**Playtesting research - Jesse Schell, Art of Game Design, ch.25 Good Games Are Created Through Playtesting**

Schell points out that while there are four types of testing (focus groups, QA testing, usability testing and playtesting), playtesting is by far the most important to yield engaging gameplay.

Schell acknowledges that developers will avoid playtesting for fear of negative feedback, but stresses how crucial it is to produce a quality product.

If playtesting is not done early and often this problem will persist into release, where the product is guaranteed to be poor.

It is better to conduct playtesting as early as possible to give your team time to identify and improve on any issues.

According to Schell there are 5 key questions, which should be considered in order:

**Why**

It is essential to consider what you are playtesting for. Each playtesting session should have a specific purpose. “is my game fun” is not enough.

Questions must be niche and detailed e.g.

* ‘Do players understand how to play?’
* ‘Do players want to play a second time? A third time? A twentieth time? Why?’
* ‘Do players feel the game is fair?’
* ‘Are there any dominant strategies or loopholes?’
* ‘Should the “A” button or “B” button be used for jumping?’

Preparing this list of questions will guide the playtesting session and yield feedback which is far more helpful to designing future iterations.

**Who**

Play testers should be selected from the game’s target demographic/psychographic, though within this group play testers can be selected to learn different things.

* *Developers:* will likely give thoughtful feedback, though will have their opinions changed by how close they are to the project. Schell still suggests playtesting with the dev team, though to consider their opinions less than the other testers.
* *Friends:* a benefit of friends/family playtesting is that they will be comfortable talking to you and likely give in-depth feedback. However, they are likely to not want to hurt your feelings and may be inclined to tell you what you want to hear and not what you need to hear to benefit the game.
* *Expert gamers:* these are gamers who have many hours experience in the genre of your project. Their feedback will be detailed and likely given with specific examples/terminology. The main downside is that this group consider themselves superior players so will often suggest more complex changes than the average player which could potentially exclude the average player from elements of gameplay.
* *Tissue testers:* people who have not encountered the project before (can only be used once). Huge benefit of this group is that they will have fresh eyes and notice things that others will have become too used to, to have a measurable reaction to. Very useful for usability questions as they have no prior knowledge or experience. Risk of testing with only tissue testers is that the game becomes very appealing for a first-time-play, but as it has not been tested over repeat plays, has much less draw if a player returns.

The tester chosen should depend on what the developers are trying to learn. Find what you need to know, produce questions, select the most appropriate tester.

**Where**

The environment the testing is conducted in can alter the emotions and feedback given by testers.

* *In the developer’s studio:* testers invited in may not feel comfortable in the foreign environment. If this is the only option, the testers should be made to feel as comfortable as possible.
* *Public venue:* zero associated cost, with large footfall for many potential testers. Downsides may be distracted testers, not giving their full attention due to other events in the public space or under pressure from onlookers. May also find finding enough testers from target demographic inconsistent.
* *On the internet:* can get a very large number of play testers very quickly. Very good option for stress testing the games features. Undesirable element is that quantity will come at the expense of quality. Will be unable to ask specific follow up questions to remote testers, there is also the potential for testers to send the game available to their friends etc.

Again, the option selected will depend on what the team wish to learn.

**What**

What are the team looking to find through playtesting.

There are two option to consider:

* The things you know you are looking for:

The questions produced before playtesting is held.

The team can consider restricting elements of the game during testing to focus on the specific question that is being tested against.

* The things you don’t know you are looking for:

Testers will always be able to answer questions when the question directs them to specifically consider an element. The team must always be looking to interpret tester’s responses to see if they lead to an unforeseen explanation.

The team should also watch for unexpected approaches/solutions to challenges that testers find.

**How**

Once the other factors have been assessed – what you want to confirm through playtesting, who you want to playtest and where playtesting should take place – the implementation of playtesting should be considered.

*Playtesters should only be present during the testing elements if it does not affect testers feedback.*

Playtesters should be encouraged to behave naturally, not to pay attention to developer’s feelings.

Being present at a testing session is far more beneficial to developers than a recording, though if the results are altered by your observation then testers should continue without being watched.

*Information given to playtesters before starting*

Developers must take care with what testers are told before they begin testing. Choice of words can influence their actions during the test and prepare them emotionally to give a more positive/negative response.

The choice of words or lack thereof becomes more important when considering what is being playtested. When to give instructions/explanation will have a much greater impact of tester action during some activities than others.

*What should developers collect during testing*

* The players facial expressions, so you can identify their emotions.
* Where players are looking, to review the information present on screen and how you are presenting it compared to what the player considers the priority.
* Aim to record the players faces, their vocal interactions/responses and the game screen itself.
* Use your ‘why’ questions to make note of further tester actions, e.g.
  + Which items were used the most
  + Where did players stand during wait phases
  + What was the average completion time

All data is valuable, the more a team can collect the better informed their project will be.

*Disturbing testers mid-game.*

There is a choice to made about whether to purely observe testers, or to question them during play for specific responses.

The benefit is that very specific information will be given, though the risk is that the games flow is interrupted, and the testers actions are made unnatural.

A potential fix for this is to ask play testers to ‘think out loud’ which will allow developers to understand the thought process of testers without interruption. However, there is risk associated with this if the tester is not comfortable with speaking during play which would also impact on the quality of the results.

Each tester and the appropriate approach should be considered on an individual basis.

*Collecting data AFTER playtesting sessions*

Surveys

* Record testers demographic etc
* Be prepared to answer any questions the testers have following gameplay and about the questionnaire they will be asked to complete.
* Using pictures of game items will help give context to testers when answering questions
* Online surveys can save time and also remove any ‘awkwardness’ from testers having to answer in front of developers often leading to more honest answers.
* Do not ask for ratings on a 1-10 scale (a 1-5 scale proves far more consistent).
* Limit number of questions on the survey to ensure all are treated with same level of attention throughout.
* Give access to survey immediately after playtesting has concluded.
* Be aware that not all answers received will be given with total accuracy.

Interviews

* Have prepared questions ready to ask (leave space for testers answers)
* Better to interview testers one-on-one to eliminate input from others and to put them at ease to receive honest answers.
* Take an approach with questions which will make play testers unafraid of offending you – phrase questions “we have problems we need help identifying”, so they have permission to address anything they thought was negative.
* Avoid memory tests – do not ask them to recall specific elements but rather overall elements. If specific portions of the game need specific questions these should be asked or information recorded during play.
* Remember that testers are not developers. Using terminology or asking them design questions is unlikely to give appropriate answers. Instead phrase questions in mutually understood language.

Do not to be offended or to try to defend your game during feedback as this may make testers uneasy and less likely to give further honest feedback.

The aim of testing is to highlight issues so the game can be improved.