@SengFoongLim - Sen Foong-Lim (Board Games; Belfort, Junk Art, Korra)
@TTVoid - Jessey Wright (Board Games; Korra)
@firestormink - Jonathan Lavallee (RPG and Board Game; J'Accuse, We Used to Be Friends)
@RobinDLaws - Robin Laws (Writer and Game Designer; Gumshoe)
@PartyHatGames - Pam Walls (Organizer of Proto T.O.)
@JonGilmour - Jon Gilmour (Board Games; Dead of Winter & Wastelands Express Delivery Service)

What is playtesting, how do we do it, and what's the importance of it.

Jon, how did you find all the play testers?

I participate in Reddit quite a bit, and I used to use social media to gain play testers. I had 100 groups play testing Dead of Winter before it came out. It matters that you participate in communities and are visible, and people will help you out. We also have a local weekly playtest group of 6 people.

Pam, you are the leading force behind Proto T.O. How does convention playtesting differ from weekly playtesting?

Conventions have a formality to it where you can give a questionnaire and people will fill it out. While meetups are less formal. Dedicated, concentrated, accelerated feedback, I find, comes from conventions.

Robyn, speaking of RPGs, what do your sessions look like?

When I work on a new design, the objective is to have a fun game that works with an in house group before ever reaching out beyond the local group. The first set of notes typically will collapse the game, and so get the game working really well. Then, after that, get a document that can be sent to out of house testers to see how much of your game is "on the page" versus how much has been "in your head" as a GM running the game.

> Once you get to out of house testing, the key is that the play testers are always right when telling you about a problem, but always wrong about the solution.

> Play tester forums are not helpful as they converge views instead of letting each tester's view stand on its own.

> Be careful to notice the difference between feedback that reflects what the play testers like vs whether or not the game you are designing works.

Johnathon, what's the difference between RPG and card game playtesting.

Not as much as you would like to thing. You are really looking for the same kind of thing. Does it work, does it work for our goals. Ie, if you are making a "Horror" game and everyone laughs while playing, you've missed your mark! The difference is in how you resolve the problems.

Jon, If you could pick one piece of data, what would it be?

The most important piece of data is watching the players play. We just playtested a Missile Command game and mechanically I didn't care about what was happening, I cared about how they players were

playing and if they were having fun. When possible, don't play your game and sit back and watch other people run the game.

Robyn: If you ask for feedback, you can get playtesters to talk themselves out of enjoying the game. They want to have some sort of critical assessment. If they were having fun, keep that in mind!

Pam, what kinds of forms do you use?

Verbal feedback is great to have after a playtest, but the loudest voice is always the one you hear. Quieter people may have great insights, but don't speak up. Written feedback forms let everyone have a voice. I use a questionnaire, which helps me to (1) build a community (by asking if they want to be on a mailing list), and (2) to get written comments that can be used in promotional materials and pitching (I ask play testers on the form if I can use their comments to promote the game).

Robyn, what forms do you use?

I don't. I create a playtest kit and see what people say. Ideally, I have a coordinator between me and the testers. This person can help filter and collate the feedback. The best tool is somebody else to help you and act as mediator for you.

Jonathon, how do you deal with feedback that is 'hard to hear'?

I smile and nod. Maybe at that point in time, as the table is not the best place to process that. That's why you have forms, data and so on. "Great thank you for that feedback". Always give yourself time and space to process the feedback.

Jessey, what is the most helpful thing a play tester can do for you?

Actually play the game.

Pam: I love when play testers play a full turn before giving feedback. It's really annoying when they give feedback before playing anything.

Jon, how do you set up a playtest session?

I usually start with some self-depreciating humour. I make them aware that they are not playing a finished game. I tell them not to hurt my feelings, and to tell me what is bad not what is good. I can't see what is bad, and that's what I need them for!

Pam, how does playtesting differ between genres?

I am pretty much just a party game designer. I haven't dabbled to much in other types of games. For me, I would think the process would be the same while a heavier game might take a lot longer. Party games get a bad rap for being "not hard to do", and that's not true. There is a lot that goes into them!

Robyn: Simple is way harder!

Robyn, RPGs are heavily text based, but also feelings based. Do you give notes to the GM as how to play to get a good playtest or do you let the free?

I don't want to direct it that much. My "how to playtest" boiler plate doesn't direct how the game should be played. I want to know how different styles of GMing. What I really want to know is things like is "power X" too strong when combined with "power Y", did I miss rules, are these rules clear, and so on.

Jonathon, what's different between blind testing in board and RPG.

It's really the same, just RPGs are a bit easier because of how RPGs are played. With a board game it's the same, but you tend to be there because of the components you have to send or provide (while an RPG just requires sending a PDF).

Jessey, what do you think is the single most important thing about play testing?

The most important thing is the play testers themselves. So, care for, feed and respect your play testers!

Have you had a game that broke under the weight of play testing?

Jonathon: A little bit, but the thing that tends to happen is if your local play group isn't particularly varied you are only getting one viewpoint. This will create opportunities for your game to collapse under play testing when it gets into the hands of groups with different demographics, or play preferences, then your local group. The other problem is if the game is missing a crucial rule that the designer hasn't realized they are teaching/saying but not writing down.

Pam: I used to design in lone wolf mode, by myself in isolation. It's scary to put your design in front of strangers, but it is necessary! You need the game to be broken to make it better.

Sen: You have to screw your cards to the sticking place ... ?

How do you divide up your groups?

Jon: It depends on the scope of your game. It's always good to get all perspectives, but you should focus on getting groups who fall into the 'target market'. Wider and more varied is better.

Robyn: Just getting great play testers is hard. Play test with who you have.

Jon: Also, learn to play test with 'bad' play testers. Learn how to get something useful out of a bad play test.

Sen: When you go to play test nights, always play test other people's games. Learn how to be a good play tester.

Robyn: Also Toronto has an amazing play testing community, which is really unique so leverage it!