

Playtesting Babushka

Introduction

Throughout the development phase, multiple internal tests were organised. This was achieved by the design team through the creation of paper prototypes which were in turn tested by each team member. By doing this, we were able to test if any ideas were completely out of place or if something was broken. These paper prototypes would mainly test the logic of the puzzle and if the visual cues made sense to the player. As the development progressed, the paper prototypes were implemented into a digital format and then regularly tested within the team; testing with the team was crucial at this point since the artists had to make sure all the assets were placed correctly, the designers had to make sure the logic of the level is correct and the developers had to test for bugs. After the game reached a 'testable' state by having three levels implemented, a series of play and usability tests were organised.

Playtest Organisation

First of all, it had to be decided whether the collected data should be quantitative (surveys), qualitative (interviews) or both. Taking into account the time restrictions as well as the small number of participants (<10), it made no sense gathering quantitative data from surveys, since the result would have been misleading (there would not have been enough data to draw relevant conclusions). What quantitative data does well is comparisons. Had we had time to make bigger changes after playtesting, and thus, time to playtest a second time, quantitative data would have made great sense. However, we playtested late in the process and only had time for minor changes to the game. Therefore, it was decided that the data gathered by interviewing people would be much more suitable for the stage of development we were in.

Second of all, the interview questions had to be focused around the core loop of the game and the overall mood that people experienced while playing it, since the game is heavily based on mood elements such as music, art, sound effects, etc.. Considering that the core loop of the game was based on solving puzzles, the focus of the playtests was to check if the players felt that the levels were too hard or too frustrating to complete. Moreover, a conclusion regarding the game 'feel' had to finally be reached; even though the core mechanics were implemented and were fully functional, we were unsure of whether the players would actually enjoy it. To clear some of this up, we included several questions about feel and narrative in the interview. Lastly, considering the 'mood' is an essential element of the game, questions about the music, art, sound effects and visual effects were also asked.

Playtest reflection

The interview questions were divided into four main sections: level related, pleasure and enjoyment, aesthetics and narrative.

Level Related

First Level

During the first level (where the tree chopping mechanic is learned) all players died while trying to chop down the tree and cross the river. It was clear for them that they can only cross onto the other side of the river if they cut the tree, but most of them had to take several attempts in order to understand the tree chopping mechanic. We believe that in this level the difficulty is set to an appropriate level, since no players died more than 10 times while trying to learn how to cut down the tree.

Second Level

One of the main complaints from players was that it was not clear what exactly they had to do; all of them understood that they have to go up the tree, but not all are sure why. Some of them realise that the acorn represents food and that they have to pick it up, but it is not really clear for them how to do it (some jump on top of it while others pick up the branch first). This represents quite a big issue in the placement of the assets, since the player should never be able to just fall on top of the acorn.

Third Level

The third level was well received by the playtesters, since it used the mechanic that players learned previously. One of the players had the issue of not knowing how to pick up the pipe; however, this was due to the fact that he finished the previous level by not picking up the branch. Most of the issues with this level were related to the placement of assets and transitions.

Pleasure and Enjoyment

One of the observations that most players made was that the world lacks interactable objects; so far, the only objects that players can interact with are the ones used in the puzzle. Moreover, players specifically said that the chopping mechanic feels good and that they would like it to be used a little but more. Also, while walking through the final level, players started wondering about the story of the main character.

Aesthetics

Players enjoyed all aspects that add up to the final *mood* of the game; this varies from music, to art, to visual effects. Testers felt like the aesthetic elements conveyed the world in which the main players is.

A choice that we made from the very beginning was that of having no UI available for the player to interact with. This is a rash decision but one we ultimately made so that hopefully the player would be drawn into the game world. It also meant that we would have to design puzzles that would make sense without the support of explanatory UI such as an inventory or indicators of where to go and what to click. A consequence of this choice was, that some of the players had a hard time figuring out, if by the bunker level, they still had the axe or not. The change of season suggested that a long time had passed, and since they had not used the axe for a while, it took them a few tries to realise that they still had it. If we stick with our decision of not using any UI, a possible fix to this issue could be to have the axe be usable even when Babushka is not facing a tree. That way the player would be free to see the axe on the character model and swing it at different things. It would then, of course, have to be included in several more puzzles as well.

Narrative

The original selling point of the game for all of us had been the story. The game has quite an elaborate backstory of a young athlete who gets recruited to be part of an elite military taskforce which is soon forgotten about by the state. The girl and their friends grow old and when she is the only one left, she decides to venture home.

This is a narrative that we had neglected to embed into the game as we made it, because we wanted to keep the focus on the gameplay rather than the backstory.

Even though the players did not receive any kind of information regarding this narrative, all of them realised that the story is about the journey of an old lady. Two of the play testers even noted that they really liked the 'story', and they enjoyed the fact that we did not spoonfeed it to them but let them figure it out on their own. Overall, all player expressed that they were interested in playing on if not for the gameplay then to see how the story would develop.

Improvements

What the playtesting revealed to us was, that what the players overall enjoyed traversing the world but had some issues with figuring out the logic of the different puzzles. From this feedback we compiled a list of some improvements. These were the improvements we deemed were doable within a week's time. Thus, the primary elements that required modifications were:

The acorn should be replaced with an apple; this makes it more obvious that it represents food.

The acorn should be moved from the right side of the tree to the left side; this prevents player from reaching the acorn just by falling on top of it.

Removing the top four mushrooms on the tree so that the top is not reachable;

Replace white squares around the tree with assets.

These changes related primarily to the second level of the game where players gave the most feedback and had the biggest issues. Apart from these small changes, we also listed some larger and less urgent changes. These changes related more to the feedback about the atmosphere and flow of the game. A secondary list of features that should be implemented in the next two weeks was hereby created. This includes the following:

Implement a frozen lake between the oak and the bunker.
Make everything as one continuous level instead of loading separate levels.
Fix movement of the parallax.

Apart from these specific changes, we got the general feedback from most of the players, that the world lacked 'interactivity' and 'worldiness'. Put simply, players lacked things with which they could playfully interact and which would make the world feel more alive and responsive. These are elements that we were aware were lacking from the game but which would take a long time to animate and impliment. We did not have time after the playtests to add these things but making the game world feel more alive is on the to do list for the future iterations of the game.

Final refections

What we set out to do with *Babushka* was to create an atmospheric puzzle game. During the process of making the game, we have primarily had the focus on making the puzzles work and making the purpose clear to the player. This was also what we focused on when playtesting. We wanted to create an atmosphere where the player would feel invited to contemplate rather than rush to win. What the playtesting releaved to us was that overall the players reacted positively to the world and the pacing of the game. The 'off moment' of the game happens in the second level where the focus shifts from figuring a puzzle out to the skill jumps of the player.

For an atmosphering game, the constant movement and progression based puzzles might invite the player less to contemplate and more to push themselves in doing something difficult. This corresponds with the general feedback that we received from the playtesters, who pointed out that the second level was somewhat frustrating and harder than both the previous and the following. This points in the direction of, for future versions of the game, making puzzles less about progressing from left to right, and more about figuring something out while staying at the same location.