

# COMP09095 Level Design

## Week 07 Lecture – Playtesting



# The Importance of Playtesting

- Critical to success of the level
- Classic mistake is to leave it too late
- Start with analysis of the game diagram
- Playtesting proper begins with the game template
- From then playtest **continuously** until development is complete
- Internal playtesting by the team
- External playtesting by a focus group
- Focus group observed by team member(s) – notes taken
- Focus group testers may also complete a questionnaire

# Playtesting In Practice

- Observing playtest session can be horrific for developers!
- Highly rewarding and informative for team
- External testing far more important than internal
- Plan and prepare playtest sessions in detail to get maximum value from them
- Need to revise level to address issues that arise during playtest session
- Revision can be a difficult and time-consuming process
- Playtest again after revision – new issues may have been introduced

# Types of Playtesting

## 1. Planned testing

Team prepare a list of tasks for tester to undertake, e.g. locate relic in Jungle area, travel from Warehouse area to Harbour area etc.

## 2. Free testing

Player has no plan, they are free to play any part of the level – normally with a time limit

# The Playtest Session

- Build regular playtesting into your project plan
- Ideal external playtester comes from your target demographic, but has no previous knowledge of your level
- Create a test plan for each session – get “inside the player’s head”
  - General questions about level size, difficulty, progression etc.
  - More specific questions about particular sections, puzzles, challenges etc.

# Sample General Questions

- Is the level too hard or too easy to complete?
- Do you remember any particular situation that is too hard or too easy?
- Does the level feel too long or too short?
- Are there parts that seem unnecessary?
- Is there a part that should be expanded?
- What are your favourite parts of the level?
- What are your least favourite parts?

# Sample Specific Questions

1. Did your character have any trouble getting into the air vent?
2. Do you think your character should be able to climb over the fence at the lighthouse?
3. Is the last piece of the relic too difficult to find?

# Playtest Procedure

- Observation is just as important as questionnaire
- One observer for each playtester
- Essential to make detailed notes
- Brief players before they start
- Observer should not speak or give clues once play has started!
- Keep track of time for each section, and for whole level
- You may wish to set a time limit



# Observer Notes

- Note any unexpected actions player makes in the level
- Note (relevant) player comments, facial expressions, body language etc.
- Once play is complete observer should question player about the experience – use questionnaire
- After session observers compile all notes together to create a task list
- All tasks are given equal importance and priority at this stage

# Using Playtest Feedback

- Team discusses task list and agrees on actions to improve the level
- Set priorities for tasks e.g.
  1. Essential
  2. Important
  3. Nice to have
- Agree a plan for addressing tasks in that order, and for further playtesting at relevant points in the plan

# Common Problems in Levels

Most can be identified by playtesting with a template:

- Impassable obstacles – use carefully to avoid frustrating the player
- Lack of consistency in obstacles – e.g. can climb one barbed-wire fence but not another
- Too much repetition – e.g. ensure there is a need for player to run, jump climb etc. not just walk
- Lack of direction – player should not feel unsure of location, what to do next etc.

# The 10-Second Rule

- If a character travels through a level and for 10 seconds they are just running/walking, something is wrong
- Think about adding an event or compressing the area
- Can be a simple event, e.g. pick up an item or jump to a ledge

# Types of Level Revision

- Don't be reluctant to change or completely redo puzzle components, or even remove them
- Level might be too big or too small overall – add or remove areas to correct
- Need to balance all areas of your level for difficulty – Goldilocks test
- Be prepared to add, edit or remove all of your level content
- Create smooth transitions between areas

# Conclusion

- The more you playtest a level, the better it makes the player experience
- Can be a difficult, frustrating and time-consuming process for the developers
- Team morale can be diminished
- Need to recognise how essential playtesting is