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GAME DESIGNER'S CONTEXT

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BA / MARTS CREATIVE COMPUTER GAMES DESIGN

Playtesting

- Playtesting Overview
- Playtesters & Recruitment
- Conducting a Playtesting Session
- Methods of Playtesting
- Taking Notes
- Basic Usability Techniques
- Data Gathering
- Test Control Situations

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*
Playtesting

Playtesting

Playtesting is the **single most important** activity a designer engages in and ironically it's often the one designers understand the **least** about.

The common misconception is that playtesting is **simple** – just play the game and gather feedback.

Playtesting is a process which involves selection, recruiting, preparation, controls, and analysis.

What isn't Playtesting

Playtesting is **not** when the designer and their team play the game and talk about the features.

This is an internal design review.

What isn't Playtesting

Playtesting is **not** having the quality assurance team go through and rigorously test each element of the software for flaws.

This is bug testing.

What isn't Playtesting

Playtesting is **not** when you have seven marketing executives sitting behind a one-way mirror watching a representative sample group play and discuss the game.

This is focus group testing.

What isn't Playtesting

Playtesting is **not** when you systematically analyze how users interact with your software by recording mouse movements, eye movements, navigation patterns, etc.

This is usability testing.

What is Playtesting

Playtesting is something the designer performs throughout the **entire design process** to gain an insight into how players **experience** the game.

There are a number of ways you can conduct playtesting. Some are informal and **qualitative**, others are more structured and **quantitative**.

What is Playtesting

The one thing **all** forms of playtesting have in common is the end goal:

**HOW TO GAIN *USEFUL* FEEDBACK FROM PLAYERS
IN ORDER TO IMPROVE YOUR GAME**

What is Playtesting

As a designer, your foremost goal is to make sure that the game is functioning the way **you** intended.

Your game design must be:

- Internally complete
- Balanced
- Fun to play

Playtesting

Game design is **not** a form of one-way communication.

Listening to what playtesters say as they experience your game is **the best way to understand how the game is working.**

Once you learn to listen to your players, you can help your game to **grow.**

Playtesting

Gauging reactions, interpreting silent moments, studying feedback, and matching those with specific game elements are the keys to becoming a professional designer.

As a game designer, it's up to you to evolve your game into more than you originally envisioned.

This is the art of game design.

(Fullerton, Swain, Hoffman 2004: 4)

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*
Playtesters

Playtesters

Playtesters are people who play your game and **provide feedback** on the experience so that you can move forward with a **fresh perspective**.

By watching other people play the game you can **learn** a great deal.



Playtesters

Many game designers **don't involve playtesters** in their process.

If they do bring in playtesters, it's at the end of production when it's **really too late to change** the essential elements of the design.

By divorcing their process from this essential feedback opportunity, they probably cost themselves more time, money and creative heartache.

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*
Recruiting Playtesters

Recruiting Playtesters

Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman suggest that there are **various stages** of playtesting, each involving **different groups** that can offer unique perspectives on the project.

- Self-Testing
- Playtesting With Confidants
- Playtesting With People You Don't Know
- Playtesting With Your Target Audience

Self-Testing



Recruiting Playtesters: Self Testing

In the early stages when you're creating your first prototype, the single best tester you have is **yourself**.

As you build a working version of your game you'll naturally **try it out repeatedly** to understand how it functions.

Recruiting Playtesters: Self Testing

Self-testing is most valuable in the **foundation stage** of a prototype when you are **experimenting** with fundamental concepts.

It is a large part of the process that enables you to come up with the **core mechanics** for the system.

It is also where you create solutions to **glaring problems** with the play experience.

Recruiting Playtesters: Self Testing

Your goal at this stage is to make the game work, even if it is just a **rough approximation** of the final product.

Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman suggest keeping a **playtesting journal** – a resource where you can **record all feedback** you get from yourself and other testers.

Playing With Confidants



Recruiting Playtesters: Playtesting with Confidants

As you progress and your game evolves, you will have to rely on **outside testers** to gain an accurate understanding of what it is you've created.

The next stage should involve testing with **people you know**.

These people will bring **fresh eyes** to the project and will uncover things you haven't considered.

Recruiting Playtesters: Playtesting with Confidants

Bear in mind that once the game is playable you must **move testing on** from just involving your confidants.

Testing with friends and family may feel like it works – and it does in the **early stages** – but this won't suffice once the game matures.

Recruiting Playtesters: Playtesting with Confidants

Your friends and family have a **personal relationship** with you and this obscures their objectivity – most of them will be **too harsh** or **too forgiving**.

They will never give you the **objective, broad criticism** that you require to take your design to the next level.

Recruiting Playtesters: Playtesting With People You Don't Know

It is only through the process of involving **total strangers** to playtest and allowing them to **criticize** your creation that you will gain the **fresh perspective** and insight you require to improve your design.

Outsiders have nothing to lose or gain by telling you **honestly** how they feel.

Recruiting Playtesters: Playtesting With People You Don't Know

If you choose them carefully and provide the right environment they can be as **articulate and dedicated** as your co-workers or confidants.

“There is no substitute for finding good playtesters.

Make them an extension of your team and the results will become apparent immediately.”

(Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman 2004: 199)

Finding the ideal playtesters

The **more sources you try**, the better your candidate pool will become.

If your invitation sounds attractive, you shouldn't have trouble lining up testers.

The next step in recruiting is actually **screening out** and turning down applicants, though you can only do this if you get **enough** applicants.

Finding the ideal playtesters

What you should be looking for is a group of testers who are **articulate enough** to convey their opinions to you.

If they can't hold a conversation, they probably won't be much use.

It doesn't hurt to **ask a few questions** to help sort out which applicants are going to be useful and which are a waste of time.

Finding the ideal playtesters

Questions can include:

- What are your hobbies?
- Why did you respond to the invitation to playtest?
- How often do you buy this type of game?

If the tester isn't a consumer of the type of game you are making, their feedback will be **less useful**.

Playing With Your Target Audience



Playtesting with your Target Audience

The ideal playtester is someone who represents your **target audience**.

These people will give you far more **relevant** feedback because they will have a gut instinct for what works.

They will also be able to compare your game to others and provide you with **additional market research**.

Playtesting with your Target Audience

Your pool of testers should represent the entire spectrum of consumers of your product.

If you are worried about someone stealing your ideas, have them sign a **Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA)**.

Non-disclosure Agreement

Non-disclosure Agreement

This Nondisclosure Agreement ("Agreement") is made as of _____ between _____ Company Name Inc. ("Company"), and Person Name, of _____ www.URL.com ("Confidant").

RECITALS

The parties are agreeing to the following:

RECITALS

WHEREAS, Company and Confidant are agreeing to the purpose of [business purpose] for the Company.

WHEREAS, Company is willing to disclose Confidential information to the other party in accordance with the terms of Agreement for the sole purpose of [business purpose] for the [business purpose];

NOW, THEREFORE, for good and valuable consideration acknowledged, and the mutual agreements set forth here follows:

Confidential Information. As used in Agreement, any information not readily available to the public information but also business information, disclosed by the Company to Confidant. Without limiting the scope of Confidential Information includes business secrets, experimental data, product design, research agreements, formulae, materials, marketing and any intellectual property therein or related to a special, valuable and unique asset of Company.

Exclusions. Confidential Information does not demonstrate: a. is now, or hereafter become the part of Confidant, generally known or known by Confidant before receiving such breach of any confidence herein; or c. Is Confidant from a third party, without breach:

Obligations. Confidant agrees:

- Obligations.** Confidential agree
- a. To hold Confidential Information in strict confidence; and
 - b. Not to disclose such Confidential Information to any third party without the specific written authorization of the disclosing party;
 - c. To use all reasonable precautions, commensurate with those used by the disclosing party in the protection of its Confidential Information, to protect Confidential Information from unauthorized disclosure.

Playtesting with your Target Audience

DON'T BE PARANOID

The fact is that 99.9% of people have **no intention** of stealing your ideas and even if they did they wouldn't know what to do with your game once they had stolen it.

The **benefits** of using playtesters far outweigh the perils.

The risk of using testers is **negligible** when compared to what else can go wrong during a production!

Playtesting with your Target Audience

You may want to provide **snacks and drinks** while your testers are playing.

Not only is this common courtesy, but it makes your testers feel like they **owe you something** which means that they are more likely to provide you with detailed **feedback**.

It also makes it more likely that your recruits will return at a later date to **test again**.

Playtesting with your Target Audience

You'll want to use the **same testers** periodically throughout the production to gauge how they feel the game is progressing.

However, **don't become too dependent** on a handful of testers – keep fresh recruits streaming in throughout the process.



Playtesting with your Target Audience

Prototyping Stage	Playtest on Your Own	Playtest with Confidants	Playtest with Target Audience
1) Foundations	●		
2) Structure	●	●	
3) Formal Details			●
4) Refinement			●

Prototyping Stages and Types of Playtesters
(Fullerton, Swain, Hoffman 2004)

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*
Conducting a Playtesting Session

Conducting a Playtesting Session

Your job is no longer that of the game designer and auteur, but that of an **investigator and guide** who must lead the game testers through the game and uncover what they **truly** think.

The most **common mistake** is for the game designer to sit down and begin reading off the rules and describing their vision for the game.

REMEMBER: People learn by PLAYING, not LISTENING.

Conducting a Playtesting Session

- Let your playtesters start **playing**.
- Allow them to make **mistakes**.
- See how **each person** approaches the game.
- Maybe your rules are confusing to some players – provide **answers** if they get stuck but for the most part let them figure it out.

You will tend to learn more the **less you speak**.

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Create a script to follow

A good way to control your impulses is to create a **script** for yourself to follow.

Your script should include at least the following sections – and perhaps **several others** – depending on the **type** of test you are conducting:

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Create a script to follow

- WELCOME THE PLAYTESTERS and THANK THEM for participating.
- Remind the playtesters that you are testing the GAME, not their SKILLS. Difficulties in playing the game will help you to improve your design.
- Give the playtesters the RULES (in a physical prototype) or let them START the application (in a software prototype).

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Create a script to follow

- Ask the playtesters to BEGIN PLAYING as soon as they are ready.
- Ask them to TALK OUT LOUD throughout the game about what they are thinking and questions they may have. You WON'T be able to answer the questions but you need to know what they are. you CAN NOT step in to help them because you need to see where the problems exist in game and how they solve those problems.

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Create a script to follow

- - When they have finished playing, INTERVIEW the playtesters or use other methods to obtain any additional FEEDBACK.
 - THANK THE PLAYTESTERS for their assistance and feedback. Provide a token gift of thanks if you can afford it.
-

Conducting a Playtesting Session

The most difficult part of this process will be learning to **listen without responding** to every point.

Most designers have the overpowering urge to become **defensive**.

If you're going to gain anything from a playtesting session, imagine that you are someone else. You are **no longer the designer** of the game but an analyst hired to uncover the truth.

Conducting a Playtesting Session

Your job is **not** to have these people love the game – it is to discover what they **don't want** to tell you or **how** to tell you.

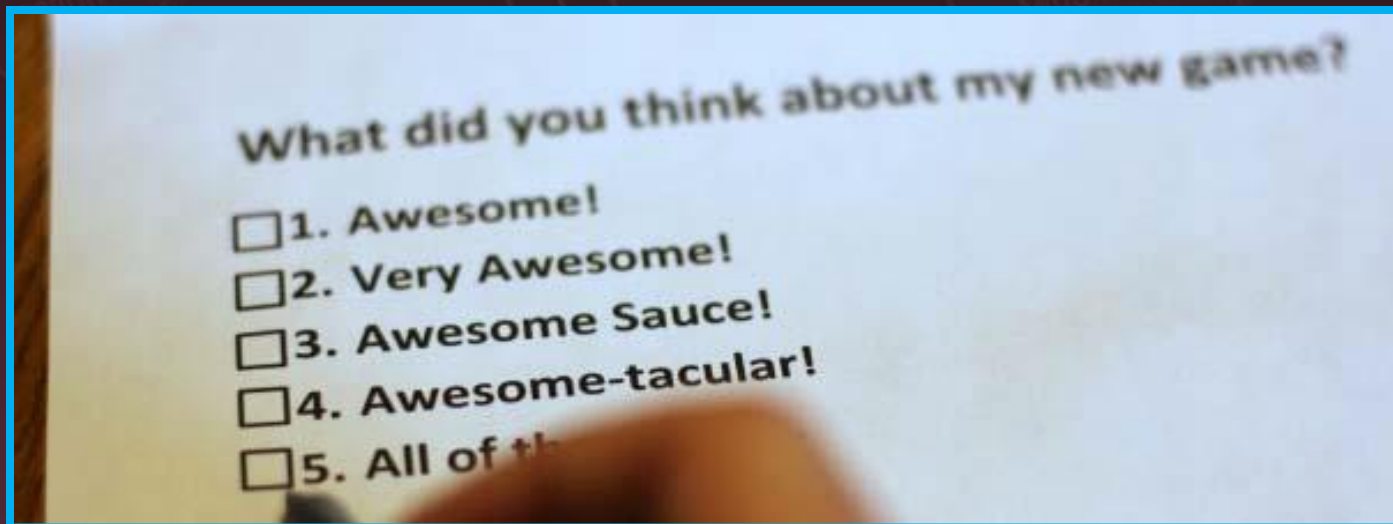
Far too many game designers fail in this regard!

Either they **refuse** to allow in any negative comments or they stop testing altogether, because it is too painful.

Conducting a Playtesting Session

If you pressure your testers or try to control them, you'll find that they gladly fall in line and tell you **whatever it is you want to hear**.

If you are determined to only hear good news, that is what you will get.



Conducting a Playtesting Session

Embrace the criticism you receive from your playtesters.

You need to **hear** the problems because you **cannot fix the problems** if you don't know what they are.

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Etiquette

It helps to make it clear at the beginning of the session that you are **open to feedback** and want everyone to be **honest** but at the same time there is a certain **etiquette** you'd like the testers to follow.

For example:

- Everyone should respect each other's opinions
- There is no right or wrong answer
- No tester should criticize another tester's ideas.

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Etiquette

If you lay down some **good rules** for feedback and discussion at the outset you should avoid any problems but **be careful not to abuse your authority**. Most people want to be **helpful**.

Your ultimate goal is to take what you are given and **learn from it**, not silence anyone who says something you don't like.

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Transferrable Skills

Becoming a **good session leader** is something that can help you throughout your **career**.

In addition to playtesters, you need **your team's input** and constructive criticism and the best way to do this is to make your entire production a **safe environment** where everyone is encouraged to **speak their mind** while being careful **not to personally criticize** one another.

You will end up with a far more **productive** and **motivated** team that feels **invested** in the product you are creating together.

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*

Methods of Playtesting

Methods of Playtesting

Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman outline a number of different ways a designer can structure game testing.

- One-on-One testing
- Group Testing
- Feedback Forms
- Interview
- Open Discussion

Methods of Playtesting: One-on-One testing

You sit down with **individuals** and watch over their shoulders as they play the game.

You **take notes** and ask them **questions** along the way.



Methods of Playtesting: Group Testing

You get a **group of people** and allow them to play your game together.

You **observe the group** and **ask questions** as they play.

Methods of Playtesting: Feedback Forms

You give each person who tests your game a **standard list of questions** to answer **after playing**.

Afterward you can **compare the results** each playtester has given you.

Methods of Playtesting: Interview

You sit down face-to-face with the playtesters and give them an **in-depth oral interview** after the playtesting session.

This is not a discussion – it is more of a **verbal quiz**.



Methods of Playtesting: Open Discussion

You conduct either a **one-on-one discussion** or a **group discussion** after a round of playtesting and **take notes**.

You can either promote a **freeform discussion** or have a more structured approach where you **guide the conversation** and introduce **specific questions**.

Methods of Playtesting

You can **combine** the previous approaches to fit your **game** and your **testing space**.

You may have players play a game together and have a **group discussion** afterwards but then ask each to fill out a **feedback form individually**.

You will be surprised how **differently** people respond when there is **no group dynamic**.

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*
Taking Notes

Taking Notes

It is important to **keep notes** of your playtests.

You think you will remember all of the comments later on but what you will really remember is those comments you **expected** to hear or **wanted** to hear.

If you do not keep notes you will **lose all the really important details** of the playtesters' reactions.

These notes should be filed chronologically in a notebook, folder, or database.

Taking Notes

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*

Playtester Comments Example Form

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Designer's Workshop*
(2004) CMP Books

8.7 Observations and Playtester Comments

IN-GAME OBSERVATIONS

[Your thoughts as you watch the testers play.]

IN-GAME QUESTIONS

[Questions you ask the testers as they play.]

1. What did you feel as your turned ended?
2. Does the navigation seem confusing?
3. Why did you move to that location?
4. Why are you pausing there?

POST-GAME QUESTIONS

[Questions you ask the testers after they've played.]

General questions

1. What was your first impression?
2. How did that impression change as you played?
3. Was there anything you found frustrating?
4. Did the game drag at any point?
5. Were there particular aspects that you found satisfying?
6. What was the most exciting thing about the game?
7. Did the game feel too long, too short or just about right?

Formal elements

1. Describe the objective of the game.
2. Was the objective clear at all times?
3. What types of choices did you make during the game?
4. What was the most important decision you made?
5. What was your strategy for winning?
6. Did you find any loopholes in the system?
7. How would you describe the conflict?
8. In what way did you interact with other players?
9. Do you prefer to play alone or with human opponents?
10. What elements do you think could be improved?

Dramatic elements

1. Was the game's premise exciting?
2. Did the story enhance or detract from the game?
3. As you played, did the story evolve with the game?
4. Is this game appropriate for the target audience?
5. On a piece of paper, graph your emotional involvement over the course of the game.
6. Did you feel a sense of dramatic climax as the game progressed?
7. How would you make the story and game work better as a whole?

Procedures, rules, interface, and controls

1. Were the procedures and rules easy to understand?
2. How did the controls feel? Did they make sense?
3. Could you find the information you needed on the interface?
4. Was there anything about the interface you'd change?
5. Did anything feel clunky or awkward?
6. Are there any controls or interface features you'd like to see added?

End of session

1. Overall, how would you describe this game's appeal?
2. Would you purchase this game?
3. What elements of the game attracted you?
4. What was missing from the game?
5. If you could change just one thing, what would it be?
6. Who do you think is the target audience for this game?
7. If you were to give this game as a gift, who would you give it to?

REVISION IDEAS

[Ideas you have for improving the game.]

Taking Notes

Sometimes it's more effective to **interview people** and write down their comments than have them fill out forms because form-filling is seen by many people as a **chore**.

Interviewing playtesters **one-on-one** is a good method but if you cannot do that then **group interviews** are also fine.

Make sure to encourage your playtesters to **speak their mind** and try to keep the more aggressive or assertive members from **dominating** the discussion.

Taking Notes

Many of the questions will be unique to a game so it is important for you not to rely on example or generic questions but to create your own.

- Identify key areas of your game you need input on and create questions geared to get feedback on those areas.
- Write down more questions than you plan to use and then rank them in order of importance. Then group the questions by type.

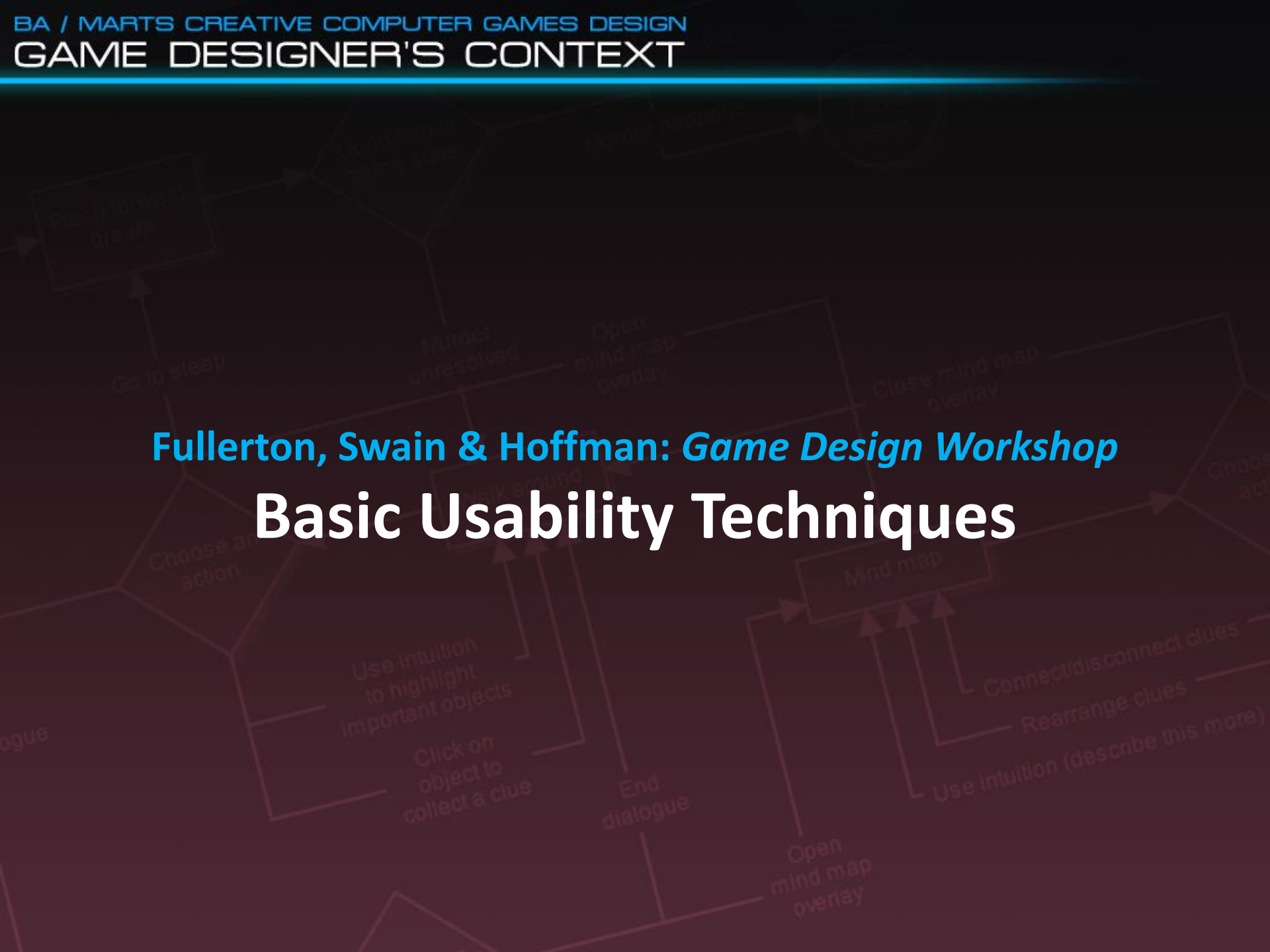
Taking Notes

The questions you create are influenced by the type of **information you wish to obtain** and how your playtesting sessions are **structured**.

AVOID GETTING CARRIED AWAY WITH QUESTIONS!

Too many questions will **overwhelm** your playtesters. Asking twenty questions in a row will result in them becoming **exhausted** and they may **stop answering accurately**.

It is not the **number** of questions you ask – what is important is the **quality** of the response.



Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*

Basic Usability Techniques

Basic Usability Techniques

Asking questions is a vital part of conducting a playtesting session but there are **other methods** for eliciting good responses.

Usability research involves real people using products and giving their feedback before those products are marketed to the public.

Basic Usability Techniques

Fullerton, Swain and Hoffman suggest three **usability techniques** that you can apply to game testing.

1

Don't Lead

2

Ask Testers to Think Out Loud

3

Quantitative Data

Basic Usability Techniques

1 Don't Lead

You'll learn the most from your testers by **quietly observing** them play.

If a playtester asks a question, respond by asking them to describe what **they** think they should do.

If they reach an impasse while playing then **you've identified something important** that needs to be **fixed**.

Basic Usability Techniques

2 Ask Testers to Think Out Loud

It is easy to see where testers have problems by **observing** them.

However, it's hard to understand why. Ask your testers to **explain to you** what's going on inside their heads as they play.

Their comments will help you figure out solutions to problems you might not even know existed. Most people are **not used** to thinking out loud, so you may have to help them get started.

Basic Usability Techniques

3 Quantitative Data

In addition to taking notes, use **feedback forms** to generate data that shows **trends**.

After a playtest session you can use this quantitative data to **prioritize the severity of issues**.

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*
Data Gathering

Data Gathering

The type of data you gather depends upon the **problems** you wish to solve. You may want to collect **quantitative data** such as:

- Recording the time it takes someone to read the game rules
- Counting the number of clicks it takes to perform a function
- Tracking the speed at which a player advances in a level

Data Gathering

You may also ask testers to rank **ease of use** of certain features on a scale of one to ten or to choose between several options to see what features are most important to them.

Data Gathering

If you are successful at gathering quantitative data you may suddenly find yourself buried in **statistics**.

Conduct your data with **clearly defined objectives** in mind – before you set out to measure something, write down your assumptions and purpose.

What is it that you want to prove or disprove? **Structure your test** to either affirm or deny this hypothesis.

Data Gathering

Although statistical analysis techniques are powerful tools, they are **not a replacement** for the designer's **creative judgement** on how to tweak game variables.

STATISTICS CAN BE MISLEADING

Data analysis is a good tool that should be **used in combination** with **other playtesting methods** in order to have the **best** overall results.

Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop*

Test Control Situations

Test Control Situations

A tool for improving the efficiency of your playtesting sessions is to utilize **controlled game situations**. This is when players are directed to test specific portions of the game mechanics such as:

- The **end** of the game
- A **random event** that **rarely** takes place
- A **special situation** within a game
- A particular **level** of a game
- New **Features**

Test Control Situations

In the foundation stage you may test **basic functionality** without worrying about **balancing** or **fairness**.

In later stages, you may also want to test for **loopholes** and **dead-ends**.

You may also focus sessions on the **accessibility** of the interface or **navigation system**.

This focus allows your testers to **repeatedly experience** an event under a **variety of conditions**.

Test Control Situations

You do **not** have to have your testers start from the **beginning** and play the game **all the way through**.

You can make one of your players far more **powerful** than the others and see what happens.

Testing is **not about being fair** to your testers or making sure that they **enjoy** the game – it is about seeing what happens under **every possible condition**.

Test Control Situations

This way you can see **how it affects the gameplay**. Does it **ruin** the experience or is it a nice **surprise**?

If you do not have much time to test, you will find yourself **relying on test control situations** in almost every session.



Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: *Game Design Workshop* Summary

Summary

Playtesting is an involved task but it is a critical part of game design that **cannot be rushed through or sidelined**.

As soon as you let it slip into the background you **give up on your chance** to see your game as the players will see it when they run it for the first time.

Summary

Playtesters are your **eyes** and **ears**.

If you **listen** to them and **analyze what they are saying** you will be able to see the game mechanics for what they are, not what you want them to be, or imagine they should be.

If you can master this process, you have mastered one of the key skills to being a **good game designer**.

Playtesting / Game Analysis Exercise: Using Existing games

- Play a game and observe how you play.
- Write down what you are doing and feeling – create one page of detailed notes on your behaviours and actions.
- Repeat this experience while watching a friend play the same game.
- Compare the two sets of notes and analyze what you have learned from the process.

Bibliography

Fullerton, T. Swain, C. & Hoffman, S. (2004) *Game Design Workshop*. CMP Books, USA.



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