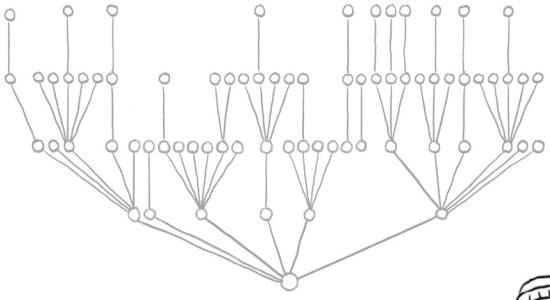

WILL WRIGHT | CHAPTER 13

Playtesting

TERMS

Kleenex test (v.) To playtest a game with a pair of players, without the intention of having them test the game again.

user interface (n.) The external graphical elements within a game through which the player interacts with and impacts the game world.

focus group testing (n.) An open discussion with a sampling of players in the demographic you are trying to reach about their experience with your game.

beta test (n.) The final test phase of your game before launch.

The playtest is your first chance to get inside the player's mind and gain a sense of how a general audience will experience your product. Focus on where your tester gets stuck, what they learn quickly, and where they choose to spend their time. Learn to cherish and appreciate the criticism you get from your playtesters. Player feedback is your most valuable resource as a designer. When approaching playtesting, keep in mind the following:

1. Playtesting should begin as early as possible in the design process. Build multiple prototypes and put them in front of users immediately. In these early playtests, you should be thinking about simple things, like whether or not a mechanic works. Once you have multiple parts in place, then you can start to playtest the game as an experience.

2. Try Kleenex testing. It has two advantages: Every pair of new users comes to your game without assumptions, and a pair will verbalize their thoughts about the game to one another.

3. As a designer, you should never intercede during a playtest. The point of testing is to make sure the game communicates concepts on its own. Observe quietly, take notes, and compare with your team afterwards. If you and your team notice similar things, those are the first to attack in the next iteration.

4. You won't always know who your audience is before playtesting. Start with a wide range of playtesters. If you notice a pattern in the kind of player who likes your game, design toward that demographic in future iterations.

5. Expect your playtesters to find problems in your game, not solutions. When playtesters offer suggestions about how to improve or change your game, focus on the difficulties they encountered to prompt those suggestions. Reverse-engineer their solution until you discover the problem, and design your own way to solve it.

6. Keep an eye out for emergent behavior when you playtest. If you've created a robust game environment, play patterns will emerge that you didn't intend to create as a designer. If you discover emergent behavior that fits your core game experience, encourage players to pursue it by designing rewards into that area of the game.

"...Your vision has to carry you through. Not just your vision, but your ability to communicate that vision to other stakeholders in the project."

LEARN MORE

Sometimes, very minor adjustments in your game have a huge impact in the way your game is received during testing. Watch Martin Jonasson and Petri Purho's famous talk on "Game Juice" to learn simple tricks that have huge upsides in your game's presentation. Before entering a public beta test, make sure you've made your game as "juicy" as possible, so it feels like a finished product.

ASSIGNMENTS

Try off-the-shelf prototyping with some of your favorite games. Take one of your prototypes from your library and consider if any of the mechanics there have been executed in another game. Develop a question about that mechanic, and then try to answer that question by playing the off-the-shelf game. Imagine how the executed mechanic could be repurposed or expanded to fit into the context of your prototype. Arrange a small blind playtest for a prototype you intend to use in your Capstone Game. Use the sheet on the following page as a guide.

BLIND PLAYTEST

STEP-BY-STEP

Arrange a small blind playtest for a prototype you intend to use in your Capstone Game, such as the one you developed in Chapter 9: Game Mechanics.

1. First, bring the prototype to a point where players can interact with it without explicit instructions from you. This might involve writing a small rulebook or tutorial.

2. Next, invite three groups of players to test. They can be friends or strangers, gamers or non-gamers. If you're having trouble finding playtesters, look for local independent developer groups through social media like Facebook and Meetup.com. Sometimes these groups will meet as part of a university program, so look there as well.

3. Group the players together by common demographics like age and experience.

4. Set up three copies of the game in the same room. Have beverages and snacks on hand.

5. Offer the briefest introduction you possibly can, then have the test groups sit down to play.

6. Rotate through the room with the other designers, taking notes. Only answer questions if play is completely halted. Otherwise, have the groups puzzle through the challenges on their own. Focus on when they get frustrated, or problems they encounter. Note when they linger on a certain moment of the game, or try to prolong it.

7. After the test, study your notes with your other designers.

   - What patterns did you observe?
   - What joys and frustrations were shared among all three groups?
   - Did you observe any unexpected behavior?
   - Can that behavior be factored into the core experience of your game?

8. How can your future designs maximize the successes and minimize the failures observed during the test?

9. Begin writing a description of the Player Experience (1.d) in your Game Design Document. Remember that this language will evolve over the course of the game's development.