

Don't follow these rules!

A Primer for Playtesting

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During our 2012 residency at the University of the Arts Berlin, we spent the summer with Graduate Fellows playtesting projects from theater, architecture, sound installation, games, philosophy, and more. This essay outlines the playtesting methodology we used by suggesting possible “rules” for structuring your own playtests.

What is playtesting?

Playtesting is a **methodology** borrowed from game design where unfinished projects are tested on an audience. A playtest happens when people come together to try out a work in progress. The next steps for changing the project are based on the results of the playtest.

Playtesting is also an **attitude** towards the creative process, an approach that emphasizes problem-solving through iteration and collaboration with members of your audience.

When is playtesting useful?

Playtesting can help develop any kind of work that involves interaction between a created experience and a participatory audience. Although many of the ideas of playtesting come from game design, they can be applied in any field.

What does playtesting look like?

Playtesting can look like any number of things. At the University of the Arts, we met as a group on a regular basis and shared works in progress. We would spend about 30-60 minutes interacting with and discussing one project – perhaps in a studio space, perhaps outdoors in a park or on the street - and then move on to the next.

Isn't playtesting the same as user testing / editing / rehearsal / critique?

Yes and no. Playtesting is not discipline-specific and versions of it can be found in many practices. The style of playtesting we outline here comes from game design and is particularly relevant for projects that involve direct audience interaction.

THE “RULES”

.....before you playtest

A. Playtest before you think you are ready

You always playtest a work in progress, not a finished design. That means you should playtest as early as you possibly can – usually much earlier than you think you should. It is much much better to playtest your ugly prototype than to wait and playtest a more polished project. A playtest is not a presentation. If you feel ready and comfortable to present and playtest your design, you have waited too long – it is probably too late to make substantial changes. Train yourself to overcome your discomfort and playtest as early in the process as you possibly can.

Is it too early for you to playtest? If the answer is yes, then playtest anyway.

B. Strategize for early playtesting

Figure out how to create a working prototype far in advance of any final deadline. This is often a question of tactical implementation. Can you make a paper prototype of a digital project? Can you scale down a work meant for 100 participants to something you can playtest with a dozen? Rather than plan your entire project in advance, focus instead on what is needed to enable the next playtest.

Simplify your project so that you can playtest today.

C. Know why you are playtesting

Enter into every playtest with a concrete idea about what you want to learn and what questions you hope the playtest will answer. Narrowing what you want the playtest to investigate can help you simplify your project and playtest sooner. Generating research questions in advance will also help you structure the playtest itself. If you are doing things right, your playtest will raise issues and questions that you did not anticipate. However, you should still go into every playtest with a clear agenda.

What is the one key question that you want your playtest to answer?

D. Prepare variations

Go into a playtest with different versions of your project to try out. This allows you to make the most out of the playtest session and it also helps you to improvise and try out new ideas during the playtest. Variations might mean different sets of game rules to play, software settings to cycle through, or contexts for a performance. Variations give you options if something breaks down, and they let you do comparisons to see which variation works best. One tip: change as little as possible each time (only one element) so that you can understand better the exact effects of your change.

What can you change to try out different variations of your project?

E. Be grateful to your playtesters

Whoever is playtesting your project is doing you a big favor. They are donating their time and attention for the sole purpose of helping you with your unfinished project. Playtesting is hard. But no matter how much stress and uncertainty you might have about the project, try and maintain a feeling of gratitude towards your playtesters. Be happy they are there and be sure to let them know how thankful you are for their time.

Take a deep breath and say thanks.

F. Design the learning experience

Remember to design the way that people will learn about your project. If you are creating a complicated interactive system, the experience of learning how to understand and interact with the system is an important part of the overall design problem.

Does your playtest address the learning process?

G. Blame yourself, not your playtesters

Remember to warn your playtesters that they will be interacting with an unfinished, rough version of what will at some later point be a smoother experience. Be sure to tell them that if they are frustrated or confused, it is not their fault – it is your fault for not designing a better experience for them. It's OK for them to be confused – after all, the most valuable part of the playtest is not what they do understand, but what they don't.

Never make your playtesters feel foolish.

H. Know your testers

What do you need to know about your playtesters before the playtest begins? If you are meeting them for the first time or don't know them very well, talk with each person and take notes that will help put their reaction to your project in context. Playtesters come in many varieties. For example, the learning curve of a hardcore gamer is very different than someone without deep experience in a particular game genre.

Do you know who your playtesters are?

I. Don't explain

Put the project ahead of the theory. Resist the temptation to explain the ideas and intentions behind your project to your playtesters. Instead, let them interact with the LEAST possible explanation from you in advance. By explaining your ideas beforehand, you are ruining the chance to see the authentic reactions that your project provokes. It is hard to hold back and not explain. But by forcing your project to carry your ideas (rather than your explanation), you are challenging your work to be better.

Is it possible to not say anything before the playtest starts?

J. Take notes

In game design, we often prepare a sheet of paper for each playtester, with questions written out and room to take notes. The notes page is structured to facilitate what you need to know BEFORE, DURING, and AFTER each playtest. During a discussion, taking notes will help to elicit better feedback – if your testers see you taking notes they will be more likely to give you detailed and thoughtful answers.

Prepare a notes sheet and use it. It is worth the extra effort.

....during a playtest

K. Be selfish

The purpose of your playtest is not for your playtesters to have fun. It is for you to learn what does and does not work about your project. If you try too hard to give playtesters a good time, you will lose the opportunity to get the hard truth from them. Don't be afraid to show your playtesters something broken and half-finished. That is in fact the entire premise of the playtest.

Don't worry about being entertaining.

L. Encourage your playtesters to talk aloud

If it is possible for your project, ask your playtesters to talk out loud about their thoughts and feelings as they interact with your work. A "think-aloud" playtester can give you valuable insight into how they are perceiving and interpreting the details of your project. Let your playtesters tell you why they are doing what they are doing and what they think is happening as a result. This may require that you periodically remind them to vocalize.

Don't be shy about reminding your playtesters to think aloud.

M. Notice everything

Prepare on your notes sheet the categories of the main things you want to observe, such as when players seemed frustrated, what make them laugh, or how many times they tried and failed before they gave up. Keep track of how long it took to run the playtest, which variations your testers preferred, and any other important information. Try to take notes on everything that you can – otherwise, you will be at the mercy of your selective memory, which will cast everything in the best possible light.

Are you noticing everything – or just what you want to see?

N. Shut up

While you are observing the playtest, say as little as possible. You will feel an overwhelming urge to help out your playtesters, to tell them what to do and what they are doing wrong. But you must do everything you can to not interfere. Their mistakes and misunderstandings are extremely useful: you must let them explore the project on their own. If they are completely confused, step in and assist them, but in general you should do everything you can to shut up. If you tell them what to do, you lose the main purpose of the playtest, which is to see how OTHER people react to your project. Learning to shut up during a playtest requires discipline.

Can you shut up – not a just little, but really, completely, shut up?

O. See the big picture

As your playtesters interact with your project, remember to not just focus on the workings of your designed system. Try to see the human element at play. What are the emotional responses of your playtesters, what is their body language, how are they interacting with each other? Seeing the bigger picture can help you understand when your audience is engaged and when they are bored. It is easy to focus too much on what you designed, rather than on the effect it is having.

Stay focused on the impact of the project, not just the project itself.

P. Don't be afraid of data

One way to get objective about your playtest is to record data and put it in a spreadsheet. Every project has data to collect: At what moments did everyone fall silent? How many steps did each participant take as they walked through the space? If you are working in software, the program can record important user input, such as time spent in different areas of the experience. Otherwise, just remember to record the data in your notes. Too much data can be overwhelming to interpret, but tracking the right data can be incredibly valuable.

What is the data that will answer your key questions?

Q. Answer a question with a question

When playtesters ask you how something works, or what something means, it is probably because they are confused. Rather than explain it to them, you can answer their inquiry with a question of your own. Don't tell them what the blue button does – instead, ask them what they think it does, or even better, what they think it SHOULD do. It's more important to get them to speculate about your project than for you to explain it to them. Their opinions are more valuable than yours.

Every time a playtester asks you something, ask them something back.

R. Hunger for failure

One of the attitudes that helps with playtesting is to yearn for your project to fail. Of course we all want successful results, but unsuccessful moments are much

more useful. If you are only looking for the successes, you will remember the smiles and laughter and think that your project is in perfect shape (we call this the “happy face syndrome”). But you need to cultivate a desperate hunger to focus on what is not working properly. Otherwise, your project will never get better. *Are you enjoying the successful moments too much and ignoring the failures?*

....after a playtest

S. Discuss what happened

After the playtest, talk about the experience with your playtesters. Use your notes sheet to structure the conversation. Begin with very specific questions, such as what was most difficult for them to understand about the project, or why they reacted to a particular aspect of the design. Finish with more general questions, such as what they liked best about the experience or what they would change to make it better.

The more concrete your questions, the more useful answers you will get.

T. Put feedback into context

It can be useful to distinguish between expert and non-expert testers. Experts are familiar with what it means to make a project like yours. Non-experts aren't. When getting critical feedback from non-experts, remember that they are the patient and you are the doctor – you can take their suggestions as symptoms of what is and isn't working in the project, rather than as directions for the next steps in your design. If someone tells you to tear down a room and make it bigger, they are really telling you that it feels small. Rather than take their advice, perhaps just rearrange the furniture. Don't expect your players to understand all of the ramifications of every suggestion they make.

Ask for feedback, but don't take suggestions literally.

U. Collaborate with your playtesters

One of the most thrilling moments of playtesting is collaborating with your playtesters – brainstorming with them, trying out their ideas, and seeing how the changes impact your project. Plan your playtest session so that you have time to experiment with new ideas as they emerge through the playtesting itself. They are seeing the project with fresh eyes and so their ideas are often better than yours.

Embrace shared authorship with your playtesters.

V. The cruelly honest playtest

Playtests represent moments of truth – when your brilliant ideas may all come crashing down. Playtests are truthful because they are a safe place to simulate your final context. When your project is completed, you probably won't be there to explain away all of the problems and defend your intentions. In a playtest, you

get to cruelly see whether or not your ideas actually work in practice. Part of the playtest attitude is building up your pain tolerance and coming to enjoy the hard truth of the playtest.

Face the truth of your playtest, even if it hurts.

W. Embrace the unexpected

Never forget that *play* is half of *playtest*. Being playful means being open to unexpected, happy accidents. Let go of the way you *want* your work to be used or interpreted. Be open to the strange new things people do with your project. Accidents are for those who are ready to take advantage of them.

If things don't go as planned, you may be on to something better.

X. The playtest's the thing

The playtesting process is as important as the actual project you are making. If you can manage to get the process right, then you will find that the problems in your project begin to solve themselves.

Forget what you are making. Focus on how you make it.

Y and Z. Break these rules

There is no single magic solution that will solve every problem you encounter. So you need to create the process that works for you. Don't follow these "rules."

They are not meant to be followed – they are meant to be twisted, modified, broken, and refashioned into something new. The best playtest is the one you invent yourself.

- Nathalie & Eric