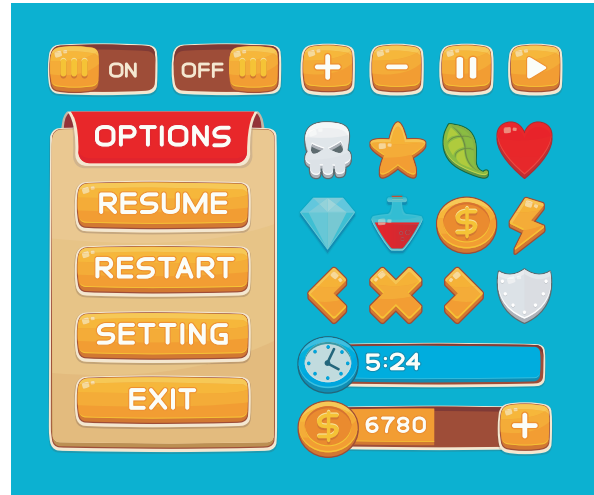# Menu Usage

ALL VIDEO GAMES need a main menu that makes the players excited to see a well-functioning game. A good menu is easy to use, has a visual flair, and is uniquely tied to the game. It is the first thing a user sees when booting up a game. So developers need this element to be right.

Objective:

☑ Summarize effective video game menu design and processes.

Key Terms:

brainstorming
gameplay
heads up display (HUD)
in-game menu

main menu
options menu
splash screen
tutorial

user experience (UX)
user interface (UI)

Understanding Menu Usage

A menu is important, and you must understand its purpose to determine how to create one effectively.

MAIN MENU ELEMENTS

The **main menu** is a screen that acts as the control panel for the game. The menu allows the player to change settings, choose modes, or access the actual game. The main menu screen has a background with an arrangement of buttons for action options (e.g., new game, start game, load game, and/or quit game).

♦ **Gameplay** is the specific way a player interacts with a video game. The escape key or the start button accesses the game menu during gameplay.

♦ The main menu of a video game is sometimes used as the in-game menu. An **in-game menu** is player access to most of the main menu actions and includes other attributes, including displaying character:

- Statistics
- Points
- Inventory

♦ **Heads up display (HUD)** is a visual overlay used to keep track of useful statistics in video games. It is most closely associated with first-person shooter games and fighting game genres.

Opening Menu Screens

A **splash screen** is a visual containing a logo, movie, and other information elements. Often a series of splash screens are displayed when a game starts. A splash screen may be used to tell the player what companies have contributed to the game firsthand, sometimes giving a part or the entire introduction of the plot. A splash screen often reveals an introduction to the plot—similar to a movie trailer—or a rendition of the game's own graphics and sounds. The next stage of the menu is the tutorial.

A **tutorial** is the location in which the player supplies his or her name and, in some games, customizes the character, settings, and other attributes. The tutorial is not considered a part of the game's plot. However, it is often integrated into the tutorial stage as part of the game's plot and is sometimes referred to as tutorial integration. Tutorial integrations are used in games, such as:

♦ The Legend of Zelda
♦ Super Mario 64

Menu Options

An **options menu** is the way players change various settings in the game to customize the user experience (UX). Games vary

FIGURE 1. The main menu is a screen that acts as the control panel for the game. This allows the player to change settings, choose modes, or access the actual game. The opening screen has a background that contains an arrangement of buttons for action options (e.g., new game, start game, load game, and/or quit game).

FIGURE 2. A splash screen is a visual containing logo, movie, and other information elements, including elements of the game plot. A tutorial is the location in which the player supplies his or her name and, in some games, customizes the character, settings, and other attributes.

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from many options to limited options. Sometimes an options menu can be called a settings menu, which offers the same type of customization to the player's experience. Video games have a wide variety of choices in the options menu. Common option selections are difficulty, music or sound, and video.

Difficulty

Many games offer the choice of changing the level of difficulty. The most common names for these difficulties are easy, medium, and hard. Some games go beyond the hard or easy setting levels using something similar to "expert mode" or to a "very easy mode."

Music or Sound

Many games have an option to turn the game music on or off. Some games have a music test option, which allows the player to choose specific music tracks within the game. Some games may have an additional option to turn on/off or tweak sound effect settings. An additional sound setting, similar to the music test, is the sound test. The sound test was a common option on the 16-bit console games and may offer a choice of specific sound effects to the listener.

Video

Many games feature video settings in the options menu. These settings allow the user to change various aspects of the visual game components. Generally, these games have far more choices than the console games.

GAME MENU DESIGN

Game menu design is a process that involves planning.

Process

Poorly constructed game menus detract from the player experience. Designing an effective game menu requires you to "think through" the user experience. Several attempts at a menu design may be required to achieve the final structure to find something that works well for the majority of players. Effective game menu designs use the following elements to produce a "good" UX: brainstorming ideas, simplicity, interface theme, content focus, clarity, clear hierarchy, and pattern consistency.

Brainstorming Ideas

Brainstorming is a creative problem-solving technique in which the goal is to obtain the maximum number of ideas related to a specific topic. No discussion of the viability of any idea is conducted during brainstorming; the goal is to create a long list of possible solutions.

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Simplicity

A "less is more" approach to game menu development is good advice. In other words, numerous menu options are not necessarily linked to "good game design." Each additional element adds visual and cognitive elements and avoids player overload. The development goal is for the player to consume more of the game, not more menus.

Interface Theme

Think about the style of the menu (e.g., How well does the theme fit the game?). Does it work because the game is light, and does the player spend less time in the menus? Is it more involved? Instead of having a different user interface for each portion, an interactive map would work better. A good example of a well-themed menu is the "Super Mario World" game.

♦ **User interface (UI)** is the human interaction and involvement that provides visual feedback on a video device (e.g., television and computer monitor). The goal of UI design is producing an involvement that makes it easy, efficient, and enjoyable to operate a game in which it produces a desired result.

♦ **User experience (UX)** is immersive and pleasant software with a user-friendly interface. One of the reasons a person may have a poor UX is lack of menu usability.

Content Focus

A player wants to interact with the game rather than "sit in front of UIs." Each time a player encounters another UI element, the developer removes the player farther from the game expe-

FURTHER EXPLORATION...

ONLINE CONNECTION: What Makes a Good Game Menu?

Have you ever played a game with an "unfriendly" menu and flow? If so, are these games difficult to use and to understand? Did you ever play the game again? Game menu usability can impact the entire "user experience." A poorly designed menu—the controls of the game—may disappoint the user, causing frustration and a loss of playing time. Think about a game you have played. What are the best game characteristics and the ones that need to be improved?

What is a good menu? Review "Game UI by Example: A Crash Course in the Good and the Bad" at http://gamedevelopment.tutsplus.com/tutorials/game-ui-by-example-a-crash-course-in-the-good-and-the-bad--gamedev-3943. Review the comments about strengths and weaknesses of the different game menus described—Honey Bee Match, Fallout 3, Oblivion, Far Cry 3, and others. Select one of these menu screens, and read the description from the author's point of view. Draft a one-page, two-column paper that lists the points Desi Quintain, the author, made in column one and your reaction and examples of any agreement or disagreement with the author's points in the second column. Then write a summary sentence that states your opinion of what makes a good menu design.

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rience to deal with another potentially boring and perhaps useless UI. To enhance the user interface experience:

- ♦ You would make UI part of the game. When integrating functions (e.g., screen boxes that require user input or some kind of action), you fit these functions into the screen so it feels like part of the game.
- ♦ You would make the tutorial part of the game. You can teach (tutor) the player by putting the content buttons directly on the screen rather than as a series of separate actions.

Clarity

The game should be easy to read. Also, the game process (rules) should be intuitive. Unless the game is story heavy, a player would prefer to learn instinctively rather than read a list of rules. Games should not require a manual for a player to understand how to play it.

Clear Hierarchy

A player typically reads bolded titles first because they attract the player's attention. Avoid creating competition between multiple elements. The goal is to create a natural flow that guides the user's eye to the next element and in the appropriate order.

Pattern Consistency

Establish a design pattern, and stick with it. Users should not have to learn three types of menus with different styling.

FIGURE 3. When conceptualizing the process of how a game menu should work, think it through. It may take several attempts to achieve the final design.

Planning

Planning involves various steps.

Sketch

It is best to sketch the full flow of the game. This step is basic to good development. Sketching saves time before you take the game to screen development. Try various ideas and work with several on paper first to explore concepts while building a game.

Flow

Keeping the game flow in mind is the key to designing the game menu. Clean and easy game flow results in involved players.

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Creative Blocks

Design inspiration can be difficult and eventually may cause creative blocks, especially with a new project or when honing in on the "angle" of the game. The following are tips to overcome a creative block.

♦ Think outside the box. Look for inspiration outside the area of design in which you are working. Overly focused game design can override inspiration. For example, when working on a project involving a game menu, you may take inspiration from existing game menus, a list of class rules, the cafeteria menu, or the rules to upload a new app.

♦ Use inquiry to get a great idea. Question everything and everyone. For instance, ask, "Does this game menu work? Is it a good solution or just a solution?" Being as objective about subjectivity as possible is important to developing a good menu design.

♦ Take a break, and let things sink in. There is always time to share your ideas and then take a break to process information. The next iteration is often much more fruitful. Taking a break to let your brain develop the idea typically results in clarity and additional visual messages that help create the menu.

♦ Mock it up. Some developers look for their design to be "pixel-perfect." To be pixel-perfect, mocking up the design in Photoshop or another pixel-based program visualizes the overall look. Then it is time to finalize the menu design. Taking time to mock it up confirms the coding.

♦ Plan ahead. Create a blueprint or diagram of any features to be added to the game and game menu in the future. Accounting for potential new features ensures that the game interface will not need to be disrupted. A player gets used to one design, and changing that interface disrupts play. Ensure the user does not have to learn three different types of menus, all with different styling and functions.
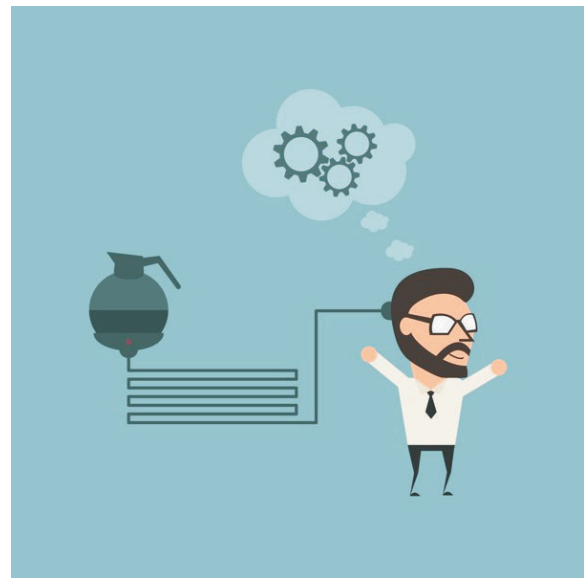

FIGURE 4. Taking a break—coffee break, Nerf battle, or skateboarding—allows your brain to process the work you have completed and helps "sort" any missteps.

Summary:

A menu is important, and you must understand its purpose to determine how to create one effectively. The main menu is a screen that acts as the control panel for the game, and gameplay is the specific way a player interacts with a video game. An in-game menu is player access to most of the main menu actions and includes other attributes. In addition, heads up display (HUD) is a visual overlay used to keep track of useful statistics in video games.

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A splash screen is a visual containing a logo, movie, and other information elements. Yet a tutorial is the location in which the player supplies his or her name and, in some games, customizes the character, settings, and other attributes. Effective game menu designs use the following elements to produce a "good" UX: brainstorming ideas, simplicity, interface theme, content focus, clarity, clear hierarchy, and pattern consistency.

Checking Your Knowledge:

1. Describe user experience (UX).
2. Describe a splash screen.
3. What does an options menu allow the player to do?
4. Why are gameplay and flow important to good design?
5. How does sketching the game flow help a developer produce a better product?

Expanding Your Knowledge:

Video game menu instructions should be easy for the player to access and to understand. When creating the game layout, there are some simple rules to follow. Review the articles and Web sites in the Web Links section. Then create a checklist for yourself of "Good Menu Layout and Design Tips."

Web Links:

Best Video Game Menus
http://kotaku.com/5546365/creating-some-of-the-best-video-game-menus-ever

DesigningVideo Game Menus
http://kotaku.com/someone-has-to-design-all-those-video-game-menus-and-co-1571725083

Video Game User Interface Design
http://devmag.org.za/2011/02/02/video-game-user-interface-design-diegesis-theory/

Video Game User Interfaces
https://www.quora.com/Why-are-video-game-user-interfaces-main-menus-etc-usually-so-bad

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