

Chit-Chat

a postmortem of a board game

Foreword

Background

I'm Filip Coulianos, level designer and a general game enthusiast with a background in the actiogame genre of computer games. Chit-chat is a board game me and four fellow students at the Futuregames Academy developed during a period of three weeks as an introductory course to computer game development. It was as much a team building exercise as it was teaching us how to make fun games.

Chit-Chat proved to be very successful and fun and in this post-mortem I will discuss why I think the mechanics worked as well as discussing problems we had during the game design phase. I will also discuss the game and its development through the eyes of a computer game designer and how that differentiated and affected the process of making a physical game.



Image from the manual, we tried to go with sort of a 80's cheesy "happy family" look just for the fun of it.

The game

Game mechanics

Chit-Chat is a social game designed for people from 15 to 65 years in all genders and backgrounds. It fits very well in the description as a “family game”. It’s designed to be played during fun social occasions such as parties and other indoor events.

During a players turn she is being presented with a set of rules printed on cards she has to follow while doing a speech about a random subject for 30 seconds without hesitating. If she manages do to this she scores points depending on how difficult the speech was.

Some of the rules has to be followed by the player at all times, even when it is not hers turn, and some only applies in certain situations. When a players notices that any other player has broken a rule, she can pling on a bell informing that a rule has been broken and by doing so scoring a point.

Example:

A player is being given a speech card in which she has to inform the audience about the relation between the Chaos theory and a potato for 30 seconds while jumping up and down. Another player has a card saying she has to mimic everything the performing player does, and a third one has a card saying she has to applaud after each player has made her speech. Should a player fail, anyone can hit the bell, inform that a rule has been broken and score a point.

The range of the rules printed on the cards is very wide and applies on very different occasions of the game, some can be difficult and some easier. To balance this a player who fails a rule has to discard it, and a player who in her turn succeeds in having her speech is being given a new set of rule cards. This is to keep the game challenging for everyone.

As the game progresses more and more rule cards are being presented to each players making the game more and more difficult and ends as all speech cards put on the table have been read.

The game

Design choices we made and why it worked

In the very early stages of the development we had planned for much more things than just speeches. We had plans for charade and other things a player could do when it was her turn, but as we started to prototype it didn't feel necessary to make the game more advanced. All other stuff got canned without any real discussion about it, it just felt natural as we started to focus on just making the game focused on speeches.

We also had plans to design a board with more of a traditional look in which each player had their own markers that they moved around and could land on different spots that affected the game and the players choices in different ways. But as we started to brainstorm ideas for a gaming board we found that moving markers around a board really put the focus from what the game was really about and re-designed the board to help out with organizing all the rule cards instead.

We also planned for a "versus mode" where players had to discuss a subject back and forth until one of them lost. This was canned as early play tests we did with people not participating in the project really didn't like the concept.

One thing that we realized very early on was that even though much of the fun factor of the game was in the hands of the players and the situations they created themselves, it was equally important that the rules of the cards were designed in such a way that they created the hilarious situations the players would laugh at.



Image from the manual. A top-down view of the board prototype

The game

In early testing we picked subjects to talk about by having a laptop by the table with wikipedia on hitting “random article”. This was in itself fun and worked quite well, but when we came to the phase of printing our own cards we realized we could go further and give all the subjects a crazy twist. Instead of just being random subject we in some of the cards picked two very obscure and strange topics and forced the player to make up a connection between those, such as: “Talk about the relation between the birth of Jesus Christ and cookies.” we also included cards that implied the speaking player had a long secret she now had to reveal to the audience such as: “Tell your fellow players about your secret absolute kidz collection”. The effect of having these fun and somewhat provocative subjects made players burst into laughter just by reading them, which really helped out creating a good mood even before the actual speeches had started. We spent a lot of time just coming up with good ideas for cards and cutting those which didn’t do the trick.

Without realizing it we designed the game in such a way that each player only does three speeches before the game is finished, but it still kept very fun to play. Players has to “stay in character” and follow their rules at all times, and bust other players even when its not her turn, keeps all participants very active and makes the game much more dynamic.

It’s heavy focus on social and theatric nature puts pressure on players ability to not take themselves too seriously. We noted that some players had difficulties with this as they didn’t wish to participate due to fear of ridiculing themselves, but I guess any social game would suffer from this.

The process

The group and the process

One thing we did really well was to keep prototyping the game for a very long time until we actually started to make the prototype nice to look at. It wasn't until last week we started to move from scratch books for scorekeeping and stickers as card decks. This made it very easy for us to keep improving the game and I believe that really helped the end product. However as we decided to move to the final design of the game we really had to work day and night to meet the deadline. It was almost like the group had split into a day shift and a night shift by the end of the project. It was hard work and we worked until the very end. One very interesting thing I noticed was how rapidly the group's productivity declined as we worked past the usual 8-hour shifts.

Working together in the same room really kept us from being productive since we preferred to chat instead of get the job done but as we started to split up the game into smaller tasks and handed it out to smaller groups of two, things started to get done. So to keep as productive as possible one should have as few meetings in a full group as possible and start handing out tasks to everyone as early as possible.

Another thing we nailed very well was to test the game with people continuously. This really helped us cut the bad parts of the game and find weak points we had to improve. When designing the manual we learned a lot just by letting people read the rules and have them then play the game. It then became very obvious which parts of the rules that were difficult to understand. In the end the rules got completely rewritten three times before we felt happy with them.

Final words

Looking back I was actually fascinated by how similar the production stages were between designing a shooter game for the PC and designing a family board game. Almost all of the common dos and don'ts seem to apply no matter what medium you are working with. Personally I felt it was extremely valuable to work with something that was very far from the genre I am used to. This forced us all to focus on the fun factor, rather than chasing clichés, overdo small details or get stuck in the exporting swamp. Designing a board game can be done with much less resources, time and required much less technical knowledge than a computer game, but is still equally as fun. I believe it should be a common practice for any game designer to keep designing board games every two or three months.