

# DESIGN

BY HAL BARWOOD



**01 FORGET THE WHOLE THING.** On my first day in film school, my first teacher issued a dire warning: Hollywood is a closed shop, you'll never break in, so drop out and study something practical, like accounting—not what an aspiring moviemaker wants to hear when he's just hitched his future to tinsel town. I repeat this warning to those students looking for a career in game design. It's hopeless. Game design is a small province in a small world. And, as with all aspects of entertainment, there is no well-marked path to success. Get out while you still have a chance. Otherwise you'll wind up as a producer, or a marketer, or a consultant, or (shudder) an executive. So that's my first tip. However, if—like me—you just won't listen to reason, read on ...

**02 AVOID TRICKS.** Still here? Okay, then, listen up! You're going to read a lot about clever ways to make yourself look good on a résumé. Don't bother; no one wants to hire an imposter. Forget tricks and stratagems. Instead of trying to look good, try to actually *get* good. Work hard to build up a set of real skills.

**03 GO TO SCHOOL.** In the same way that film schools revved up when movies got hot seventy years ago, now game development courses are mushrooming all across the globe. We've accumulated a lot of knowledge since PONG, and school isn't a bad place to absorb it. But be wary—many colleges advertise a design program, but few actually teach it. Don't slip-slide into 3D modeling, or god forbid, interactive storytelling.

**04 STUDY THEORY.** Whether in school or not, you must study. Games have a rich history, and their place in human life has been the subject of much thought. A good designer should know some of the philosophy. Read Huizinga and Caillois, check out Donald Norman's take on doorknobs, flow with Csikszentmihalyi, pick up some patterns from Christopher Alexander. Then shrug them off and ...

**05 PLAY GAMES.** This is your medium, so get to know it. Schools may be on the cutting edge of science, but they are never on the cutting edge of art. The most important lessons you will learn are taught by real games. Games that got published. So play them—some for 15 minutes, some for 150 hours. Design concepts are difficult to articulate, and a good way to overcome this problem is by reference to shared knowledge of existing material.

**06 STUDY GAMES.** Of course, you can play forever without learning anything. Remember Sherlock Holmes' rebuke: "You see, Watson, but you do not observe." Examine closely how the games you enjoy are constructed. Look for governing mechanics, powerup sequences, puzzle types, gates, pipelines, feedback systems, boss monsters, narrative form, and on and on. Try to discern what makes a good game good.

**07 MAKE YOUR OWN GAMES.** This means you. Taking on total responsibility for an entire game may be daunting, but you should not flinch. If you want to design games professionally, you must not only understand the elements, you must deploy them. Pick a small project one person can handle, and put it together—mechanics, graphics, code, sound, start to finish. The trial by fire will serve you well. It's the most important tip on this list.

**08 LEARN TO TEST.** If your big break means becoming a tester, then become a good one. Finding righteous bugs will measure your ability to understand game details. It will also test your dedication to our craft. Just try not to annoy your team with unwanted design suggestions until you really know what you're doing. And then be tactful.

**09 EXTEND YOURSELF.** Game design isn't much like designing aircraft wings or bridge decks. I hope this doesn't come as a shock—it's an art, not a science. Fortify your mind in areas outside your field, and we're not talking *Lost*, Facebook, and *Dirty Pair* mangas. Go to museums and go to the theater. Read up on social trends. All good designers I know are vastly over-qualified. Not only can they tackle all aspects of a game from interface to final boss, but they also think clearly, they express their ideas in persuasive written form, and they maintain a healthy curiosity about the world. They have some knowledge of art, literature, psychology, politics, drama, and computer science.

**10 DREAM ON.** Much of design necessarily duplicates the prior work of others—look for the holes in past successes where you can squeeze in some originality. Get in the habit of inventing games every idle moment of your waking life. Few of your thoughts will see the light of a computer display. But entertain your fantastic ideas without shame. As with all exercise, practice produces results. After a while you will tire of the familiar, the safe, the banal. Your ideas will start to focus, and something new may emerge.

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