

# Firewatch: (Studying) the Anatomy of a Game Design Process

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Researching the design process of games can help researchers understand how and why designers act and how their actions influence the media they produce. This paper discusses an approach employed by the authors that combined elements of game jam practice with timelines to form an understanding of the design and development process. The approach facilitates the development of a rapid understanding of the design process and can help to identify key insights for further study. In our experience, the approach can help to quickly map the territory of the game design process and form the basis of more detailed investigations.

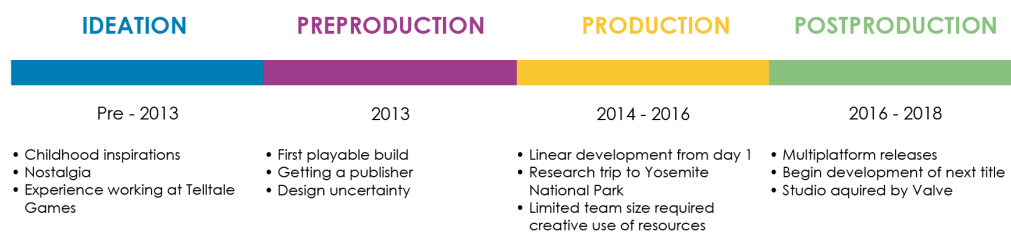
Studies of the game design process can present several perspectives. These can include first-hand accounts during development (Khaled and Barr 2023) or after release (Yu 2016, Pinchbeck 2008). Second-hand accounts during development (Hammond 2021) or after release (Kultima et al. 2024, de Smale et al. 2019). Finally, some approaches look at historical development practices to form accounts of the design process (Bódi 2022). Outside of academic literature, accounts of the design process are often found in development logs (DevLogs), industry post-mortems, conference talks, and YouTube videos profiling the development of games and studios. This paper describes a structured approach to gathering and structuring non-academic sources to form insights into the design of games as part of the research process.

This approach is situated within the game design research paradigm that has emerged as an area of game studies that seeks to “*uncover new facts and insight about game design, design processes, or games as designed objects; that is, to gain new knowledge and understanding about game design*” (Lankoski and Holopainen 2017, 1). The approach was first applied at the Multi Method Analysis Jam (MMAJam) (Eladhari and Koenitz 2020) at DiGRA 2022. During the MMA Jam, the participants explored a selected game, *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016), in a holistic manner using multiple methods of analysis.

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The authors formed a group focused on the game design process and gathered publicly available material over the course of the two-hour jam to retrospectively gain insights into the creation process of *Firewatch*. Using a jam approach for research purposes, the authors independently spent the first 10 minutes gathering sources including interviews, developer logs, podcasts, and developer talks. Following the data-gathering phase, we began analysing the documents to construct a timeline as shown in Figure 1. During this phase, we alternated between analysing the data, developing the timeline, discussing our findings, and drawing out key insights.



**Figure 1:** Overview of the development timeline of *Firewatch*.

For the jam, we adopted the timeline approach outlined by Kultima et al. (2024). Timelines can be used within game design research to produce a more concrete understanding of the game creation process, encouraging researchers to question the established narratives of game creation processes and highlighting insights that might have been left unnoticed (ibid). Following the approach, we identified a number of key insights by creating the timeline for *Firewatch*:

- Blurred starting points: The seeds of the design of *Firewatch* were in place before the team started work on the game. Childhood experiences and the developer's backgrounds formed many of the constraints that guided the design process.
- The public gaze: Showing the game to publishers, during the public launch and at conventions locked in certain design and aesthetic choices from those points forward.
- Linear process for narrative design: The developers of *Firewatch* worked on the game linearly from day one in the game until the final day. It was not designed all at once, but instead by reacting and building on top of the previous creative decisions.
- Design dead ends: The team encountered a number of dead ends that impacted the game until they were removed. These included *Metroidvania* elements, *Far Cry* style systems, and timing combos to control player movement.
- Production limitations affected design decisions: The limited team size led to a number of design constraints and solutions given the scale of the playable area. One example of this is that the game only includes 20 different tree assets and 8 different rocks.

The timeline helped provide a structure that allowed additional insight into a familiar game within a limited amount of time. The timeline method suggested by Kultima et al. (2024) was considerably different in terms of access to data and was developed as part of a research project that extended over six months. Even though the jam approach was two hours as opposed to six months, the insight gained was valuable.

Following the jam one of the authors used the data gathered as a case study in a class on game prototyping and found that the insights were both relevant and informative in the classroom context. The approach provided a time-efficient way to generate case studies that were relevant and timely for the projects the students were working on. This suggests the potential of the timeline method not just to researchers but to educators in the development of game design case studies.

The jam approach, utilising the timeline, proved to be a productive method for gathering insights into a game design process. While the approach is limited in its depth, the benefit of the approach was that it provided the starting point for a more in-depth study that could be focused on the key insights gathered through this process. It allowed for reflection, as we worked through the material we uncovered and pointed to the suitability of this approach in gathering a volume of data on existing games.

Thus, the jam approach also poses an idea for broadening the study of a volume of design processes, instead of embarking deeper into a single game. While investigating real-world game development processes, we should strive to enhance our comprehensive understanding of them. If the *Noita* project (Kultima et al. 2024) took six months with extensive access to materials and processes, our jam approach of building the timeline of *Firewatch* in hours could enable a comparative analysis of hundreds of games, provided similar access to public development narratives.

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