Intro to Game Design

Playtesting

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Mondays & Wednesdays 9:30 AM-12:15 PM

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Today’s Class

• Iteration, Playtesting, and Creativity
• Guidelines for playtesting
• The nitty-gritty: playtesting your game mods
• Feedback and discussion
• Kinds of playtesting
• When to playtest
• Next assignment: Abstract Game
Daredevil  
by Sherman Alexie

On her birthday, in 1963,
My aunt and her friends drank antifreeze.

Fourteen teenage Indians died that night.
My aunt survived but she soon went blind.

And though she's no masked superhero,
Stages of Creativity (Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi)

**Preparation**
Immerse yourself in, research and study a topic

**Incubation**
Time to think about the topic at a semi-conscious level

**Insight**
Seeing how it comes together

**Evaluation**
Will it work? (Outside input often helpful to avoid distorted reflections.)

**Elaboration**
Actual work of making things. (The “99% perspiration.”)

Not necessarily in this order!
Playtesting

Me 24f with my bf 26m 3 years, he's really upset that my Mario Maker levels do better than his and doesn't want me to play anymore.  
(sself.relationships)
submitted 19 hours ago by imadeamario
“Playtesting is for MASOCHISTS. It is SO PAINFUL but SO REWARDING... the hell of people HATING your game NOT GETTING IT or the WORST: JUST NOT CARING AT ALL.

But one day the tiniest change you made will make all the difference and players will just GET IT and you'll want to cry tears of joy.

Don't do too much playtesting at once. IT will kill you.”

Chelsea Howe -- Creative Director, EA Mobile + Independent Developer
(FarmVille, Alone in the Light, Tiny Castle, The End of Us)
Over and over and over. Yes: over and over and over and over!

Iterative Process:
This is how a game evolves (assuming you want it to)
Time for Playtesting: but first, guidelines

Designers:
• Introduce your game: title and elevator pitch (~10 seconds)
• Hand over the rules. **Do not** speak after this! **Only** observe, listen, watch, take notes.
• …unless a situation are **“OFF THE RAILS.”** Play can’t proceed, or the game they’re playing bears little to no resemblance to yours. **One misinterpretation of the rules is not “OFF THE RAILS”** – see how it plays out. Don’t interrupt to “correct” at all, unless it’s totally dire.
• **Do not wince, gasp, make faces.** You don’t have to be robots, but don’t be conspicuous.
• Watch players’ faces and reactions and listen to what they’re saying, watch their plays.
• While taking notes, **write up questions** you want to ask afterwards to help understand players’ thoughts, reactions, their impressions and feelings about the game.

Players:
• **Talk** while you’re playing and figuring out how to play. Pretend you’re not being observed.
• You don’t have to give away your moves, but otherwise: **stream of consciousness**
• Be unflinchingly honest! **Honest critique is a sign of respect. Just being nice isn’t as valuable.**
Reasons for the “one-way mirror”

The Observer Effect

The Freaking Out, Swearing and Screaming Effect
What playtesting is not...

• **It’s not focus testing.** Although some professional companies do both. Playtesting is about watching and listening to someone’s experience, not just their opinion and likes/dislikes.

• **It’s not QA testing.** Common point of confusion: playtesting isn’t done primarily to find bugs, although sometimes you do spot them in the process. QA Testers are professionals doing a boring job. Playtesters are there—hopefully—to have fun or have an audience experience.

• **It’s not a presentation.** Although getting to a moment where a game is playtested is often an important milestone, it shouldn’t *really* be a show-off moment to impress others, or even primarily to entertain playtesters. If they’re not having a good time, you want to find that out.

• **It’s not only “usability testing.”** Although finding out what aspects of a game are confusing or that players can’t figure out “how to work” is important, usability testing is focused on functional software—not on experiences that we might want to be frustrating or perplexing.
A game doesn’t have to be anywhere close to “done” to playtest. It can be raw, broken, a first draft, a rough idea—as long as it can be played.

To start playtesting, you only need to have questions about the playtest build of your game that can be answered (at least partly) by playtesting.

This can even be the basic question: “is this game fun?” But there are other less generic / vague / subjective questions too.
Kinds of questions

To start playtesting, you just have to be able to ask questions about the playtest build of your game.

“Is this a good/fun game?” (can only really be asked at the end?)

“Do players have an idea of what they need to do to win?”

“Is this section too hard? Too easy? Did they get confused?”

“Was it funny when an opponent got crushed? Did they laugh?”

“Does the last phase of the game take too long to wrap up?”

“Did the 2nd level teach the player how to deal with flying enemies?”

“Who do players think the main character is supposed to be?”
Categories of Playtester

- **Yourself and Your Team:** yeah, you should probably kick the tires first. If you can answer questions yourself, you can move on to harder Q’s!
- **Other Game Developers:** can be useful early on, but often give you “well I would do it this way” suggestions
- **Friends and Family:** often available, easy to ask, not scary, but too nice
- **Intended Audience Tester:** Finding people who like this kind of game, or are part of the “target audience.” Extremely valuable.
- **Kleenex Tester:** one-time testers useful for getting enough “does this make sense” and “is the beginning the right difficult” results—the things you can’t “unsee” once seen; use many and don’t reuse.
- **Benchmark, Living, or Longitudinal Tester:** a tester you come back to over and over again to evaluate how your changes are affecting the game
- **Uber or Style Tester:** a benchmark tester who’s gotten very good, useful for understanding the upper limits, or how certain playstyles are affected

Always thank playtesters for their time!
# Categories of Playtester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prototyping Stage</th>
<th>Playtest on Your Own</th>
<th>Playtest with Confidants</th>
<th>Playtest with Target Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Foundations</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Structure</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>3) Formal Details</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Refinement</td>
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Thinking Aloud: Getting the Thought Bubble into the Speech Bubble

**MOST USEFUL**

- What they’re looking at / paying attention to / concerned with at the moment
- The occurrence a feeling or reaction (“I’m bored right now.”)
- General stream of consciousness (“Huh, I wonder if... no, maybe over here...”)
- Explaining the root cause of a feeling or reaction (“I’m bored because X, Y, Z...”)
- Opinions about how to address problems

**LEAST USEFUL**

- Explaining the root cause of a feeling or reaction
- The occurrence a feeling or reaction
- General stream of consciousness
- Opinions about how to address problems

**Concurrent Think-Aloud**

- Helps spot & underline problems
- Multitasking, self-censorship & slow-down

**Retrospective Think-Aloud**

- Goes deeper, helps clarify & elucidate
- Takes more time, relies on memory of “not knowing”
Constructing a Playtest

1. **Introductions:** especially “any problems are not your fault, we want to know!”

2. **Pre-Interview:** getting information that will help you understand observations—and the differences between multiple playtesters.

3. **Play and Observe:** think-aloud, don’t talk, record observations

4. **Post-Interview:**
   - getting additional verbal feedback about your questions (can pre-prepare)
   - understanding what you observed better (can’t pre-prepare)
   - answer questions with questions, even here
   - avoid leading questions or biasing playtesters towards pleasing you