* by Tobias Heussner, Toiya Finley, Ann Lemay, and Jennifer Hepler