

# Usability Testing and Video Games: Designing for Fun

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Video games represent a multi-billion dollar industry. In fact, growth in recent years has caused the revenue of the gaming industry to surpass that of the film industry. With all this revenue coming in, competition in the gaming industry is stiff and crowded.

To increase the chance that a game being created is designed well (by end-user standards), that it is enjoyable and that ultimately it will sell well, game design companies should consider video game usability testing. It should be noted that, while some standard usability testing procedures and doctrine, such as those used with productivity software, are applicable to video game design, many are not. In fact, a large portion of productivity software usability ideals are in direct contrast with their use in video game design.

## **Productivity Software vs. Video Games**

On the surface, productivity software and video games share one need... the need to be useable. Neither Microsoft Word nor Grand Theft Auto would be much use to customers if they lacked the ability to be used efficiently. This, however, is where most of the similarities end.

Take, for example, ease of use. This is a basic design principle and is adhered to (or should be) vehemently in productivity software. In terms of video games (specifically gameplay), a game that is easy to use will be uninteresting. Imagine a game where every time a dot on the screen changes color, you press a button on the controller. After 15 trials, "You Win" appears on the screen. This would represent a very useable, but very boring game. Video games must be designed to challenge the user.

Consistency is another design characteristic which differs between video games and productivity software. Would it be acceptable if the "Save as..." option in Microsoft word routinely moved from menu to menu? Of course not! Adding this lovely feature would surely irk more than a few users. Now imagine a video game in which the same actions are repeated over and over in exactly the same manner. Again, this game is most likely useable, but extremely boring. It seems the saying "Variety is the spice of life" can be attributed to games as well!

## **Usability Testing and Video Games**

Usability testing for video games can take two forms. The first is what you might typically think of as usability testing. This type of testing looks at things like the menu system, the controls and the interface. Standard practices can have at least some bearing on the assessment and design of these video game components.

The second type of video game usability testing is designing for fun. One might ask the questions “Isn’t fun intuitive?” and “Wouldn’t game designers, being gamers themselves, know what how to design a fun game?” The answer to these questions, quite simply, is no.

What is considered “fun” by one person may not be considered “fun” by another. This subjectivity makes it difficult to design specifically with fun in mind, but there are ways to circumvent this problem. I, personally, am not a huge fan of real-time strategy games. Engross me in a 60 hour role-playing game, however, and I will be extremely happy! I use my own gaming preferences to make a point about “fun”... usability testing for “fun” in video games should be done with gamers who enjoy the genre of game being tested.

The second question deals with a tricky issue, the game designers. However, their opinion is only the opinion of one person, one gamer. And, truth be told, this opinion can be a bit biased. This is not to say that designers are wrong. What it does mean is that, while a designer might think that a certain design implementation is fantastic, end-users might have a different opinion.

This was exactly the case when Microsoft’s Gaming Usability Lab (GUL) was testing its flagship Xbox game Halo. The designers of this game wanted players to use all of the many weapons available in the game. However, during playtesting, they noticed that the users stuck with only one or two of the weapons instead of taking advantage of them all. The designers brought the game to the GUL and explained the situation. After some testing, it was determined that, while there was a large selection of weapons for use in the game, the power and range of the weapons did not really differ. The players indicated that, whether with the pistol or the shotgun, enemies across the playing field could be disposed of.

To fix this disagreement between what the designers wanted and what the users reported, the usability specialist at Microsoft’s GUL suggested two changes. First, and most obvious, they suggested that the power and range of the weapons be modified so that each one was unique. The second suggestion was to change the color and size of the aiming reticule on the screen to indicate when an enemy was within optimum range of the currently held weapon. The designers implemented both of these changes.

This is only one example of the usability testing that was conducted on Halo. These changes, along with the other changes made after extensive usability testing, helped to make the game not just good, but great. This is reflected in the fact that Halo has sold over 4 million copies and is still considered by many to be one of the best games for the Xbox game system.

## **Conclusion**

Usability testing on video games, when conducted by a usability specialist familiar with how this type of testing differs from standard usability testing, can be an invaluable asset to the game’s design. And while no direct correlation can be made between final sales and the improvements made by the usability testing, using feedback from the end user will certainly make the game more enjoyable for them. This alone can lead to more positive recognition and better sales for the game.