

7 Tips for Producing a Successful Educational Game

by Sage Einarsen

First off, let's get this out of the way:

There is no fast and cheap way to make a great educational game. Like anything of quality, this takes careful work and lots of polish, both of which take time. So if you're looking for a quick and easy solution, you're out of luck. That said, there is the fastest and cheapest way—one which involves the strategic deployment of your resources and focusing heavily on a few key aspects of the production while avoiding some sinkholes—to make a game that will both engage kids and accomplish educational goals in a cost-effective manner. Here are some tips to guide you along that way.



Know the purpose of your game.

1

This may seem obvious, but it's surprisingly easy to veer down production rabbit holes without a clear idea of what you are trying to do. Is it to teach a set of facts as a part of a curriculum? To drive more visitors to your museum/institution? To spark the curiosity of kids in a given subject by having them engage with it in a fun context? The answer to this should be straightforward and specific, as it will need to be clear to every member of the production team.

The purpose of your game will drive many of the big design decisions that go into its production (gameplay type, art style, length, etc.), and will continue to factor into the more granular decisions being made by individual programmers and artists along the way. It will let you know where to invest time and energy, and where not to; where making a given feature exceptional is worth the cost and effort, and where basic functionality will suffice.

If you ever feel like the production is starting to drift, come back to this question of purpose. It's your compass.



Keep it simple and don't compete with commercial games.



In making an educational game you should have a narrow set of goals that shouldn't ever include competing with commercial video games for kids' attention. Not only will you fail—they're playing in a different league in terms of budget, and have fundamentally different goals—it's not necessary. A commercial game needs to be fun over time to be of much worth, more fun than its competitors, and preferably addicting. An educational game only needs to be fun for as long as it takes to accomplish its limited goals. This is already a high bar in and of itself, so don't defeat yourself by chasing something unrealistic.

Another key thing to keep in mind, is that many games that seem simple on the surface are actually quite complex when it comes to the fine tuning of the underlying mechanics or the programming (e.g., Angry Birds), so be sure to aim for something that is actually on the simple side to produce. This is something to consult with your production team on.



Don't reinvent the wheel, steal like an artist.

3

In keeping with the previous point, you can make things a lot simpler for yourself by building your game on top of proven, well-understood game mechanics rather than trying to build your own from the ground up. With good content and popular old tropes like the multiple choice quiz or a spot-the-differences game, the game can not only be instantly accessible and engaging (and very producible), but a lot of fun.



Prototype, test, iterate.



Unlike some other types of media, a game doesn't get made in a linear fashion where you're just knocking down one task after another until you're done. Rather, it goes through a series of rebirths and refinements, as multiple drafts of the game as a whole are put together, tested, fixed and improved on. This is the nature of designing a complex system (which even the simplest of games are), and trying to skip all of this work will result in games that are buggy, dysfunctional, boring, frustrating and just plain don't work—in other words, something just like the raft of poor educational games that are out there that kids turn up their noses at.

You'll want to take the time in the beginning to come up with a clear plan for the game and to make sure everyone is on the same page. After that, all the balls should be rolling. Programmers can focus on having a prototype up and running using temporary assets (“gray boxes”) in place of the final artwork while that artwork is being produced, with the same going for final copy, sound and music. Each build of the game should be tested and evaluated, picked apart and improved upon. As you go, you might even find that aspects of your original plan no longer make sense in practice, and have to change or discard them. But by starting with the roughest of drafts and constantly reviewing your work, you can make your mistakes early and keep the production on track.



Charm goes a long way.

5

You can never underestimate what a charming art style or clever, humorous writing can do for a game. Since it often costs the same as the blander stuff, take the time to find the right people to bring your game to life. This is an area that many educational games neglect, to their detriment. Take the time and stand apart from the crowd—it'll be worth it.



Watch out for these sinkholes.

6

Animation and voice-over add a lot to a game, but can also rapidly turn into time- and money-vacuum if you aren't careful. It is best to employ them selectively, where they'll have the biggest effect, and avoid using them elsewhere. For example, you might want to limit your animation to the gameplay only (where a really nice, satisfying animation can have an outsized effect on how a game "feels"), and use still images and text for any introductory sequences or story beats.



Expect to debug, optimize and polish.



Once all the assets and features have been implemented, the game still needs to be de-bugged, optimized and otherwise polished. Be sure to plan for this stage in your schedule and to resist the urge to skip it, because this is what needs to happen to ensure that your game works as planned, every time. Nothing is more frustrating to players than a game that isn't working like it's supposed to and nothing will get them to quit playing faster. It's this final 5% of the work that gives the other 95% a chance to shine, so don't skimp!

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