

Level 13:

Playing with Designers

Originally posted August 10, 2009

As the designer, it is an important skill to be able to playtest your own creations (which you've already done at least once). It is also important to be able to set up conditions for *other people* to playtest your games, so that you can get useful information from the precious time you have (which we will cover over the next few levels).

There is another side to playtesting: the ability to playtest *other* people's games and provide quality feedback. This is a skill in and of itself, and a surprisingly rare one to find. This scarcity makes it a valuable skill. Personally, I have received many freelance opportunities through colleagues, simply because they know that I am good at finding the flaws in their designs. This is what we cover today: the ability to critically analyze a fellow designer's work-in-progress.

Readings

Read the following:

- » *Giving Criticism - the good, the bad, and the ugly!*
(Available at <http://theclosetentrepreneur.com/giving-criticism-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly>)

This may not be a class on giving constructive criticism, but it is something I'm going to ask everyone to be doing. Far too often in classes, students are asked to give peer feedback and review, and yet not given the tools to do so in a useful way. I think many teachers either take the stance that simply giving feedback enough times will make people better at it ("practice makes perfect") or else that feedback techniques should be taught in some other class ("I can't waste precious class time on that").

This article may not be particularly comprehensive, but it is short, and after doing a Google search for "constructive criticism" it is the one that I found that fits best with the advice I give in my classes.

The Time Barter System

At Protospiel, an annual gathering of non-digital game designers, participants are encouraged to give as much playtesting time as they take. For example, if your prototype takes two hours of play and discussion and it requires four players (other

than yourself), a single playtest consumes eight person-hours of time; in exchange for that playtest, you are then expected to playtest other people's prototypes for eight hours of your own time. This system prevents there from being an extreme shortage (or surplus) of testers relative to games, and it gives people incentive to respect each other's time.

Notice that this means you tend to spend far more time playing other people's games than you do playing your own. You could even say that, given the time difference, the ability to be a good playtester is *more* important than being able to design your own games.

Keep this in mind as you proceed through the rest of this course. You will be consuming large amounts of other people's time as you iterate through your own designs. Accordingly, treat your testers with respect. (It wouldn't be out of the question to give them food or some other compensation, as well, if it is in your means to provide.)

If you are in a group, playtesting with other designers should be relatively easy. Just meet up with your fellow designers. Keep in mind that you should be giving more of your time to other people's games than your own.

Next Steps After Solo Testing

At this point in the project, you should have a playable prototype of your game, and a set of rules. You should have playtested on your own at least once, identified any really obvious problems, and iterated on your design. You should continue to do this until your design is at a point where you are confident that you can play all the way through without having to make major changes.

Once you reach that point, your goal shifts from "make this game work" to "make sure the core mechanics are fun" (or whatever your design goal happens to be, if not "fun"). Who would make the best playtesters to help with this?

Normal players (such as friends and family, or even complete strangers) are marginally useful here. By watching them, you can determine if they are having a good time and if your game is meeting its design goals. However, if there is a problem,

a typical gamer will not be able to give you useful feedback other than "it's great" or "it sucks." It will be up to you as the designer to identify and fix the problems. Therefore, normal testers can be used if necessary, but their usefulness is limited.

Far better is to playtest with other game designers. Game designers can also let you know if the game is fun, *and* they can offer suggestions on where the problem points are and what can be changed to make your game better. You can often have wonderful discussion following the play of the game, on the design of your game and sometimes on game design in general. These kinds of discussions are important, and your game can get better much faster with them.

Finding Designer Playtesters

There are a few places to find other game designers.

If you are lucky enough to already work at a game company (or know someone who does), you probably already know some designers who you work with regularly. In this case, finding skilled testers is the easy part. The difficulty is that professional designers are often busy with work, and simply do not have the time to help you. You must work around their schedules. Also be prepared to offer something of value in exchange. You are essentially asking for a professional game design consult. Your colleague could spend the same amount of time freelancing and make anywhere from US\$40 to \$250 an hour, depending on their experience and the nature of the project. (I get those figures from personal experience and what I can piece together from what my colleagues say on the subject.) If you are asking for their time for free, be prepared to give a comparable amount of your own time to their projects in the future. At *least* be prepared to be extremely grateful.

What if you don't know any professional designers? Perhaps you signed up for this course in a group with your friends. This is where that group of yours will come in handy. Get in touch with your friends, and arrange a time to meet in the near future for a playtest session. Play through each of your games.

If you took this course alone and don't know anyone else, the next best thing is to check the forums at

medesignconcepts.aceboard.com/ The bottom section of forums, “Local Communities,” was set up specifically so that you could find other people in your local area. If you are not yet registered on the forums (but you did sign up for the course ahead of time), do that now – just be sure to sign up with the same email address that you registered with for the course (or at least drop enough clues in your forum account info to let me figure it out on my own). Arrange through the forums to meet at a neutral location. Who knows, this may be the start of a long-term professional relationship.

If you’re having trouble finding others in your area on the forums, as a last resort, post your work on the course wiki <http://gamedesignconcepts.pbworks.com/> at and beg on the forums for playtesters. There may be other people in similar situations. Again, if others are willing to take a look at your work and provide feedback, return the favor and playtest *their* work. When playtesting another’s work in this way, be sure to give them instructions for assembling a playable prototype. The easiest way to playtest in this way is to solo test each others’ games. Another option is to arrange a meeting over the internet (using a chat tool such as IRC or Skype) and attempt to play remotely in real time (some games are easier to do in this way than others).

Being a Great Designer

As other people playtest your game, keep in mind the following:

- » Your game is not perfect. If your game were perfect, you wouldn’t need to playtest.
- » There will be problems. The goal of playtesting is to find and eliminate those problems. If all your playtest did was confirm that your game is perfect, you have just wasted your own time and everyone else’s.
- » It is far better to identify problems in a small playtest, than for them to be found after the game is printed and ships to millions of players.

- » If one of your playtesters finds a major problem in your game, they have given you a great gift. Do not be hostile or defensive; be gracious.
- » When a problem is identified by a playtester, your goal is not to verbally defend your game or to explain why the playtester is wrong. First, even if your playtester *is* “wrong,” it probably means a lot of other players will also be “wrong” in the same way, and you can’t ship yourself in a game box in order to explain your Grand Vision to everyone. Second, the playtester is probably right – they are seeing your game through fresh eyes, and are more likely to have an unbiased view of the game.
- » If your playtesters do identify problems, the correct response is to write the issue down in your notebook... and then discuss your design goals with the playtesters so that you can get some ideas of how to preserve your goals while changing the game.
- » Not all people are tactful. Sometimes people will say things about your game (or even about you, personally) that are downright hateful. Sometimes people will make fun of your game, or will taunt or berate you for a problem with your design. Keep in mind that, no matter how it is delivered, this is still extremely useful content.
- » It takes a strong person to hear a statement like “your game sucks, it is the worst game I’ve ever played, and by extension *you* suck and you are nothing better than a waste of space” and to genuinely reply: “You have just helped me identify some major flaws in my game. **Thank you.**” Getting to the point in your life where you are emotionally strong enough to have an exchange like this should be one of your long-term goals as a game designer. You do not have to be like this right now. I’m not. But I have seen an exchange like this before from a great designer, and it made me realize how far I have to go.
- » If it sounds like I’m repeating myself here, it’s because I’ve seen this go horribly wrong so many times, that I

think it is worth repeating.

Running a Great Playtest Session

If you want your playtesters to keep coming back for your future designs, be as respectful of their time as possible. Here are some things to consider:

- » Before you show your game to other players, make sure the rules are fresh in your mind so that you do not need to look them up. Try explaining all of the rules to yourself in the mirror to make sure you can do it. This will save time, if it only takes you a couple minutes to explain rather than half an hour.
- » If you already know there are problems (and you just don't have the solutions) or if you have specific design goals other than “make a fun game,” let your playtesters know this up front. It will help them to be more aware of potential solutions.
- » End your playtest as soon as you can. If you have received as much useful information as you are likely to after a half hour of play, stop there (even if the full game would last three hours). Remember that the purpose of the playtest is to identify problems, not to “play games.” If you're not identifying problems, you are wasting everyone's time.
- » Bring your playtest notebook and take good notes. You *will* forget everything that takes place, no matter how obvious your playtest results seem at the time, so make sure you write down every piece of information that you don't want to lose.

Being a Great Playtester

Here are some of the things you should keep in mind when testing other people's games:

- » When testing, give the designer and the game your undivided attention. You would want others to extend the same courtesy to your game, after all.
- » Don't leave in the middle of a test. Aside from being rude, it can throw off the results (not all games can gracefully handle it when a player leaves). At minimum, if you know you have limited time or that you may get called away in mid-game, let others know this up front so they can handle it accordingly.
- » Be as detailed as possible. Don't just say that the game is “fun” or “boring,” try to analyze why. You should have enough of a background at this point to give meaningful feedback. Make use of your design skills!
- » Allow some time after the game for discussion with the other testers and the designer. Talk about your play experience, and how it was related to the mechanics. Remember that there are many possible playtest goals. Are you playing to see if the game is fun? Are you playing to win? Are you playing to find holes in the rules? Play accordingly. We are so used to playing games in our own personal style, that it can be difficult to remember that there are other ways to play. Keep the goals of the playtest in mind.
- » Be polite. Attack the game mercilessly, but do not attack the designer.

Homeplay

Continue working on your game from last time. If your game is not already at the point where it is ready for playtesting with other designers, continue testing on your own until you are at that point.

You have two additional tasks.

First, before you read Level 14, **arrange a playtest session with other designers**. The session itself should take place before you move on to Level 15.

Second, **playtest other people's games**. Keep track of the number of person-hours spent in the playtest of your own game (not including yourself), and give at least that many hours of your own time towards helping your fellow participants.

Feedback

Do you know of any great articles on giving constructive criticism, or playtesting games as a designer? Post them in the comments on the original blog at <http://gamedesign-concepts.wordpress.com/2009/08/10/level-13-playing-with-designers/#respond>, or on Twitter with the #GDCU tag.

