Car building games on steam

This is an edited excerpt from Chapter 5 of playful design: Creating Game Experiences in Everyday Interfaces, published by Rosenfeld Media. Okay, you say, I'm ready. You are an experienced designer with a long history of creating compelling user experiences. You see the benefits that games can offer to UX design. You like (maybe even love) the idea of building an iPhone game that will serve as a tour of the historic park, a social media game for Facebook to organize a political campaign, or a free-to-use Flash game to teach basic physics on an educational website. You even have a rough idea of what that game might be like. You may be able to get funding for a project within your company or to bring the idea up to a receptive client. You want to start putting your ideas on paper, get developments underway, and speed towards launch. It's a great place to be. Vision and ambition are written into the opening lines of all success stories. But there are some risks to jumping in too fast. The development of the game is very time-consuming and resource intensive. It can be difficult to make a significant change of direction if you discover midway through development that some of your initial ideas don't translate into the great gaming experience you had in mind. So before you start and run with it, you need an example that will steer you in the right direction, steer you naked from the most common mistakes and maximize your chances of success. This is a chapter for you. While the challenges of building a enjoyable game shouldn't be oversimplified, the 10 general guidelines I present here will at least help you refine your ideas and break through some of the common obstacles that might otherwise retain your design.1. Games must be games firstThis point may sound too obvious, but it can be very easy to miss. And there is a lack of frequent undoing of benevolent design. You can design games for teaching and persuasion (as was later discussed), but if such goals in the real world outsize meaningful play, they will undermine your chances of success. First of all, the game should be enjoyed. Schwab MoneyWise It's Your Life game has a noble mission: to convince people to save more money for retirement and other long-term goals. Similar to the original board game, It's Your Life presents players with a range of choices between spending or saving money during a simulated life (Figure 5.1). In the end, players get a letter score that will represent how well they did. Figure 5.1 At every turn in Schwab's It's Your Life game, it's pretty obvious which choice will lead to a winning outcome The problem is that the game's designers were much more interested in nailing their message than creating a real game experience. If you want to win the game, then the right choice at every step is to save your money, not spend any of it. Ever. Anything. This means you can earn an A, the highest Result, if:Skip collegeNever move out of your parents' houseNever get marriedNever have kidsNever trips or take any vacationWork indefinitely after 65Die alone with a lot of money and no one leave it on I'm sure the designers have concluded that people playing through scenarios will choose to do valuable things with their lives, but they set the game so they do nothing with their lives and saving is an energetically safe way to win. Separating what people should do from what is rewarded destroys the intended message. Although your life is packed as a game, it is not dedicated to being as experienced as a game. As much as we all know that testing is absolutely, completely necessary in the design of the user interface, I must emphasize (grammar is cursed) that it is even more absolute, completely necessary when designing the game. While every UX designer's mantra is a test, test, test, it's still worth saying that you really shouldn't neglect to play your game early and often. The reason testing is so important in the development of the game is that most video games are very dynamic experiences. The course of events changes from moment to moment, and every decision a player makes leads to multiple outcomes. Most games are also programmed with an element of chance, so the same player never has quite the same experience twice. Multi-player games throw even more unpredictability into the mix. As a result, the designer does not directly control the actual gameplay, but controls only the underlying system in which the game develops. Without actually watching the game in action, you can't reliably predict how it will work. Mike Ambinder, an experimental psychologist at game developer Valve Software, says this in scientific terms: Every game design is a hypothesis, and every case of a game is an experiment. So aren't you happy to have a background in testing user experiences! Take advantage of it at every opportunity when designing your game. Grab your coworkers, your family, your friends - anyone who is willing - sit down with your game and watch them play it. Don't forget to play it yourself too! Be severely critical. Do you enjoy playing? When it's over, do you want to play it again? Is it frustrating? Is it boring? Is it too hard to figure out what to do? I will talk in more detail about game-specific testing methods in Chapter 8, but it is important that you are ready to put your game under the microscope over and over again, and customize the design to make it more comfortable.3. Games do not have to be for childrenYoung people have much more free time than adults, and many of us remember that they spent long periods of our childhood playing games. It's natural to associate games with children. Video games in particular tend to have a juvenile image, and this is not without reason: 91 percent of children under 17 identify as players, and often have a big impact on which games a Purchases. Large segments of games are on the market according to children, and many of these games have child-friendly mascots such as Pikachu or Mario. The connection between childhood and video games is very real, so it is not surprising that designers often decide to create games specifically aimed at children. But with a large catering market for them, children also have latitude to be very discerning consumers. Enormously sophisticated marketing campaigns among media pushing big budget headlines are already crowding each other out, so you'll find that just getting the attention of a young consumer of the game is a huge challenge. Children often choose a popular title especially because they feel it will raise their social status among their friends. Since these games can be very demanding for their time, your idea must offer a pretty compelling value proposition for them to sacrifice minutes or hours that might otherwise be spent with their walkability choices. Kids take games seriously, and you can't assume they'll play your game just because it's a game. We also know that children are just a minority of people who play video games. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, 82 percent of players are over 18 and 29 percent are over 50 (Figure 5.2). 3 Adults may also be more receptive to playing games outside the mainstream and have more disposable income to spend on games (if you plan to sell it to consumers). This does not mean that children could not form part of the audience of your game. But if your game is obviously aimed a little bit for kids, as announced in breathless starbursts that say Hey kids! and Super cool! you'll turn off a larger segment of players. So consider targeting your game to an older age group while being available to a wide range of ages. Figure 5. 2 Children under 18 represent the smallest minority of game 4 players. The action can be boringCall of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 is an amazing action game. It takes place over tens of hours, during which you encounter waves of enemies exquisitely balanced against the resources available to you, communicate with teammates controlled by artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms, and fight through different locations that provide no unfair advantage to you or your goals. And it's all wrapped up in an interesting and complex story. Call of Duty also made a team for years consisting of dozens of designers, artists and engineers at a cost of many millions of dollars. You're probably not filming Call of Duty. It is very difficult to sustain adrenaline-pumping thrills for a very long time. If you decide to make an action game on a small scale, you will find that you are limited to very simple and short-lived scenarios that resemble arcade-era games. Car racing. Throwing a basketball. Filming a spaceship. Taking on their own, these types of experiences tend to grow tiresomely fast. Compared to the enormously sophisticated action games that people today have access to, Just plain boring. Consider what makes the game quintessentially interesting. You will find a lot of creative opportunities in games that make the player think through interesting choices instead of executing twitch answers. The Hearts card game, for example, is all tiwing at the election (Figure 5.3). What three cards should I pass on to my opponent? Should I play the high or low card? Should I break hearts, or endure to see if anyone else will do it first? If I play clubs one more time, will anyone else put me with the Queen of Spades? Should I try shooting at the moon, or will it prove self-destructive? Each choice is revalued from one trick to another, depending on the changing conditions of your hand and on new information about what other players have already done. While Hearts can be a fairly long game, it can retain the interest of players without any laser blasters or lava levels. You can also invite players to apply their imagination to the game. Mafia Wars, a Facebook game with more than 3.5 million monthly active players,4 just drooling over street crime until it shows any of it (Figure 5.4). To pull off a bank robbery, just select Bank Robbery from the criminal activity menu. The game immediately responds with a message that you have successfully completed the job. Instead of real-time action and 3D graphics, players are offered choices about which jobs to take on, how to invest their earnings, and what personal attributes to develop. There is no limit to what can be achieved in a player's imagination. Figure 5.3 Hearts creates excitement by presenting players with lots of interesting choices Picture 5.4 Mafia wars leaves perverted crime to the player's imagination 5. Incorporate the game into the player lifestyleInk about the real contexts in which people will play the game. Start the design process with the question: Who are your players? How much time do your players have to give the game and how much time would they actually be willing to give? Will your players have to take a break from the game and continue it later? How will your players approach the game? Where will your players be when they play the game? What kind of hardware, software, and Internet access will be available to your players? The answers to these questions can help you make requests for the duration of the game, how the game will be accessed, and the technical requirements of the player's computer and device. Use playtesting to find out if your assessments work. For example, Unisys has developed a number of online games for the company's sales team that will send customers as holiday greeting cards. Customers would get a link via e-mail to an online holiday card with a personal message from the retailer. The card would then open into play, marked with the Unisys logo (Figure 5.5). Image caption The 5.5 Unisys mini-golf game was designed to be a quick, unobtrusive diversion from the workday because the players were adults receiving these emails at work, Games could not require significant investment of time to reach the end, so they were all designed to last less than five minutes. And since many players would access the game while sitting in standard office booths, where they would usually have computer speakers turned off to avoid irritating collaborators in the common space, limited sounds in games were not essential to the experience. Compare that design with Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, a home console game that features cutscenes (in-game movies during which the gameplay is suspended) that can run for as much as an hour and a half and can come at any time during the game (Figure 5.6). Games like this require real commitment from their players, and are only suitable for audiences with abundant time off. Figure 5.6 Individual cutscenes in Metal Gear Solid 4 could run an hour and a half of FarmVille smartly seems adaptable to the player's lifestyle. Players need to devote only a few minutes at a time, during which they can plant seeds for crops that need different amounts of real-world time to harvest. Raspberries last only two hours, so they are useful when a player can log in several times in one day. Eight-hour pumpkins fit well just before and after the working day. Crops like artichocies take four days to harvest – better for players who can only apply now and then. Players are asked for some commitment, as fully grown crops that have been un-invested for too long and cost the player gold coins. But strained growth rates allow for a time commitment to be under player conditions (Figure 5.7). Figure 5.7 The strained crop harvest time at FarmVille allows players to decide how much gameplay they can fit into their lives on 6 October. Create a meaningful experiencePlayers must apply their time, concentration and their problem-solving abilities to the challenges their game throws at them. There should be a point to these efforts, the payment for their investment. When the game is over, players should come in feeling that the experience has been meaningful. For the game to be a meaningful experience, players need to have a sense of control over the outcome. If players win or lose, does that prove anything about their skill, knowledge or wit? Or does it all come down to a coin toss? Many games involve some element of chance, putting parts of the experience out of player control. The random element adds interest to the game by putting the outcome in doubt. But meaningful play at least gives players a hand in the dagu chance in their favor. A great example is the Game of Cards Killer Bunnies, in which success is ultimately determined by a card selected randomly from the deck (Figure 5.8). The player holding the match for that card (magic carrot) is declared the winner. No player has any control over which card is selected; It's a completely random choice. But the gameplay gives players some control which the relevant cards hold. Players compete for carrot cards during the game, and crafty players will work to keep the largest number of them before the game ends. Even for players who don't win, the game says a lot about their mastery of strategy, risk tolerance and other people's reading skills. Players move away from the game knowing they have control over their chances of success, making the experience meaningful. Figure 5.8 Players exercise control over the outcome of Killer Bunnies by acquiring carrot cards, increasing the likelihood that they will catch randomly selected magic carrot 7. Do not cheatBecause video game rules are implemented inside the black box of computer circuits, there is a special temptation for designers to take shortcuts by allowing the game to cheat. Giving the system more information or control than a player has, for example, can be an easy way to build challenges into a game. Power in a video game is unbalanced between a computer and a player, and the player has no way to challenge the computer or hold it to account. Don't be tempted to cheat. This is a poor choice of design because, first, people will be able to tell what is happening (oh yes, will); Secondly, cheating is a serious offense in games, and players have an instinctive aberuction towards it. Suppose you're designing a blackjack game that matches a player against a computerized merchant. As a designer, you must write a script to control the merchant's processes. You want the dealer to be a little hard to beat, but not impossible. One simple way to create a challenge would be for the script to choose which card from the deck will be drawn next. Then you program the merchant to choose a card that will either win or lose and put in a randomizing function so that two out of every three times he chooses the winning card. This strategy also creates an easy way to allow players to change difficulties, so on harder settings, the dealer will choose the winning card four out of every five times, while on a lighter environment it wins only one out of every three. Since the deck of cards shows face down on the screen, how would anyone even know you were cheating? After playing the game several times, you will see how (Figure 5.9). The dealer will do seemingly irrational things, such as hitting 20 and magically drawing an ace. The deck will not seem random, as certain cards will appear early, and others will appear only after these preferred cards are drawn. After a few playthroughs, these patterns will become painfully obvious. Although a player can't catch a computer in an act of cheating, these telltale artifacts are hard to disguise. When players realize the game is cheating, they will make the ultimate winning move by shutting it down. Figure 5.9 If winning computers consistently look like this, players will come to recognise the pattern of cheating even though they have no way to prove it The better approach is build a simple, rules-based AI. Do not be too intimidated by the idea of building AI; Ultimately it's just a computer program like any other. In this case, all you need is a line of code that tells the dealer to hit 16 and stop at 17. It is important that the computer is subject to the same rules as the player. Some things work the way they look like they should work. If you show that the deck is interfering, randomly select the full series of cards and place it in a sequence that cannot be changed. Don't let AI know which card follows or what cards are in the player's hand. Don't abuse the inherent advantage you have as a game designer.8. Skip the manualThis best way to convince people that the game is worth playing is to let them jump in and try it out for themselves. You can understand people's decision to open the game as the clearest signal possible that they are in the mood to play, not to sit back and read about how to play. Relying on written instructions presented at the beginning of each new game only creates an obstacle to entering a time when you want to be the most player-like. Instructions can also become a crutch, used to justify unconventional and insiparable choices in the interface. Finally, the instructions for the game can be very difficult to follow. Each game interface introduces a new vocabulary and a new set of controls. These things can be difficult to imagine abstractly beyond the dynamics of gaming. So the best place to teach people how to play the game is right there, inside the game itself. Tutorials have become one of the most famous patterns in games. Minimalist, timely instructions are even better (Figure 5.10). Ask yourself: What is the smallest amount of information a player needs for the first move? Then give nothing more than that; you can come up with another move when the time comes. The game is learning. If people are interested in the game, they will be motivated to fill in the gaps themselves by playing it. Figure 5.10 In the Bri Lance's Kanyu game, detailed instructions on how to play are cleverly embedded directly in the game's story and keep in mind that if your game needs robust instructions for people to play it, it can be a warning sign in itself. Your game can be too complex, and some simplification may be fine.9. Let the game make sensePlayers need to understand why things happen in the game to feel they are controlling it. Your skills as a UX designer here will be very valuable, because this point is basically about the intuitiveness of gaming. In the design of the game, building a reasonable experience relies on some key understandings between designers and players. When players lose, it should be clear why they lost. If it's not, then the players won't be able to do better in the game by avoiding the same mistake in the future. If this happens again, the players will begin to feel they have been unfairly punished. When players win, it should be clear why Won. If not, then it will be difficult to replicate the victory. A win that doesn't make sense can also cheapen the experience, leaving players feeling that the standards of the game haven't been as rigorous at all. Any effect should have a clear cause. When something happens, players should be able to understand why it happened. Foldit, discussed in Chapter 1, is a wonderful example of the mechanics of the game applied to the problem in the real world. The relationship between cause and effect, however, is often unclear in play. Twisting the protein side chain can create conflict, but twisting a similar one in a similar way can earn you points. Trying to understand why these actions have different results can be tremendously frustrating. The object of the game should be clear. The players need to know what they're working on. A clear goal gives structure and meaning to experience. This allows players to formulate strategies and gives them a reason to get involved in the game. From the beginning and during every moment of the game, players should be aware of their ultimate goal. Players should always know what actions are available. Visible or aural cues should be provided at all times so that players know what they can do. Adventure games, a popular genre of the 1980s, were plagued by failures of basic intuitiveness, as they often made players guess what arcade actions might be available. Using a blue key to open a blue door makes sense for most people; using your sports fan as a slingshot to knock out a guard (as was required in Space Quest II) really doesn't.10. Make it easy to try again When you're down in weeds constructing your game mechanics, it's easy to focus on the ideal case where players play straight through from start to finish. It makes sense to author the game as a continuous narrative, with beginning, middle and end. But thinking about your game in these conditions also risks losing sight of how it will actually be experienced in the real world. Don't forget to step back and think of the game as a discontinuous and iterative experience. When a player loses, it should be easy to cycle back into the game and try again, immediately and effortlessly. Even large commercial games with multimillion-dollar development budgets make the usual mistake of forcing a long-lasting screen to load into that anxious space between loss and second attempt. Stretching that time space to the second, third or twentieth rounds inevitably attempts the player's patience. Games such as Braid and Prince of Persia: Sands of Time are a smart way around this problem, allowing players to fast-forward time to a safe point before a losing moment. Think, too, about the amount of work the game requires players to invest in it and whether players would be frustrated if they lost and had to start all over again. That could be enough for some players to decide it's not worth getting back in the game. Consider giving players the option to save Progress. Consider giving players an incentive to play the game again after they finish it. Some common ways to do this include: Simple performance yardsticks, such as ratings on carnival power testCollectables and achievements earned during the game, and the sum of how much the player managed to getScore tracking and online leaderboardsPeriodic releases of fresh contentNew features and privileges that become available only on consecutive playthroughWhen people repred the game, they signal a personal appreciation for their design. Tracking the number of video repetitions is one of the best general measures of your game's success. Play to your strengthsThese 10 guidelines will help you get started, but a lot of challenges lie ahead as you set yourself around designing and developing your game, and you'll need to learn how to manage them as they develop. The final advice is to play to your strengths. If you have a background in the design of conventional user interfaces, use the resulting skills and techniques by all means. Wire reshaping, user testing, fast prototyping, storyboarding, flowcharging and other core skills translate well into game design and can help you get through the inevitable rough patches. When the game design problem has confused you, trust your instincts and ask how you would deal with a similar problem if you didn't design the game. More often than not, you will find that you can point in the right direction. This is an edited excerpt from Chapter 5 of playful design: Creating Game Experiences in Everyday Interfaces, published by Rosenfeld Media. 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