Usability and Player Retention: Finding Heuristics for Tutorial Design

by Elliot Kehler

The Problem

- Complex games can struggle with usability

- Indie games have insufficient play testers

- Tutorials are difficult to create

The Purpose

- Provide heuristics for indie game developers
    - New and solo developers
    - Resource-limited developers
- Help indie developers reach goals
- Usability leads to accessibility
    - Target audience will increase
    - Game communities will improve

A-Star Theft

- Long development time
  - Interdisciplinary work
- Action/Strategy game
- Complex mechanics
- Think Hotline Miami + Payday 2

A-STAR THEFT

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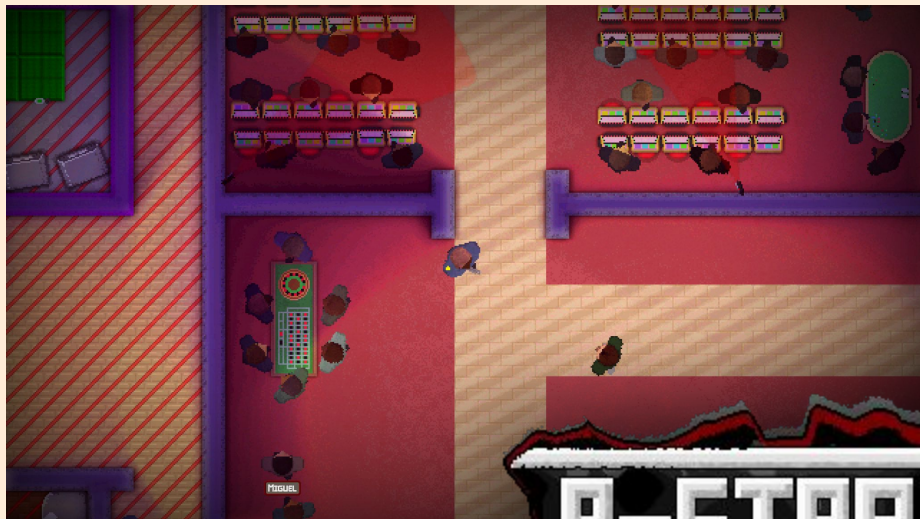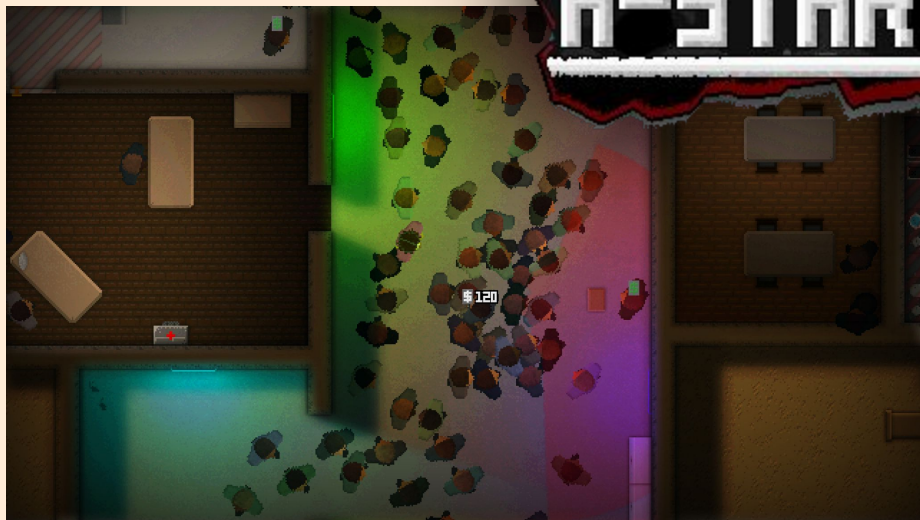
A-Star Theft: Problems

- Usability issues

- Tutorial problems

- Some players have been dissatisfied

New Tutorial: Planning

- Read literature

- Define mechanics

- Understand constraints

- Study similar games

- Initial playtesting

New Tutorial: Goals and Purpose

- Increased effectiveness

- Story

- Music

- Graphics

New Tutorial: Development

- Structure and layout

- Interdisciplinary work:

  - Programming, story, music, and graphics

- Decoration

- Iterate

New Tutorial: Playtesting

- Ethical research guidelines

  - Confidentiality

  - Informed consent

  - Scientific purpose

- Established interviewing guidelines

  - Types of questions

  - Interviewer conduct

New Tutorial: Playtesting

- Evaluation testing - measure the changes

- Iterative improvements

Analysis and Conclusions

- Most mechanics are more clear to players

- Some mechanics were unchanged in clarity

- Some mechanics were changed or replaced

- Usability is crucial

Heuristics (from literature and playtesting)

- Teach one mechanic at a time

- Let players experiment with the mechanics

- Repeat especially important mechanics

- Provide unambiguous instructions

Teach one mechanic at a time

- Do not overwhelm the player

- Leave enough time between new mechanics

Allow for experimentation

- Set players loose without putting them in danger

- Do not punish the player for deviating

- Show multiple use cases for mechanics

Repeat especially important mechanics

- It takes time to learn

- Puts focus on the essentials

- Slowly increase difficulty

Provide unambiguous instructions

- Use clear and concise language

- Display instructions only when relevant

- Avoid using time limits

- Poor phrasing can confuse players

A helpful note

Never assume that something that you made by yourself, for yourself, is obvious to other people.

Limitations

- Focus is on maximizing teaching and usability

    ○ Player enjoyment comes secondary

    ○ Playtesters are a captive audience

- Games of different genres

Final words