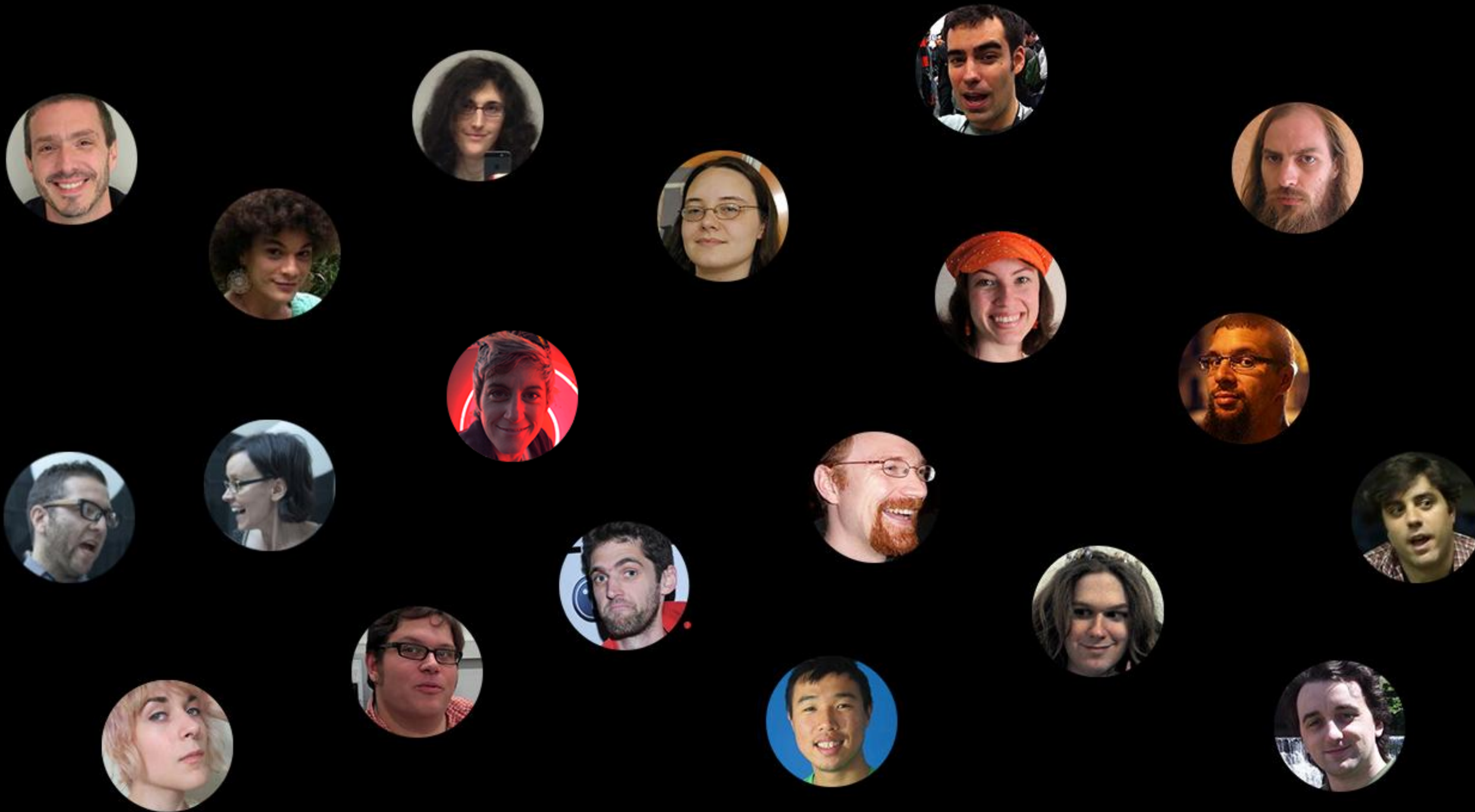# How Indies Playtest

Naomi Clark · PRACTICE 2013

halfrobot.com/indiesplaytest.pdf

When do you start playtesting?

"Playtest before you think you are ready. Is it too early for you to playtest? If the answer is yes, then playtest anyway."

Eric Zimmerman & Nathalie Pozzi (*Sixteen Tons*, *Interference*)
...from "The Rules of Playtesting" (unpublished)

"Don't playtest very early on. You can but I don't get a lot from it. Early controls or programmer visuals or being a toy instead of a game tend to throw people off. They'll comment on superficial items or get hung up."
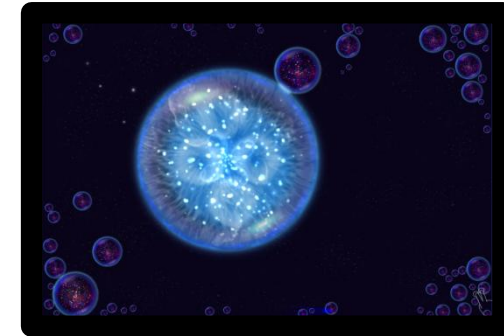
Dan Cook (*Triple Town*, *Leap Day*)

"At a stage 75% of the way between 'idea in my head' and alpha. We really need a name for that."

Robert Yang (*Radiator, Souvenir*)

"For *Osmos*, we waited until the controls felt close to finished. Shoddy controls break the feel of an otherwise potentially great game."

Andy Nealen (*Osmos*)

Methodical Time-Slice Testing

EXPERIENTIAL TARGETS

| 30-seconds of fun | 5 minutes **of fun** | 15 minutes of fun | 30 minutes of fun | 1 hour of fun | 2 days of fun |

Almost all internal tests with development team
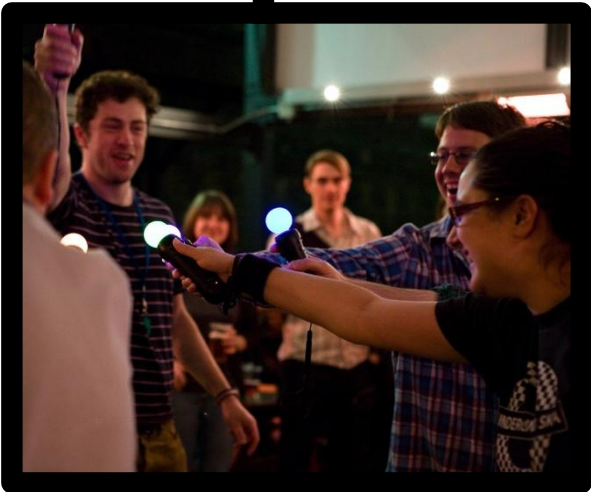
May be more like toys than games

Start bringing in external players

Look for intuitive learnability (no tutorial)

Look for unexpected opportunities: skill, interesting dynamics

"Living tests" after this point, with the same player population over time (longitudinal)

Freeform Playing with Others

CONCEPT EXPLORATION

PUBLIC FIELD TEST

REFINEMENT

PROMOTION

Open brainstorming without directed questions: more like *"What kind of play emerges from messing with accelerometers?"*

Key suggestions from influential people: *"This could have huge potential if more could play it."* (decision to move to PS3)

UI Tweaks similar to formal playtesting: *"When the move controller goes red signaling you're out, it should flicker out like a candle."*

Public playtests at events (or in forums for digital games). To test is to promote

Where do you playtest?

"Testing at conventions: a biased sample, but can be close to your target audience. Cons: hard to get them in a nice test environment."

Dan Cook (*Triple Town, Leap Day*)

"DRUNK PEOPLE are a lot like CASUAL PLAYERS. Use this how you will."

Chelsea Howe (*Alone in the Light, FarmVille*)

"I tend to find places where showing a person a game is the *worst* possible thing you can do.

I like to see how people react when their attention is strained; people ordering drinks, music playing, people coming in and leaving.

If they still play it, I know that the game is solid and can compete for attention. It's like the attention olympics."

Kurt Bieg (*Circadia, Even Up*)

Techniques for playtesting

- Don't talk while players are playing, especially not to explain or correct.

- Do ask players to talk out loud about what they're thinking.

- Listen to what players say about problems they had, not solutions they come up with.

Live iteration (for the bold!):
"It's a lot of pressure coding with 10 people watching you, but it also helps keep them entertained during the downtime."

Josh DeBonis *(Killer Queen, Meriwether)*

"Attach a trail renderer with a very long decay time to the player: a poor man's heatmap. Over time, you see patterns."

Robert Yang *(Radiator, Souvenir)*

Have variations of gameplay ready:
"Variations give you options if something breaks down, and they let you do comparisons. Change as little as possible each time to understand better the exact effects."

Eric Zimmerman & Nathalie Pozzi (*Sixteen Tons, Interference*)

Do Talk: Iterating Out Loud

"I found that [my pre-planned tutorial] made people less likely to try out the new attack style.

So I changed my pitch by doing a more targeted demo, basically telling the player to try the new hook, then explaining the inclusion of the traditional gameplay mechanic after the player had tried and succeeded."

Shawn Allen *(Treachery in Beatdown City, Max Payne 3)*

How do you deal with feelings about feedback?

"Playtesting is for MASOCHISTS. It is SO PAINFUL but SO REWARDING... the hell of people HATING your game NOT GETTING IT or the WORST: JUST NOT CARING AT ALL.

But one day the tiniest change you made will make all the difference and players will just GET IT and you'll want to cry tears of joy.

Don't do too much playtesting at once. IT will kill you."

Chelsea Howe (*FarmVille, Alone in the Light*)

How do you deal with feelings about feedback?

Going to school might help:

"I had one guest critic literally try to make me cry. 'You have a lot of nerve thinking you might become a designer...'

Yeah, I've got a thick skin."

Joe Mauriello (*Das Racist, Fong*)

"Mostly, it is about not running away, no matter how tempting. Face it, get your dreams beat out of you and then fix what you can with as much creativity and wit as you can muster."

Dan Cook (*Triple Town, Leap Day*)

"If the playtest reveals *anything* whether good or bad, I consider the playtest a success. It's much better for my mood to expect 'results' and not 'it's going to be great!' as that's just setting myself up for disappointment."

Andy Nealen (*Osmos*)

The Zen of Playtest

"I take a day or two off to let the ideas swim around in my head without thinking about them too consciously.

I return to the making part after I have had that day to let ideas bounce around freely and unobserved -- subconsciously.

When I go back to the notes from the playtest, I feel like I can see them in conversation with the ideas I have been subconsciously playing with -- like two people talking."

Colleen Macklin *(The Metagame, Budget Ball)*

Who to test with: Other Devs?

"Game designers give the worst feedback.

They'll tell you how they would make it instead of if they would play it or if it's fun, which is the only thing that matters."

Kurt Bieg (*Circadia, Even Up*)

"I don't think I'm great at engineering feel, so I'll ask devs who have great feel for tips as to what to do with feel. I may not ask them about narrative or anything else."

Robert Yang (*Radiator, Souvenir*)

"[Developers] have tastes and analytical thinking skills that are not common in the broader populace."

Dan Cook (*Triple Town, Leap Day*)

Who to test with: Kids?

"Kids are great. They will be honest and blunt.

It's not uncommon for them to give short curt answers: it's boring, I don't get it.

Stress to them that what they have to say is important and they will go into more detail."

Joe Mauriello (*Das Racist, Fong*)

"Test with children, but don't necessarily listen to everything they're saying.

We had one boy who said, 'oh, this [world] is clearly in a girl's head.' That interested us because we didn't make it very clearly feminine or anything. Why would he say that?

'Because everything is so messed up.' We gave him the side-eye and moved on."

Robert Yang (*Radiator, Souvenir*)

Who to test with: Communities of Players?

"You don't need a budget of money, but I think you do need a 'budget' of fresh / interesting ideas that are exciting to people.

'Amazing playtester' is actually a personality type. Some of them are already the BEST, most active beta testers of other games."

Keith Burgun (*AURO, Empire*)

Establish communities of practice for developers and players:
"In the absence of money to pay for QA, the IF community set up if.game-testing.org—an institution to help new authors find people to test their games."

Emily Short (*Versu, Counterfeit Monkey*)

"I did ALL my playtesting through this tight-knit webforum. People kept commenting after release that the game felt really comprehensive, or they'd found this amusing easter egg where the game recognized you could confuse the mechanics.

I was able to get this kind of coverage because I had really exhaustive playtesting, so I knew that 'edge case' was there to stick in an easter egg for."

Andi McClure (*JumpMan, Markov Space*)

Who to test with: Strangers?
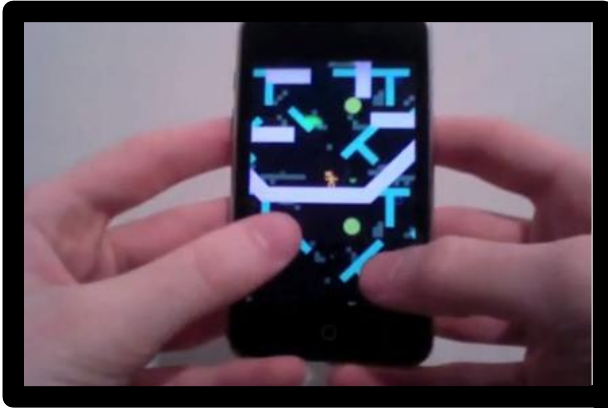
"The iPhone version was supposed to be something with more mass appeal, so I found people who "weren't gamers" to play.

If I couldn't get them to give the iPhone back, then that meant I was on the right track."

Andi McClure *(JumpMan, Markov Space)*

"He tapped all over the place, each tap a deafening validation of my mistaken design, eventually hitting a button. He insists on swiping and touching in all manners. Finally he looked up at me and said, 'Sorry, my heart's just not in it.'

That day I learned not to be a Captain Ahab.

The days of the silent non-explicit handholding tutorial were over. Time to tell people what to do.

Kurt Bieg *(Circadia, Even Up)*

Who to test with: Experts?

Consensual Torture Simulator
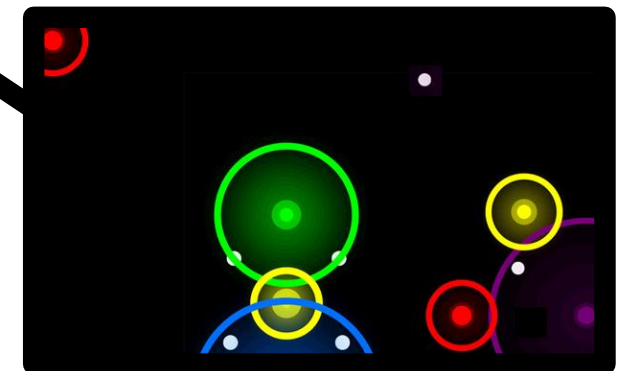
"I obsessed so much about possible responses that I wasn't surprised to see some of the most common reactions to the final game.

I had already decided how to make my game... knowing that those responses would be out there.

The people I asked for feedback earlier were experts in the themes I was tackling... the most likely to see issues I *didn't* anticipate."

Merritt Kopas *(Conversations with My Mother, Consensual Torture Simulator)*

Is Frustration the Enemy?

"Don't interpret player frustration as a design failure.

IT'S OKAY IF SOMEONE GETS STUCK FOR A WHILE.
You don't see what's going on inside their head, so what's really going on might not be as static as it looks.

IT'S OKAY IF SOMEONE GIVES UP.
They might come back later; if something's hard you shouldn't expect a player to get through it in a single session.

IT'S OKAY IF SOMEONE NEVER GETS THROUGH AT ALL.
A game doesn't have to work for everyone."

Michael Brough *(Glitch Tank, 868-HACK)*

Must Games Be "Playable?"

"The game was set in its ways, knew what it wanted, and I felt incidental. I could play along, or leave. So I left. Its content disturbed me, to be completely honest.

Within the hours that I spent away from it, I reflected on my inability to play, and decided it was a rigidity in myself, feeling a lack of control and agency within someone else's world."
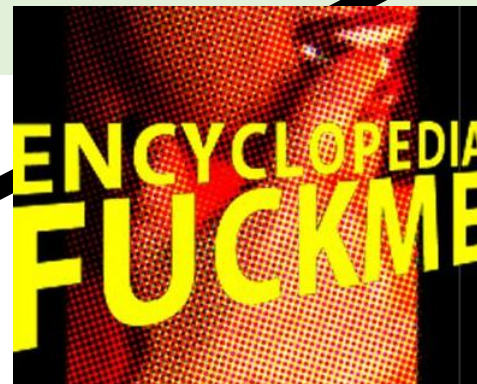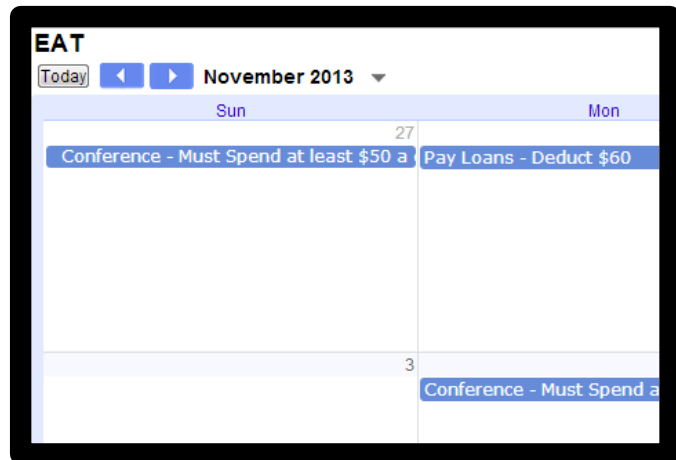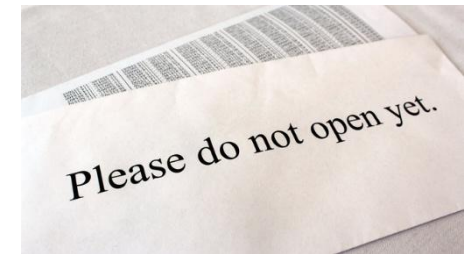

lose/lose (Zach Gage)

Train (Brenda Romero)

A Game for Someone (Jason Rohrer)

(Anna Anthropy)

"I want to propose that not only do games and play exist without players, but sometimes, it is preferable to purposefully make them auxiliary or absent from craft and interpretation.

Just to be clear, I don't think there should be a blanket destruction of player-centric experiences."

Mattie Brice *(Mainichi, EAT)* …from "Death of the Player"

On Critique and Feedback

"ALL FEEDBACK IS NOT CREATED EQUAL. If you treat all feedback as equal you are essentially doing DESIGN BY COMMITTEE - need we explain the failure of this route? OR EVEN WORSE: catering to the lowest common denominator."

Chelsea Howe *(Alone in the Light, FarmVille)*

"A lot of people are afraid to critique, and many that do, critique from a bad place, with bad intentions. One of the most valuable, rare things in this life is someone who will give you honest critique because they want your art to be the best it can be."

Porpentine *(howling dogs, Ultra Business Tycoon III)*

"A lot of AAA games feel tested to death. Everything is sanded off and smoothed down. Portal 2 was the product of players telling them to make a Portal sequel and Valve tabling their promising experimental prototype.

Henry Ford said: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.""

Robert Yang (*Souvenir, Condom Corps*)