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Gamasutra.com

The Game Proposal, Part One: The Basics

By Luke Ahearn

Gamasutra

December 20, 2002

URL: http://www.gamasutra.com/20021220/ahearn_01.htm

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It is a safe bet that most of you will not ink a deal based solely on a good game proposal - you will have to have a running demo. But it is an almost certain bet that you will never ink a deal based on a bad proposal, even with a great demo. This is because publishers are usually not looking for awesome talent and great game ideas alone; they are looking for the developer that can complete a marketable game.

Part one of this two-part article examines the process of putting together a game proposal. In this article we will only look at the basics of the game proposal (what it is intended to accomplish) as putting together a complete game proposal is very involved. What the proposal is intended to accomplish is very similar to that of a business plan.

Keep in mind that we are not going to talk about the design document. The design document and the game proposal are often confused and they are two very different things. The game proposal is the complete package you go to the publisher with, proposing they give you a lot of money to develop the game and then spending even more money on your game to market and promote it when it is finished. The design document only details your game and that document is only part of the game proposal.

As a result of the process of building the game proposal you will clarify your game idea, your goals for the production of the game, and the expectations you should have of your proposed title in the market. You will, in the course of generating these documents, know what it will take in terms of time, talent and resources to make your game and if your game idea is feasible (sellable in the marketplace) and which publisher you will be the most successful approaching. Ultimately your goal with a Game Proposal is to communicate to the most appropriate publisher for your title that you have a great game

idea, the ability to actualize the game you propose, and that the game you propose will sell.

Please note that proposal (selling) documents are geared towards the procurement of a publishing deal but they do not replace other business documentation generated in the day to day functioning of a business such as detailed budgets, schedules, and other business processes.

In the early days of game development, while there is a lot of exciting brainstorming and note jotting, keep the proposal in mind and keep focused on the goal of creating an effective proposal. Keep asking the questions; is this a truly unique idea, can we pull this off, what will it take to pull off, and most importantly, will this idea sell? How do you answer these questions? That requires a combination of project management, marketing knowledge, and more. The good news is that you can do a solid job answering these questions on your own using even the most basic of books on these topics.

A proposal also differs from a design document in the fact that while the proposal will fall to the side once a deal is obtained the budgets, schedules and game design specs developed for the proposal should be refined right up to the point you officially start development, then consulted and updated at regular intervals. In fact, while it may be normal (even desired) to have deviations during a two-year game development cycle you must keep legal obligations and promises of performance in mind and that means paying attention to the documents the publishers invested in.

And another point on deviations - the design document must be updated regularly to reflect those changes. You need to see the effects that any deviation will have on other areas of the game. An added menu may create more work for artists, programmers, writers, and almost anyone on the team. The tremors sent down the schedule by even a small change may snowball.

Before we talk about the specific parts of a game proposal you must know one thing: No one can tell you exactly what should be in your game proposal, and those who think they can are wrong!

The Internet is a vast repository of tools and resources, but it is also filled with bad advice. There are a lot of armchair game developers that have never developed a game that tend to really hammer their views on people. All the newbies that comb the net looking for answers may end up with an ear full of bad advice if they are not careful. Often they are referred to documents that are not very useful, out of date, or simply may not contain information that is applicable to the game they are trying to develop. You can't just fill in the blanks for a Design Document, Business Plan, or a document that defines anything as fluid and substantial as a game development effort - it has to evolve from your core game idea.

Form Follows Function

"Form follows function" is the fundamental principle of professional design in any field. Whether you are putting together a business plan, a proposal for a computer game, the design document for the game, or any thing meant to perform a certain and unique function you must first examine what the end result will be - what is your goal? What goal (function) you want to reach with a document dictates the form of that document. If you want to write a movie (function) the form would be a movie script. If you want to detail a game proposal for a team that just developed a blockbuster hit the form of the proposal should be changed to highlight that fact.

What are the market strengths of your title? What is the substantiality of your name or team? What is the value of any other assets such as a licensed property or a truly unique design, stunning artwork, or breakthrough technology? The answers to all these points will determine what prominence they have in the game proposal.

Only when you have formulated a clear idea of your game, the development team, and other factors needed to make a game can you go about assembling and ordering your proposal. You should then use

the format you have decided on consistently throughout your proposal. The choice of structure, fonts, language, marketing focus, - everything aspect of the game proposal will be in the decided format. In other words, if you decide that your strength is your design, artwork, and marketing research then that should be the focus of everything you say or do pertaining to the title and put first in the proposal. If, for example, later in the proposal you begin to discuss the awesome and groundbreaking technology you developed, but you fail to mention that upfront in your cover letter and introduction, you need to rewrite to include that fact.

Letting the form of your proposal be dictated by the function it needs to serve, and then staying focused, will help you sell your vision to the publisher. Convincing the publisher that you can make the game you propose and that the game is worth making is always the main goal.

The final form that your game proposal takes will be a product of you, your game, and your situation and not a fill-in-the-blank template.

Basic Elements of a Game Proposal

At its most basic; the elements of a game proposal are:

- Your game idea
- The plan for its implementation
- And, most importantly, the reason to develop the game

You must know who will most likely buy your game and include the reasons they might buy your game over the competition. Remember "will it sell", "to whom", and "why" are among the questions the publishers will be asking you.

The most important fact to realize about your game proposal - and the most often overlooked or unknown fact - is that the publisher wants to know how they can make money selling your game, not how "cool" it is. It is your job to make the publisher desire your game. This does not mean telling them how great your game is or how well it will sell, it means showing them with a demo, marketing research, and other materials and information.

Yes, you do need the best possible, most refined, functioning demo. That is paramount. And yes, it must be cool. But the written portion of the proposal is what will convince the publisher that you can make the game and that it will sell. The reason for this is that for every thousand submissions, the publisher may see a handful of technical achievements, artistic masterpieces, even design accomplishments...but seldom do they see a proposal that makes them feel like they are holding the next million unit seller in their hands and the developer can actually pull off the job of developing the title.

In order to be successful your proposal must do the following:

- Define the market for the game and the reason and proof that the market will buy it. This section cannot be based on your opinion or personal opinions like, "Well, they bought *Quake 2* in numbers." This has to be a well thought out and researched marketing piece.
- It must describe the game both in general and detail. In the Treatment or Cover Letter you will describe the game in selling language (general) and in the Design Document you will detail the game. This is not necessarily a long and boring document, you want the game to sound exciting, but your focus will be on the details of the game here.
- It must show that you are qualified and capable of developing the game.

Some Tips For A Good Proposal

Your cover letter will be the first document to orient the reader (the publisher) to you and the game. But what comes next depends on what your strengths and weaknesses are. If you or your team is something special (hit game producers, celebrities, or have demonstrable and superior skill) than lead with that. If your title is really on the brink of opening up an untapped and huge market and your marketing report is top notch, then that should be the primary focus of your proposal.

Even if your game idea itself is truly something great, you still have to convince the publisher it will sell to an audience and that you can develop it. Leading with the game design document is almost never done. It is always the market as that is the of primary importance to the publisher. If there is no market then why publish the title?

Brevity

Despite popular opinion, the "longer the better" game proposal is not the best. In fact a bloated wordy proposal will do more harm than good. There is a time for detail and time for concise selling language, never a time for pompous word spewing.

The sizzle language is contained in the cover letters, presentations (phone and face to face interviews), web sites, game proposals and press materials. These documents are not full of exaggerations or grand promises, but sales language. These documents can contain facts and proof, but they are concise and designed to grab attention and generate the demand for more.

The detailed documents are informational; Design of the title, schedules, budgets and sometimes negotiation terms. The detailed documents are usually looked at in more depth after the selling documents have peaked interest and once that happens the publisher will want to see the longer, more detailed documents. But remember that if a game design document needs ten pages than use ten pages - if it needs 500 pages use 500 pages.

Writing

As you may have guessed buy now, there is an awful lot of writing in a game proposal - and even more rewriting. If you are not a writer or don't like the process of writing, this can be a hard part of the proposal and you may need to get help. You may be tempted to gloss over these portions or try and hand them off to other individuals, but you cannot do this. While writing may be a chore for you, only you and the individuals intimate with the game market and the proposed title are the ones who can detail the proposal properly before letting a writer or consultant try and edit or rewrite for you. Usually it will only be you and the team that can explain the game adequately before significant materials have been developed to present it so others can understand it through story boards, demos, and documentation. Perhaps the greatest benefit to this process will be that you will clarify the game in your mind and improve upon your ability to make a solid presentation.

Opening Lines

While we are talking about the importance of writing it must be said that proposing a game is not a personality contest; it is a business proposition. Your game proposal will be judged primarily on content (marketability, the demo, your team) and not writing style. Of course you should have your materials proofread and they should read well and be grammatically sound, but you cannot sell a game on writing style alone.

It is often a temptation when trying to sell your game idea to let your enthusiasm shine through, to feel desperate enough to beg, or to try and get attention in a negative way. Here are some actual examples of some good and lots of bad opening lines you may want to be aware of.

Good opening lines, taking strengths into consideration:

"From the team that brought you (insert hit game title here)"

In this case you should name and detail what the members of your proposal team did on the hit game named. It would be a good idea to clarify your position up front and make sure any claim you make is absolutely true and does not lead to disappointment in the publisher's eyes, or worse, give them the feeling that you are not an honest person.

"Everyone has said that (insert hot movie title here) would make a great game. We got the license and the team to do it."

It would help a great deal in this situation - finding yourself the holder of the rights to a hot movie - to understand exactly what those rights entitle you to do (this is the realm of a lawyer specialized in this area). It would also be of benefit to you to realize two things; not all hit movies translate easily into computer games and that having the license to a hit movie will not guarantee a hit game.

Again we are talking about the market. How do you know if the audience that made a certain movie a smash hit even plays computer games? If they own computers you still need to know who they are and what type of game they would most likely play. You cannot expect a hit movie license to automatically generate a hit game. The license is mostly an awesome tool for the marketing of the eventual title - it can create interest in the title. Secondly, it can be the source of things such as good content, story lines, and characters. But a terrible game based on a hit license usually results in low sales, high returns, and an all around well-known flop.

"Finally a 3D game that appeals to the masses! (Insert very detailed and credible marketing report here.)"

And of course you should have the awesome marketing report. Many create marketing reports that are simply exaggerated opinion and it is apparently hard to understand that making the marketing report more credible doesn't mean making it more emphatic! "More credible" means that the report is backed up with material from sources such as NPD, credible polls, and even interviews with industry leaders and quotes from high profile articles and reviews.

"5,000 polygon limit, we can render 50,000 on the same machine. See if you can tell how we do it."

And of course your demo should really deliver the promised technology. Remember, technology alone will not get you a game development deal but a significant technological breakthrough will get you noticed. If the technology is significant enough your game proposal may actually lead you into a job, a pairing up with another developer whose art and design shines but technology lacks, or other great possibilities.

Bad Lines

Yes, there a lot more bad lines than good. These are all real lines that appear over and over in proposals.

"This is your next big hit!"

Making this claim makes the writer look like an amateur. This line, like many of the others, is used a great deal and says nothing to the reader. If what you are trying to say here is based on marketing research, use a line or fact from the research.

For example; "Joe Publisher, president of Big Hit Game Publishers, said in a recent interview that anyone who could design a game that would run on all systems equally well would have a hit on their hands." We feel we have designed that game and have enclosed a demo in this package.

"This is a guaranteed hit!"

That is a foolish claim. Remember to show and not just tell. You should lead with the implied hit status of your title based on your research, innovative design, or talent - whatever you possess that is most credible.

"I don't expect you to understand or be able to play my game at first."

This line tells the publisher that the writer thinks he is stupid or that the game is not playable - or both. If you don't think the publisher will be able to understand or play your game then you have to address that problem before you send it to them.

Is the game not playable or are you assuming that publishers don't know their own industry? Maybe this line is used out of fear, the fear that the person getting the package may not be a hard-core gamer and the game demo was designed for hard-core gamers. If this is your fear then realize that game publishers can either play the games they publish or hire people to do it for them in the form of outside contractors, freelancers, or an internal review department.

"To whom it may concern"

This tells the publisher that the writer is too lazy and unprofessional to bother getting the right name on the package. Using a proper name helps the recipient feel as if the package is for them, whereas "to whom it may concern" is a label for junk mail.

"I am familiar with the titles you publish and can see where you are going wrong."

This line is the most unbelievable of them all and surprisingly opening lines and language like this is used quite frequently. Even if the writer has a great title and marketing to back it up, they may just bury it with this opening line.

If what the writer is attempting to do with this line is to explain an untapped market to the publisher than that is what should be said.

"I have played games for (x number) of years."

This is like a form letter it is so common an opening. While it may seem like the writer is building credibility, using this reasoning for being able to develop a game, this is so overused that it is a detriment to use as an opening line. Now the sentiment behind this line can actually be of great help later (much later in your biography), but not as an opening line on your cover letter.

Playing games is not making them. In your biography you should go into a fair amount of detail, especially if you have no industry experience, about the games you played and give a quick summary of the good and bad of those games, to demonstrate your knowledge.

"Please sign the enclosed NDA." Or worse, "Only after you have signed the enclosed NDA will I show you my game proposal."

Publishers and developers have more ideas than you can imagine. If the writer really has some world-shattering design, then they need to send a query letter first that explains it and request an NDA politely.

Setting up a demo under NDA conditions is difficult with publishers and you will need to show them something initially that really entices them to want to do this. The reason being is that publishers see so many game ideas, and so few are actually unique, that they would run the risk of getting sued by everyone they ever signed an NDA with every time they published a title.

If you really possess a license, artwork, or technology that you believe is world shattering than you can get legal protection before going in and not worry about an NDA. Simply make sure you document your presentation and mail a copy to your attorney by certified mail and ask him not to open it. Of course consult an attorney first if you find yourself in this situation.

"I have never played a computer game, but..."

How can someone expect a game publisher to read this and take him or her seriously? Certainly a lot of game developers don't play many games. Some admit to not playing games at all. But playing games is usually a prerequisite for knowing how to develop them and certainly for designing them. Yes, it has been said that playing games is not making them, so don't overplay the fact that you play games, but to declare that you have never played a computer game tells the reader that you don't understand them.

An opening line is a first impression and this line is a bad first impression.

"I play games so much I can't hold a real job."

Getting two million dollars of the publisher's money for a two-year development cycle is as real as it gets. Game development is a real job. This line only serves to put in the mind of the publisher the image of the developer they just funded picking up and leaving after a few weeks when they realize that they have yet another pesky real job. Maybe the writer was trying to be witty or illustrate how saturated he is in games, but again, this is not a personality contest.

"I know if you give me a chance..."

The writer is too personal. Remember it is not about you but about making money. The publisher, by definition, is already giving the writer a chance by reading the proposal. What the publisher gets out of this statement is, "Please make an insane gamble of 2 million dollars on me, even though I can't prove to you that it will be worth your while."

"Dear (wrong name here)"

This is a no-no, but is sometimes overlooked. Just make sure in your packaging frenzy you are careful to put the right letter in the right envelope. At the worst this makes the recipient feel like they were sent a piece of bulk mail.

"I have a game that I believe . . ."

The writer risks possibly losing the attention of the publisher with this, even if they follow up with a great letter because deep down the publisher may be thinking, "I don't care what you believe and I am tired of hearing personal opinion. Prove it! What's the market? Have you researched this? Can this title sell?"

"This is the third time I have sent this proposal."

This line sounds confrontational and accusatory. There is a reason the first and second proposal was not acknowledged. Did the writer determine why or just keep mailing the proposals thinking the publisher is acting wrongly and must respond?

Remember, it is your job to figure out why your proposal, calls, or emails are not responded to and fix the problem. This line also tells the publisher that he already rejected your proposal sometime in the past, so no use looking at it again.

The list of bad lines is really long. Most of the errors stem from the simple fact that the writer has taken his focus off the publisher and placed it on him or herself. What will make the publisher want to see more? Showing them how your proposed title can sell. Do not focus on what you want personally; focus on giving the publisher reason to have the game developed.

Show, Don't Tell

In a proposal the visual words "see" or "show" are used even when we are dealing with written documents, the difference being illustrated as follows:

- You can tell the publisher, "I am the most qualified level designer for the proposed game expansion."
- Or show them by saying, "I ranked number one in the level design contests on (game site) and my levels have been featured at (source). I also maintain the largest fan site for this game on the Internet and have written several tutorials. Please see my site description under my biography for links and industry quotes."

That was a basic orientation of what the game proposal is meant to accomplish. In part two of this article, we will look at the actual parts of the game proposal which include such documents as the cover letter, game treatment, design document, and more.

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