

Design Lenses

A deck of lenses for designing ttrpgs

v20.09.08b

<https://nevarware.itch.io/>

Introduction

What is this?

A deck of design lenses with a focus on physical game design, especially TTRPGs.

Design lenses are a tool used to help you focus on one important topic without getting distracted by other topics. They help you choose a mindset and stick to it while working.

How do I use them?

1. Choose a card at random (or according to your current needs).
2. Go through each question and consider how it applies to your game, and what benefits considering it could have.
3. Take an hour break after using a card to give your brain time to reset.

Tone

A) Choice:

1. What is the game's elevator pitch?
2. What are its cultural touchstones?
3. What feelings do you want players to experience?
4. How flexible is your game's tone if players want to change it?
5. What skills or lessons do you want players to learn?

B) Propagation:

1. Does the lore have motifs running through it?
2. Do the mechanics support the tone of the game thematically?
3. Do the rules use language that suggests the tone?
4. Do the layout and graphic design fit the tone?

Mechanics

A) Do:

1. Do the mechanics share a key idea, such as 'd20 based' or 'blackjack'?
2. Is their approach to the idea unique?
3. Are they intuitive to people who understand that key idea?
4. Do they express the game's tone?
5. Are they ordered intelligently and easy to reference?

B) Don't:

1. Are any mechanics too dissimilar from the rest?
2. Does anything interrupt the game's pacing?
3. Who would have trouble using your mechanics?
4. What are the probabilities of success/failure etc. in each mechanic?

Lore

A) Allow:

1. Paid consultations.
2. Societies with different views.
3. Economies that aren't strictly fiat.
4. Antifascism.
5. A sense of past and future.
6. Small bites of non-narrative, non-mechanical flavour.

B) Avoid:

1. Settings that are cliché.
2. Names with bad SEO.
3. Telling people's stories without paying them to consult.
4. "Human condition", binary gender, racial traits, disability mechanics, or other essentialism.

Ecology

A) Consider:

1. Do your creatures follow a consistent logic regarding territory, habitat, biomass, and food-chains?
2. Does your setting have biomes? Are they different experiences? Do they require different skills?
3. Is life susceptible to different forms of danger?

B) Caution:

1. Are you depicting or encouraging habitat displacement?
2. Are you depicting or encouraging natural resource exploitation?
3. Are you depicting or encouraging exploitation or destruction of lives and bodies?

Inclusivity

A) World Setting:

1. Are real world conditions/identities or analogues of them mechanically coded into the rules?
2. Are setting cultures monotonous?
3. Are setting cultures exoticised?
4. Can people build characters that reflect their life and culture?
5. Do rules infer default ability, race, religion, sexuality, or gender?

B) Demographic:

1. Do you research resources on relevant social issues?
2. Do you hire and listen to consultants about writing PoC/queer/disabled experiences?
3. Do you connect with communities?
4. If you are receiving from communities or privilege, how can you reciprocate that fortune?

Language

A) In rules:

1. Who is playing?
2. Who is narrating?
3. Who is in control?
4. Who is significant?
5. Is anything too ambiguous?
6. Can anything be made simpler?
7. Are statements ordered by importance?

B) In lore:

1. Does anything diminish a real world group?
2. Does anything diminish a fantasy group? Is it necessary?
3. Does language reflect the culture it was made in/for?
4. Are there occupational, geographical, vernacular, and academic dialects?

Generation

A) Creation:

1. How much guidance do players need in creating story elements?
2. Do prompts inspire answers that go beyond just the question?
3. Is randomisation you use interesting?
4. Do you generate anything unnecessary for an element?

B) Ownership:

1. Are responsibilities shared between players?
2. Are story elements shared between players?
3. Can everyone prepare things during downtime?
4. Can you run a game while missing a player?

Artefacts of Play

A) Purpose:

1. Utility - what is needed to make sense of things?
2. Memory - what will remind players of their fun?
3. Aesthetic - what will invoke the tone, and feel unique?
4. Chronology - what will present information chronologically?

B) Aspects:

1. Persistence - will it be disposed of?
Does this feel good/bad?
2. Immersion - does it bring players closer to their role?
3. Media - what is it made of?
4. Ownership - who controls it?
5. Mutability - does it change after the game? Does it last multiple games?

Physical Space

A) Positioning:

1. Do players need to be together?
2. How do they need to be positioned?
3. What tools do they require?
4. What tools are you providing them?
5. What atmosphere would improve the experience?

B) Interaction:

1. Do any actions require players to reach or indicate something far from them?
2. Do any actions require interaction?
3. Can the game still work if a player can't do or doesn't consent to an interaction?
4. Are any actions annoying or uncomfortable?

Timing

A) Play Time:

1. How long do you expect a game to run?
2. Is it designed for repeated play?
3. Does it eliminate players from the game?
4. Are inactive players engaged?

B) Pacing:

1. Which mechanics take the longest?
2. Are there periods of action and inaction? Are they well balanced?
3. Will there be the same amount of action between two sessions?
4. Is downtime rewarding?
5. Can players adjust the pacing to their liking?

Aesthetics

A) Rewards:

1. Does it provide sensory pleasure?
2. Does it strengthen friendship?
3. Is it a fantasy? Is it too real?
4. Does it tell a dramatic narrative?
5. Can you discover places or ideas?
6. Is it pleasing to collect and customize things in the game?
7. Does it provide challenges to overcome?

B) Punishments:

1. What oppressive structures does it mimic the beliefs of?
2. Does it discourage challenging those beliefs?
3. Does it punish pursuing greatness?
4. Does it allow competition?
5. Does it reward loss as well as victory?

Example of Play

A) Basics:

1. Is there one or more examples of play?
2. Do they explain each mechanic in the game?
3. Do they explain common misgivings about mechanics?
4. Do they demonstrate use of safety features?

B) Nuance:

1. Do examples use your game's language?
2. Do they recreate the atmosphere a play session should have?
3. Can your demographics see themselves in the examples?
4. Do they show people being people?
5. Do they show people having fun?

Playtesting

A) Quantitative:

1. Did everyone engage?
2. Has anything taken longer than expected? Shorter?
3. How many aspects of the game did you have to explain?
4. Did anyone find a first-order optimal strategy? How quickly?

B) Qualitative:

1. What is your focus for this test?
2. Which of your expectations were not met?
3. What did people struggle with?
4. What did people enjoy?
5. What did people dislike?
6. What would make it better/easier?
7. What unexpected ideas emerged during gameplay?

Simplicity

A) Resize:

1. What can be removed from the layout?
2. What large paragraphs can be shortened or divided?
3. What can be replaced?
4. What can be spread across more pages/space?

B) Emphasise:

1. Is colour-coding, hierarchy, and formatting used to group things?
2. Is anything worth repeating or referencing in another section?
3. Could anything be arranged into a more understandable order?
4. What would benefit from an index?
5. Have you emphasised important words?

Attention

A) While learning rules:

1. Is information ordered so that it is available as needed?
2. Are setup instructions distinct from play instructions?
3. Are bullet points used where easy reference is critical?
4. Are short paragraphs used where clarity of intent is critical?
5. Are the rules sectioned?

B) During play:

1. Is information easily referenced?
Do you have a quick reference guide?
2. Do the mechanics support moments of action and inaction?
3. Does the pacing work for action?
4. Does the pacing work for inaction?
5. Does the game allow natural breaks during action?

Balance

A) Mechanics:

1. Is there a first order optimal strategy?
2. Are there any system breakpoints?
3. What are the chances of success?
4. Are any character archetypes over/under powered?
5. How well does an imbalanced party function?

B) Economy:

1. Assuming there is an exploit, what is the worst-case if players become infinitely rich?
2. Do geography and world-setting factors affect prices?
3. Are resources exchangeable?
4. Does scarcity exist for any resource? How does it affect tone, pacing, and fun?

Visual Design

A) Layout:

1. Do you have no more than three typefaces?
2. Are sections cleanly divided?
3. Are important things emphasised?
4. Is flavour subtle, or broken out?
5. Have you used symmetry and alignment to create harmony?
6. Would it look better spread over more pages?

B) Graphics:

1. Have you used a consistent, limited, and striking palette?
2. Does anything detract readability?
3. Is the viewer's attention directed where it should be?
4. Is there negative space where it is needed?
5. Can images be manipulated to fit the layout, palette or tone better?

Accessibility

A) Formats:

1. Is there a text-only format?
2. Is there an audio format?
3. Is there an image-only format?
4. Is there a print-friendly format?
5. Does text have strong contrast?
6. Are there language translations?

B) Assumptions:

1. Have you stated what you assume players already know?
2. Can your game be played without an internet connection?
3. Is your text's language use simple enough for someone who speaks it as a second language?
4. Who cannot play your game?

Responsibility

A) Tools:

1. Have you considered how your game interacts with safety tools?
2. Are players able to use the tools?
3. Are they comfortable using them?
4. Will they regret using the tools?
5. Can the tools be used online?

B) Aftercare:

1. Does your system have advice for handling emotional bleed?
2. Does your system have a check-in or review at the end of a session?
3. Are players incentivised to think more about each other's feelings?
4. Does it recommend a quiet space and calming ways to unwind?

Admin

A) Checklist:

1. Do you have a cover photo, banner, and screenshots?
2. Have you scheduled launch time and date for traffic and conflicts?
3. Have you secured payment for, and copyright from, collaborators?
4. Is all information available on each format of the game?

B) Chronology:

1. Is your game versioned using 'version YY.MM.DD[a-z]' format?
2. Are any hyperlinks available?
3. Does anyone mentioned need to be unmentioned?
4. Is any time-sensitive information up to date?

Crowdfunding

A) Setup:

1. Do you have an account?
2. Have you verified your ID and bank details?
3. Have you studied similar projects?
4. Have you used this platform for a smaller scale project before?
5. Have you scheduled this work into your life?

B) Budget:

1. How much will you need to pay for commissions?
2. How much will you need per backer?
3. What are fees and your buffer?
4. How will you handle shipping?

Press

A) Kit:

1. Are there high-res photos and bios for staff involved?
2. Is there brand imagery, a fact sheet, and quotes/testimonials?
3. Is there a description that relates the work to its touchstones?
4. Are there contact details for further information?
5. Where will you host it?

B) Release:

1. Do you have a contact for a relevant publication?
2. Is your press kit prepared?
3. Have you looked at other releases on that publication?
4. Will they reach your market?
5. Is your writing compelling?

System Reference

A) Should I?

1. Is there a mechanical or philosophical core worth sharing?
2. Is this work up to high standards?
3. Who is interested in what this game does?
4. Are you prepared to support the community? Run a game jam? Face criticisms?

B) How do I?

1. Come up with an intro, cool name, and logo.
2. Link to your game.
3. Explain core concepts to designers.
4. Make it print-friendly.
5. Add explicit copyright terms.
6. Tell people they can't use your SRD if they're fascists.

Acknowledge

Whose idea was this?

As far as I know, the concept of game design lenses was first put forward by Jesse Schell in his book 'The Art of Game Design'. A free app, and a link to purchase his cards can be found at

<https://www.schellgames.com/>

How did I make this?

I couldn't have made this without the constant education from the ttrpg design community on twitter, MIT's edX program, and various online design resources.

But most importantly, a constant drive for self-improvement. Keep striving, everyone.