Playtesting Educational Games with Children: Preserving the Fun

Mike Christel
christel@cmu.edu
http://www.etc.cmu.edu/engage/
DARPA ENGAGE ETC Projects

- Scott Stevens, PI with Bryan Maher, Sam Collier, Matt Champer, Ricardo Merchan
- Emphasis: Science games for 5-11 year old children
- Development: 5 ETC graduate student projects plus current effort (Sam, Matt, Ricardo running workshop this afternoon)
- Partners: CMU Human Computer Interaction Institute, Sesame Workshop
ETC Project Contributors

• Parent page with links to contributions: http://www.etc.cmu.edu/engage/
• Illuminate, Fall 2011
• Sci-Fri, Spring 2012
• Torque It!, Fall 2012
• STEMPOWER, Fall 2012
• IMPACT!, Spring 2013
• PuppyBot Rescue (current effort)
First Half of Semester

- Energy ball grows and turns yellow

- Gems arbitrary
Iterative Changes

- Energy ball absorbed, Gems light up
- Gems regularized
New goal visualization
Nov 9 – ETC
1 girl
Age 6
Playtime: 1 hour

• New goal visualization works
• Energy ball visualization works
• Developmental differences
• Two-handed approach

Nov 10 – Children’s Museum
10 kids – 9 boys, 1 girl
Ages 2 – 8
Playtime: 5-25 minutes
Nov 19 – ETC
11 kids - 7 boys, 4 girls
Ages 5-8
Playtime: 45 minutes

- Game is fun!
- Level difficulty is appropriate
- Rotation video in tutorial is too fast
- Tutorial works well with and without voiceover
- Narrative understood and played key role in keeping children interested
Dec 8 – Children’s School
7 kids - 4 boys, 3 girls
Ages 4-5
Playtime: Limited to 10 minutes per child

• Intro makes sense
  • Crash landing a little too fast
• Mini-game:
  • Kids want to click the arrows
• Best reception ever
  • More intriguing to kids
  • Love hitting the alien
RumbleBlocks, Lessons Learned 1

Narrative helped attract young players, keep them interested, and motivate them to achieve success.
Scaffolding was subtle so players not offended by the help; it blended with the narrative (energy balls that guided placement of tower blocks to energize ship)
RumbleBlocks, Lessons Learned 3

• Remember surprise, pleasure, “juiciness”
Science Content for Remainder of Discussed Games

• Balance scale and sum of cross products
• Determine whether a scale will balance, given a particular configuration of weights on each side of the fulcrum

Objectives for Remainder of Discussed Games

Help learners progress through 4 increasingly sophisticated mental models identified by Siegler:

1. Learners only pay attention to weight, not distance.
2. Learners also consider distance, but only when the weight is equal on both sides.
3. Learners consider both weight and distance, but when the cues suggest different outcomes, they guess.
4. Learners consider both the amount of weight and distance of weights from the fulcrum; if the cues suggest different outcomes, they use the sum of cross products rule.
Playtesting: Beanstalk

7 Playtests

57 students
Beanstalk: Socio-Emotional Learning Focus Added

• Jack/Jackie: plays role of peer/friend to the player (e.g., reminds player of goal; directs player to ask birds for help)
• Chicken: eager to help (like young sibling), positive and excitable
• Crow: also likes to help, but preens when correct and likes to take credit for player’s activity (sharper than Chicken but not as eager)
Beanstalk Lessons Learned

• Respecting importance of narrative: keep beam balanced so Jack/Jackie can return teddy bear to creature above

• Providing scaffolding blending with narrative: increasingly complex problem states in later levels occurs through active pod slots and water inventory
RumbleBlocks 2.0

Working with CMU HCII to make stronger assertions about educational game

Ages 4-9 + 237 Players
Players are better at identifying stable structures.
RumbleBlocks 2.0

Players build towers faster

Kindergarten
First Grade
Second Grade
Third Grade

Before
After
RUMBLE BLOCKS 2.0

Accuracy in Block Removal Levels

With contrasting cases: 25% increase

Players learn through contrasting case levels
WEICHUAN TIAN | JINGYI FENG | MENG HUI KOH
MATT CHAMPER | QIANRU MA | SEAN BRICE | SAM COLLIERS

ADVISORS
SCOTT STEVENS | MIKE CHRISTEL
Testing (Sesame Workshop)

- 11 children. 7 1st graders. 4 2nd Graders, 11/26/2012
- User interface was unclear
- Turn making was not clear
- Sharing is hard (some children resisted, emphatically!)
- Fatigued from confusion in UI
- Game titled “Teeter Totter Go”
Changes Motivated by Playtest

Streamlined interface (make clear what actions constitute a turn)
More Changes from Playtesting

• Black outlines and contrasting colors to highlight foreground
• Music adjusted (longer track, volume lowered)
Follow-Up Playtesting

• 12/3/2012, one week after test at Sesame Workshop, with 15 first graders
• Majority breezed through the game
• Enjoyed inquiry
• Enjoyed and understood the game
• Understood the need to share to succeed
Teeter Totter Go Playtest Video
Playtests! (Slingshot vs. Tractor Beam)

- Feb. 13th
- 6 Pre-K Students; Children’s School
- 3 boys, 3 girls
- Both mechanics work, need to pick one
Playtests!

- Feb. 27th
- 8 Pre-K Students; Children’s School

- 4 boys, 4 girls
- Most players asked for more levels to play
Playtests!

• Mar. 13\textsuperscript{th}
• 21 2nd grade students, 7-8 years old
• Testing for fun
Playtests!

• April 13th
  • 6 Playtesters, 4 girls and 2 boys
  • Narrative well received

• May 3rd
  • 17 Playtesters, K-3rd grade
  • Game Well Received
PuppyBot Rescue

- Current effort, building from other games
- Developed with Sesame Workshop
PuppyBot Rescue

- Developed in concert with Sesame Workshop to do the following:
  - Emphasize Siegler balance principles, dropping out socio-emotional learning
  - Use HTML5 (createjs) to prep for pbskids.org deployment
  - Optimize for touch: increase interactivity beyond the level established by IMPACT! team for its *Helios* game
  - Adapt game level progression, because what works for 5 year olds won’t work for 11 year olds and vice versa
PuppyBot Rescue Playtests

- Conducted by Sesame Workshop (as were tests with Teeter Totter Go game) with children in New York City
- Conducted in Pittsburgh area schools as well
- Dozens of children tested in grades K-3
- Young children struggled, older ones were bored before adaptive level progression was added
- Latest test (last week!) with 18 children shows adaptive strategy is working as expected
Summary

- ETC DARPA ENGAGE projects producing games to teach science concepts to children
- Testing with children helps to preserve the fun
- Important elements include:
  - Interesting story narrative
  - Gentle, adaptive level progression (attention to problem flow)
  - Scaffolding that fits with narrative
  - Frequent interaction points, emphasis on touch-optimized for tablet usage
  - Remember the surprise, pleasure, juiciness (often via art and sound)
Rumble Blocks is an educational game about saving several aliens by building stable structures in a sandbox environment. The aliens’ mothership was damaged and they have to retreat to several different planets while they wait for another one to come save them. In the meantime, the player must build towers by manipulating a series of blocks to help them recharge their spaceships by building stable towers that capture the necessary energy. This game is designed to teach children ages 4-11 how to build and identify stable structures.

Rumble Blocks has been formally evaluated with several hundred guests. In our research, we have found that this age group has difficulty in understanding principles of stability, specifically making correct predictions and explaining them. In order to discover whether learning is occurring in-game, we implemented “Contrasting Cases” levels, where the player has to select which tower is more stable - these have shown that enhanced learning of principles of stability and balance is occurring. Rumble Blocks has shown to foster learning and engagement.

Rumble Blocks can be played at: http://rumbleblocks.etc.cmu.edu/
and is also available on Learning.com and CS2N.org
Beanstalk is an educational game about balancing a beam at the tip of an ever-growing vine to return a teddy bear to the monster on the moon. Beanstalk focuses on teaching balance to the player, as they plant flowers to counter balance the bugs on the beam. The design is based heavily on research done by Carnegie Mellon University professor Robert Siegler on balance experiments and drawn from the National Research Council’s Framework for K-12 Science Education and Pennsylvania’s Academic Standards. Beanstalk is highly configurable, allowing anyone to change the balancing problems and other gameplay variables. Built with Unity3D, it’s available for download or across major web browsers with the help of the Unity3D plugin.

Beanstalk has been formally evaluated with several hundred guests. Through playtesting, we have discovered that Siegler’s findings have been confirmed. Young kids pay attention to weight and tend to ignore distance of items on a balancing beam. With this in mind, we built Beanstalk to be adaptive, allowing players who master one of Siegler’s rules to continue sooner than those who do not. Beanstalk has shown to foster learning and engagement.

Beanstalk can be played at: http://beanstalk.etc.cmu.edu/ and at Learning.com
Helios follows the adventures of students aboard The Ark, a space station that houses the school for gifted children, “Helios.” The game is designed to teach children (ages 6-10) how to solve balancing puzzles, ranging from circuits and bridges to goo and putting out fires. The design is based heavily on research done by Carnegie Mellon University professor Robert Siegler on balance experiments, and drawn from the National Research Council's Framework for K-12 Science Education and Pennsylvania’s Academic Standards. Helios’ is highly configurable, allowing anyone to change the problems and level type to suit varying age groups. Having been built with ImpactJS, it’s available to play across major web browsers without additional plugins.

So far, Helios has been tested with 49 guests with no noticeable player fatigue after 25 minutes of play. The narrative and mechanic were well received by both boys and girls through a wide range of ages. Helios is currently being updated to fit in with The Electric Company narrative and style in order to possibly be broadly deployed on PBSkids.org.

Play Helios at: http://www.ete.cmu.edu/projects/impact/?page_id=18
Works best with Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox
DARPA’s ENGAGE
program seeks to develop interactive
game-based technologies for pre-k through 3rd grade
students to inspire them to become future innovators by
educating them in STEM skills. To get the target audience
to play, these games must meet the highest standards for quality and
entertainment. The goal is to create games that improve over time by
analyzing play across a large population of anonymous users.
As a result, ENGAGE hopes to not only produce valuable game-based
teaching tools, but to also provide insights into teaching
techniques that can be applied to future products and classroom
STEM learning. Our games can be found at: etc.cmu.edu/engage
Summary

• ETC DARPA ENGAGE projects producing games to teach science concepts to children: http://www.etc.cmu.edu/engage
• Testing with children helps to preserve the fun
• Important elements include:
  – Interesting story narrative
  – Gentle, adaptive level progression (attention to problem flow)
  – Scaffolding that fits with narrative
  – Frequent interaction points, emphasis on touch-optimized for tablet usage
  – Remember the surprise, pleasure, juiciness (often via art and sound)
• Afternoon workshop with Sam Collier, Matt Champer, Ricardo Merchan will demo games and let you play!