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Dogs at Work Post Mortem

With the source material/inspiration of this project being a children's book, it was only natural for me to want to make a game that had the same target demographic. Yet, while the book shows a diversity of breeds and "dog jobs" with the theme of reversing the roles of people and man's best friend, I wanted my game to have an edutainment spin. And with the title of the book in mind, I immediately thought of service dogs and how most people don't interact with them properly. As a result, the core game mechanic that I developed was volume control via shouting/speaking versus whispering. Kids can be rambunctious critters who can get overexcited very easily, so if they were to see a dog (service dog or not), they'd probably have some sort of reaction. Therefore, my game would reinforce how kids shouldn't distract/distract them since they are "dogs at work."

I first came up with the idea of a board game with different kinds of cards, which is where the reactions would take place. See a person? **That's a person.** See a dog? **That's a dog.** Now, see a service dog? *That's a service dog.* And with each successful reaction, the player would move forward on the board as they make their way through the fictional city of the book. My main inspiration for the board game was Candy Land, a classic and nostalgic children's game. Who doesn't love Candy Land? But I got stuck in the weeds of the art and the story when those were the two elements that were already provided for us. And who could blame me as a Creative Writing and Studio Art Major? So when the first round of prototyping came around, my

spaghetti of a game barely stuck on the wall. The gameplay was clunky, the players were constantly confused, and I was stressed out. But the one spark of hope was the shouting vs. whispering mechanic.

So to further suppose this key game mechanic (and with the help from Prof. Clay. Yes, you, thank you), I threw the board game aspect in the trash and stuck with the card for a more streamlined card game. Since the game would hypothetically come after a lesson on service dogs, there would already be a teacher who could guide the players as a game leader. The main inspirations for this iteration of the prototype were Simon Says and Uno. The game leader acts and players must react. And the “last person standing” aspect of it would naturally create competition and, therefore, engaging fun. But when playtesting in the classroom came along, the gameplay was still clunky (less so compared to the previous, but still flawed). There wasn’t enough of a challenge (partially because we’re playing with college students versus kindergarteners), so whatever fun the players experienced in the beginning quickly stagnated. I didn’t put much thought into the time aspect of the player reactions and it was hard for me as the game leader to juggle flipping over cards, seeing the players’ reactions, and penalizing them. But the shouting vs. whispering mechanic continued to work.

So for the third prototype, I streamlined the game, tightened the rules, and created a unique one-player experience that would continuously bring the player back for more. Incorporating a timer into the game and actually going through the entire deck of cards creates an end goal with an incentivizing challenge that feeds into people’s competitive nature. Yet players must balance out their speed with the accuracy of their reactions, which is where my knight in shining armor of my core game mechanic comes riding along from the horizon. When I playtested with my friend Sam, it took him a bit to get a handle on the rules and get over the

feeling of being psychologically tested (his words, not mine; it reminded him of being tested for ADHD). But once he got over those hurdles, my “bizarre” game was extremely fun for him. Its success came from self-competitiveness of trying to get the best time with the best accuracy. But it also came from incorporating the class’s feedback of normal colored cards and grayed-out cards to create a normal and hard mode for the game. The variety of game modes in each round kept my playtester on his toes. And by the end of it, Sam was encouraging other friends in the area to play the game as well, which I took as him inviting others to “get in on the fun,” but also to compare his time with other people which adds a new level of competitiveness.

If I were to continue with the iterative game design process, I would next playtest the current version with kids from my target audience. And as luck would have it, I was able to smooth-talk my way into playing my game with five-year-olds at my mom’s daycare job. So in preparation, I will create a simple PowerPoint about service dogs, what they do, and how to interact with them. Then I’d end with, “Now let’s practice what you’ve learned with a game,” and see how it goes from there with gameplay. I’m really excited to see how this goes and add this project to my portfolio of work.