Playtesting and Iteration:
A Guide

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Introduction

Games sometimes seem like they spring fully formed from the mind of their creators. This is largely a misconception: most successful games are knocked around a lot before they reach your hands. Designers learn what to revise and keep through testing their ideas and assumptions. Actual play of your game by people willing to give you honest feedback is one of the most valuable resources in gaming. Improving your game after getting this feedback is largely what game design looks like.

First, Some Terms

Playtesting is having participants play your game before you release it, with the goal of helping you learn from their experience. You might facilitate, participate or just observe. **Agnostic testing** is playtesting without you in the room.

A **Readthrough** is a thoughtful analysis of a game's written text. This is the easiest sort of feedback to both solicit and receive, but it isn't as useful as actual play.

Iteration is making small-but-substantial changes in new versions of your game multiple times before its release, gradually approaching your vision of play.

A **game designer** is what you are now, whether you like it or not!

Goals

You have goals for your game. A great exercise for defining your goals is to imagine playing it - even if it is still just a vague idea. Play an imaginary session in your mind. Who is playing? How are they engaged? What do they do? What is the tone? Often you know the answers to these questions subconsciously, and a little unstructured imaginary play can bring them to the surface.

Another way to look at this process is to ask "The Big Three" questions: What do the characters do, what do the players do, and how is your game about these things thematically and structurally?

Having a clear set of goals will help you know what questions to ask playtesters and what to do with their feedback.

What are your goals?

The Value of Actual Play

There is no substitute for actually trying out your game. You will learn a lot by watching other people bounce off your ideas (even if they are half formed; especially if they are half formed). Actual play will highlight the parts of your design that are strong, the parts that need to be refined, or, sometimes, quietly buried in the yard.

Play your own game -in your head, -by yourself, or -with your loving, patient friends. If you can't play the whole thing, pick an interesting 15-minute chunk and play that. Play a few parts of it online on a video call, even if it's not an online game. Play it in a formal setting with friends who have seen it before, friends who are new to it, and strangers. Arrange to get it played without you being there; agnostic testing is hugely informative. A good way to set up an agnostic test is to trade somebody one-for-one. Some cities have freeform groups who meet regularly and playtest games. Reach out to these groups if you can.

How are you going to play your game?

When to Playtest

There's no rule about the best time or way to solicit feedback. You might find it more valuable early in the process or quite late. A little outside input at various stages of development is probably ideal, but find the cycle that works for you. When first inspired, you might run your idea by trusted friends and gather their candid input. Later on, after you have a playable skeleton but before you pin down all the details, playtesting can sharpen your game. After you have a functional game in which you are confident, consider an agnostic test: handing it off to people who will play it without you present, relying on the materials you provide and nothing else.

When is the right time for you to playtest?

What to Playtest

Remember that you can test in very small chunks. Maybe a three hour long dedicated playtest is not practical, but fifteen minutes with a friend trying out one small aspect of play can be hugely informative.

Here are some things you might test for:

- Expectations. What expectations are set for the players? Does the description of the game express what will be interesting about it?

- Clarity. Can people make sense of it and understand what to do without turning to you for clarification? Are your instructions clear and free of assumptions?

- Goals. Does it do what you want? Is it hitting your goals?
Tone. Are players embracing the feel you are after? Do you communicate that tone to them successfully? Does your game generate the right tone through its rules?

- Pacing. Does the game move along at the speed you'd expect? Does it take as long as you want it to take? Does it feel rushed or tedious?

- Balance. Does the game become lopsided in an unsatisfying or unplanned way? Is one character privileged (mechanically, with spotlight time, with interesting stuff to do, etc.) in an unintentional way?

- Emergent properties. Do things happen that you didn't expect? Do things happen that aren't codified but that you really want to happen?

The Thing You Can't Test For, So Don't Bother

"Fun" - If you make the game of your dreams and are passionate about it, it will resonate with people who share your enthusiasm. For them it will always be fun, by some definition of fun. Designing for fun is a fool's errand.

What are you going to be asking about?

Soliciting Feedback

Never lose sight of the fact that your game is your vision and an expression of your creativity. Playtesting should help you refine your game.

- It is a gift for people to give your work attention. Always be gracious and appreciative. Embrace mutualism and help them out, too!

- No feedback is wrong; players feel what they feel, so don't correct or argue.

- Sometimes suggestions are not useful and you need to be judicious about what feedback to act on. Accept it all graciously, but be prepared to throw some of it out.

- Understand the difference between readthrough feedback and playtest feedback. Readthrough feedback is valuable, but playtest feedback is the gold standard.

- Know what you want to ask and make sure you are asking it. If you want to know if your dancing mechanic is engaging, ask "I'm interested in knowing how engaging the dance mechanic is. How did people react when it was time to dance? Did they enjoy dancing? Did people pay attention during the solo King and Queen dance?"

- Avoid asking questions that players may feel uneasy about answering in a negative way. "Did you have fun" is a difficult question for players to answer in the negative. Instead, ask them about their favorite and least favorite parts. Ask them about memories that stuck out and whether they know others who might enjoy the game.
- Respect playtester's time and only ask the most directly useful questions. Ten questions, when thoughtfully answered, is a lot. Give them space to expand and share more, but don't expect them to do so.

How are you going to solicit feedback?

Receiving Feedback

The purpose of feedback from readthroughs and playtesting is to gain a picture of what the game does and how it behaves for the the designer. It is then up to you to decide what, if anything, to do with what you are told.

Things you CAN test for

- All that stuff in "What To Playtest" above: expectations, clarity, goals, tone, pacing, balance, emergent properties, and more.
- What actually, literally happens when someone tries to play the game.
- That certain things keep occurring across playtests, for good or ill.
- How it all makes players feel.

Feedback can't tell you

- How any other player in the world might react.
- Which suggestions you should implement and which you should discard.
- What you actually want.

You should follow up on particularly interesting feedback. It's good to ask questions like "when you did [some weird thing], what was going through your head?"

How are you going to thank your readers and players?

Giving Feedback

There's an art to giving useful, productive feedback, and it is one you can learn.

- When giving feedback be honest but considerate. Share the most salient points for you, whatever they were. Use "I" statements. Be respectful of the fact that the designer worked hard and is passionate about the game.

- Remember the purpose of feedback is to help the designer reach their goal, not to judge the game or to "fix" it.

- Don't give design suggestions unless the designer asks for them, or that you are using it as an example to illustrate a point, or you think that it will make a massive difference based on your conversation with the designer.

There's a series of really smart articles on critique by Lizzie Stark and Alex Roberts that you can read here: http://leavingmundania.com/2017/07/16/how-to-write-good-larp-critique/

On the Readthrough

Giving readthrough feedback can be tricky. It's not easy to predict howa game will play from reading alone. Here are some useful things to share:

- Are the instructions comprehensible? Is information presented in a way that lets you know what to do, when you need it? Could a new facilitator easily run this game? Share a quick synopsis of what you think is happening in the game in your own words, so the designer can assess if their key ideas are getting across.

- What is your reaction? Where does the game take you? How does it make you feel? What immediately comes to mind? If you find yourself wanting to play it, describe how you'd like to approach it.

- Is there alignment between the designer's stated goals and the game? Share the ways in which the game feels like it clicks or comes together for you.

- Are there any discrepancies? For example, does it seem impossible to get the Very Important Thing done in the given amount of time? Keep in mind that a discrepancy might occur either because the designer doesn't realize something, or because you don't. Fixing problematic discrepancies is powerful, but many unique new designs also look like discrepancies, even to experienced readers.

- Is the game approachable? For example, does it require coming up with a lot of ideas at high speed, or spending a long time in a physically uncomfortable position? Share what those parts are, and the particular reasons why they are more or less approachable to you.

On the Playtest

Hopefully you will not only be getting feedback, but will also be helping other designers by playtesting their games. Thoughtful playtesting is hard work! You are a hero for doing it.

- If the designer doesn't say, start by asking what areas they are looking for feedback on.

- Highlight anything that caused a notable reaction in you and what the reaction was. Pleasure, excitement, surprise, confusion, disappointment, and discomfort will all be very interesting to hear about.

- Try to tie your reactions to specific points in time and gameplay. The more specific you are, the better!

- Remember to include ample positive feedback and list things that worked very well. It's often easier for us to remember and articulate things that went wrong, but positive feedback is essential for the designer to understand what is working, how much, whether they even want that thing to happen, and most of all what to avoid accidentally changing in the course of adjusting to negative feedback. It also encourages them to continue revising the game.

- Also note things that went averagely or indifferently. These can often be the most difficult to notice.

- Take notes on all of these elements as the game unfolds, so that you remember everything to share at the end.

How are you going to provide kind, honest, and useful feedback?

FAQ

This seems like a lot of work!
It definitely can be! It's totally worth it, though, because you'll end up with a far, far better game.

Do I have to do everything people suggest?
No.

How do I deal with negative feedback?
Your game is your baby, and by sharing your creative work you are making yourself vulnerable. Negative feedback can be painful. Try to read charitably and assume good intentions; it is very unlikely that someone involved in this contest is going to be deliberately hurtful. They might be excessively blunt, misread your desire regarding critique, or assume a different culture of discourse.

If the feedback isn't helpful, just throw it out, but try to see beyond the negativity to make sure; sometimes there might be a really useful nugget in there. It's always OK, if you want to stay in dialogue with someone, to ask them to change the way that they give you feedback.

What if I disagree with what you're saying here?
That's great! We're glad you're thinking critically about the process. Nothing here is intended to be prescriptive. Whatever works for you is the best possible way.

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Credits

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