Playtesting Games 101

Do game companies really do this?

- They have to.
  - Typical game can cost $1 – 20 million to develop
  - Playtesting is the best defense against producing a commercial flop.

Half Life

- People near Valve's offices who sent in registration cards

- 400 hours of playtesting (200 sessions, 2 hrs each)

- Plus at least that much additional time analyzing what happened and determining how to change the game.

Spore

- 59 games

- 1 year

- 393 hours of gameplay

- Videos:
  http://humanfactorsblog.org/2008/09/12/science-of-fun-user-testing-the-game-spore/

Studying the game experience

- Focus groups
  - Group discussion at any point in development
    - Game pitch
    - Play a running prototype
    - Shortcomings?
- Usability
  - Focus on making game interface intuitive
    - Expert analysis
    - User testing
    - Shortcomings?
    - http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20050623/laitinen_01.shtml

Studying the game experience (2)

- Playtesting
  - Bring people in watch them play the game
    - Focus on the game experience.

- All of these have their place, but we'll focus on playtesting.

Playtesting is tough.

You are cordially invited

to tell me why I suck

Bring a friend— Refreshments served

From The Art of Game Design, Jesse Schell

Playtesting – why?

- You need to go into each and every playtesting session with a set of questions that you are trying to answer.

Playtesting – why?

- Examples
  - Do players understand how to play?
  - Do men and women play my game differently?
  - Are there any dominant strategies or loopholes?
  - Are players ever bored?
  - Are players ever confused?
  - Is level 3 too long?
  - Is the asparagus puzzle too hard?

Playtesting – who?

- Developers
  - Pros: convenient, can provide lots of feedback
  - Cons: they are too close to the game. Take what they say with a grain of salt
- Friends/Family
  - Pros: available and comfortable with you. They'll probably tell you if they have an idea later.
  - Cons: They don't want to hurt your feelings. And, they'll be trying to like it (won't happen in the real world)

Playtesting – who?

- Expert gamers
  - Pros: can provide detailed comparisons with similar games.
  - Cons: They don't represent the general public. If you focus too much on expert gamers, you may limit the potential audience for your game.
- Tissue (one-time, non-friend) Testers
  - Pros: Fresh eyes. Lots of insight into initial appeal.
  - Cons: Too much focus on one-time testers may make for a game with a good beginning that gets boring fast.

Playtesting – where?

- In your studio
  - Pros: convenient, developers are all there.
  - Cons: Players may not be completely comfortable. Social stigma to not cause a distraction.
- Playtesting lab:
  - Pros: designed for playtesting – comfortable but instrumented with all the right stuff.
  - Cons: typically expensive.

Playtesting – where?

- Some public venue
  - Pros: Cheap. Lots of potential users.
  - Cons: It may be difficult to find the "right" users. Lots of potential distractions.
- At the playtester's home
  - Pros: Comfortable, real conditions (friends, kids, etc).
  - Cons: You probably can't bring the whole development team. Limited number of users.

Playtesting – where?

- On the internet
  - Pros: Lots of people.
  - Cons: Low quality data. Possibly, also security issues.

Playtesting – what?

- Should you be there?
  - You have a potential to seriously bias your playtesters. Be very careful to remain objective.
- What do you tell users at the beginning?
  - I'm testing the game, not you. If you have problems, don't feel bad. That's what I'm looking for. (see Gomoll article for a semi-standard blurb)
  - You can quit any time.

Playtesting – what?

- What do you tell users at the beginning?
  - Explain how to "think aloud" and demonstrate. (Gomoll has suggested language for this, too)
    - Some players will do this naturally, but if it's really unnatural and impacting the game play it's ok to let some players lapse.
  - I won't provide help.
  - Introduce the game
    - Think hard about what a player *needs* to know to get started. Write it down.

Playtesting – what?

- What do you tell users at the beginning?
  - Introduce the game
    - Read your description so that all users get the same info.
    - You may find yourself massaging it a little over time. Make a note of this. Eventually you'll zero in on the right set of info, and the right language. Make sure you save it, it's a great tutorial beginning.

Playtesting – what?

- Take copious notes.
  - Playtesting is expensive, human memory fallible. Detailed notes helps you get the most benefit.
  - In Half Life user testing, 2 hrs, 1 user produces about 100 problems. You should be writing down about one new problem per minute.
- Watch the user's face (and occasionally the screen for context)
  - Look for things like boredom, confusion, sense of accomplishment, concentration, etc.

Playtesting – what?

- Interruptions?
  - You may interfere with normal play patterns
  - But it can also be a source of critical insight into what's going on
  - Questions to consider when contemplating interruption
    - Is this something the user is going to remember later? (if there's a lot of state – why did you turn left there – then now is the time)
    - How important is it to the overall game?

Playtesting – what?

- Afterwards?
  - Surveys
    - Use pictures
    - 1 to 5 scale with descriptive labels (terrible, pretty bad, so so, good, excellent)
    - Not too many questions
    - Take with several grains of salt
    - (see list of potential questions)

Playtesting – what?

- Interviews
  - Script of questions (related to your goals for the session)
  - Let interviews take unexpected turns – feel free to add in questions you didn't plan if someone says something surprising.
  - Do interviews privately – people will be more honest one on one.
  - Don't ask your playtesters to be game designers – ask about their experience not about the game.
  - Don't defend your game. Right now, it's about their experience, not your grand plans.