

# Game Design

---

11/14/08: Documentation, The Pitch

# The Myth of the Game Design Document

“If only I could find out the proper format for a Game Design Document, I could become a professional game designer too! I’m full of ideas, but without this template, there is no way for me to design games.”

-Stereotyped Neophyte Designer

The Template Does  
Not Exist

The Template Has  
Never Existed

The Template Will  
Never Exist

Documents are different for  
every game, every team,  
every designer

documents are different for every game and for every team

# The Purpose of the GDD

- Memory
  - You may think certain details will be impossible to forget, but after two further weeks of design decisions, it is easy to forget even the most ingenious solutions
- Communication
  - DUH!!!
    - However, no document replaces person to person / person to team communication...

# Types of Game Documents

- What needs to be remembered, and what needs to be communicated?
- One document hardly ever serves all purposes
- The six main groups each generate their own special kind of documents

Art

Management

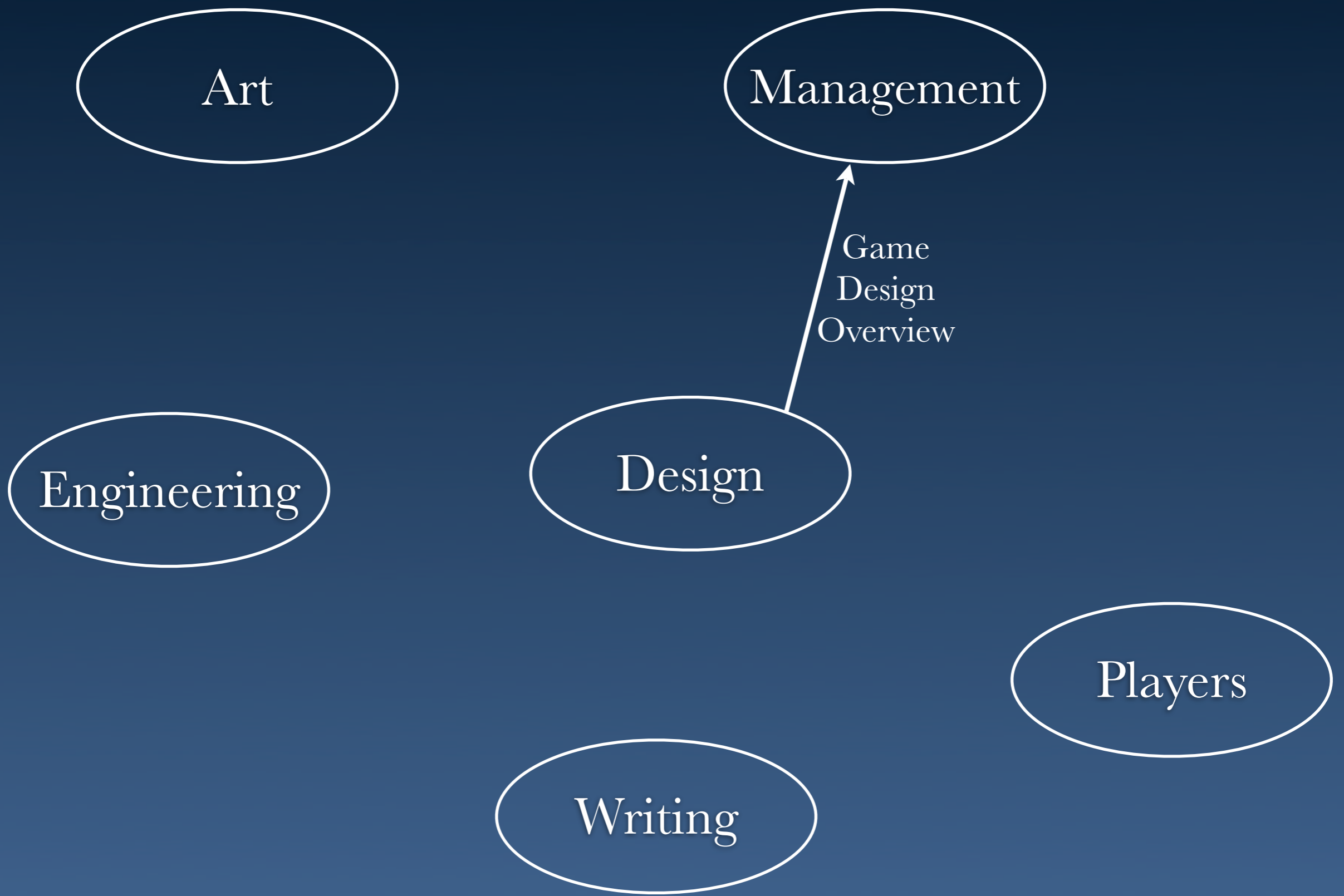
Engineering

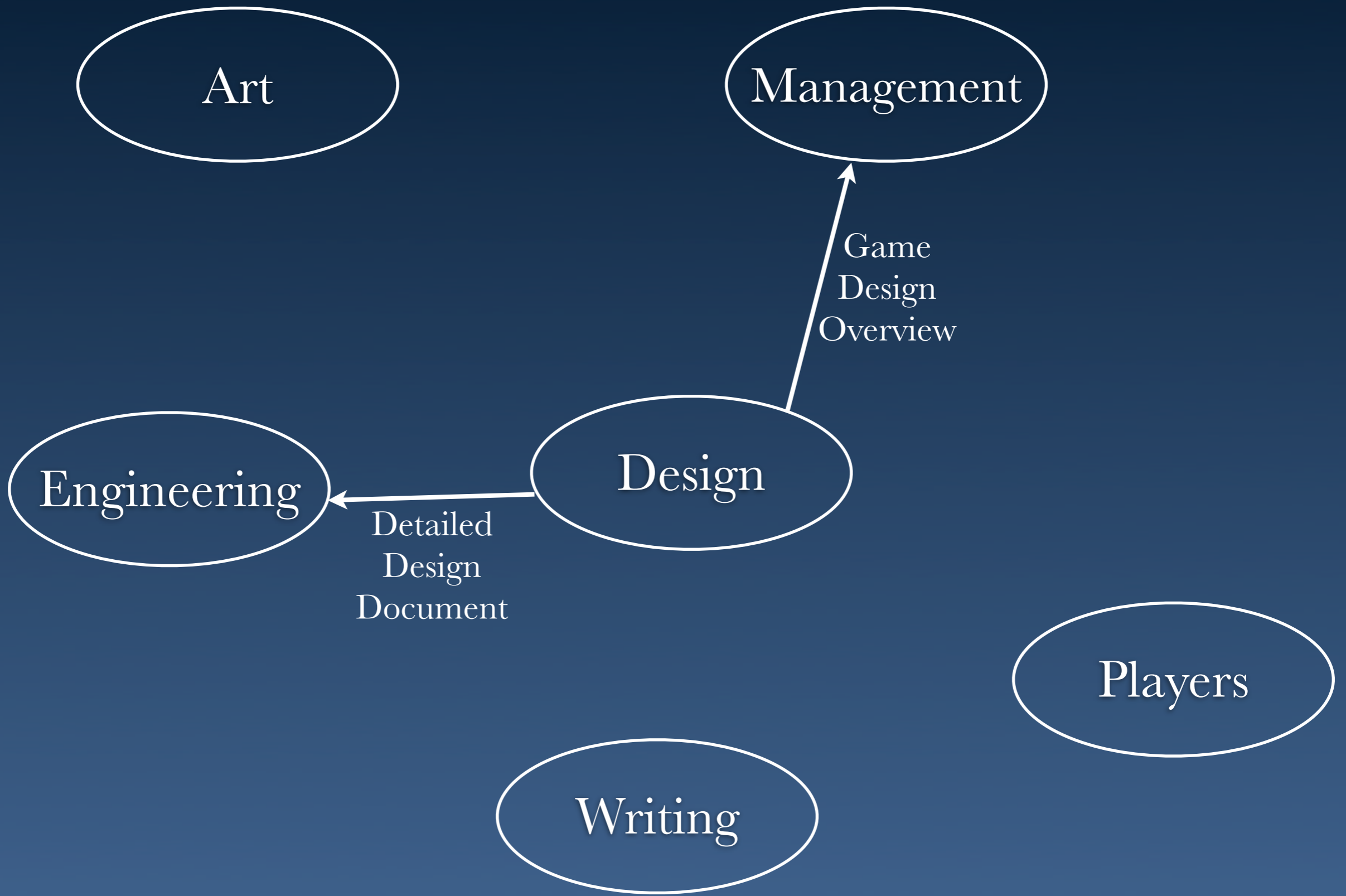
Design

Players

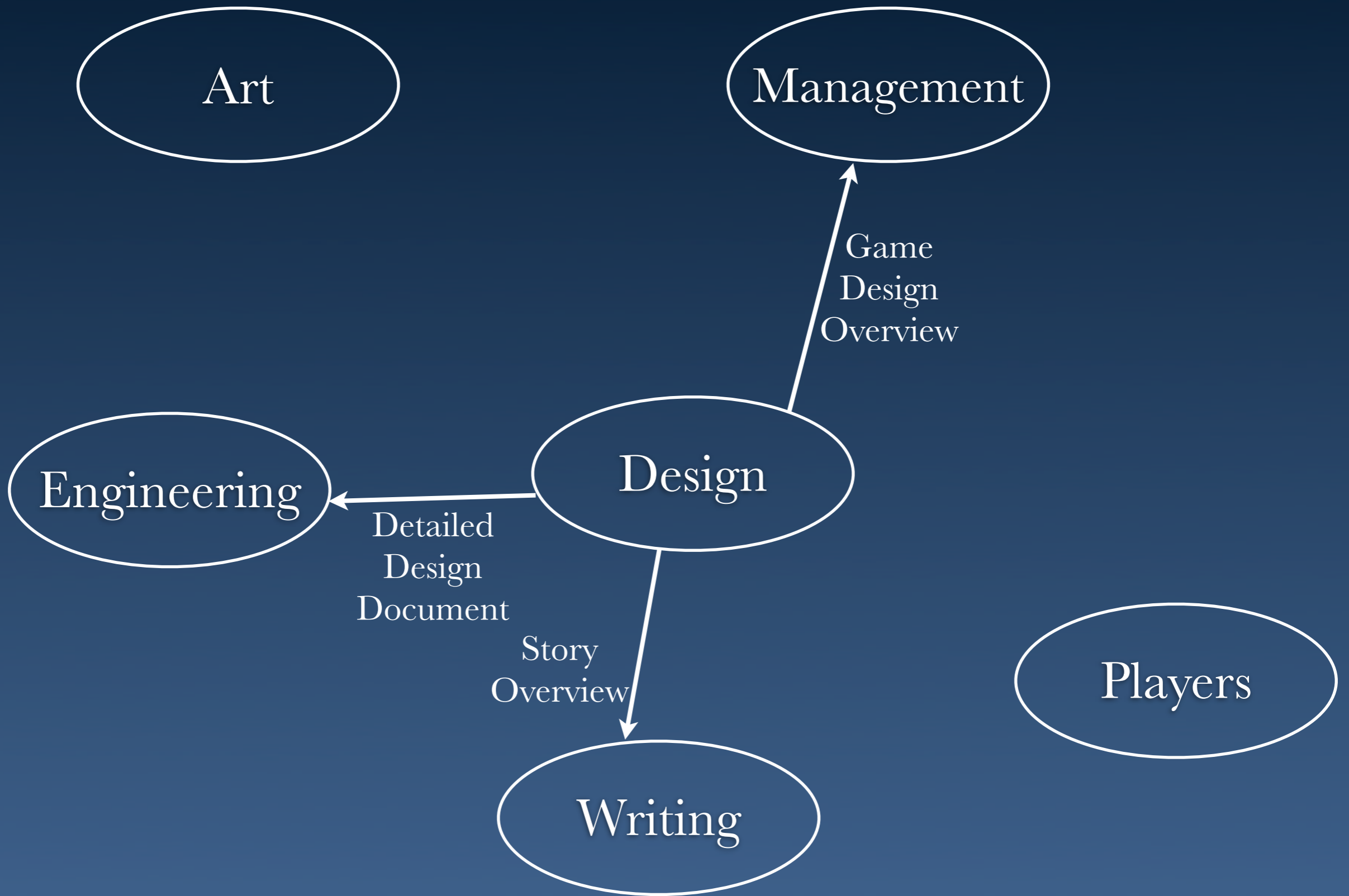
Writing

The six main groups...  
Just a warning: Most of the following documents are not appropriate for every game/development cycle

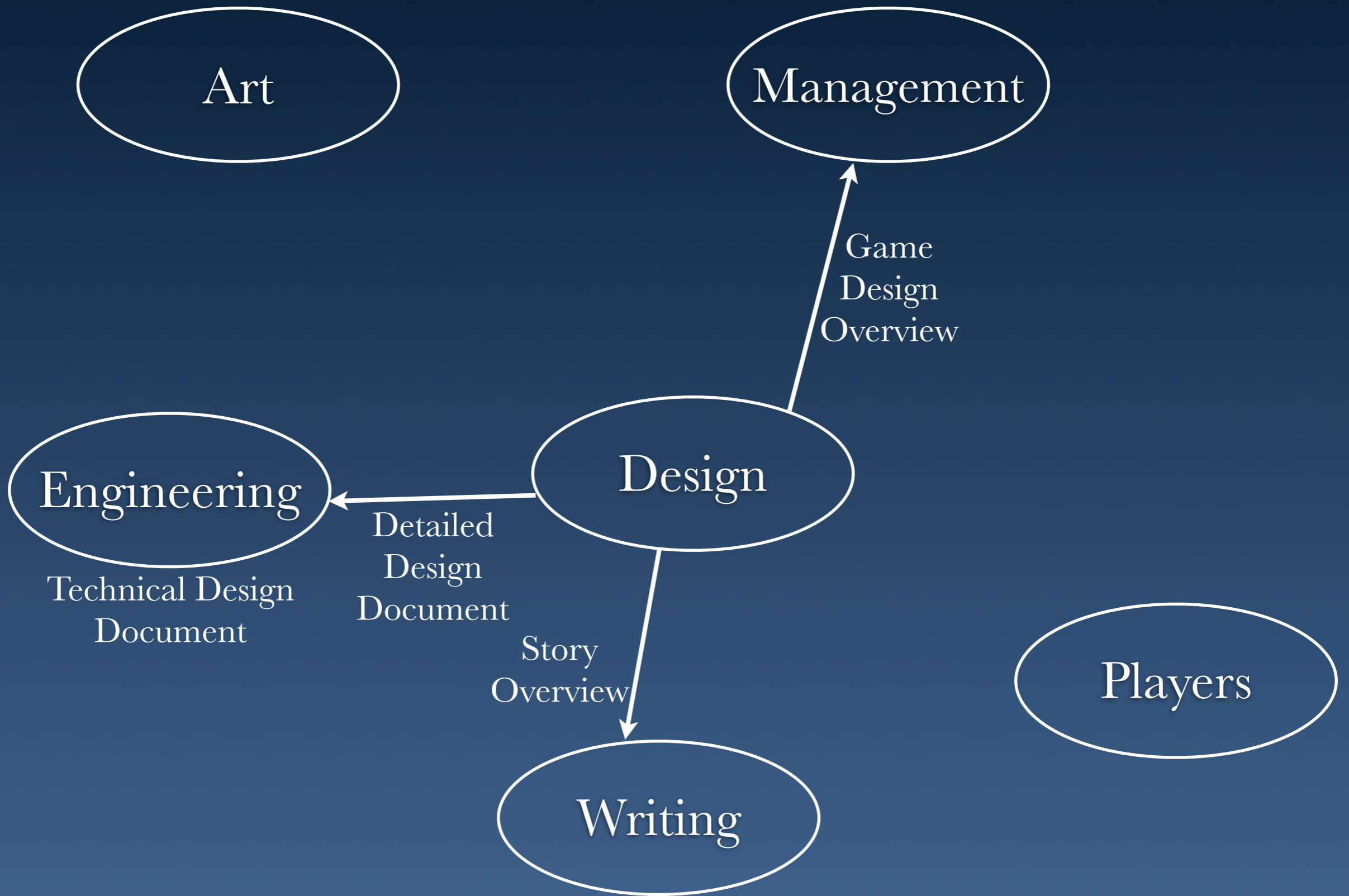




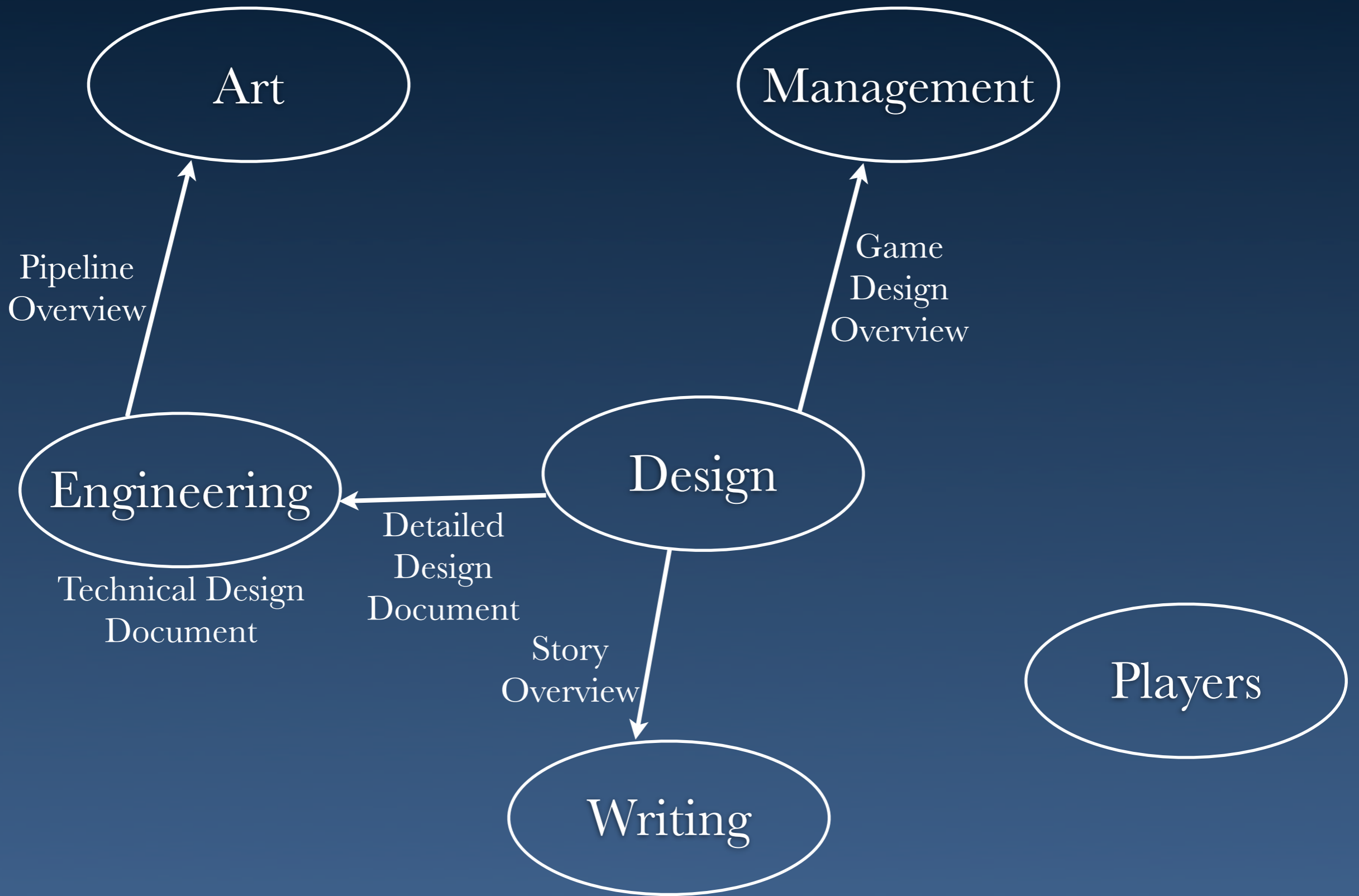
Detailed Design Document – defines all mechanics and interfaces in great detail. Helps designers remember the details, and gives engineering enough to code the game. Doesn't usually keep up with development, and is often abandoned halfway through the project, but by that point most of the details are in place, and meetings and emails take care of the rest



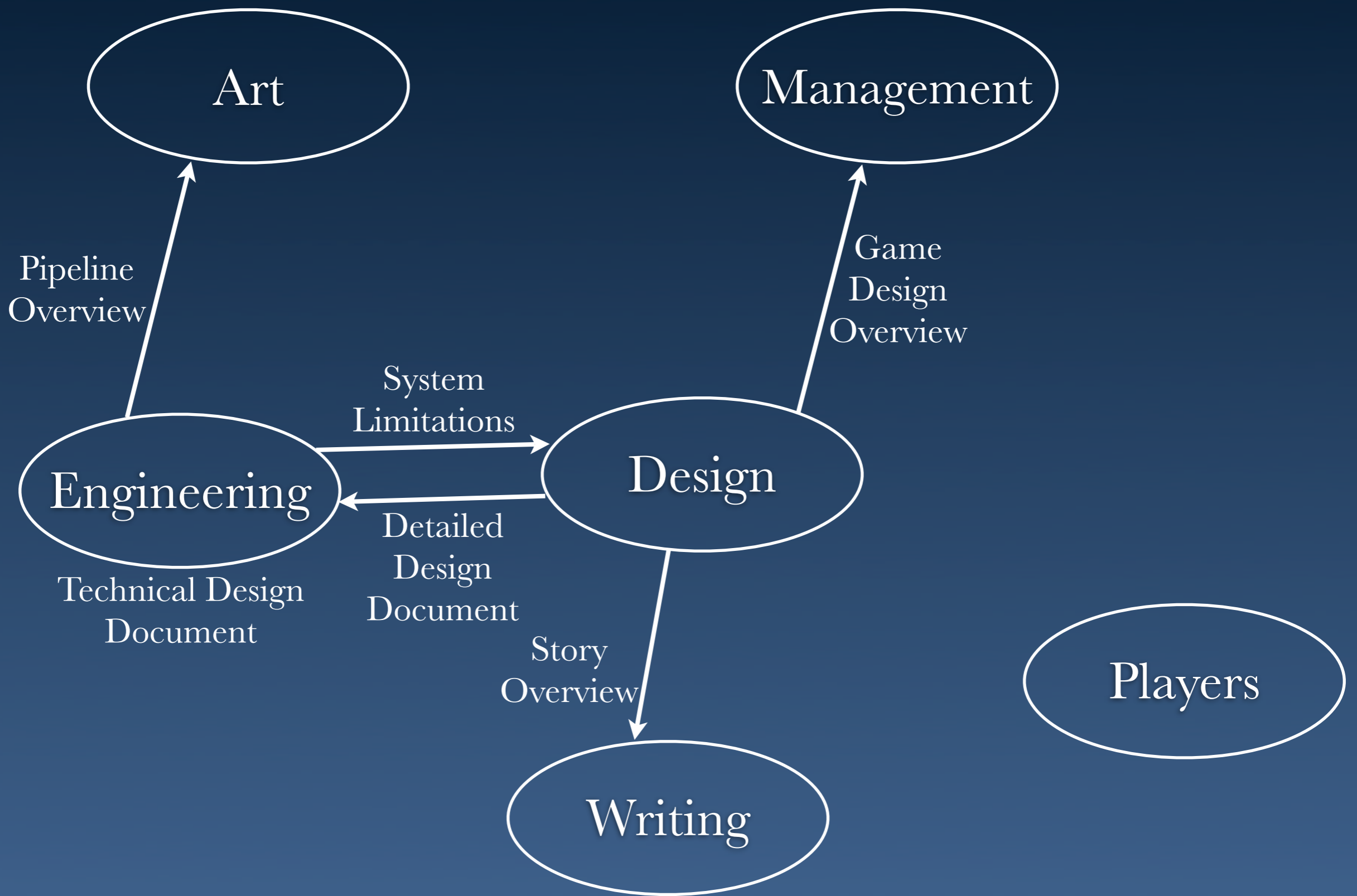
Story Overview – Writers are often contracted out, and are usually far away from the team. This document lets the writers know important settings, characters, and actions, and sometimes the writer’s response will change the whole game design



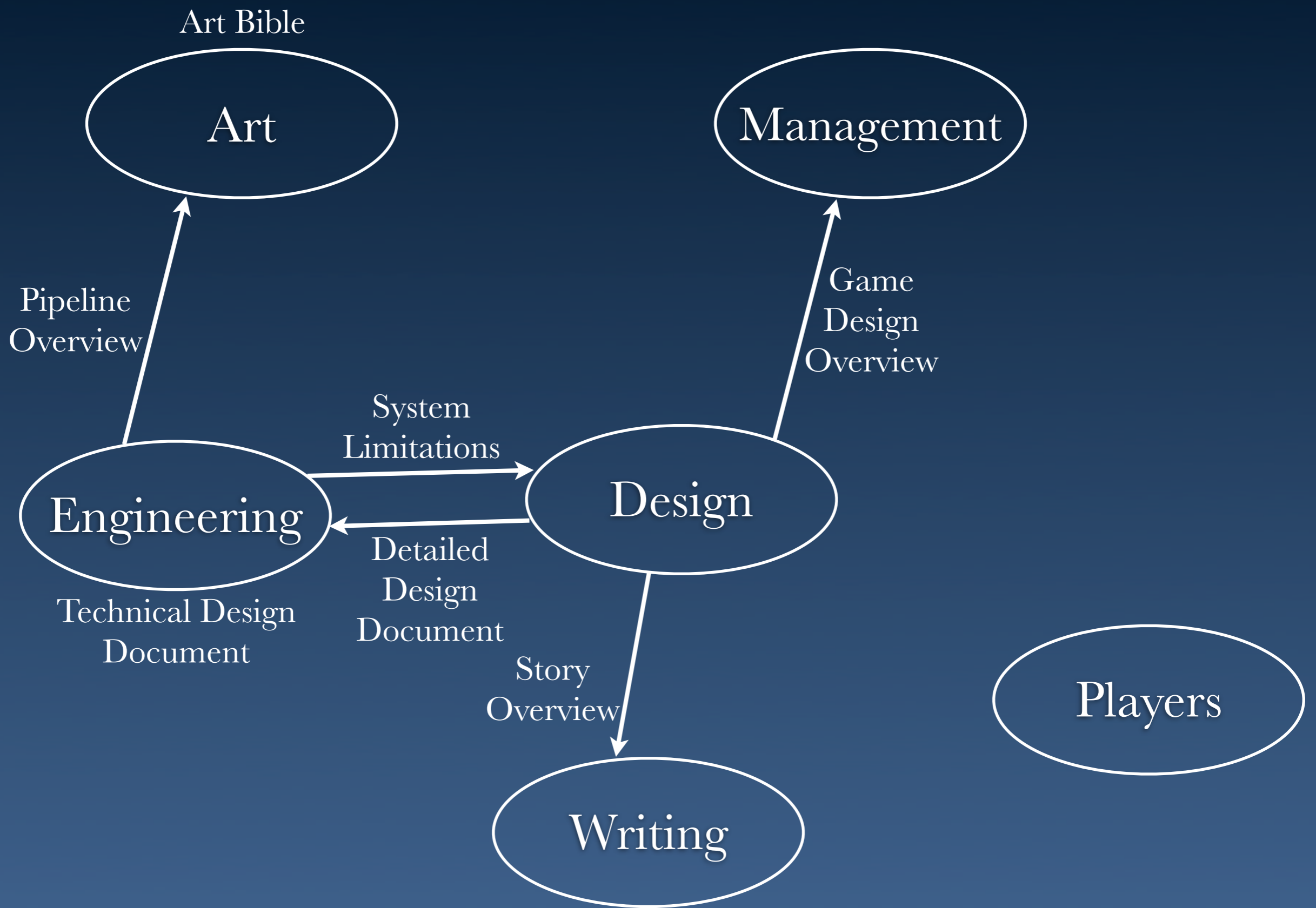
Technical Design Document – Games have many complex systems beyond game mechanics, like networking protocols and graphics processing. Rarely seen outside engineering, but very useful when there’s more than one engineer (almost always). Like the Detailed Design Document, often jettisoned halfway through production

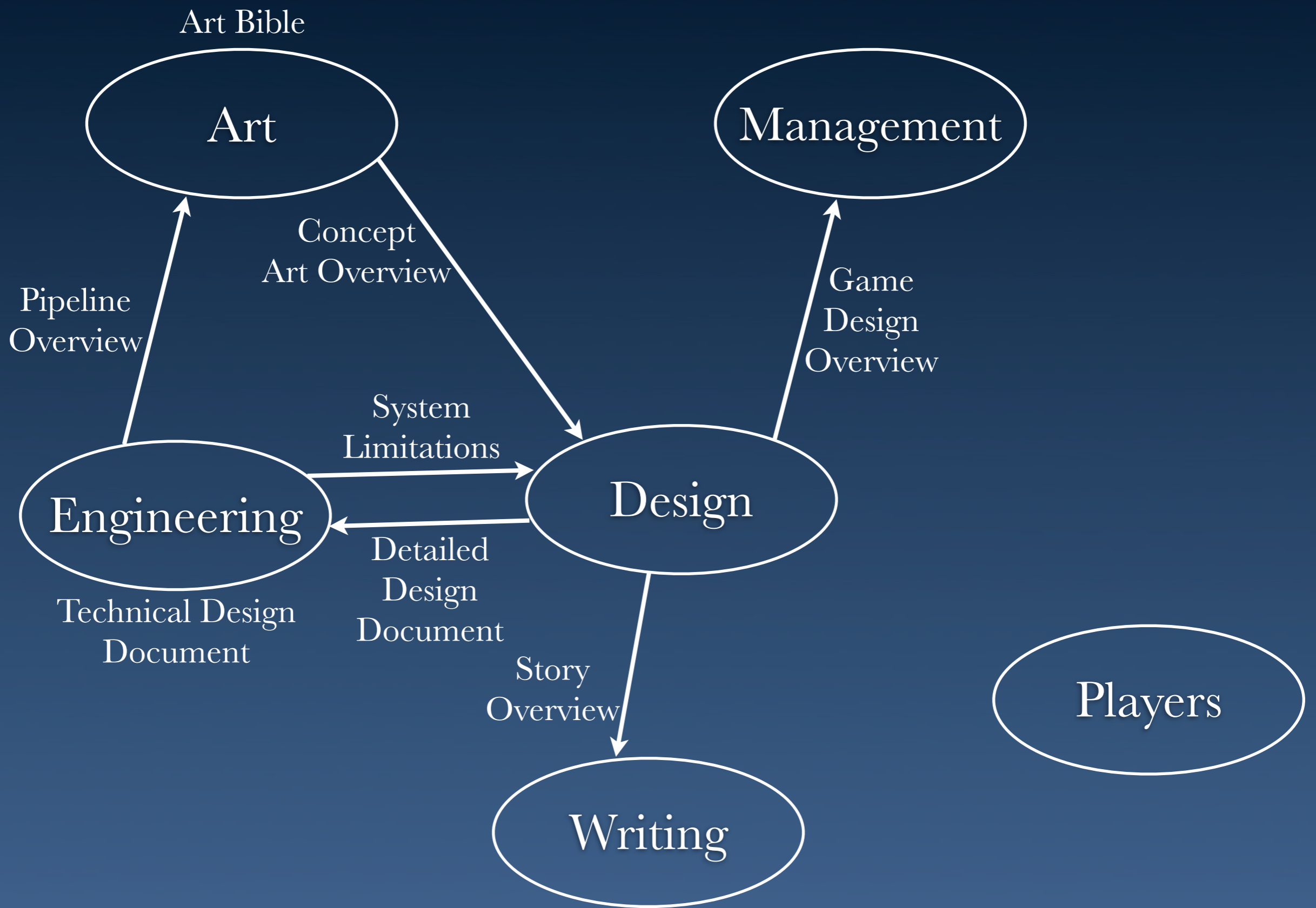


Pipeline Overview – integrating art assets into the game is a primary engineering challenge, and sometimes the engineers need to list “do’s” and “don’ts” regarding what limitations the artists need to work within. The shorter this document is, the better... Unfortunately, Sometimes limitations aren’t known at the start of the project so this document gets left out quite a bit which causes lots of rework towards the end of the project....

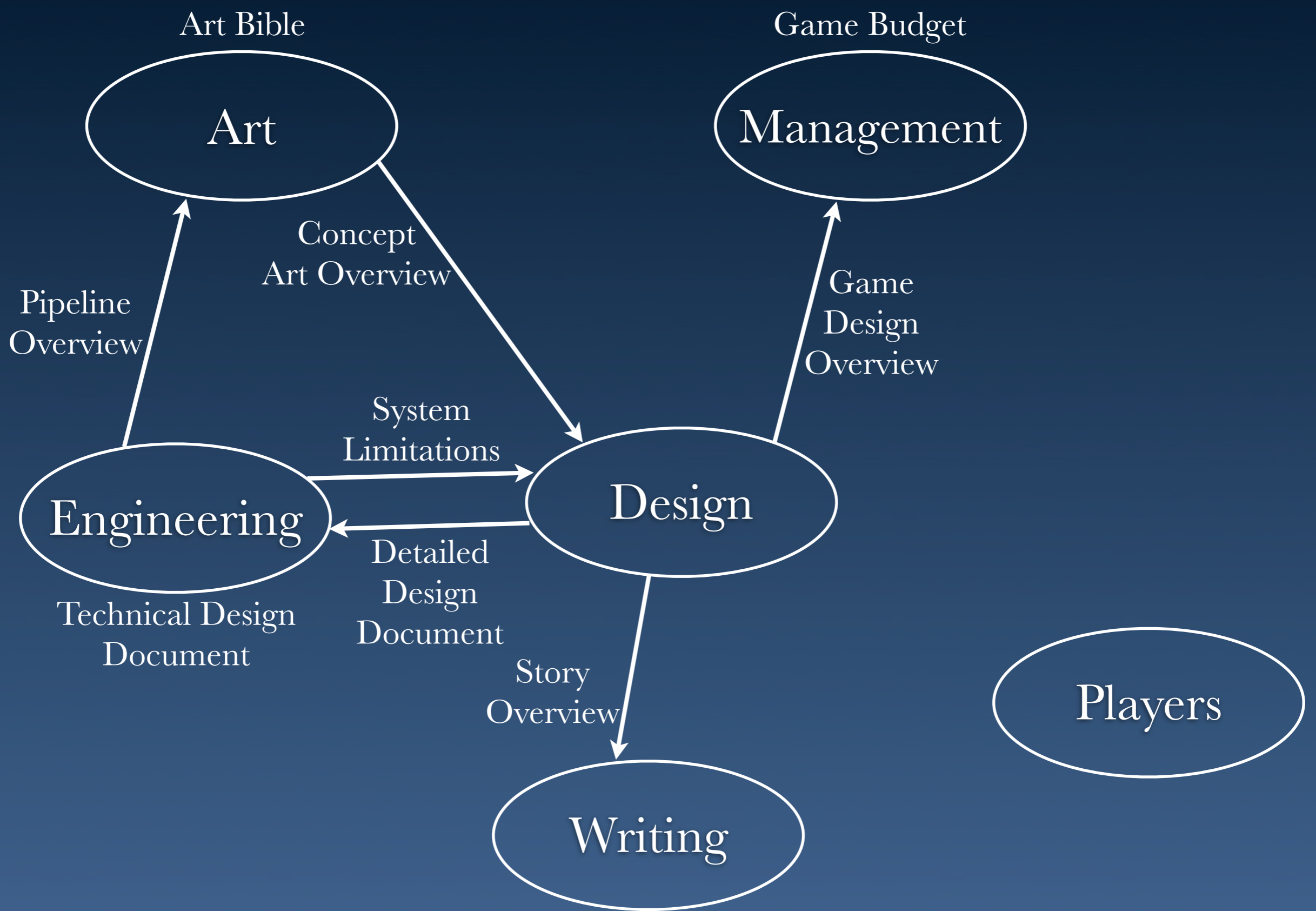


System Limitations – Sometimes it’s useful for the engineers to create a document that clarifies limits that should not be crossed – number of polygons, number of update messages sent per second, number of simultaneous explosions on the screen at once, etc. Sometimes fosters creative discussion regarding how to get past the limits... again this doesn’t happen all of the time.

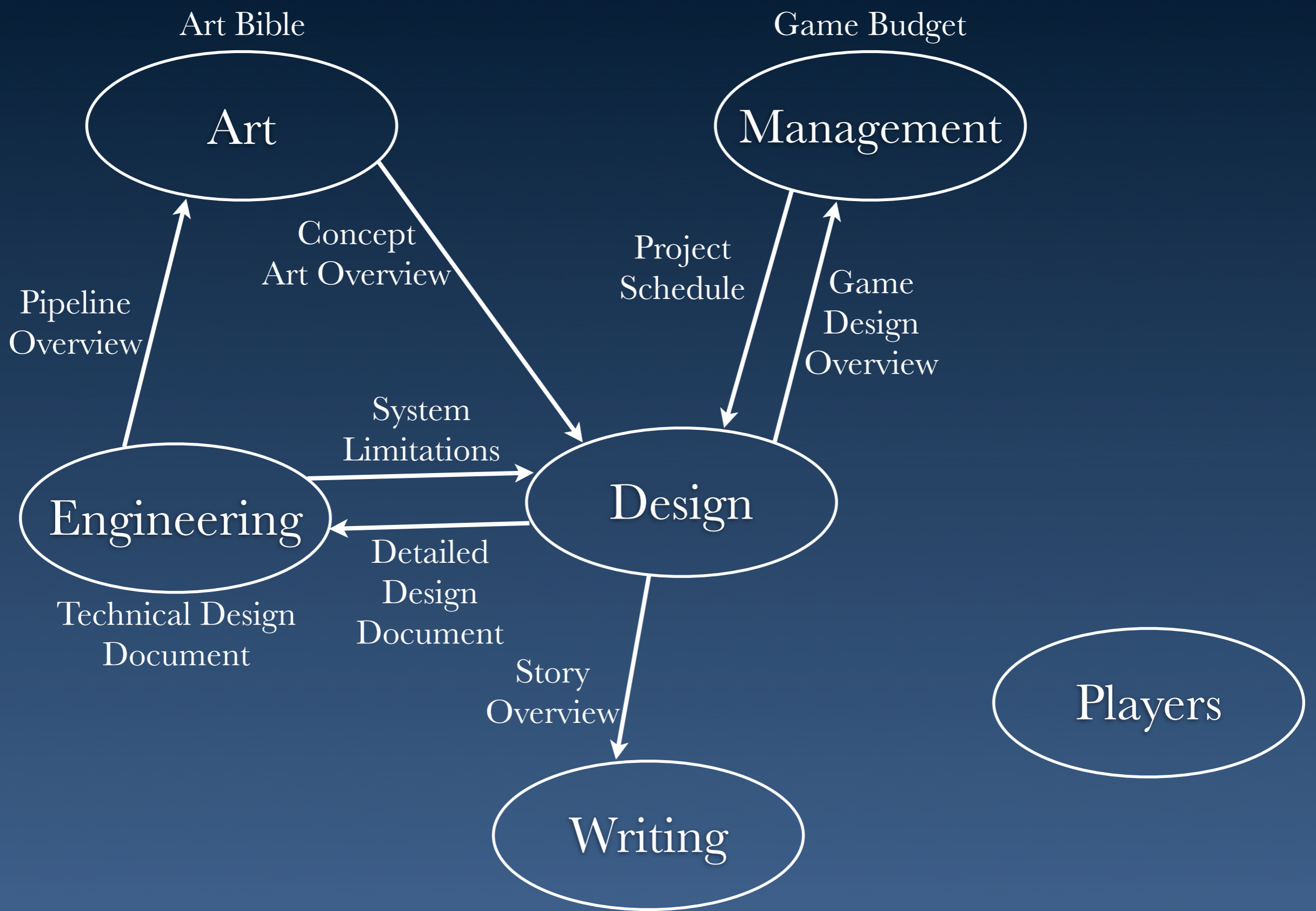




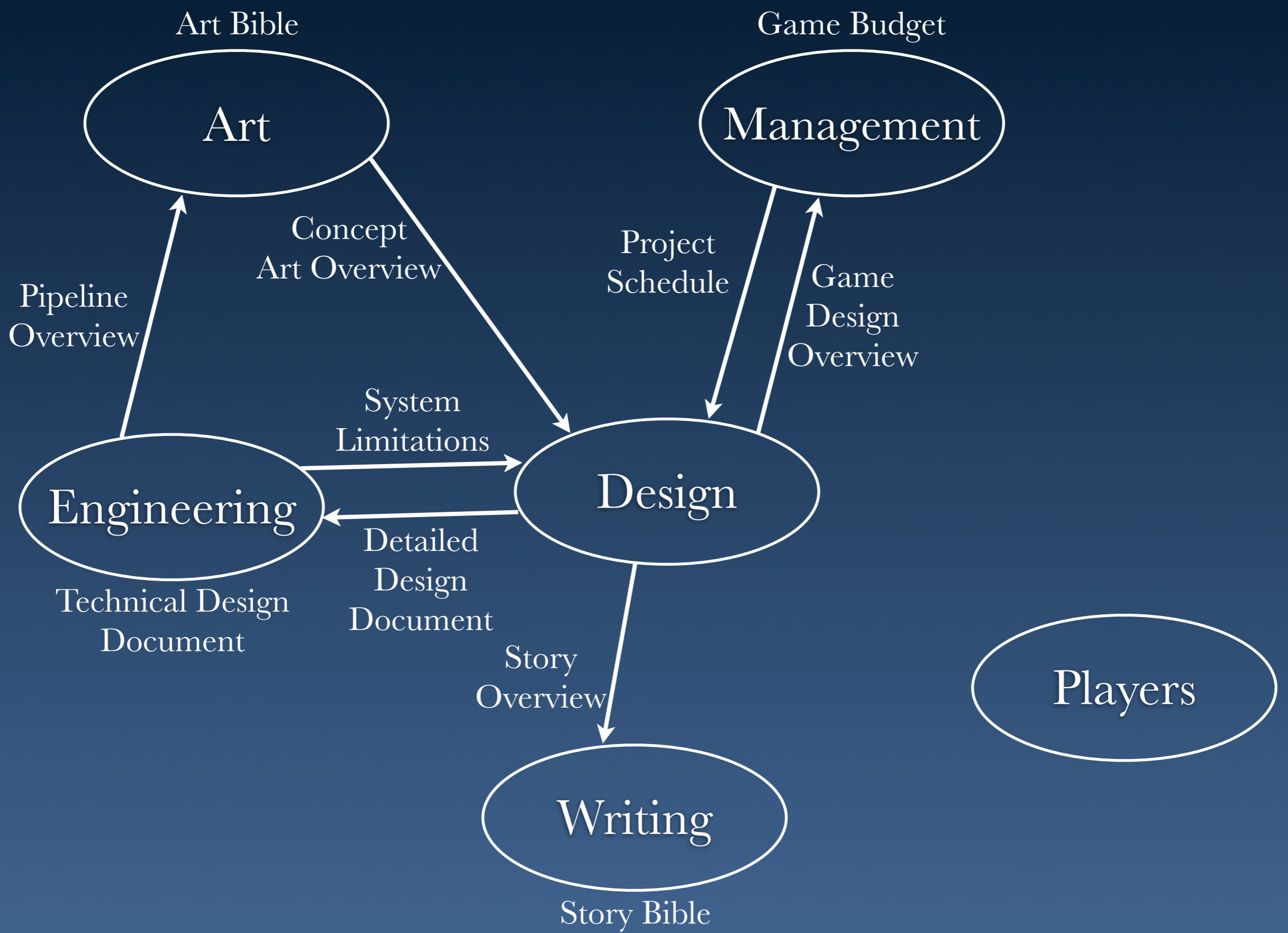
Concept Art Overview – Early images that show up everywhere, often as part of the original GDD, because many people need to understand what the game is going to look like before it is built



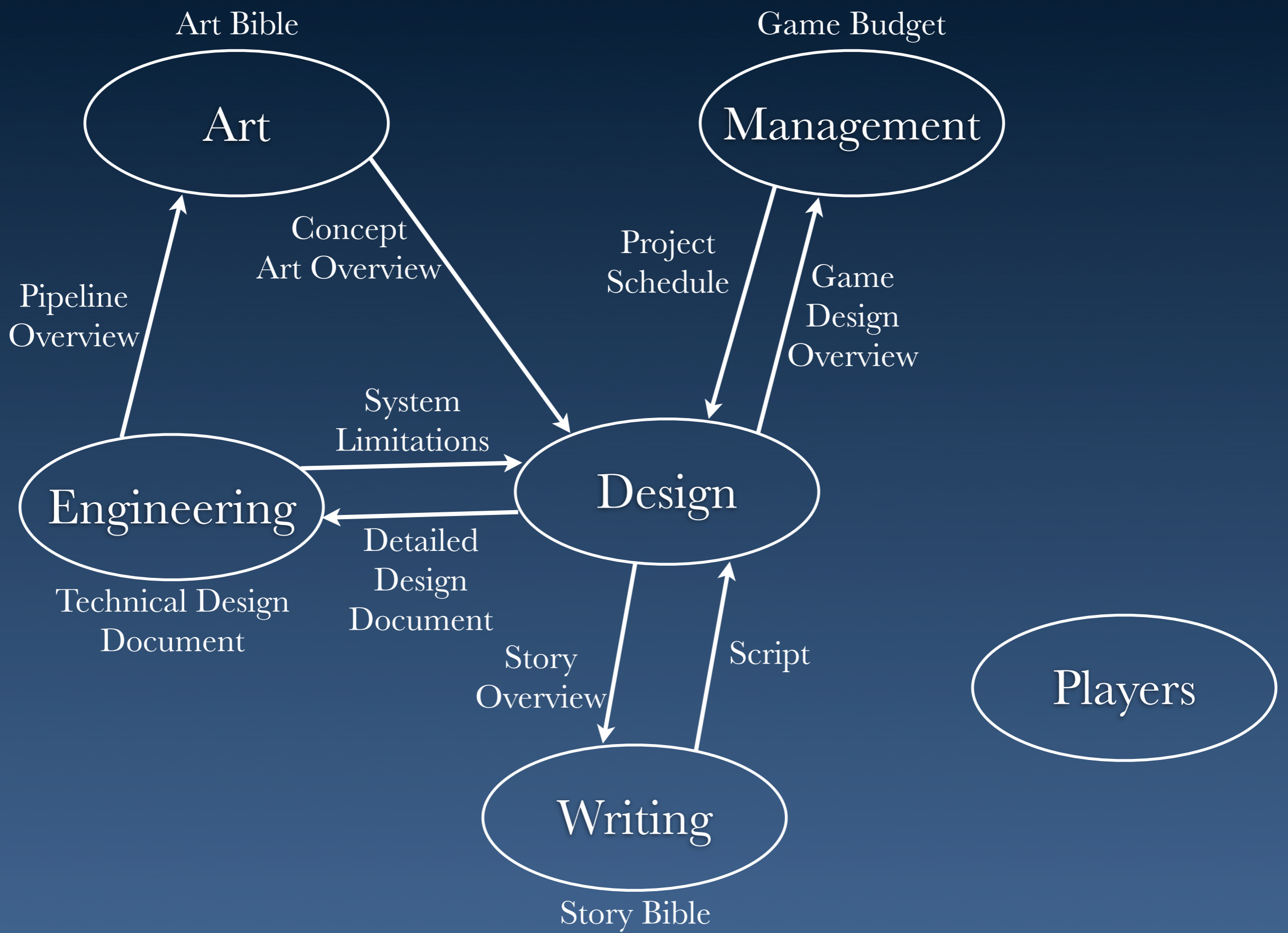
Game Budget – We would all like to work on the game “until it’s finished,” but this is almost never possible. Often costs must be estimated without knowing what’s going to be built. Often one of the first documents created, in conjunction with everybody, in order to get funding. At VV this is the FTE document.. FTE stands for Full Time Employees, they use it to figure out how many people can be on the project over the course of it.



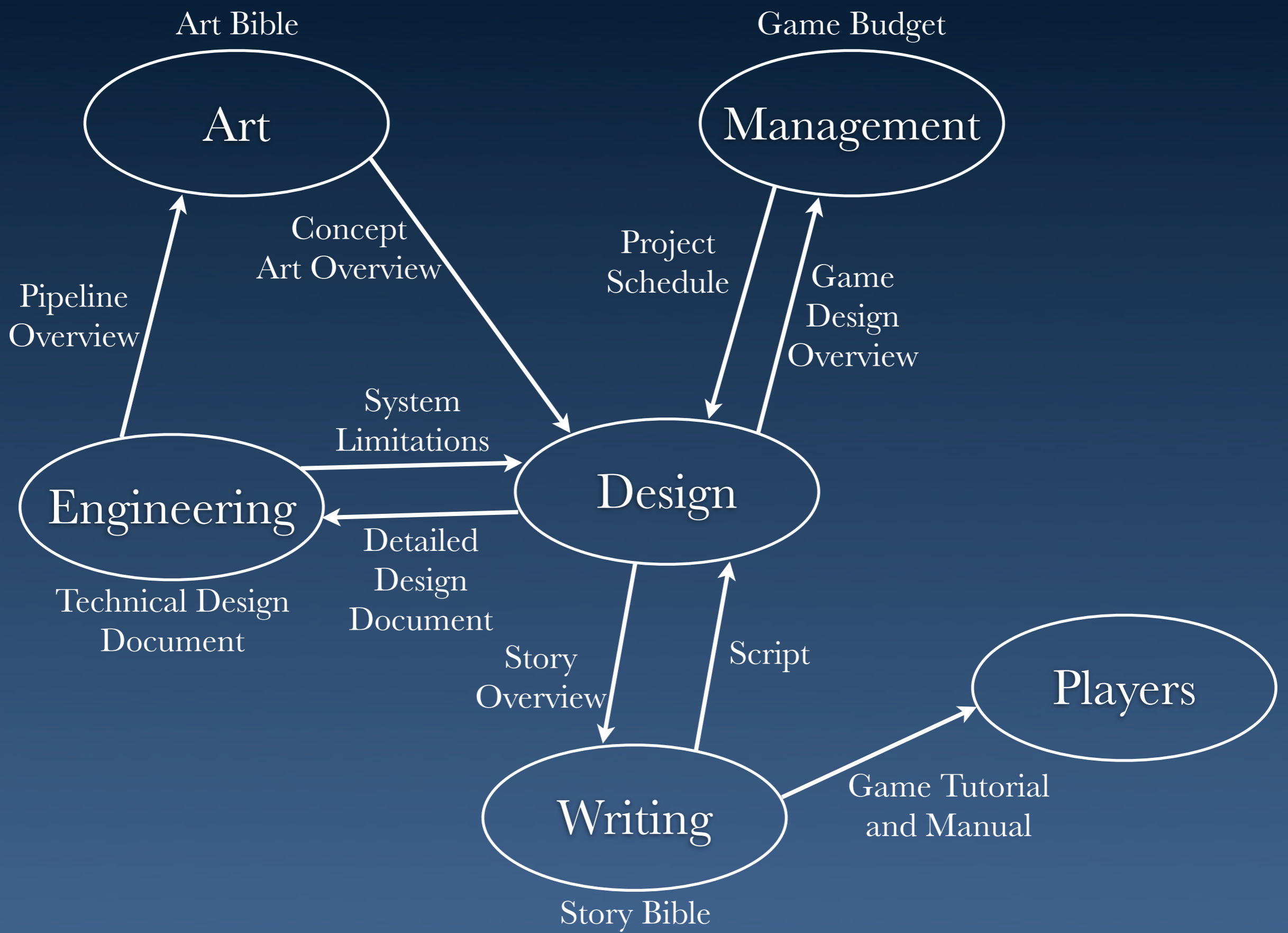
**Project Schedule** – The most frequently updated document on a well-run project. Unexpected changes are of course going to happen, but planning is still necessary. Lists tasks that need to be completed, how long each will take, when each task must be complete, and who will do them. On a medium-to-large game, updating this document (or spreadsheet) is a full-time job.



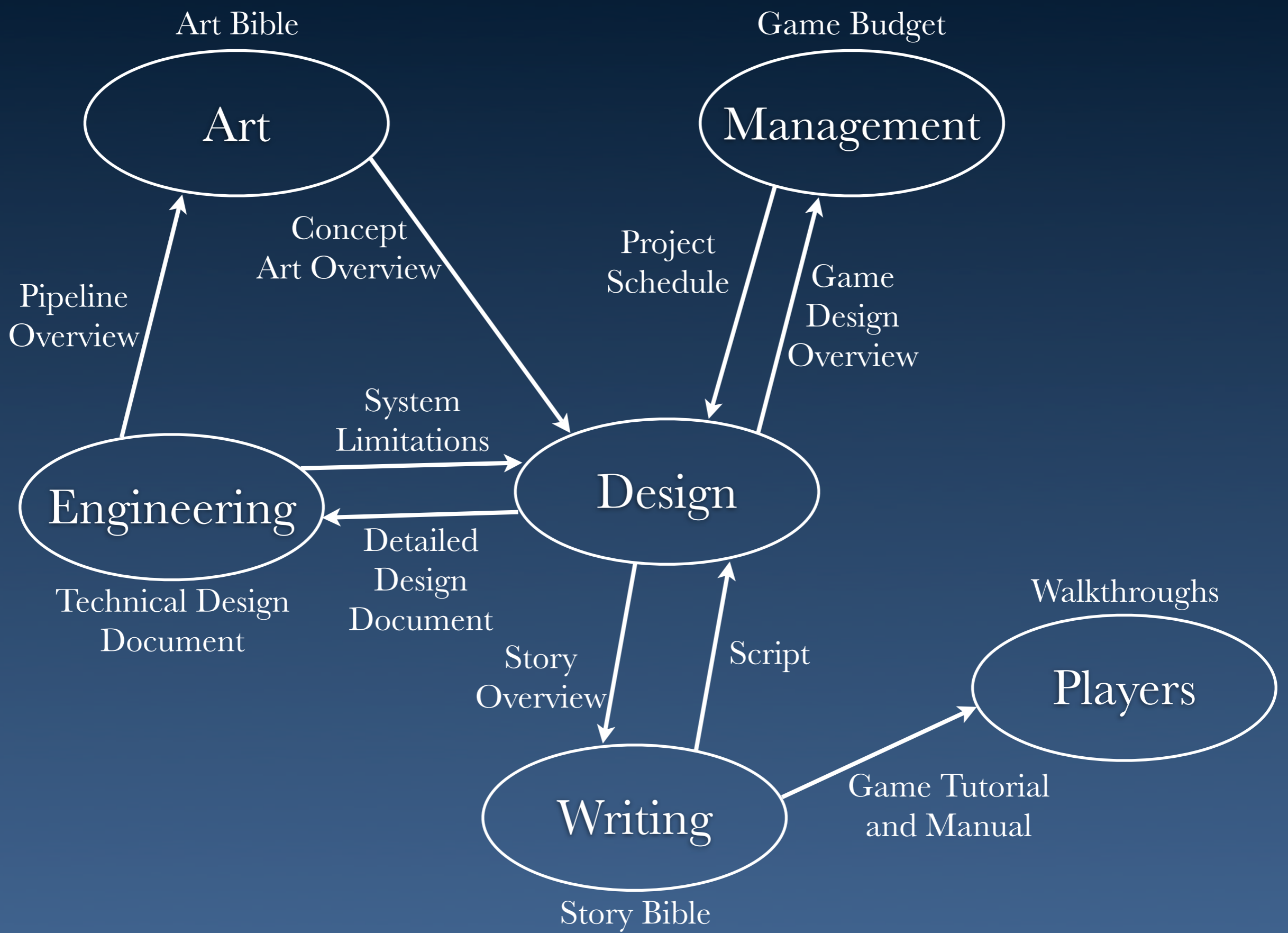
Story Bible – lays down the law regarding what is technically and narratively impossible in the story, and makes it easier for everyone to contribute ideas



Script – NPC dialog needs to come from somewhere! Often an appendix to the Detailed Design Document, and must be reviewed by the designers, for it is all too easy for a line of dialog to be inconsistent with a rule of gameplay



Game Tutorial and Manual – if players don't understand the game, how will they enjoy it? Just because you don't read the manual doesn't mean no one else does. The text that goes into this is often under-prioritized -> This is almost never written by someone on the development team. The producers sometimes write it, or they hire other companies to write it (especially the tutorials)



Walkthroughs – Players make documents about the game too! Valuable lessons to be learned by reading walkthroughs of your game.

# Where Do I Start?

- Rough bullet list of ideas
- Questions will arise - write them down!
- “Working on the design” usually means answering these questions
- Make notes on each decision and why you made it
- Gradually, the list of ideas, plans, questions and answers will start to fall into categories
- Your document should grow organically around your unique design, not based on a template

# The Client

- Form follows function
  - Louis Sullivan, architect
- Form follows fun
  - Susannah Rosenthal, toy designer
- Form follows funding
  - Bran Ferren, realist

# Clients Will Drive You Crazy

- You may think that they see you as the expert – after all, the client can't make the game themselves, so they will naturally respect your opinions about what will make the best game
- Most of the time, clients have **very** strong opinions about how the game should look and play. After all, they're paying for it
- Some of these opinions will be thoughtful and wise. Some will be the stupidest things you have ever heard, and you have to deal with it

# Coping With Bad Suggestions

1. Agree to the bad suggestion, for fear of displeasing the client
2. Immediately tell the client why the suggestion is bad, so they will be impressed with how much you know
3. Try to understand why the client is making the suggestion

1) This is a disservice to your client and your game

2) This usually backfires

3) Ding! The client (usually) isn't dumb, they just want to help, and the suggestion is often the "solution" to an unstated problem. A client reviewed a racing game, and said "the cars need more chrome" The developers temporarily panicked, because the models were locked and the CPU was already overworked. The designer asked "Why? Why do they need more chrome?" The client said "I felt like the cars weren't as fast as they should be. I know changing the speed would be a lot of work, so I was thinking that if you added chrome, it would at least \*look\* faster." This may sound like some bizarre logic, but the point is that the client was trying to help. The team lowered the camera viewpoint, which was very easy, and all was well  
The phrase "What problem are you trying to solve?" will serve you well

# Not That Rock

- The other way clients will drive you crazy is by not knowing what they want:

Client: Bring me a rock

Designer: How about this one?

Client: No, not that rock

Designer: Oh. Uh, how's this?

Client: No, not that one either

[repeat 200 times]

# Not That Rock

- The right way to play:

Client: Bring me a rock

Designer: What kind of rock?

Client: I'm not sure, I don't know much about rocks

Designer: Well, what are you going to do with it?

Client: Oh... I was going to put it in my driveway and paint my house number on it

Designer: Ah... I think I know a good one, let me bring you a few to choose from

# Three Layers of Desire

- You must understand what's important to the client. Do your homework, and keep in mind the three layers of desire: words, mind, and heart
- Words: “I want you to make a game for this foundation that teaches algebra to eighth graders”
- Mind: “I want to make a space-themed game that teaches geometry. I've got it all planned out, but I need to do algebra because it's what the foundation wants.”
- Heart: “I'm tired of being the finance person and I want to show people I have a creative side.”

# The Pitch

- “Why me? It’s enough that I’m designing it. Couldn’t someone else do this?”
- Who else is more qualified? The programming team? Marketing???
- If you don’t believe in your game enough to get up in front of people and sing its praises, why should anyone else believe in it?
- The following tips and guides are written regarding presenting to producers, but they also important regarding your presentation to your development team as well

# Twelve Tips

1. Get in the door
2. Show you are serious
3. Be organized
4. Be passionate!
5. Assume their point of view
6. Design the pitch

# Twelve Tips

7. Know all the details

8. Exude confidence

9. Be flexible

10. Rehearse!

11. Get them to own it

12. Follow up

# Get in the Door

- It's very difficult to get an audience with a publisher - they know they're King of the Mountain, and will ignore emails and cancel meetings with almost no warning
- Most game deals happen because a developer and publisher were introduced to each other by a mutual friend
- Know someone on the inside, and use the back door
- Go to IGDA meetings, and go to the GDC if you can

# Show You are Serious

- The days are over where you could just show a publisher some sketches and give a brief description
- You need to show you are serious about building this game – a working prototype is virtually required
- Your presentation needs to detail why the game will sell – it's not enough to say why your game could be fun, you must show the work that proves it **will** be fun

# Be Organized

- Don't fall into the "I'm creative, so I don't need to be organized" trap. Organization is another way to show you are serious
- If you are organized, you will be more calm, more in control, and the publisher will think you're low-risk and will be more likely to trust you
- Bring handouts!

# Be Passionate!!

- You need to get these people excited about your game, so **you** need to be excited about your game!
- People are **very** good at knowing when you're faking it
- Passion represents more than excitement – it represents the drive and commitment to deliver a quality product

# Assume Their Point of View

- No one likes a hard, pushy salesman
- LISTEN!
- Learn what you can about the company, and make sure that the pitch is a good fit
- You know your game backwards, but the person you're presenting to doesn't know it at all – explain it in a way that's easily understood
- The people you present to have seen hundreds of pitches and are very busy. Get to the point quickly, and pass over points that bore them

they'll ask questions if they want more detail

# Design the Pitch

- The pitch is an experience, too! Design it as well as you designed your game
- Give it a hook, a build, tension and release, and a climax
- Over-planning won't spoil the energy. You can always deviate from the plan, but having the plan will set you free

# Know All the Details

- Expect experienced publishers to interrupt your perfectly planned pitch with detailed questions about what's important to them
- You need as many facts on hand as possible
  - Design details (How many hours of gameplay?)
  - Schedule details (What's the fastest you could get this done?)
  - Financial details (How many units do you think this will sell?)

# Exude Confidence

- Confidence is different from passion, but just as important
- Know the details, and don't get shaken up by tough questions – you're selling yourself as well as the game
- If you think the answer to a question is “probably,” then you say “Absolutely!”
- Your handshake matters. Practice it!

# Be Flexible

- You are going to get curveballs (“What else do you have?”)
- If you’re told your hour-long meeting will be 20 minutes, then handle it with coolness and confidence
- Richard Garfield

# Rehearse!

- The more comfortable you get talking about your game, the more natural your pitch
- If your mother calls and asks what you've been working on, give her the pitch
- Give it to your barber, give it to your roommates, give it to a squirrel on campus
- You don't need to memorize every word, but the chain of ideas needs to spring forth like a favorite song

# Get Them to Own It

- Integrate their ideas into the pitch if you can
- Use concepts from earlier questions (“Could it have vampires in space?”) to explain things later on (so, you establish visual communications with the other ship, and it’s a vampire!”)
- If you make it easy for them to imagine it’s their game, the closer they get to accepting the proposal

# Follow Up

- When you're done, they will thank you, and promise to get back to you.
- If they don't, then don't think it's because they didn't like it – they probably got swept up in another pressing matter
- Within a few days, find an excuse to follow-up by email or phone. Don't nag!

# What's it all About?

- Money - sorry!
- If games didn't make money, the industry would die
- There are many people who would happily switch from selling games to selling can openers if they thought they could make 2% more profit a year by doing so
- Try to find out how many units of similar games sold
- Know the breakeven point
- Know last year's top sellers

# Top Selling Console Games of 2007

1. Halo 3
2. Wii Play
3. Call of Duty 4
4. Guitar Hero III
5. Super Mario Galaxy
6. Pokemon Diamond
7. Madden 2008
8. Guitar Hero II
9. Assassin's Creed
10. Mario Party 8

ANY publisher would be able to rattle off this list - it's a hit-driven industry  
Did you forget Madden? Pokemon?

# Final Project

# Individual, or Pairs

I need to know pairs by Tuesday. The bar will be set significantly higher for pairs

# Final Project

- To be pitched on 12/2 (solos) and 12/5 (pairs)
- Figure 8-10 minutes
- 10-page (solo) or 18-page (pairs) detailed Game Design Document (for a video game)
- Space-and-a-half, 10-point font, 1-inch margins, Times New Roman
- No weapons. At all.
- Definitions, not descriptions

# Things I'll be looking for

- Accessibility
  - no RPI sim, Make sure a normal (perhaps even casual) gamer can play this game.
- Non-linearity
- Triangularity
- Balance
- NO INCOMPLETE THOUGHTS/IDEAS/QUESTIONS

1) Shouldn't require a college degree to play (one submission required the player to write an artificial intelligence algorithm)  
2) No pretty "answer the question" cards while players move on a linear track  
3) Small risk/small reward and high risk/high reward decisions  
4) Several of you started sentences in HW3 with "we could also", "maybe with <insert incomplete feature here>", etc...  
Misc questions in a document aren't ok... you need to make a decision and be willing to change those decisions later, but posing the questions up front make for a weak doc.

find out who the pairs will be by the end. Stress that the bar will be set significantly higher