Playtesting Games 2: The Sequeling

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Abstract: Playtesting should be a part of any game design cycle, since most games aren't *good* games until they've been through multiple iterations of refinement based on player feedback. This workshop allowed conference participants to test out in-development games from other participants, including many student teams from Clark Street Community School, providing that valuable feedback and bringing the featured games closer to being good.

Iterations Are King

Last year's playtesting session was a huge success (Chen et al. 2014)! We'd like to make it a tradition at GLS, and that started with a sequel. We know that our work improves as we iterate incremental changes for a final product. This is true of academic work such as writing papers (and running workshops) and of game design. Indeed, usually the first prototypes, alpha builds, and drafts of our work start off so broken that it's often intimidating to share these early versions. Yet it's only through collecting, synthesizing, reflecting, and acting on feedback from reviewers and playtesters that our work improves. This session provides GLS attendees a space to share in-progress work with other attendees to gain that invaluable feedback.

Workshop Logistics

This workshop provided hands-on experience with game design's playtesting cycle. Participant-players playtested tabletop and digital games in progress, providing feedback to participant-designers while also learning and reflecting on the playtesting process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Playtesting in full swing.

To fit in the one-hour format, the workshop consisted of two 30-minute playtesting cycles, each including time for playing (20-25 min) and time for feedback (5-10 min). Thirty minutes was a rough estimate, however. Some games were much shorter than 20 minutes, allowing for more players to rotate through their playtests. Likewise, some games took longer, and we accommodated designers who wished to hold one long playtest.

The workshop organizers prepared a 2-page handout for design teams to use as their games were played. This included space for notes from in-game observation and then sets of in-game and post-game questions, culled from Fullerton (2014, pp. 295).

The games that were tested came from multiple sources (see Table 1). Two digital games were tested by high school students at Clark Street Community School in Middleton, WI, with whom Filament Games has partnered to teach a game design seminar. Many of the high schoolers are interested in getting into game design & development, and this represented a chance for them to interact with and get feedback from scholars and practitioners in the field. Other games included those featured in the Educational Game Arcade and/or other in-development games by the same designers. We also sent out a general call on the GLS and GamesNetwork listservs, inviting other conference attendees to submit games for the workshop.

Game name	Author	Affiliation	Genre	Digital?
Snow Mercy!	Doug Maynard	State University of New York at New Patlz	tabletop dice/card	no
Flora: A Game That Takes Guts	Barry Joseph and Hannah Jaris	American Museum of Natural History	card game	no
MicroRangers	Barry Joseph and Hannah Jaris	American Museum of Natural History	mobile augmented game	GPS
Codename: Purple	Owen Gottlieb	RIT	strategy card game	not yet
Translator's Pickle	Joel Langston	Indiana University South Bend	card game aobut literary translation	no
Wastelander	Julian	Clark Street	apocalyptic shooter	yes
Germ Tower	Tyler and Corey	Clark Street	nasty dungeon crawler shooter	yes
Codename: WISE beta game	David Ng	University of British Columbia	card game	no
+PlusOut!!	Brandon Bell	Independent Game Designer	card game with points/ numbers	no

Table 1: The final list of games that were tested.

The workshop organizers invited teams that were working on issues with learning goals (rather than basic user interface issues) and that could be explored in just a short amount of time. Designers were also encouraged to welcome moments of frustration and failure with their games. Some groups may have been apprehensive of this if this was the first time their games were shared with the public, but this feeling quickly dissipated in the fast-paced, supportive, chaotic environment.

By the end of the workshop, both participant-players and participant-designers gained experience with the process of rapid playtesting iterations. Other, slower forms of playtesting afford other kinds of feedback, but this rapid format gives us a more manageable chunk / concept / process that we can think about incorporating into our other learning experiences. It also gave invaluable insight for our participant-designers as they seek to improve their games, *and* it was a lot of (crazy hectic) fun!

References

Chen, M., Jameson, E., Behringer, M., Numerous designers of games in progress... (2014). Playtesting games: Iterating failures to success. *Proceedings of the GLS 10 Games + Learning + Society Conference* (pp. 376-378). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press. http://press.etc.cmu.edu/content/gls-10-conference-proceedings

Fullerton, T. (2014). Chapter 9: Playtesting. In *Game design workshop, 3rd edition.* Natick, MA/Boca Raton, FL: A K Peters/CRC Press.