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So You Want To Be A Video Game Designer

Linda Soules

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So You Want To Be A Video Game Designer

by Linda Soules

Genre: Children's Nonfiction

Key Takeaways

• Game design is about shaping the player’s experience: what they can do, what challenges they face, and whether the game feels satisfying, fair, and fun.

• The designer’s central tool is curiosity—the habit of asking “What if?” and imagining new rules, worlds, and possibilities.

• Iteration is the core of the craft. Designers prototype, play, observe, revise, and sometimes remove work they care about when it does not improve the game.

• Playtesting reveals the difference between what designers intend and what players actually experience; observing without explaining helps uncover the most useful feedback.

• A game’s fun cannot be added as a finishing touch or guaranteed by attractive visuals and reliable technology. It emerges from systems working together and must be tested with real players.

• Game design depends on collaboration among designers, programmers, artists, writers, sound specialists, testers, and producers—and on communicating ideas clearly across those roles.

• Empathy, systems thinking, an understanding of motivation, strong writing, mathematical comfort, and a lasting sense of play all support effective game design.

- Games can entertain, tell stories through player choice, support learning and rehabilitation, and create meaningful communities and memories.
- Aspiring designers can begin now: invent a paper game, change the rules of a familiar one, study why games work, try beginner tools such as Scratch, and finish small projects.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is especially suited to curious readers, roughly ages 10–14, who love games and wonder how they work—or who enjoy inventing rules, drawing imaginary maps, solving puzzles, and building worlds. It is also useful for parents, teachers, and librarians looking for an approachable starting point for conversations about creative careers. Readers will come away with a realistic picture of the job: game design involves imagination, collaboration, technical tools, observation, revision, and the patience to learn from imperfect attempts. Unlike a guide focused mainly on coding or game-industry business, this book centers on the player's experience and the creative decisions behind it. It combines career information with practical exercises, examples from game history, a glossary, and suggestions for beginner resources. Readers who want a first step rather than a complete professional training manual will find it encouraging and actionable: make a simple game, watch someone play it, and use what happens to improve the design.

Chapter Summaries

Imagining the Game Designer's Work

The book introduces game design as the work of inventing interactive worlds and the rules that make them feel alive. A designer might ask what would happen if gravity worked sideways, the player became the villain, or a kingdom had to be saved with an unlikely tool. The role blends creativity with careful observation: designers think about how a player experiences a game from the inside, rather than concentrating only on its appearance or technical performance. Designers decide what players can do, how challenges are structured, and whether a moment feels rewarding or frustrating. They describe systems in design documents, then work with programmers and artists to build playable versions. Since written plans are only predictions, the real test is play: designers repeatedly try the game, notice where the experience breaks down, and refine it. Effective mechanics often become nearly invisible when they work well, allowing players to become absorbed in the world.

Workplaces, Tools, and the Creative Process

Game designers commonly work in collaborative studios, surrounded by workstations, visual references, and spaces for discussion or focused concentration. Playtest rooms are especially important: there, people unfamiliar with the game try it while the team observes where they hesitate, misunderstand, or become engaged. The studio environment reflects the job's mix of concentrated craft and shared problem-solving. A game engine such as Unity or Unreal helps designers build interactive spaces and configure objects, rules, physics, lighting, and other systems. Prototypes let teams test an idea's feel before investing heavily in it. Playtesting is a particularly honest tool because players respond to what they actually encounter, not what the designer meant. The book also emphasizes sound: footsteps, menu clicks, music, and impact effects can change how responsive and polished a game feels, and sound artists may create effects from surprising sources such as squashed mud or a smashed watermelon.

The Rewards and Difficulties of Making Games

One of the job's greatest rewards is creating a world that players can explore and seeing them discover it for the first time. Designers may build unusual environments, memorable puzzles, or challenges that are difficult enough to make a player feel clever when solved. Watching someone move from frustration to insight can be especially satisfying. Games can also matter deeply to their audiences: people may return to them for years, create fan art and stories, or form friendships through them. The work is also marked by imperfect early versions and extensive revision. A first build may have broken controls, poorly balanced enemies, crashes, or music that does not work; the polished release may follow many discarded attempts. Some systems and levels are cut even after substantial work because they do not serve the whole game. After release, designers must learn from valid criticism while not being overwhelmed by the volume or tone of online reactions. The book presents revision and the ability to let go of beloved ideas as necessary parts of making a stronger final experience.

Unexpected Discoveries and a Designer's Day

The book highlights a surprising source of creativity: some famous mechanics began as bugs. Quake's rocket jump, for example, emerged from unintended interactions in the physics system and became a defining feature. Designers must judge whether an unexpected behavior is merely a flaw or a "beautiful mistake" that makes the game more interesting. That judgment reflects the unpredictable nature of interactive work. Designers may not know whether a game is fun until players try it, even if the game looks polished, runs smoothly, and has a compelling story. A typical day therefore combines studying other games, writing down a mechanic's rules, observing first-time playtests, and discussing raw observations with teammates. Rather than assuming a confused player made a mistake, the team asks why the game led them there. Designers may also try to play their own game as a newcomer would, identifying places where a player could lose interest or become stuck.

Collaboration, Player Impact, and Essential Qualities

Making a game takes a team. A director guides the overall vision; programmers build systems; artists and animators create environments and characters; sound designers and composers shape the audio; narrative and level designers develop story and spaces; testers look for problems; and producers help manage the schedule. The designer's ideas must be communicated clearly enough for all these specialists to turn them into a coherent experience. The finished game is the result of collaboration, even though players may never see the work behind it. Games can put players inside a story, letting them make choices and experience consequences rather than simply watch a character do so. The book also notes uses in training, social-skills development, and rehabilitation. To design responsibly and effectively, designers need empathy for players, systems thinking, patience with iteration, and an understanding of motivation. They also need to preserve their own love of play. Practical skills matter too: probability helps tune drops, difficulty, and game economies; writing gives worlds their dialogue and lore; and mentally imagining a level before coding can help anticipate confusion or boredom.

Designers, Games, and the History of the Medium

Profiles of Shigeru Miyamoto, Roberta Williams, and Hideo Kojima show different paths into the field and different ways designers have expanded what games can be. Miyamoto drew on childhood exploration to create influential worlds such as Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda, and Donkey Kong. Williams helped pioneer graphic adventure games, building on what she saw missing in text adventures. Kojima's work has argued that games can explore ideas with the depth associated with film and literature, even when that ambition meets resistance. The book's facts illustrate how practical constraints and accidents shape game history. Mario's mustache helped communicate a character when early hardware could not easily display a mouth; Pac-Man's design is linked to Toru Iwatani's pizza; and Tetris began on a Soviet government computer, with its creator unable to receive royalties for years. Designers also plant hidden Easter eggs for players to discover. Together, these stories present game design as a field where ingenuity, technical limitations, experimentation, and cultural impact continually interact.

Starting Out and Exploring the Career

Readers are encouraged to practice game design before they have professional tools or training. They can invent a game on paper, define its goal and rules, play it with a friend, and observe where that friend becomes confused or excited. Changing a familiar game's rules is another simple experiment. Studying games as a designer—asking why a jump feels satisfying or why one level works better than another—turns play into a way of learning. Beginner platforms such as Scratch and GameMaker can help aspiring designers build and finish small projects. The book offers questions to guide this practice: how does a mechanic feel to the player, what kind of fun does it create, and how might someone behave in a way the designer did not expect? It defines useful terms including mechanic, core loop, prototype,

bug, playtest, level design, and user interface. Its closing message is that curiosity, close observation, and willingness to build something imperfect are strong first steps. Resources such as coding websites, game jams, clubs, and game-design organizations provide ways to keep learning and meet others who share the interest.

Notable Quotes

> *"Every game that has ever been made began with exactly that question."*
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> *"Iteration means doing something again and again, making it a little better each time, and iteration is the heart of game design."*
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> *"The player doesn't know what was intended by the designer. They only know what they experienced."*
>
> *"Fun is not a feature you add."*
>
> *"No single person can make a real game alone — a game is too large, too technically complex, too many things at once."*
>
> *"You cannot manufacture wonder. Protect it."*
>
> *"Your first version will be terrible. Build it anyway."*

Full Summary

A game designer begins with a question: What if? What if gravity worked sideways, the player took the role of the villain, or a kingdom had to be saved with nothing but a spoon and a brave hamster? That question opens the door to rules, worlds, and possibilities that do not yet exist. The designer's essential tool is not a keyboard or controller but the habit of imagining how a different rule could change the experience.

Designers are part architect, part storyteller, part psychologist, and part mad scientist. They decide what players can do, what challenges they encounter, how the world is arranged, and what makes an experience satisfying rather than frustrating. Their responsibility is not primarily how the game looks—that is the artists' work—or whether it runs, which programmers make possible. It is how the game feels from the inside. Is a challenge thrilling or merely annoying? Does a level teach players what they need to know without spelling it out? Does a moment feel earned? A designer considers hundreds of questions like these, across every level, mechanic, and choice available to the player.

That work is less about spending the day playing games than about studying the experience players will have. Designers write documents describing how systems should behave, but a

document is only a guess. The rules must be built and played before anyone can know whether the idea works. Even tiny decisions can matter. A designer might spend three weeks choosing whether a jump should take three-tenths of a second or four-tenths. The difference can seem absurd until players try both versions and consistently prefer the quicker jump. Players may never explain why one feels right, but they feel the difference; the designer's job is to tune details until the experience works.

The process depends on iteration: build a version, play it, find what is not working, revise it, and repeat. A mechanic that sounds brilliant on paper may feel clumsy once it is playable. A game engine makes it possible to test such ideas inside an interactive world, while a rough prototype can quickly reveal whether a mechanic has the right feel. Rather than trying to perfect an idea in a document, designers create something simple enough to play and learn from. The game takes shape through repeated encounters with what is actually there, not just what its makers hoped would be there.

This cycle also asks designers to stay capable of being surprised. When they know their own game too well, they may stop noticing where it confuses or disappoints someone new. The best mechanics can be like air: players do not notice them while they work, but immediately feel their absence if they fail. Designers keep looking for the places where the experience catches, falters, or unexpectedly delights. When players become so absorbed that they lose track of time, the systems have come together in a way that lets the game disappear and the play take over.

Game designers usually work in studios, often in open-plan spaces filled with workstations, reference art, character designs, and environmental paintings. Multiple monitors let people look at different parts of the work at once. The atmosphere during development is both focused and collaborative: people care intensely about getting the details right, while sharing ideas and building on one another's work. Studios may also provide informal areas for discussion, walls that can be written on, and quiet rooms for concentrated tasks.

Among the most important spaces is the playtest room. There, people who did not make the game try it while observers watch and take notes. The player arrives without the designers' explanations and assumptions, so their experience exposes a crucial gap: what the team intended is not necessarily what someone else understands or feels. Designers watch for confusion, boredom, and excitement, and they learn from what players actually do rather than what the game was supposed to make them do. The player's response can be humbling, but it is among the most honest sources of information available.

The game engine is another central tool. Software such as Unity and Unreal handles systems including physics, lighting, and collision detection. Designers use the engine to place objects, define rules, and shape the encounters players experience, working within a framework that brings a small interactive universe to life. Their work takes place alongside programmers, who

build the systems, and artists, who create the visual world. The designer’s ideas need to become something the whole team can make and test.

Sound is part of that experience, too, and can change how a game feels even when its images stay exactly the same. A footstep’s thump, a gunshot’s crack, a menu’s click, or ambient music can affect whether players perceive the game as responsive and polished. Sound designers may make effects from unexpected materials: squishing mud or smashing a watermelon into a microphone can produce just the right impact. Every sound, rule, object, and response contributes to the experience players encounter, so the game must be heard and played as it develops.

That constant testing makes room for some of the job’s greatest rewards. Designers build worlds where rain falls upward and puddles form on the ceiling, where color has vanished and players restore it brushstroke by brushstroke, or where there are no wrong answers, only interesting ones. Creating a space, a system of rules, and a set of challenges is only part of the pleasure. The special thrill comes from watching someone encounter it for the first time: discovering what is possible, getting surprised, and finding their way through. Puzzle design is especially satisfying. A challenge should be difficult enough to make a player work, but fair enough that solving it feels like a genuine achievement. Watching a playtester’s expression shift from frustration to sudden insight can make all the careful tuning worthwhile.

The reward can grow beyond that first moment. Some players return to a beloved game for years, make fan art, write stories about its world, or meet close friends through it. Learning that something you helped create has become meaningful to other people is one of the most powerful experiences in creative work.

But the work that leads to those moments is rarely smooth. The first version may have a character that jumps incorrectly, enemies that move too fast, music that sounds like a cat on a keyboard, or a crash triggered by pressing two buttons at once. Designers do not discard the whole project simply because it is rough; they repair it piece by piece. The game sold in a store may be version one hundred and twelve, with every messy attempt before it necessary to reach something better.

Not all that work survives. A mechanic may be carefully designed and tested, then removed because it does not make the game more fun. Entire levels may be built and cut because they interrupt the pacing. Letting go of something you worked hard on can be disheartening, but keeping it just because it took effort would serve the work rather than the player. Even after release, feedback can be difficult to absorb. Online responses are immediate and loud, and a single frustrating mechanic may attract more attention than many things that work well. Designers must learn to take useful criticism seriously without being overwhelmed by its least generous forms. Sometimes even a one-star review identifies, almost by accident, the exact problem they had argued about for months.

There is another complication: games do not always behave as their creators expect, and sometimes the unexpected turns out to be better. Some beloved mechanics began as bugs, unintended effects of the code that players discovered and enjoyed. The rocket jump in Quake, for example, emerged from the physics engine's response to a player jumping as an explosion went off. It became an influential mechanic in competitive gaming, despite never being part of the original design. A horse flying into the sky, a glitch opening a route through a wall, or an enemy doing something unexpectedly funny can also become part of what players love. The designer must judge when an accident is a beautiful mistake worth keeping and when it needs fixing.

Even when everything works as intended, a game can still fail to be fun. It may look beautiful, run reliably, and tell a compelling story, yet the systems may not come together into an enjoyable experience. Fun is not a feature added at the end; it either emerges from the parts working together or it does not. Designers can aim toward that feeling, but they cannot guarantee it by designing a mechanic in isolation. Until real players try the game, the team may not know whether the experience will make them light up or leave them cold.

A designer's day is therefore organized around asking questions, then checking those questions against play. The morning might begin with an hour spent playing other people's games, not simply for fun but to study their choices: why one moment feels good, or why a challenge seems unfair even when it follows the rules. Later, the designer writes documentation for a new mechanic. Explaining it clearly often reveals that an idea which seemed obvious in the mind contains unanswered questions.

At noon comes a playtest with someone encountering the game for the first time. The designer does not explain or offer hints, but records what the player tries, where they hesitate, and when their expression changes. Afterward, the team shares raw observations before deciding what they mean. The first proposed fix is often not the right one; the useful question is why the player became confused, not what the player did wrong. Later, the designer plays the newest version as if they were an ordinary player, trying—never entirely successfully—to forget what they know. They might notice two points where their younger self would have stopped. Those become the next day's work.

No designer does this alone. A game director holds the overall creative vision; programmers build systems; modelers, environment artists, and animators create the world and bring its characters to life. Sound designers and composers shape the audio, narrative designers develop story and dialogue, and level designers build the spaces players move through. Quality assurance testers search for bugs, while a producer manages the schedule. Players, ultimately, judge whether the pieces work together.

Because games are too large and technically complex for one person to make alone, a designer needs more than good ideas. The ideas must be communicated clearly enough for

programmers to build them, artists to visualize them, and producers to schedule them without losing what made them compelling. Each person translates the design into part of a finished experience. Players may never see that collaboration, but they feel whether it succeeded.

That experience can matter beyond entertainment. Games place people inside a story: they make choices, encounter consequences, and feel the pride of overcoming a challenge. Games have been used to train surgeons, help children with autism develop social skills, and support stroke rehabilitation. They can also offer the joyful absorption of being fully engaged in something that matters in the moment.

To design for those experiences, a designer needs empathy: the ability to encounter a game as someone who does not already know how it works. Systems thinking matters because changing one rule can affect the balance of the whole game. So does the discipline to iterate and remove work when the result is better without it. Understanding motivation—the rewards, engagement, and satisfaction that keep players going—helps make an experience feel natural rather than forced. And designers need to protect their love of play. Skills can be learned, but wonder cannot simply be manufactured.

Other useful tools may be less obvious. Mathematics, especially probability, helps designers tune loot drops, difficulty curves, economies, and spawn rates so that random systems feel fair and challenging ones feel rewarding. Strong writing gives life to dialogue, lore, and details hidden in item descriptions. Designers also practice an inner playthrough: before code exists, they imagine walking through a level, making choices, meeting obstacles, and noticing where a player might become confused or bored.

The people who shaped games show how different paths can lead to lasting creative work. Shigeru Miyamoto grew up in rural Japan, exploring hills and caves and finding adventure in the world around him. That childhood wonder became part of the foundation for Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda, and Donkey Kong—games that brought joy to hundreds of millions of people and helped create childhood memories around the world. Roberta Williams came to game design from a very different direction. A California homemaker, she played a text adventure and saw what it lacked. Working with her husband at their kitchen table, she helped create one of the first graphic adventure games, pioneering visual storytelling in an industry that did not expect her to belong. She built it anyway.

Hideo Kojima has likewise used his games to make the case that the medium can take on questions as deep as those explored in novels and films. Publishers and colleagues sometimes pushed back, but he made his games anyway, demonstrating that a game could be a work of art people would still discuss decades later. Their stories are reminders that game history is shaped not only by new technology, but by people who notice an unexplored possibility and pursue it.

Even small design choices can leave a mark on that history. Pac-Man reportedly began with Toru Iwatani looking at a pizza with one slice missing and seeing a character in it; the game's original Japanese name was "Puck-Man," before it was changed for the American market. Mario's mustache, meanwhile, was a practical solution: early hardware could not display a human mouth clearly on such a small character. Tetris began in 1984 on a government computer in the Soviet Union. Its creator received no royalties for more than a decade because the state owned the intellectual property, and he finally gained the rights to his own game in 1996. Behind familiar designs are often circumstances as inventive as the games themselves.

Games also carry mysteries across generations. Designers hide Easter eggs—secret rooms, messages, and characters that may appear only under impossible conditions—for the pleasure of leaving something for players to discover. Some secrets remain hidden for decades. The short ascending "boing" of Mario's jump may be the most-heard sound effect in entertainment history. And the medium's growth has been astonishing: in less than fifty years, from a simple table-tennis game in 1972, the global video game industry grew larger than the global film box office and recorded music industries combined. Its history is not finished; new designers will decide what the medium can become next.

A good way to explore that possibility is to make a game now, even if it exists only on paper. Write down its rules, goal, challenges, and source of fun, then play it with a friend. Pay attention to the places where your friend becomes confused or excited. Change the rules of a game you already know and notice how the experience shifts: in tag, perhaps the person who is "It" can move only backward; in hide-and-seek, perhaps the seeker has to find everyone before counting to fifty. Each change is a design experiment. Watching someone play without giving hints, and recording where they hesitate, is a way to practice one of the field's hardest and most valuable skills.

It also helps to study games as a designer, not only as a player. Ask why a jump feels satisfying, why one level is more enjoyable than another, or what makes a challenge seem unfair. Play older games, too—Pong, Tetris, or the original Mario—and ask someone older what they played. The decisions in those games became foundations for what followed. For hands-on practice, try a simple tool such as Scratch, a free platform made by MIT, or GameMaker. Start small, and aim to finish something. Learning basic storytelling can help give players a reason to care about what happens in the world you make.

There are ways to learn alongside other aspiring creators. Books such as Dustin Hansen's Game On! explore the history of games and the ideas behind influential titles; his The Greatest Stories Ever Played looks at how games tell stories in ways other media cannot. Kathy Ceceri's Video Games: Design and Code Your Own Adventure includes projects for making games, while Jon Woodcock's Coding Projects in Scratch offers step-by-step ways to

build games, animations, and simulations. Online, Scratch lets young coders create and share projects, and Code.org offers free coding courses and game-design activities, including its Hour of Code. Girls Make Games provides tutorials and camps where kids ages eight to eighteen design, build, and pitch a game.

A game jam offers a different kind of challenge: participants receive a theme and a deadline, then work to finish a game. Global Game Jam Next is a worldwide event for ages ten to eighteen. Girls Who Code runs free after-school coding clubs for students in grades three through twelve, and Games for Change holds an annual student game-design challenge for people interested in games that do more than entertain. The International Game Developers Association, a professional association for game makers, is another organization to know about as a career becomes more than a possibility.

The first design does not have to prove anything. A child who invents new playground rules, draws maps of imaginary worlds, or wonders why one game feels wonderful and another falls flat is already practicing the habits of a designer. The important questions are concrete: How does this make a player feel? Is it fun, and what kind of fun? What might a player try that the designer never expected? Trying to answer them through small projects can reveal whether the work itself—not just the idea of a career—holds your interest.

Games can let people inhabit a story, make choices, fail safely, and try again. They have also been used to train surgeons, help children with autism build social skills, and support stroke rehabilitation. That gives designers both a creative opportunity and a responsibility: a game is not merely software or entertainment, but a space where people make decisions, encounter challenges, and may feel understood. The games that shaped you were built through hundreds of choices made with someone else’s experience in mind. Your own first version may be terrible. Build it anyway. That is not the obstacle; it is the method—and the blank screen may one day become someone else’s future memory.

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