IT'S NOT DONE TILL THEY SAY IT'S DONE

The Who, What, Where, When, and Why of Playtesting
by Teeuwynn Woodruff

I've known Tey for a quarter century, and can say that she's one of the most pleasant people you'll meet. This masks one of the cruelest streaks I've ever seen. When it comes to playtesting, she is ruthless. Where most of us feel a need to help a confused player, or just explain one little rule they're missing, Tey will let them flounder in pain, merely noting their distress on a form. She is right to do so. From decades of experience, she knows how to extract the most useful information from a playtest group, and will share that with you now. As proof of my above statements, she will start by crushing your spirit.

What I'm about to say may offend some of you reading this essay—especially those of you who have just created a shiningly perfect game that is bound to set the gaming world on fire and make you a kabillion dollars. But, please, hear me out. Your game, and possibly your wallet, will thank you for it. So, here it goes: *Your game's not as good as you think it is.* At least not until you've had people who don't hold it—or you—near and dear to their hearts play it and agree with you.

How can you make your game the best it can be? One of the most important ways, and the one most often skipped by new designers, is by playtesting it. And playtesting does not end with having your friends and family members play the game you've told them how to play. Unless you plan on including yourself in every game box, that kind of playtesting has little value.

So welcome to the who, what, where, when, and why of playtesting. We'll work our way backwards through that list. By the time we're done, you'll have a better idea of how the playtesting process works and why

it's really important that you do it.

Why should you playtest?

Who knows a game better than the person or people who created it? Nobody. A game is like your child. You've created it, you've seen it through challenges, and you love it. But, also just like your children, your love can blind you to your game's faults if you're not careful. And even if your game truly is brilliant, fun, and engaging, if your rules are complicated, confusing, and wrong, your audience may never even get to the point of playing your game.

A playtest can help you learn a great deal about your game's strengths and weaknesses. When you create a game, you play it, you live with it, you work with it, you become very familiar with its ins and outs. In fact, you become so familiar with it that you often become blind to the stumbling blocks others might face when they first play it. For example, in one of the many playtests we conducted to figure out the best way to teach *Magic: The Gathering* to new players, we watched as players read the rule that says you should tap your land for mana to use it. We all knew what tapping for mana meant. Everyone knows what tapping for mana means, right? Right. It means touching the land card firmly with your index finger a couple of times. D'oh. It turns out a visual reference of someone turning a card to the right and getting one of the appropriate color of mana goes a long way in teaching the game term "tap."

Playtesting is a crucial tool allowing you to step back from your game and see its flaws and strengths through new eyes—eyes of people who have never played the game before. In other words, the eyes of the consumer. Without this sort of objective playtesting, even experienced game designers can stumble on rules or gameplay elements that cause new players to give up on what is an otherwise excellent game.

When should you playtest?

There are several different times you should consider playtesting a new game. Each type of playtest has a different goal.

A **developmental playtest** is a playtest before the rules are finalized. That sort of playtest aims at understanding if the gameplay itself is what you want. These playtests don't worry about conveying *how* to

play the game; instead we're concerned only with *if* the game plays well. This first type of testing happens once you have game mechanics you're happy with. The least formal way to test is to get some people you know, tell them how to play, and see how it goes. You might start and stop several times, tinkering with the rules as you go. You can uncover some basic problems with rules and game mechanics through this method, but that's about it. You're too close to your game, and your friends and family are too close to you, to do more than this.

A **hand-taught playtest** is a better way to test how the game itself is playing. Here, you leave your friends and family behind, and recruit people in the target demographic. (Meaning the people your game is made for. And if you say "everyone," you need to start playtesting *stat*.) Then you or someone else who knows how to play hand-teaches those people how to play. Even if you are the person teaching the game (and if you have little or no budget that will probably be the case), tell the playtesters you don't have anything to do with the game's creation. Why the fib? People are more comfortable giving critical feedback to someone if they aren't worried about hurting their (meaning your) feelings.

Even if you do some good hand-taught playtesting—and I encourage you to do so—you'll want to switch to the **blind playtest** when the game is very close to finished. A blind playtest involves a number of people in the target demographic for the game, with no association to the game or its creators, playing that game as if they had just bought it at a store (or as close to that as we can make it). You should have a set of rules laid out with graphics, a mocked-up set of game components, and mocked-up packaging to put those components in. This will get you as close as possible to the "real world" of someone buying and attempting to play your game. (There's a more thorough type called a **double-blind playtest**, where even the person running the session doesn't know how to play the game.)

A final form of playtest is a **focus group playtest**. A focus group is a carefully selected group of people in your target demographic. (This may involve parents of your demographic depending on the main age of player you're going for.) A focus group can provide a lot of useful feedback on the look and feel of your product and its packaging. As with

getting your rules right, getting the look and feel right will improve the odds of getting your game into the hands of the people who will love it.

 Now, all these types of playtests cost money. You can spend as little as a couple pizzas and snacks, and putting your testers' names in the playtesting section of the credits. Or you can spend hundreds of thousands on complete testing including in-store product shelf-testing and the like. Since most readers of this essay are newer to game design, I won't get into how to conduct those larger-scale tests—although they give an advantage to the companies who can afford them. In the next section we'll talk about appropriate (or necessary) compensation for playtesters and other playtesting costs.

Where should you playtest?

From now on, we're going to concentrate on later-stage playtesting, because if you can only afford to do one type of playtest this is the type you should do. You have to see what reaction new people have to your game and if they can play it from the materials you're giving them.

 So, where does this playtesting take place? For most games, the ideal setting for playtests is either the consumer's home or a focus group facility. People's homes are particularly good for family games or party games. Focus group facilities are great because they are neutral, the people who work at these places can recruit the playtesters using your criteria, and they provide a place for you to watch the playtests without interfering (behind a piece of one-way glass). The facility will also tape the sessions so you have records to look back on.

 Of course, focus group facilities and recruitment grows costly quickly. You'll need to budget something between $5,000 and $50,000 to go this route. Getting professionals to neutrally recruit your participants and having neutral grounds to watch the playtest can reveal numerous flaws and strengths of your game, rules, and packaging. Finding out a crucial mistake in a focus group facility can make the difference between success and failure. You might discover that one of the main terms you are using in your game is offensive to a certain segment of the populace—something we saw happen at Wizards with the TCG originally named *Jyhad.*

 To use a focus group facility and their recruiters, find a couple of

places in your area and ask for references—particularly ones involving games and entertainment. Find out their menu of costs and determine which services you want to use. (For example, you could just choose to use their facility, or use both facility and recruiting.) For running the playtest, you should get facilitators who are familiar with the game and can ask questions after the testers play to elicit what they liked, disliked, and found hard. You should not be that person. You should be behind the mirror concentrating on the playtest. Companies usually use market researchers for this position, although focus group facilities can provide someone as well.

 If you can't afford a focus group facility or your game is best tested in a home or other local environment, you'll have to go in the field to test. You can hire a market research firm to recruit testers, or you can try to do so on your own. If you recruit, get away from folks who know you. Place an ad on a college information board, ask around at after-school activity places, or get friends to post on Facebook to their friends (as long as they don't reveal they're friends with the person who made the game). The exact method depends on your pocket and who you need as playtesters.

 Once you recruit playtesters and get to the location, if you are involved in the playtesting, make sure you tell the testers you had nothing to do with the game design and are just here to test it. That will help the testers feel freer to share negative as well as positive feedback.

What should you playtest?

Alright, let's say you're at some nice family's home. They've invited you in to playtest the new family game you've been perfecting. How do you go about getting valuable and truthful information from them?

 First off, be sure to bring enough playtest materials—mocked up as close to what you plan to sell as possible—for the test. If the game comes in a box, make the box. Have a set of backup materials just in case. You'll also want to bring materials to take notes, a way of videotaping the session, and post-test forms for everyone involved to fill out. (Usually these forms involve rating the gameplay, ease of learning, rules, and so on. Basically, anything you're trying to find out from the playtesters should go on that form.) Finally, you'll need a release form which gives

you legal rights to use the tapes and responses for your informational purposes and swears the playtesters to secrecy until the game comes out. You can find templates for these forms online, but you may want to consider a couple of hours of legal time to draft a basic form for your company.

Hand out the release form and secrecy form, and have the playtesters sign before you begin. Children need parents to sign for them. After that is done, the facilitator hands the playtesters the box and leaves or moves away from them. The facilitator should *not* answer any questions about the game or game materials while the testers play—or attempt to play. And neither should you or anyone else there. This is not the time to defend your game or correct mistakes. Seeing where people stumble over rules, mechanics, and visuals is what you're here for. So be quiet! (If you're conducting a developmental playtest, you will tell the players how to play and correct any play mistakes, but don't comment on the game itself.)

Once the playtest is done (either in a given time frame or until the playtesters have completed the game), pass out the post-playtest sheets. Once testers fill out this sheet, the facilitator (and possibly others) should ask testers questions about what they liked and didn't like about the game, as well as what they found problematic and anything that helped them understand the game better. If you saw places the testers played wrong, make sure to tell them the correct way to play and find out what led them to the error. Some errors are matters of omission. For example, when playtesting a new soccer TCG in England, we found that simply telling kids to draw a hand of cards wasn't enough—that led to players picking up their entire decks! We had to be more specific —shuffle your deck, put it down, and draw seven cards off the top. But many errors come down to poor formatting, poor—or no—graphics, poor or missing examples of play, and rambling text. Nobody likes to read rules, so your goal is to get the game across correctly with as few words as possible. If you can say it with a picture, do so.

Finally, pay the playtesters their consideration (often $25-$100 each) if you are doing so. And make sure you note their names correctly for inclusion in the credits.

After the playtest is over, go back and rework the game—then playtest

again. Ideally, you'll have a set of very clean playtests, where the players enjoy themselves and learn from the rules, before shipping the game.

When testing, try to have three to twelve different groups play your game.

Very often, you will find one or two groups that do something or play in a way that's very different from most people. Having a larger pool of playtesters helps you find out more consistently where the current strengths and weaknesses of your game lay.

Who should you playtest with?

You should playtest with people in the target demographic of your game. Is your game aimed at 6- to 8-year-old boys? Then get them in for playtests. Do you have an adult party game? Have a playtest with friends in one of their homes and see how it goes. Does your game contain an electronic device? Then be sure you have the devices you need with the game loaded for testers. (If the technical elements of the game aren't ready yet then you'll want a series of "screen" pages. The testers show the facilitator which "button" they are pushing and the facilitator hands out the next "screen.")

If you don't playtest with the people your game is targeted at, the playtests won't help much. And remember, if you're playtesting with children, you'll want to get the parents' feedback too—after all, they'll probably be the ones buying the game.

So, you have your demographics and you've got materials for the testers ready to go. Time to recruit the testing troops! You can recruit from places your ideal demographic are likely to be. If girls 7 to 10 is your target, you may want to approach after school activity locations, sports games, the library, and the like. For college students who like sports, post information near the sports parts of the campus, try to get in their newspaper or online information page—and be sure to tell them who matches your criteria and how much you will pay them right off the start.

Getting playtesters for your game wouldn't be too difficult if all you needed was warm bodies. The issue is getting testers in the proper demographic who are outgoing, articulate, and analytically minded enough to express any problems they are having with game…. Yeah, all

that's true. But going beyond the niceties, you really have to determine if someone is open to directly criticizing the work—as harshly as they feel it merits. Also, you'll probably want some players who get pleasure from breaking the game. They play by searching for loopholes and amorphous rules they can use to their advantage—often pissing off the other players—but just as often showing you some major problems you need to fix before debuting your game.

In order to find a solid array of playtesters who have the characteristics you want, you'll have to conduct demographic surveys. These surveys ask basic information about the person. But for a game test, you'll likely want to know things like: What games do you play? How often do you play? What game is your favorite and why? What makes you pick up a game at a store? What can make you give up on a game?

In your post-playtest survey, in addition to quizzing the testers about specific aspects of your game and your rules, ask the testers to name their favorite games again. Also, ask how likely they are to purchase the game (1/2/3/4/5 scale).

I could write a book on the ins and outs of playtesting, but probably the most important thing to remember is to *stay neutral*. If the testers know it's your game or if you sit across from them rolling your eyes or making verbal comments, your data is tainted. And that won't do your "baby" any good when it's time to kick the game out on its own in the real world!

Teeuwynn Woodruff *is a game, puzzle, and events designer in Sammamish, Washington. At Wizards of the Coast, Teeuwynn worked on games like Dungeons & Dragons, Magic: The Gathering, Pokémon, Harrow, Betrayal at House on the Hill, and Duelmasters. Her puzzles appear in magazines such as Games and Wired, as well as in alternate reality games. As creative director for Lone Shark Games, she has created games and immersive events for companies such as Microsoft, Sony, Lucasfilm, Turbine, ArenaNet, and Southpeak Interactive. She can't even count the number of hours she's spent watching playtests of all kinds.*

AMAZING ERRORS IN PROTOTYPING

by Steve Jackson

The phrase "Steve Jackson games" (lowercase "g") defines two things: games designed by Steve Jackson, and games published by Steve Jackson Games. Those two sets are not coterminous, but there are a whole lot of games in both. Steve has made and reviewed more prototypes than just about anyone, and oh my lord, the stories he tells…well, they're right here. There are many ways to make good prototypes. Read on for the ways to fail spectacularly at that goal.

You may hope to sell your game to a publisher. You may already have a publisher…you may already be a publisher…and you now hope to sell a great number of copies to hobby distributors or chain stores. Either way, you know that it would be a mistake to send your game to press, fill your garage with shipping cartons, and then start marketing the game using actual samples.

Ahh….You do know that, right?

A prototype is an advance copy of a game, created before the game goes to press. Prototypes may be "working," intended for evaluation by playtesters and potential publishers, or they may be "display" prototypes, with finished art and components, intended for the eyes of distributors or chain buyers.

Some display prototypes have beautiful covers, boards, and components, but the rulebook is unfinished or absent. The buyers at Toy Fair want to see your meeples, but they don't care about your rules! The publishers displaying these prototypes may not even have designed the game yet! If the concept (a licensed property, perhaps) and graphics attract interest, then they'll create a game…

This essay deals with working prototypes, because that's what I

know best. If you want to make your working prototype beautiful as well, more power to you. At conventions like the appropriately named Protospiel[29], one may see amateur[30] prototypes that look like real, finished, professionally published games. But to present a game to a publisher, you don't need a beautiful prototype. You just need a clear, playable one.

I have seen some prototypes that were not good, and now we reach the meat of the essay. As you read, you will laugh, but my goal is not to make you laugh. My goal is to reduce the odds that you will do these things, because if you do, your perfectly clever game may languish forever in obscurity.

Less is more

The designer was concerned that we would object to the number of counters in his game, so he sent a prototype with fewer counters. The shortage of pieces made the game unfinishable.

Yes, it was annoying that we could not finish the game without supplying a few more bits. But that was not the deal-killer. We're a game company; we have lots of game pieces around. The deal-killer was that it first seemed that the designer didn't understand his own game…and, when we heard his reasoning, it was obvious that he was trying to psych us. He was withholding information about the gameplay from his potential publisher! No, thank you.

More is less

The designer specified that the game worked for 2 to 8 players, and sent setup rules and components enough for an 8-player game. It turned out that all his games had been with 3, 4, or 5 players. Never once had it been tried with 2 players, or with more than 5.

Again, the designer was withholding information…in this case, he was making claims not backed up by playtesting. Ironically, for us, 3 to 5 players is the sweet spot. If he had started by saying "It works for 3 to 5, and might work for more, but I have not tested it with more than 5," we would have thought that quite reasonable.

Anachronistic components

The designer had created new cards based on his own last round of

playtesting, but the rules had not been updated to match the new cards, leading to utter confusion on the part of the people who played it in our office.

This told us that the designer was sloppy, and called into question his claim to have extensively playtested his game. Whenever you revise one component of the game, you should review your other components to see if they need updating.

Hey, let's put in elephants! Elephants are cool!

The designer had some great ideas for new cards (or so he thought) and added them after his last playtest, and then sent us the untested cards.

This is really just another way to make the same mistake. If you represent to the publisher that the game is tested, make sure it's all tested. In this particular case, if the designer had included a separate packet labeled "Do Not Open This Unless You've Played the Game and Liked It," and explained what he was doing, we would not have objected. As it was, he waited for us to point out problem cards, and then explained, "Oh, I didn't test those!" We were not amused.[31]

If a thing is worth doing, it's worth overdoing

The designer paid a professional artist to illustrate the cards for his prototype.

We've actually seen this more than once. It becomes a problem when we really hate the illustrator's style. Had the designer done the best he could and submitted playable components built with desktop publishing, we would have been free to imagine whatever graphics we thought best. His prototype drew more attention to the (bad) art than to the design. And in one case, the cover letter made it clear that the designer really liked the (bad) art and expected the publisher to reimburse him for the (high) art expenses and use the (bad) art!

Of course, this can work both ways. Twice, I have bought designer-illustrated games because the art really grabbed me. Of course, neither of those games has yet seen print; there may be a moral here.

I can play this with my eyes closed

The designer playtested his game with wooden blocks, but saved money by sending us flat semi-transparent counters, which got lost on his boldly and jaggedly colored map. He was then surprised that we had trouble playing.

Another designer sent three types of cards, intended to be different decks, but indistinguishable when turned upside-down.

"Working prototype" means it works. Make it easy to use. There's a reason that Kinko's carries several colors of cardstock.

This is so wrong it cannot be summarized in a single cute subhead

The designer decided the setup instructions should be modified, so he edited his map in squiggly ballpoint pen before sending it to us. Sadly, we could not read his handwriting!

Where do I start? Just don't do this. Don't do anything like this. If you are so sheltered and/or self-centered that you cannot realize that someone else might not be able to make out your squiggles, you should not be trying to write rules for other people to play. You should become one of these guys who spends 20 years writing complex rules for a game that nobody else will ever see.

Federal Express loves you but we do not

A designer shipped us a prototype in which the game boards (plural) had all been laminated to half-inch hardwood planks.

Another designer shipped us a tiny cardboard pack of cards packed in a huge annoying carton of peanuts.

This really illustrates how subjective the evaluation process can be. Neither of the above examples made it any harder for us to play (at least, once we cleaned all the peanuts off the table). But both of them left us saying "What is this guy thinking?" In general, you don't want to leave your publisher thinking, before he even tries your game, that you are some kind of nut.[32]

Or he could have written another

thousand words

The designer appended a note to the rules saying, "Some illustrations would be useful here."

Yes. Yes, they would. Quite useful. In this case, they would probably have gotten us to try the game at least once. And perhaps before he submitted it elsewhere, he created those illustrations. I am mildly curious as to whether he included this note because his playtesters asked for illustrations, but I wasn't curious enough to ask.

The moral of the story

All of this boils down to:

- A working prototype must include everything it actually takes to play the game.
- A working prototype must not include anything you have not tested thoroughly.
- A working prototype should be about gameplay. Don't try to dictate the art or the marketing!
- Above all, and summarizing everything else: A working prototype must be playable, legible, and user-friendly.

Steve Jackson *is the founder and president of the uncreatively-named Steve Jackson Games. His designs include Ogre, Car Wars, Illuminati, GURPS, Munchkin, and Zombie Dice. He intends to retire from his ill-gotten Munchkin gains, and keep right on creating games. He waves off all insinuations that this is not "retirement."*

Endnotes

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29 Protospiel (www.protospiel.org) is, to quote the website, "annual get-together of amateur and established game designers to test and promote nearly-finished game prototypes." There is now a Southern spinoff, Protospiel South (www.protospielsouth.com).

30 I use amateur, not in the modern and condescending sense, but in the original meaning of "one who does a thing for the love of it rather than for money." An amateur can display as much skill and commitment as any professional; for instance, most Olympic athletes are amateurs. In game design, amateurs may be able to spend less time per week than

professionals, but they are unhindered by deadlines, and the results can be remarkable.

31 Yes, I am well aware of *We Didn't Playtest This At All*. It is a work of genius, a thing of beauty, an achievement for the ages, a clever deconstruction of the game designer's art and craft, and now it's been done. Find your own shtick.

32 That's my shtick, and it's taken.