Team Smol

SMOL

Cyberspace Liberation - Computer-Network-Takeover-Operator delivers Net Neutrality Triankolos Edition

Playtesting

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Playtesters

We conducted a total of 15 playtest sessions with a mixed bunch of testers. Some of them had very little experience playing games in general, while others were quite experienced and some were even game developers themselves. Our testers came exclusively from our personal surroundings.

Procedure

During our playtests we first had the player play the tutorial level, followed by the main game while we watched them. Once the players decided they were finished with the game, we conducted an interview with the player with some guiding questions. We opted for an interview rather than a survey since we knew we would only get a rather limited number of testers and therefore it seemed to provide more valuable feedback.

We conducted some of our playtests in person, while others were done remotely. In the remote cases, we had our playtesters stream the game and we talked and listened to them via Discord. However, in the remote playtests we were not able to get other cues, such as body language, from our testers as not everyone had a webcam or sufficient bandwidth.

Observations and Feedback

Currently one of the largest issues with our game is the tutorial. The tutorial is very hands-off, does not properly explain some important parts of the game, and ultimately confused all of our testers to some degree. One problem was that when players entered the tutorial they were met by a prompt telling them how to move. We also had two enemies in the scene so the player could learn that they can shoot at enemies and that enemies die. Unfortunately, those enemies started shooting at the player the second they spawned into the level, which caused players to sort of panic. They expected a relaxed tutorial but felt they were immediately thrown into combat.

The next issue was that when we tried to teach the players about abilities, it is never explicitly explained that they are presented with a selection. Players then got confused that several abilities seemed to have the same button prompt. For some of the players, it became clear that they were presented with an ability selection once they entered the actual game and had the selection screen in front of them.

Our tutorial also resembled more of a sandbox in which players could try out the mechanics rather than a guided tutorial. Because of this, players were unsure whether the tutorial was over or whether there was something left to do. It also didn't help that there

was no direct route from the tutorial into the main game. Instead, players had to return to the main menu and then had to start the game.

The next big issue that emerged during playtesting was our user interface. The color scheme of important UI elements, such as the player's health bar, is currently very similar to that of the UI background. Players, therefore, had issues finding the health bar in the first place and, once they had found it, it was problematic to keep track of it. UI readability was a problem in general. We had icons that indicate which abilities the player currently has selected and when those abilities are on cooldown we desaturate those icons. However, these icons are very small, so players had issues seeing them in the first place and the cooldown effect was even less visible.

The ability selection menu was also not as clear as it should have been. While some players understood that it was a selection screen, others thought that it was merely an overview of the abilities. Most likely this results from the visual difference between active and inactive abilities being miniscule. It was also not clear to players how to proceed from the selection screen to the level, because the 'Confirm' action was indicated by an 'X' button. On top of that many players had already forgotten what some of the different abilities did after the tutorial. It was also noticeable that those players that understood the selection, for the most part, didn't change their abilities after their initial selection. Some did another playthrough to try out a different set of abilities, however.

The feedback we got for our abilities was rather mixed. The dash, for example, was very well received, used a lot and players had a lot of fun with it. Therefore, the teleport was barely used and most of the players that used it thought it was inferior to the dash.

The hack ability was considered very useful and fun by some players, while others thought it was utterly useless. We think in part this was because the game does not communicate the range the abilities had. Therefore, some players thought the range of the ability was very low rendering the ability useless and others had a more accurate model of the range.

The slow grenade was rarely used as the game did not provide proper feedback where the grenade would land and the projectile also had a fixed range which made it even less useful. The weapon boost was considered by some players as way too powerful, while others thought it was too weak to justify being input locked for a second. The second life ability that revives the player on death was generally considered to be a good choice, but players never realized when the ability was triggered. In part, this was because the UI did not clearly communicate the player health bar and on top of that there is no visual feedback or animation that the ability was triggered.

Players also had mixed feelings on difficulty. Somewhat experienced players had no issues getting to the boss fight without dying and some of them even defeated the boss on their first try. Those players thought the game was too easy and felt the game was dramatically less satisfying. Players with less experience playing games, or at least this type of game, struggled more with the game and often needed several attempts to defeat the boss. For

some of these players, the game was too hard, but those that did eventually defeat the boss had a more satisfying experience for it. Many of our players also did not realize that the final fight was in fact a boss fight and thought it was just another type of enemy. In part, this was because the boss did not have a special health bar at the top of the screen or a name, which some players expected from a boss fight. The players also weren't expecting a boss fight already, since there were only very few levels leading up to it, and those were generally considered quite easy. Generally, players wished for more levels and for those levels to contain more enemies.

Overall, players enjoyed the game quite a lot and would have liked it to last longer. Many of them kept playing until they beat the game and many of those that easily beat it played it a second or a third time. Almost all of our testers thought that the controls were very smooth and most of them enjoyed the visuals and the music.

Some of our players also would have enjoyed more narrative framing at the beginning of the game and after they defeated the final enemy.

Feedback Gems

Some of the feedback we received was particularly interesting or inspired some ideas on how we could make our game more interesting.

First, the model of our boss enemy contains a sphere that is encased in a transparent pyramid. Two players thought the pyramid was a shield and they first had to defeat the minions spawned by the boss. They expected that the pyramid would then vanish and the boss would become vulnerable. Although that is not how our boss fight currently works, we think that it would make for a more interesting fight.

Second, we have one type of enemy that connects to other enemies of the same type with a laser. If the player entered that laser they would receive damage. However, the situation that the player entered the laser never arose. One player was unsure what the laser connection did. They thought it made the enemies stronger or maybe they had to destroy it in a certain order. We liked the idea that it would make the enemy stronger because currently, this certain enemy is fairly useless.

One player also suggested that we drop health packs at the end of a level so that players can regain some of the health they lose during the level.

Planned Changes

For the final release, we are planning to overhaul the tutorial so we can better introduce players into our game. To that end, we will break the tutorial into several sections, each of

which will teach the player one component of the game and after that, the player is led directly into the main game. This way we can control the flow of information to the player better and can reduce stressful or overwhelming situations, such as enemies shooting at the player the second they enter the level.

We also need to rework various parts of the user interface. Most importantly, we need to make the health bar more readable to the player. The ability icons need to be larger and the cooldowns need to be communicated more clearly, i.e., with a top to bottom gradient that indicates how much longer the player needs to wait for the ability.

We are going to add a few levels leading up to the final level and tweak the difficulty so we have a nicer progression in our game. We are also considering adding a difficulty selection so inexperienced players and experienced players can have a similar gameplay experience if we have the time.

The abilities need to be tweaked as well. Some, such as the Hack and the Second Life, simply need to provide more feedback to the players. The slow grenade on the other hand needs to be reworked to a larger extend so it can be a useful ability.

We also need to add a winning and a losing screen to the game. Currently, the player is simply returned to the main menu. One player even thought the game crashed because of this.

If time allows we will also add some narrative flavor at the beginning and the end of the game to frame it a little bit better and provide a little more context to the player.