The design process of Island Influence

There were three driving components behind the design of *Island Influence*: A-B testing, play-testing, and market research. We started with a simple premise: combine the cooperative and family aspects of The Game of Life (“Life”) with the Empire building aspects of Settlers of Catan (“Catan”). Through a combination of the thoughts and opinions we collected from subjective testing, specific answers we got from AB testing, and acumen we got from our market research and created persona, we created a novel board game that’s fun to play.

The driving component behind our design process was play-testing. By keeping an open mind and all the materials from both Life and Catan nearby, we were able to rapidly take feedback, design a change, and introduce that change between play-testing rounds. The result can be an incredible amount of refinement from just a few playtests, and we did half a dozen. In our tests we found that players were able to spot problems and suggest changes. Many times we found those changes to be excessive, but they typically identified a key part in contention or mechanic that needed to be tweaked. By keeping a creative designer at these play testing sessions we were able to design a new component or modify an existing one very quickly. Sometimes these changes were quickly reverted, but more often than not we found ourselves modifying our existing copy of the rules to accommodate them.

Our market research showed us the kinds of players that play Catan and Life and how they contrasted to our persona, Steve, and the game we were making. Steve was created as the personification of the thought processes we expected a typical customer of ours would have. While not driving any creative decisions, reflection on “What would Steve want” provided direction for our decisions. For example, at one point we had to decide between a motif of war and one of diplomacy, we turned to Steve, and decided that because Steve is interested more in casual board games he can play with friends, he’d prefer the more intricate aspects of a democratic game over one in which you simply go to war with each other. Steve the persona ultimately allowed us to tailor our game to our target audience, but did not provide a tool for original creativity in the design process.

We also asked play testers a series of very specific questions, “A-B questions”, about our game with respect to Life and Catan. We found that while most of our questions yielded answers that told us little about which game people preferred, some questions provided key insights that would drive the design process behind *Island Influence*. For example: we found that everyone we questioned enjoyed collecting things in board games, whether it be money or resource tokens people enjoyed the aspect of taking something as their own. This was the driving factor behind the currency system in the game. Like market research however we found that AB testing did not drive creativity and did not in itself allow us to introduce new concepts, but instead guided the design decisions had to make.

By applying these components to our process we were able to quickly create a well-designed and thought-out game. Though the bulk of the process was driven by play testing, without the insights offered by our market research and AB testing we would have created either a game that had a very generic appeal or little appeal at all. Going forward we will continue to integrate market research and AB questions into the design process.