

Activity 2A: Thinking About the Game



Sequence

2A.1: <i>Brainstorming Game Ideas</i>	Teams brainstorm ideas for their game concepts, drawing on what they have learned so far in their research.
2A.2: <i>Looking at Game Settings</i>	Students look at screenshots of existing video games to learn about the use of visual elements and to compare different video game styles.
2A.3: <i>What Does Your Game World Look Like?</i>	Students develop ideas for the look and setting of their own game worlds.

Materials

- **Handout 9: Game Ideas**
- Students' copies of **Handout 8: Formulate a Purpose**
- Students' copies of **Handout 2: Game-Play Log**
- Six or seven screenshots from video games (see Advance Preparation)
- **Handout 10: Analyzing Game Worlds**
- **Handout 11: Our Game World** (1 for each team)

2A.1: Brainstorming Game Ideas

1. Introduce the activity.

Tell students that they will work in their teams to generate ideas for their game concepts. Distribute **Handout 9: Game Ideas** and have students read it. Point out questions 2 and 3, which ask about their game’s purpose and strategies. Remind students that they have already developed preliminary ideas for these items, but they may wish to refine their ideas. Have students refer to their copies of **Handout 8: Formulate a Purpose**.

2. Have students brainstorm ideas about their game.

Encourage students to come up with as many ideas as possible as they complete Handout 9. Remind them that their ideas should support a game that relates to their chosen issue and purpose. Tell students that they may also refer to their copies of **Handout 2: Game-Play Log** for ideas. Tell students that they will have an opportunity later to further refine their game ideas.

Allow 20 minutes for teams to complete Handout 9.

Note: To keep students focused on moving ahead, let them know when they have 10 minutes and then 5 minutes remaining.

3. Have students complete Journal 3.

Journal 3

Choose an element of the game that your team has not yet settled on. For example, do team members disagree about the game’s setting? Does the team still need to decide what the key characters look like?

Write a few sentences outlining your point of view or listing your ideas. Plan to share what you’ve written with your teammates.

4. Have teams discuss and incorporate journal ideas.

In their teams, have students share ideas from their journals and then incorporate them into Handout 9.





Handout 9: Game Ideas

With your team, answer the questions below. If team members have more than one response to a question, write them all down. You will have opportunities later to refine your answers and focus your game ideas.

1. What is the name of your game?
2. What issue does your game address? What is your game's purpose in addressing this issue?
3. What strategies will you use to achieve your game's purpose?
4. What is the object of your game? How does a player win or complete the game?
5. How is the game played?
6. What is the setting or look of the game?
7. What objects or physical locations might a player see, and what will they look like?
8. Who are the characters in the game? What are they like? Is the player a character?



2A.2: Looking at Game Settings

1. Describe the activity.

Tell students that they will analyze video game screenshots that show game worlds or settings. Explain that they will view a series of screenshots and analyze one screenshot.

2. Display and discuss screenshots.

Show students the six or seven screenshots that you have chosen. Point out the screenshots with user interfaces. Explain that the term *user interface*, also sometimes called a *heads-up display*, refers to the onscreen display that gives players the information they need to play the game and make game decisions.

Ask:

- What kinds of information might be displayed on a user interface?

Possible answers: Instructions to the player, the player's progress in the game (such as the number of lives remaining, or the time left in the current round), a map showing the player's location in the game world, capabilities (such as available weapons or spells), or links to menus where players can change the game settings.

Discuss the ways that information is displayed in the screenshot examples.

3. Model analysis of one screenshot.

Distribute **Handout 10: Analyzing Game Worlds**. Model an analysis of one screenshot, asking students for their responses to each question on Handout 10.

Teacher's Notes: Sample Screenshot Analysis from *Banjo-Kazooie*

Banjo-Kazooie is an action-adventure video game developed in 1998 and published by Nintendo. The game's story focuses on a bear named Banjo and a bird named Kazooie, who set out on a quest to rescue Banjo's sister, Tooty. Tooty has been kidnapped by the evil witch Gruntilda.

What adjectives come to mind when you see this scene?

Bright, fantastical, colorful, adventurous, goofy, youthful.

How does this scene make you feel?

Amused, excited, interested.

What can you tell or infer about the setting or world of this game?

How?

The game takes place in an outdoor world—an actual geographical place with vegetation (trees). You know it's a fantasy world because there's a bear wearing a backpack and some kind of gigantic mechanical equipment. The world is lush, and it looks warm. The

world is likely inhabited by different kinds of creatures and animals. There is a bear flexing his muscles, implying that he or she is getting ready for some sort of physical task or mission.

What do you think the mood of this game is?

It seems upbeat and silly, but there are also hints of adventure, conflict, and possibly violence.

What elements of art are used to convey this mood or feeling?

The cartoon-like quality of the images gives the game an upbeat tone and a fantasy-world feeling. The bright colors reinforce this tone. However, the jagged edges on the giant machinery and the shape of the explosion in the background imply action or even violence. The bear is large and dominates the scene, suggesting that he is some kind of hero-adventurer, although the outfit and backpack he wears seem youthful—like a kid going to school. The size and shape of the backpack make it look like it might hold weapons or something useful for an adventure.

Does the image show an onscreen user interface? If so, what does it look like and what information does it convey?

This screenshot does not include a user interface.

4. Have student pairs analyze screenshots.

Have students work in pairs to complete Handout 10 as they analyze a screenshot. Give each pair one of the screenshots you've chosen, or have pairs choose their own.

5. Share screenshot analyses and discuss visual elements of games.

Ask volunteers to share their analyses of video game screenshots. Have students draw broader conclusions about game worlds in video games by asking them the following questions:

- In what different visual styles are the game worlds presented (for example, realistic, abstract, cartoon-like)? Are any game worlds drawn in similar styles? If so, which ones?
- What techniques are used by the artists and designers to convey different moods or feelings?
- What design principles do you recognize in these images? Do the objects, characters, and other design elements in one screenshot look like they belong together? How can you tell that they are part of the same game?
- What information is important to include in a game's onscreen user interface? What should a good onscreen user interface look like?

Note: If the screenshots students analyze do not show a user interface, ask students to answer based on their own experience with user interfaces.

Teacher's Notes: Visual Elements of Games

(Answers will differ depending on screenshots chosen.)

In what different visual styles are the game worlds presented (for example, realistic, abstract, cartoon-like)? Are any game worlds drawn in similar styles? If so, which ones?

Some games, like *Gran Turismo*, have a setting that looks very much like the real world, while others, such as *Banjo-Kazooie*, are based in imaginary worlds and are drawn in a cartoon-like style. Often, realistic games make an effort to model the real world, while games based in imaginary worlds bear little relationship to reality (while still including recognizable features, such as humanoid characters and buildings). Puzzle-based games such as *Tetris* may be much more abstract or two-dimensional. (You might note that realism is a continuum and that all games represent some simplification of the real world.)

What techniques are used by the artists and designers to convey different moods or feelings?

Color: Color can be used to convey mood (as students learned in *Unit 4: Make Me a World*). Bright, warm colors may indicate a happy or inviting setting, while the use of darker colors and shadows may indicate someplace scary or foreboding. (Of course, there are exceptions to these generalizations!)

Visual styles: Different visual styles can affect the mood of a game world. For example, exaggerated, cartoon-like drawings may indicate a game world that is fun or funny, while a game world that is gritty and dark may be drawn in a more realistic way. A futuristic landscape filled with hard, mechanical objects, such as robots or machines, feels very different from a tropical seascape with lush foliage and soft-looking sand. Visual style can also affect how players feel while playing the game. For example, a realistic style might make the game seem closer to reality, whereas a cartoon-like setting might distance players from emotionally connecting with game characters or content.

Other art elements: The use of line, shape, form, texture, and space can all affect mood. Jagged lines and rough-looking textures can convey tension or danger, while smooth flowing lines and shapes might suggest a peaceful world. Large open spaces might suggest freedom, while small confined spaces can make a player feel closed in.

What design principles do you recognize in these images? Do the objects, characters, and other design elements in one screenshot look like they belong together? How can you tell that they are part of the same game?

Prompt students to talk about the ways that they see artists and designers using balance, contrast, dominance, emphasis, movement, repetition, rhythm, subordination, unity, and variety. Call particular attention to the artist and designers' use of *unity*, or the careful blending of elements to achieve an overall visual effect. In a well-designed game, all the elements—landscapes, characters, objects, and typography—have a similar look and feel. Ask students about the qualities that make different objects or features in a single screenshot look like they belong together.

What information is important to include in a game's onscreen user interface? What should a good onscreen user interface look like?

Good onscreen user interfaces provide players with the at-a-glance information they need to make decisions during game play. The interface should be as clear and easy to read as possible, while still fitting the style of the game.



Handout 10: Analyzing Game Worlds

Complete this table for one screenshot of a video game world.

What is the name of this video game?	
What adjectives come to your mind when you see this scene?	
How does this scene make you feel?	
What can you tell or infer about the setting or world of this particular game? How?	
What do you think the mood of this game is?	
What elements of art are used to convey this mood or feeling? (How does the artist or designer use line, shape, form, texture, value, and space?)	
Does the image show an onscreen user interface—an area that displays information about the game? If so, what does it look like and what information does it convey?	

2A.3: What Does Your Game World Look Like?

1. Describe the activity.

Distribute **Handout 11: Our Game World** to project teams. Tell students that the questions in Handout 11 will help them think through the visual elements of their game and prepare them to sketch their game concept art.

2. Discuss the design principle of unity.

Make students aware that as they work on Handout 11, team members will need to reach consensus on art and design elements in order to achieve a unified look for their game.

Have students read the introductory paragraphs on the handout. Ask them to recall the screenshots they analyzed. Ask:

- What are some ways that the screenshot artists or designers achieved unity?

Teacher's Notes: Achieving Unity in Game Design

Students may discuss the consistent use of some or all of the following:

- Line (curved, jagged, or straight, closed or open, etc.)
- Shape (geometric, organic, etc.)
- Perspective, depth, and shading, including color scheme
- Overall visual style, whether realistic, imaginary, or abstract, highly detailed or simplified
- Balance, dominance and subordination, rhythm, repetition, and variety, including having certain elements or objects repeat with variations or in patterns

Suggest to students that they keep these ideas in mind as they make decisions about unity in their own game design.

3. Have students create their game worlds.

Have students work in their teams to read and complete Handout 11. Tell students to write their responses directly on the handout. If they need more room, have them use their journals or a separate sheet of paper.

Note: Achieving a unified look in setting and visual style will involve some compromise and negotiation. Be prepared to assist teams in reaching agreement.

Tell students that they will refer to their completed copies of Handout 11 when they make their concept art sketches.

Note: Teams' initial visual ideas in **Handout 11: Our Game World** offer a good opportunity for formative assessment.





Handout 11: Our Game World

Your team will need to consider two aspects of your game's graphics: the setting of the game world and the visual style in which that world is created. Graphics set the mood of your game and can convey important information about your chosen issue. The more compelling your graphics, the more likely your game is to catch and hold the players' attention. Graphics are also key in the marketing of your game.

To be successful, your team must decide together on the setting and style of your game. All the concept art created by your team members must exhibit *unity*—the careful blending of the elements of art and the principles of design to create a total visual effect. Think about how unity was achieved in the screenshots you analyzed. In a unified game design, all the pieces look like they belong together. A unified look will enhance the players' experience of immersion in the game world and help them suspend their disbelief, no matter how fantastical that world may be.

This handout will help your team answer two key questions:

- What is the setting and visual style of your game?
- How will your team achieve unity in its artwork and game design?

Setting

Your team will think about how the setting can enhance your game's ability to inform people about your issue, raise their awareness, or motivate them to act. Consider the following types of settings:

- **Real-world settings.** In some issue-based games, the setting is very realistic because the game is designed to inform viewers about an issue in the real world. For example, a game about smoking might be set in a high school, while a game about respect might be designed to look like a basketball court and bleachers.
- **Imaginary worlds.** A game may take place in an imaginary world similar to our own or in a completely strange world. The setting for a game that teaches about global warming, for example, might be an imaginary world where players' decisions can cause the world to flourish—or to fall apart.
- **Abstract settings.** Some games, especially puzzles and certain action games, may be abstract or look like board games. They may not include any characters or landscapes at all. For example, a game about obesity might have a large balance scale with places for players to put snack food choices.

Style

Once you've decided on your game setting, you can think about the style you'll use to create that setting. The style could be realistic or more like a cartoon, anime, or a watercolor painting. Think about the kinds of lines you might use (thick or thin), the colors you could use to convey a specific mood, and the shapes and forms of characters and objects in your game world. Consider how your style compares with other games you've seen.





Creating Your World

To achieve unity in your artwork, you will need to come to a consensus about the look and feel of your game. As a team, answer the following questions:

1. Where does the game take place—a real-world setting, an imaginary world, a more abstract world? What are the boundaries of this world?

2. If the game is set in a real or imaginary world, does the game play take place outdoors, indoors, or both?

Outdoors: Describe the landscape. Is the climate warm or cold? Are there many plants, or is it dry like a desert? Is it mountainous or flat? Does the game take place in a city or town? If so, what do the buildings look like?

Indoors: Describe the indoor space or room(s) where the game takes place. Is the area large and open or small and contained? Is it dark or bright? Dirty or clean?

3. If the game takes place in an abstract setting, describe what players will see. A geometric board, as in chess? A rectangular box with shapes in it, like *Tetris*? Is the setting based on changing patterns or colors?





4. Do people or humanoid characters inhabit the game world? If so, what are they like? How do they look? What do they wear? If the characters are not like people, what are they? How do they look and act? What objects appear in your game world, and what do they look like?

5. What kind of onscreen user interface will there be? Will certain information be available on the screen at all times? If so, what kinds of information will be given? If not, how will the player receive game information, and how will it appear?

6. What adjectives would you want people to use to describe your game's setting? What emotions do you want players to feel?

7. What style will you use to draw the game's setting—realistic, abstract, cartoon-like, or something else? Will it be simplified or highly detailed? Why have you chosen this style? What colors will you use? Why?

8. How will the game's setting and visual style reflect the issue you are addressing?