

A Jersey for Helmutt

A Videogame Designed to Communicate with Audiences

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ABSTRACT

Computer games are established within communication media to share information to audiences. I outline such project with a team of developers and a museum who created an app: A Jersey for Helmutt. Players create a character's jersey through integrated and guided play. The app follows an exhibit on the baseball jersey's history, engaging historical information through choice and feedback systems. Playtesting—testing focused on user experience—allowed developers to learn if they conveyed needed information in an enjoyable experience for a broad audience.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **User centered design**; • **Media arts**; • **Interactive learning environments**;

KEYWORDS

cultural institutions, videogames, communication design, playtesting

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I explore apps used in communication design and use a project with a museum and game design program as a case study. I worked in a team of four for our client, Worcester Art Museum, to create an app for an exhibit on the baseball jersey's history. I argue that this app, A Jersey for Helmutt, provides key rhetorical support to engage users with the exhibit's educational information. First, it was designed knowing it had to engage to a broad audience, which contradicts traditional communication design. Second, it uses a character-based approach to convey instructional and historical information. Third, developers playtested to learn if they effectively conveyed information.

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2 CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS' DEMOGRAPHICS

Cultural institutions have a broad demographic, due to their public service, who they tailor their communication methods to [1]. They consider their audience through these spheres: economic class, age, gender, and race. Communication theory stresses specifying who is the targeted audience [2]. By using games as a communication media, developers are challenged in embedding information into an experience without breaking its "flow", the state that players enter in an uninterrupted, immersive experience [3]. Developers working with cultural institutions must understand that the experience must reach multiple demographics since cultural institutions cannot afford multiple platforms [1]. Through these communications presentations, institutions create games that engage with their audiences to build stronger relationships [4].

3 PLAYERS LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE AND INTERACTION

As players immerse themselves in a game, they form opinions of the characters leading to relationships [5]. In A Jersey for Helmutt, players positively reacted to the dog mascot during playtesting. Though it is difficult to create ethos connections without character interactions, Helmutt's cute art style compelled playtesters to read information. It was important for the game's design to be character-based rather than standard UI based, because the client wished for players to have a relationship with the exhibit and museum. We borrowed the interface from McCloud's influential work on comics and literacy [6]. Players may solely enjoy reading all the factoids or designing jerseys, and both are valid experiences in receiving supplemental information.

4 PLAYTESTING COMMUNICATION METHODS

Playtesting focuses on player experience toward an experience goal, allowing developers to gain feedback on communication methods. Rather than continuing to practice user testing, communication designers can think about what experience may best lend itself to convey information. We used playtesting to learn how players viewed the game as well as if our communication was effective. In total between both sessions, we playtested with a total of 20 individuals spanning from elementary school children (9 to 12 years old), college students and recent graduates (18 to 24 years old), young adults and middle-aged adults (25 to 54 years old), and elderly individuals (55 years old and older), which allowed us to decide how much information is needed to convey directions, whether the language used is understandable, and understand how

testers were translating their experiences. Younger players refer to the elementary school students while older players refer to players above the age of 18.

Initially, results showed that younger players needed less guidance to play our game, while older players needed more. During playtesting sessions, two developers observed the player's reactions as they "thought out aloud", which allowed us to understand the tester's decisions. Playtesters voiced confusion towards UI buttons, specifically what the symbols meant, and a lack of overall guidance. This was confirmed when playtesters described the game as mainly fun and creative, but confusing. Playtesters enjoyed the experience, but any confusion came from a lack of communication conveying direction both visually and written. Entering our second polish phase, we addressed these concerns by changing UI buttons to better match their purposes and adding initial directions. The UI buttons were redesigned to better describe what actions were accessible when the button was pressed and the mascot, Helmutt, introduced the basic mechanics of the app to inform players how to interact with the app. In the second playtesting session, we tested with older playtesters to see if our communication improved. With these clarifications, older players enjoyed the experience more since they had the needed guidance. We used playtesting to understand whether our game conveyed educational information within an experience that engaged multiple age groups.

5 CONCLUSION

Communication design in interactive media has special challenges and affordances, and needs to be explored both as an isolated medium and in its larger context. When collaborating with sponsoring institutions who have broad audiences, playtesting can determine whether the experience and information conveyed fit within the experience and was understood by players. By designing the overall experience and improving based on audience, cultural institutions can craft a better relationship through interactive, exhibit features like apps. Using both communication design methods as

well as playtesting, designers and developers can iterate their experience in order to best resonate with their audience. The field of communication design needs to expand to include nontraditional rhetoric tools such as apps and video games, as communication methods. Both apps and video games provide an engaging experience in which players absorb and respond to the information provided through the experience. Playtesting and user experience design can be used in different fields, like hands on learning in schools or simulations for job trainings, to ensure that key information is conveyed to its audience. With the opening of the exhibit in June 2021, we will soon evaluate the app's design within a larger context of artifacts, curated exhibits, larger cultural and civic trends (this exhibit accompanies a minor league baseball team, affiliated with the Boston Red Sox, moving to Worcester), and individual play.

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