Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

BA COMPUTER GAMES DESIGN

GAME THEORY & DESIGN

Conducting A Playtesting Session

Conducting A Playtesting Session

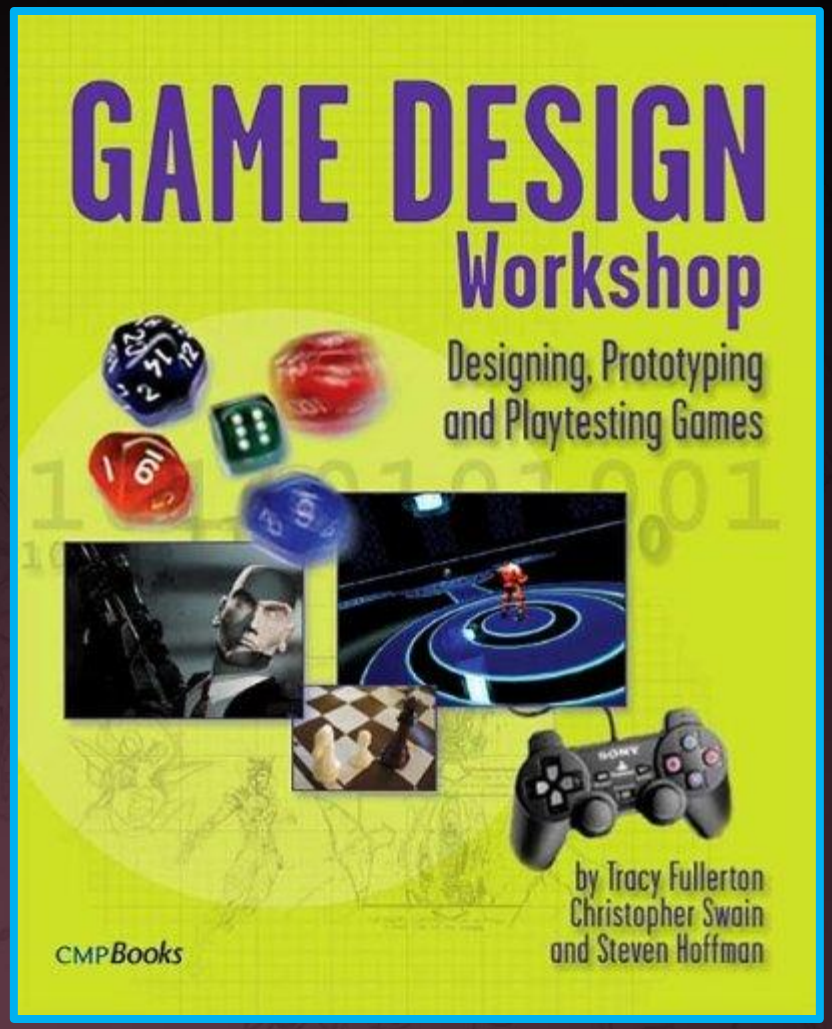
- Conducting a Playtesting Session
- Methods of Playtesting
- Taking Notes
- Basic Usability Techniques
- Data Gathering
- Test Control Situations

Further reading:

Playtesting

Tracy Fullerton, Christopher Swain & Steven Hoffman
Game Design Workshop

(Available in Y Fforwm Library, SA1)



Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman: Game Design Workshop

Conducting a Playtesting Session

Conducting a Playtesting Session

Your job is no longer that of the game designer, 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.

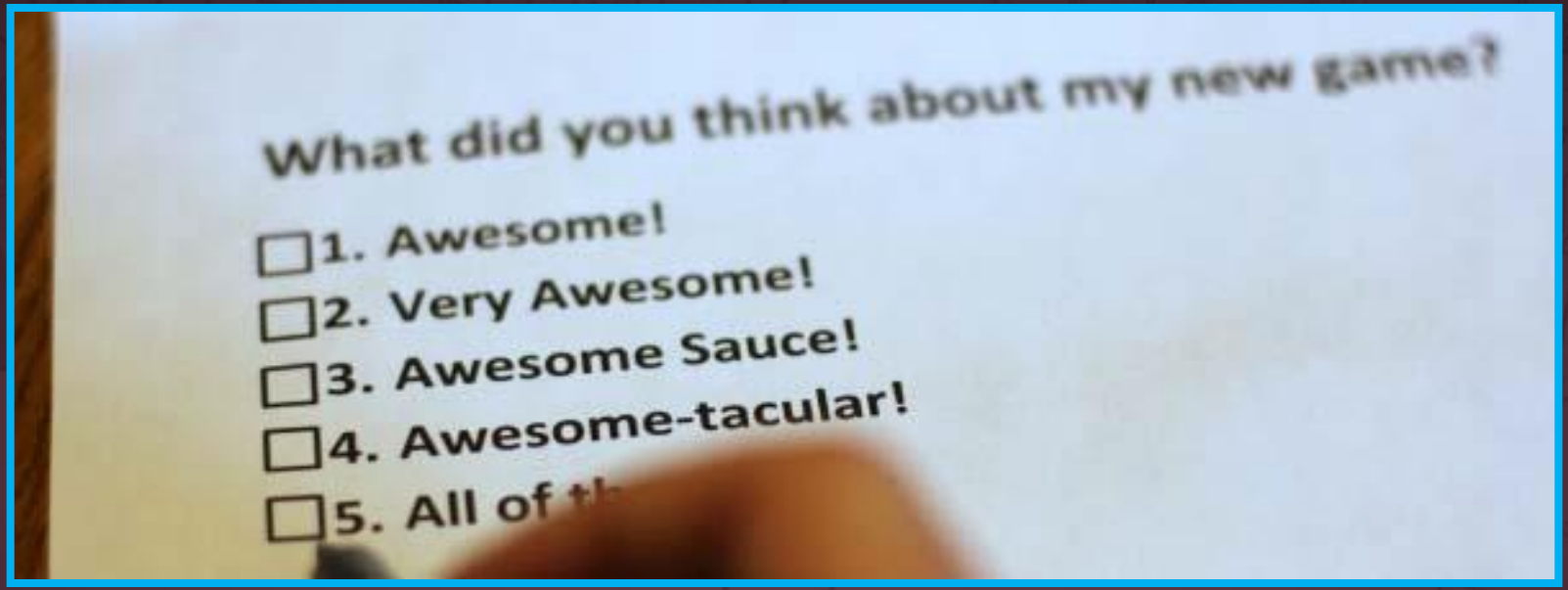
Far too many game designers fail in this regard!

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.

Conducting a Playtesting Session: Transferrable Skills

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.

Taking Notes

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 my 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!

Taking Notes

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.

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Basic Useability 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

Any questions?

Bibliography

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

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