Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3)

Tutorial Playtest and Findings Report
Session GYMEMP001

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May 2021
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Executive Summary

The Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) playtest session (Session GYMEMP001) uncovered 5 high-priority issues, 9 medium-priority issues, and 1 low-priority issue.

The highest priority issues are a result of critical incidents that prevented player progress due mostly to 1) system UI confusion, 2) non-transparency of goals, and 3) inconsistent rules regarding controlling client behavior.

Issue Count by Priority

- High
- Medium
- Low
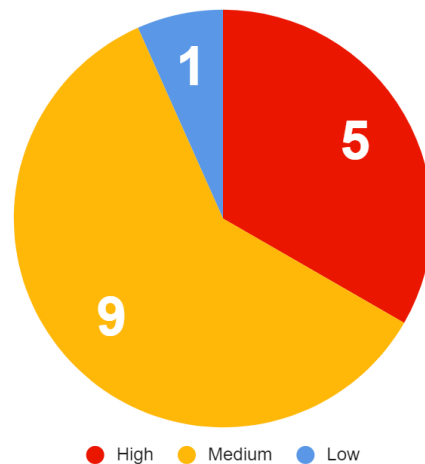
Issue Count and Priority by Section
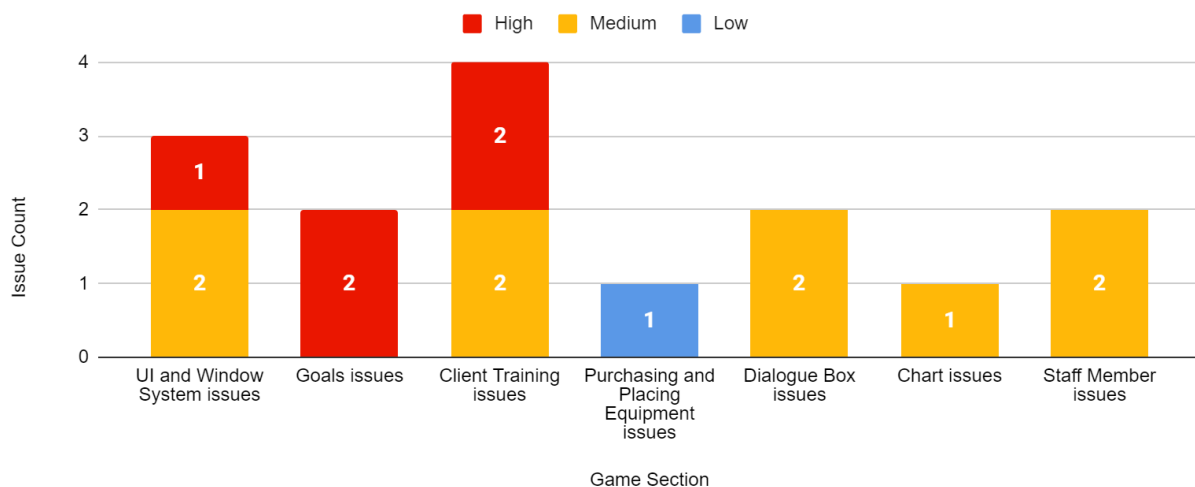
These results were generated following an analysis of two think aloud user/player tests, each lasting 30 - 60 minutes.

Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) will require substantial changes in the form of goal milestones, a cleaner UI, and making client manipulation consistent.

Introduction

Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) is a strategy/management video game in which players aim to grow their fitness business by engaging with clients, expanding their selection of exercise equipment, and increasing the number of gyms in their portfolio.

As is conventional with such strategy/management games, Gym Tycoon's game loop depends on players understanding a complex network of systems, each with a high allowance of variable user input. The flexibility of systems of strategy/management games means players must learn a great deal about the game mechanics in a relatively short amount of time. Because of this, in-game tutorials are generally both robust and presented in quick-succession.

This user test report focuses on the usability of Gym Tycoon's intro tutorial segment, which tutorializes the following systems:
- Training clients, including assigning clients to equipment, understanding client needs, and influencing client happiness.
- Purchasing and placing exercise equipment
- Earning profit

This user test report will highlight issues related to how players learn the above systems in service of the goal of the game's tutorial which is, as the game states, for the player to make a "good amount of money."

In short, **how successfully does the tutorial for the game Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) teach the player to earn a "good amount of money?"**

Methods

Two playtests were conducted using semi-scripted interviews and think-aloud protocols. Players played the game as the moderator watched and asked periodic questions focused on the research objective (how successfully does the tutorial for the game Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) teach the player to earn a "good amount of money?"). The questions asked, as well as supplemental material, can be found in the [Playtest Interview Protocol](#) in the Appendix.

Following each playtest the players were debriefed with both general and specific questions about their experience (see [Debrief Questions](#) in the Appendix).

Participant codes and timestamps are included with each piece of data using square brackets at the end of each data string. P01 data can be found in this playtest recording: https://youtu.be/5zh1qnu-Dkc. P02 data can be found at this playtest recording: https://youtu.be/7roJ96Ba9qY

Players played Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) from the local computers and shared their screen with the moderator via Discord.

Target population	36-49 year-old gamers who play PC video games on keyboard & mouse more than once per week and are interested in playing strategy/management games
Playtest sessions	2
Players per session	1
Playtest session length	P01 = ~60 minutes P02 = ~30 minutes
Remote or Local	Playtests were conducted remotely
Build state	Alpha Demo version 0.3
Moderator	Caleb J. Ross
Analysis methods	Video recording, audio recording, affinity wall, analysis of critical incidents

Recruiting method

A participant survey was used to gather qualified users for this test. The full survey can be found in the Appendix under Participant Survey.

Summary of participants

Participant 01 (P01) summary

Gender	Female
Age	37
Gaming devices played more than 1x per week	Computer with keyboard and mouse, Console (Xbox, PlayStation, Wii, Switch [docked mode]), Retro consoles (PS1, Xbox or earlier)

Participant 02 (P02) summary

Gender	Male
Age	36
Gaming devices played more than 1x per week	Computer with keyboard and mouse, Computer with a game controller, Virtual Reality on computer (Oculus, VIVE, PSVR)

Findings

Summary Results

Neither of the two participants were able to complete the tutorial to satisfaction. The tutorial lacked specific milestones for the player to aim toward, leading to players not only unsure *how* to progress, but more importantly whether or not they were progressing at all. This lack of direction was exacerbated by 1) a UI that resisted conventional navigation and 2) client manipulation mechanics that were inconsistent.

Overall, how successfully does the tutorial for the game Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) prepare the player to earn a "good amount of money?" Not successfully. Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) will require substantial changes in the form of goal milestones, a cleaner UI, and making client manipulation consistent.

Prioritization Logic

Issues have been prioritized based on the anticipated impact on the player's experience, based on an adapted version of the userfocus decision tree.

High - A persistent and/or difficult to overcome issue with a core feature that will severely impact progress. Issues regarding real-world currency or in-game equivalents are always a high priority.

Medium - An issue that may be persistent or difficult to overcome but will not prevent progress.

Low - An issue with a secondary feature that is not persistent or difficult to overcome but may affect players' opinion of the game.

UI and Window System issues

The screen often became cluttered with windows

Priority: High

- **Cause:** Windows lack a dedicated back-out functionality
- **Cause:** Windows lack a consistent back-out functionality
- **Impact:** Players are unable to make quick decisions that impact any area obscured by windows.
- **Impact:** Players are unable to make decisions based on areas obscured by windows

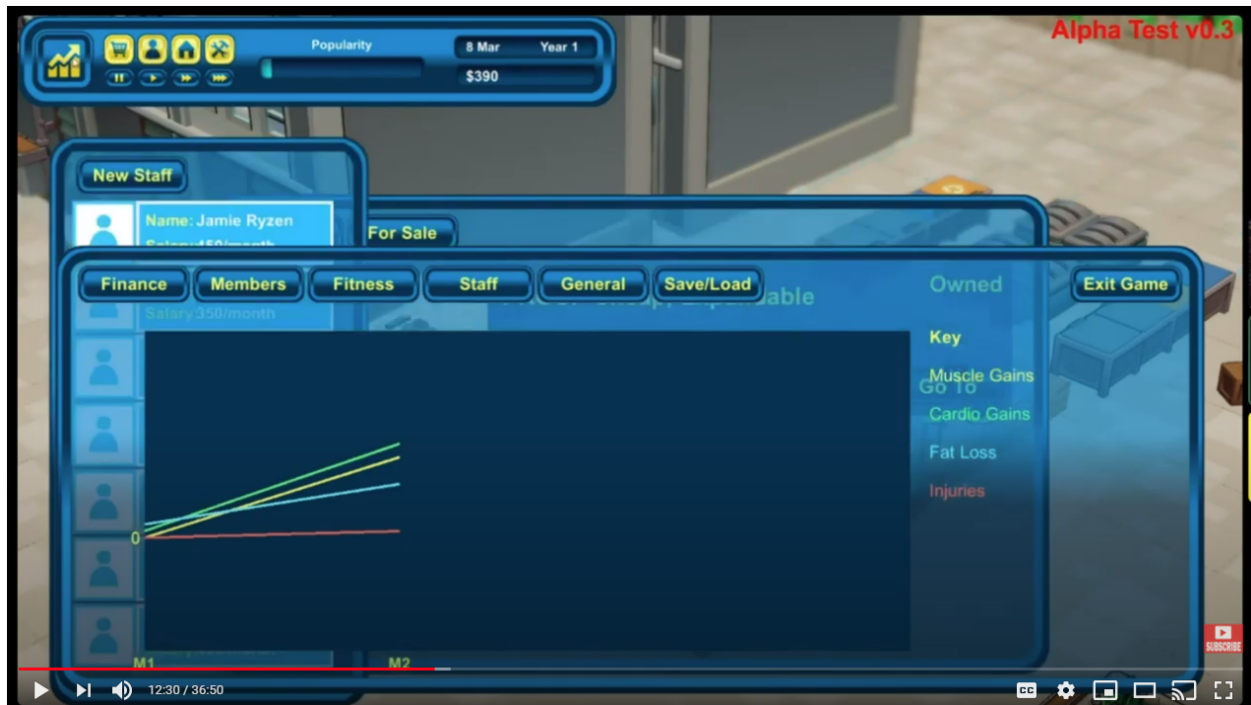*Fig. Multiple menus layered over one-another, preventing players from reading information.*

Data
- P01 - "Could use an X icon or an easy way to close menus. Maybe a button or escape (presses Escape), which doesn't seem to do anything." [10:47]
- P01 - "So many menus," spoken during a time when the screen was populated by 3-4 layered menus. [12:30]
- P02 - "I don't know how to make a window go away." [06:49]

UI and Window System issues

Unintentional deviation from the goal of the tutorial is easy and occurred often

Priority: Medium

- **Cause**: Menu options unrelated to the goal of the tutorial are enabled and available to the player at all times.
- **Impact:** During uninstructive times of the tutorial, players explored unrelated menus for guidance and options
- **Impact:** In an absence of overt direction, players assumed access to menus meant those menus would provide guidance.

Fig. the player is able to open the staff menu despite the staff menu functionality not yet having been tutorialized.

Data
- P01 - The player offered the suggestion that some menus shouldn't be accessible (should be greyed out) if those menus aren't meant to be accessed during specific points of the tutorial. [14:34]
- P01 - Regarding clicking on menus without being prompted to: "generally if I can click on a menu, I will do so (to see what options are available)." [14:34]
- P01 - The player clicked "Other" in the equipment menu expecting "decorative things or water stations. Stuff like that." [10:27]

UI and Window System issues

Panning across the gamespace is slow

Priority: Medium

- **Cause:** The game does not give players the ability to reverse the panning behavior.
- **Cause:** The tutorial does not teach the player about the faster and more controllable option to pan, which is by holding down the center mouse button.
- **Impact:** the player's time is wasted
- **Impact:** The player is unable to "chase" clients efficiency when needing to open or close client stats windows.
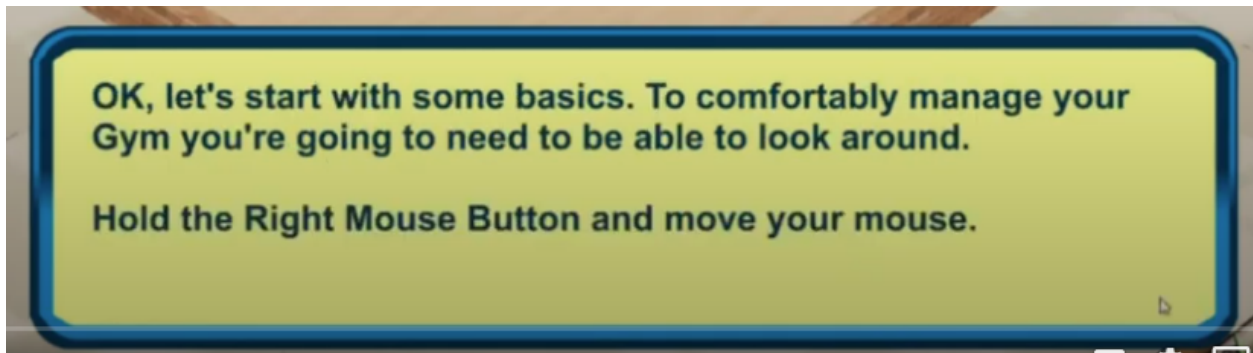
Fig. The "Hold the Right Mouse Button" way to pan is much slower than center-clicking the mouse button, yet "Hold the Right Mouse Button" is the only method tutorialized.

Data
- P02 - During the scripted tutorial section, the player consistently experienced confusion with the panning being inverted. Consider providing an option to change the panning axis. [00:39]
- P01 - The player clicked the center mouse button, which allowed for a much faster zoom. The player was very happy with this much-faster pan. [19:12]
- P01 - "The panning movements are a little small, though I guess the gym is fairly small too" [04:38] "This panning is very slow." [07:56] Does the player expect panning to become more flexible as the size of the gym grows?

UI and Window System issues

The client priority icons can be confusing

Priority: Medium

- **Cause:** Muscle / Thumbs Up icon has associations with social credibility metrics
- **Cause**: Weight / Bust icon does not convey weight
- **Cause:** The small size of the icons next to "Train" are difficult to interpret as one being bigger (the primary need) vs. smaller (the secondary need)
- **Impact:** The lack of match between the systems and real world equivalents increases cognitive load and may cause players to second-guess the icons' actions and functionality
- **Impact:** The player may incorrectly base play decisions on the client priority icons

Fig. The client needs icons don't align with real-world equivalents

Data
- P02 - The equipment type icons (heart, muscle, weight) confused the player. The heart icon as cardio made sense to the player, but the orange "person" icon and the "thumbs up" icon did not successfully afford their meaning. [09:10]
- P02 - "I assume the top icon is the primary need. I know it said the larger one, but it's kinda hard to tell (which is the larger icon)." [03:00]
- P02 - Regarding the client status window, the player paid the most attention to the "primary" status icon, saying both "primary" and "the one at the top." Does the player believe that the primary status icon will always be at the top? [49:28]
- P01 - The player felt that the primary/secondary needs icons were important because when those icons matched the equipment purpose icons the client would display a happy face. Observation: P01 - Happiness = good = progression. [30:03]
- Regarding the primary and secondary needs icons, "an arrow pointing to [which was the primary need] would be quite valuable and would have made things a lot more clear. But it wasn't entirely clear how [changes to the primary needs] improved your standing in the game." [28:59]
- P01 - Of all the elements of the client status window, the player paid most attention to the two primary/secondary needs icons, but even then, the most attention was paid to the top needs icon. [29:32]

Purchasing and Placing Equipment issues

Players hesitated to place equipment

Priority: Low

- **Cause:** The game does not indicate if position of the equipment impacts progress
- **Cause:** The tutorial does not teach the player how to (or if) equipment can be moved after it is placed
- **Cause:** The game disallowed placement of some equipment and lacked transparency about the rules of equipment placement
- **Impact:** Players are unable to make informed decisions regarding where to place equipment.

Fig. The player is unable to move the equipment after it has been placed.

Data

- P01 - The player could not move a piece of equipment after placing the equipment [12:53]. The player repeatedly attempted to move the equipment, even taking advice from the interviewer, but could not move the equipment. "I really wish I could move this (away from the entrance door)". [15:17] Is the gym floor layout (and overall flexibility with design) a draw for simulation game players?
- P01 - The player isn't sure if placement position ("design") mattered at all (eg: "If I put all the yoga mats in between the barbells, if that's a good idea or not") [32:32]
- P02 - The player noted the "stress" with knowing where to place objects; ie, is there right and wrong placement in regards to meeting the goal? [01:26]
- P02 - After repeated attempts, the player gave up on trying to place a mat. "Why didn't it put down a mat?" Later, after successfully placing a different piece of equipment (a dip station) the player assumes each piece of equipment is limited in the number that can be placed into the gym. [09:40]. Later [18:21] the player reaffirms this assumption.
- P02 - Both succeeding to place an exercise mat and failing to place an exercise mat resulted in money being spent, which is contrary to the expectations of the player. [09:40]

<u>Goals issues</u>

Progression during the tutorial is unclear

Priority: High

- **Cause:** The goal stated during the tutorial is imprecise ("When you've made a good amount of money, I'll let you know how you can move to a fancy new gym."
- **Cause:** The game does not teach the player how to make money.
- **Cause:** The game does not teach the player how money is lost.
- **Impact:** The player is left to assume how to progress in the tutorial.
- **Impact:** The player is unable to make informed decisions that impact the money total.

Data

- P01 - Regarding what has informed the player of the game's goal: "The emphasis on making people members [is why I believe] that is what I'm meant to be doing." [21:12]
- P02 - Player assumes the goal of the game based on other simulation games like "Sim Tower." "You want to be the biggest and the best...Keep building your gym with bigger and better equipment." [30:51]
- P02 - The player yearned for a way to measure progress against something, "whether that's the game's standards or another gym." [39:02]
- P01 - When exploring the various menus, the player opened the "building" menu and stated that the existence of a new gym to buy indicates that buying a new gym must be a goal of the game. [12:38]
- P01 - The player assumes the goal of the game to be getting clients, making money, and building bigger and better gyms. [20:44]
- P01 - The player "only assumes" the goal of the game. (no explicit indicate exists of the primary goal of the game) [21:12]
- P01 - The player desires more information regarding the overall goals of the game. The player suggests even a simple set-up would be helpful "You have a gym. Your goal is to make all the money." [35:50]
- P01 - The player increased the price of monthly subscriptions. "I assume I want to make more money and open up bigger gyms, but I assume customers might be less happy if costs go up." Observation: Happiness = progression. [12:00]
- P01 - "The tutorial...told me how to get people and how to not make them get injured, but it wasn't all that clear on what I should be doing as a long-term goal or what I should be doing to get to the next milestone." [22:08]
- P01 - "I honestly had no idea what the goal was for completing the tutorial. I was just sort of waiting for something to happen." [24:09]
- P01 - The player felt that simultaneously the tutorial was "long and text-heavy", but also that there "wasn't enough tutorial." This could indicate that the tutorial failed to teach enough different aspects and spent too much time on a few aspects. [34:15]
- P02 - "I'm just kinda looking at smiley faces right now and making sure my money is staying headed in the right direction, but that's kinda all I'm really looking for." [18:39]
- P02 - The player feels the time between starting the tutorial and moving on to the "second part" of the tutorial is longer than expected. "It's been 30-40 minutes at this point...and we're at year 2 in the game...and still not on the second part of the tutorial." The player feels "not great" about the tutorial's preparation for the full game. [34:15]

The ways in which money is gained and lost is confusing

Priority: High
- **Cause:** Money increases an an irregular cadance
- **Cause:** Money decreases when the player attempts to place equipment but the placement fails.
- **Cause:** When money increases or decreases, the game provides no feedback regarding that change
- **Impact:** The player is unable to make informed decisions that impact the money total.

Suggestions
- Include visible feedback such as red (negative) and green (positive) dollar signs above clients' heads when that client does something that changes the gym's money amount.
- Use a progress bar, instead of a single numerical value, to display funds. This would 1) allow for quicker interpretation of progress, 2) indicate financial milestones and goals, 3) allow for a visible lerping as money increases or decreases.

Fig. The profit value, which players assume is a primary metric, provides no feedback when it increases or decreases. A change in this value was rarely noticed by players.

Data
- P01 - "The money aspect wasn't addressed at all," regarding how money is made or lost. [22:27]
- P02 - Player assumes that payments from the members come in 1x/month. However, when the player searched for verification of this assumption, the player found none. "I'm not sure why it goes up in $10 increments occasionally and what the days have to do with that." [24:16]. Later the player realizes an assumption that the $10 increments are likely from clients without memberships. [25:33]
- P02 - Player does not know how funds increase. Further exploring revealed the Finance menu, which prompted the player to adjust the Monthly Subscription value. "I assume this will change how much people are paying." The player did not verbalize assumptions about how increasing the Monthly Subscription value might impact other factors such as client happiness. [14:47]
- P01 - "It would be interesting to see the money coming in more clearly...in Theme Hospital/Two-Point Hospital, it will pop up/show above the patient's head that they've paid a certain amount of money." [17:21]
- P01 - "I notice my money continually going in the wrong direction, but I'm not really sure why." [18:28]
- P01 - Is the lack of visibility into the money-making system a positive draw or a negative thing? "Generally, I want to be able to see fairly quickly what is good for money and what isn't" [23:18]

Client Training issues

It's unclear what constitutes a successful training session
Priority: High
- **Cause:** The long-term effects of training clients vs letting them work out on their own is unclear
- **Cause:** The game is unclear about how differing pieces of equipment with the same Primary Need Icon impact clients differently.
- **Cause:** The role of client happiness is unclear
- **Impact:** The player is unable to make informed decisions when training clients as related to equipment assignment and happiness.

Figs. Despite the client displaying a sad, red-face (left) the client's happiness icon in the client stats window is a happy, green-face (right).

Data
- P02 - The player questioned the benefits/risks of training clients vs. letting them work out on their own. The player was never able to determine which, if either, method was better.
- P02 - Player assumes that not only the client needs must be met, but that each client prefers specific pieces of equipment. The game never confirmed this assumption. [14:01]
- P01 - "I wasn't totally sure about how [a client's] happiness helped or not (in relation to the assumed goal of the game). Whether people would leave the gym if they got injured or if I trained them in things they didn't want to be trained in."[21:12]
- P01 - The player had to assume how client happiness impacted progress toward the goal. "Does the client stop coming to the gym if they get too unhappy? I assume there is some kind of rating of overall client happiness that would be a goal you'd have to meet in order to progress at some point." [31:37]

Client Training issues

Manipulating client behavior can be inconsistent and confusing

Priority: High

- **Cause:** When assigning clients to an empty piece of equipment, the assignment sometimes wouldn't take.
- **Cause:** Locating the client responsible for an open client stats window is cumbersome, especially with a full gym.
- **Impact:** The player is unable to assign clients to equipment
- **Impact:** The player is unable to quickly interact with clients who are obscured by open client stats windows.

Fig. In a crowded gym, locating a client whose client stat window is open can be difficult.

Data

- P01 - The player often attempted to assign clients to an empty piece of equipment, but the assignment wouldn't take. Is there a background queue system at work that prevents clients from being assigned to pieces of equipment? [26:53]
- P02 - Regarding the client status window, "Having to click back on the person you clicked on to get rid of that window is not my favorite. And it appears you can only click on that person's head." [11:50]
- P01 - "Some people I can click on, and some people I can't click on." [13:24]
- P01 - "Some people I can't click on. I guess they are waiting for the equipment, maybe." [19:44]
- P02 - The player would forget the client needs after selecting "Train", and when wanting to re-click the client (to be reminded of the client needs), the player found it difficult to determine which client it was that was just clicked [40:07]
- P02 - When instructed to train a client on the barbell, the player clicked to the barbell first a few times, until finally clicking the client. [03:45]

<u>Client Training issues</u>

The impact of client injuries is unclear

Priority: High
- **Cause:** When clients are injured, money decreases, but the game provides no additional impacts.
- **Cause:** the difference between training clients and letting them exercise without training is unclear.
- **Impact:** The player is unable to make decisions about progress related to client injury.

Data
- P02 - "There's no reason not to make them members. There's the possibility of them injuring themselves, but who cares when there's three [staff] members watching. [20:24]
- P01 - "I'm not sure why I would ever choose not to train people" (said after a client injury, assuming the lack of training caused the injury) [09:40]
- P01 - The player perceived client injuries as impacting only the amount of money the gym had. When pressed for any indications as to what other impact client injuries had, the player said "not really. I didn't notice, if [for example] they would stop being a client after that or wouldn't come back to the gym. That wasn't really clear." [26:26]

Client Training issues

The relationship between the client need icons and the client stats meters isn't easily understood

Priority: Medium
- **Cause:** The levels displayed in the client stats meters are never explained.
- **Cause:** The primary needs icons sometimes contradict the client stats meters.
- **Impact:** Players are unable to use the client stats meters to make informed decisions for their clients.
- **Impact:** Players are confused about which element to trust more regarding client needs: the client needs icons or the client stats meters.

Fig. The client needs icons sometimes contradict the client stats meters.

Data
- P02 - The player bases the client needs both on the primary/secondary needs icons in addition to the client stat meters that correlate with those icons. When asked how the player determines when a client stat meter level is filled "enough," the player states that comparisons to other clients drives that understanding. "I've seen other clients with higher stat meters." [10:43]
- P01 - The player assumes the client stat bars are "proficiency" bars and that training clients to these proficiency bars instead of the primary/secondary needs icons made the client unhappy. [25:25]
- P01 - The player did not notice primary and secondary needs icons. "It said bigger icon, but I assume it means bigger bar (status meters)" [06:32]
- P01 - The player recognized long after the tutorial regarding primary and secondary needs that those needs are designated by the two icons next to "Train" rather than by the three stat meters below "Train." "Now people should be much happier." [16:30]

Client Training issues

Players do not have easy access to client stats at all times when such ease of access is expected.

Priority: Medium

- **Cause:** It is not possible to view client information when that client is in the middle of an exercise.
- **Impact:** Players are unable to make plans for future moves during a character's exercise animation state.

Fig. The player wanted to check the stats of a client in the middle of an exercise, but clicking on the client did not produce the expected result of the client stats window opening.

Data

- P02 - The player clicked on a client mid-exercise to check on client needs, but was frustrated when unable to view stats during an exercise. [12:21]

Dialogue Box issues

The dialogue box instructions are hard to remember

Priority: Medium
- **Cause:** All of the text in the dialogue boxes has the same style
- **Cause:** A single dialogue box often contains multiple instructions.
- **Impact:** Players may have difficulty recalling specific instructions.
- **Impact:** Players may have difficulty picking out the most important instructions from dialogue boxes.
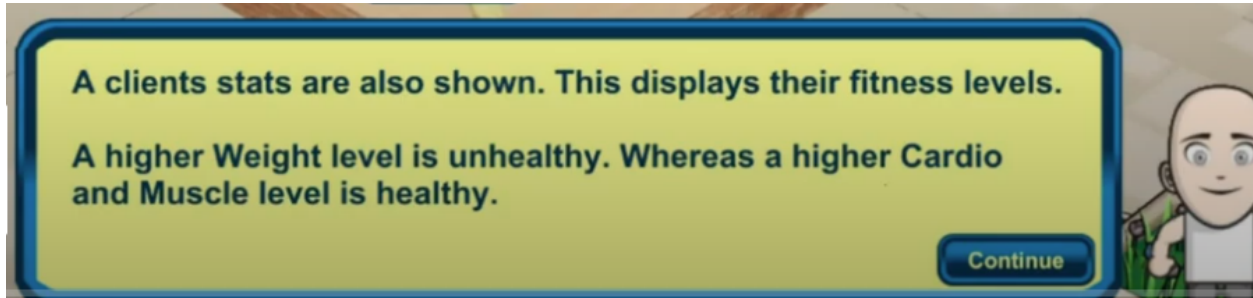

Fig. This dialogue box provides a lot of important information to players, but does so in a way that requires rote memory recall rather than recognition. Suggestion: highlight the need (Weight, Cardio, and Muscle) in the associated icon color.

Data
- P01 - "Doesn't look like I can do my own thing yet" [09:17] said while waiting for the two members to be injured (though the player at this point isn't aware that they are waiting for the injury).
- P01 - Following instructions of 'Don't train the clients' the player remained idle without moving forward until the interviewer had to state that clicking the star icon is not the same as training.
- P02 - Having missed the dialogue that instructs the player to make money for the remainder of the tutorial, the player required help from the interviewer for direction. Later, the player questioned how much money needed to be made to move on, and never found out that number. [08:20]
- P02 - The player did not recall the instruction "This time don't train the Clients." Given that this instruction is counter to the player's assumed goal of the game, this instruction might need to be called attention to more directly (bold italics, etc). [05:13]
- P01 - During a lull in dialog box direction the player assumes the goal of the tutorial is to "keep training people and get as many members as possible." [11:14]
- P01 - During a lull in dialog box direction the player clicked aggressively throughout the interface, stating "not much is happening when I try to click on anything." [11:32]

Dialogue Box issues

Dialogue boxes deactivate quickly

Priority: Medium
- **Cause:** The length of time dialogue boxes remain active isn't controllable by the player
- **Impact:** Players may be unable to read the full text of a dialogue box.

Suggestions
- Give players the control to click out of dialogue boxes

Data
- P01 - "That went away quick" [08:17] said after having a read-aloud of a dialogue box interrupted by the dialogue box disappearing.

Charts issues

The charts revealed metrics that the players interpreted as important, but the specific role of those metrics is unclear.

Priority: Medium

- **Cause:** The purpose of each chart is labeled or otherwise explained to the player.
- **Cause:** The charts don't expose benchmarks or player goals.
- **Impact:** Players are unable to use the charts to make decisions regarding their progress toward the game's goal.
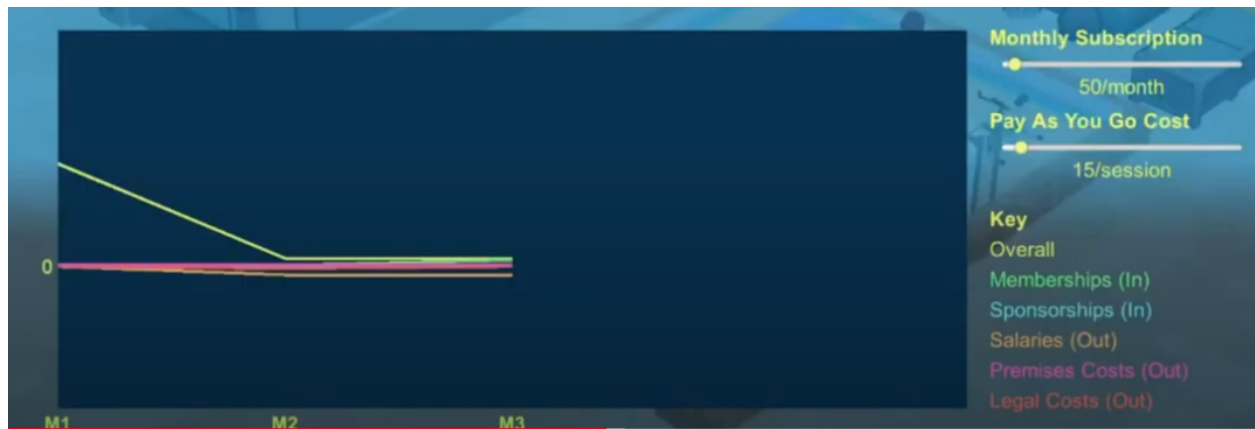

Fig. The values and y axis on this chart are such that the lines are too close together to inform decisions. Suggestion: never force a chart into the data; the data should inform the chart. In this case, perhaps include fewer metrics or opt for a different style of chart.

Data

- P02 - The player expressed multiple times that the charts should provide insight into pacing toward a goal but that they weren't that helpful. "There's no numbers, so I don't know how many people have been hired." [21:13]
- P02 - The charts menu (ie, Finance, Members, Fitness, Staff, General) is what the player assumes indicates progress toward an overarching goal, but the lack of numbers on the charts prevents the player from verifying this assumption (ie, the player cannot compare chart numbers to the revenue value at the top of the screen). [36:46]
- P01 - "You can kind've see your finances here, but I'm not finding a whole lot of use here." [17:40]

Staff Member issues

Cannot fire staff

Priority: Medium

- **Cause:** Hiring staff is not explained and therefore accidentally hiring staff is easy to do.
- **Cause:** Clicking on a staff member does not reveal staff member details in the way players have come to expect with clients.
- **Impact:** Players cannot increase profits by controlling expenses related to staff.

Fig. Clicking on a staff member does not provide any additional information, which defies the convention established by the ability to click on clients to see additional information (via the client stats window)

Data

- P02 - After accidentally hiring staff members, the player attempted to fire them but could find no way to do so. The player brought up the need to get rid of staff members multiple times throughout the play session. [08:05]
- P01 - "Why am I employing this many people? And how can I fire them?," said when first looking at the Staff list. The player did not realize that the Staff list was a list of available-to-hire, and not already-hired. [18:38]
- P02 - The game lacks visibility into why some staff members are paid more than others. "I don't know anything about my staff, and I can't click on any of them [to learn more]." [25:03]

Staff Member issues

The role of staff is unclear

Priority: Medium

- **Cause:** The staffing mechanic is not explained during the portion of the tutorial that explains injuries (which would be important, assuming staff helps correct for injuries).
- **Impact:** Players are able to hire staff without having been told what staff do and how they impact gym profits.
- **Impact:** Players accidentally hire staff

Fig. the player is able to open the staff menu and hire staff despite the staff menu functionality not yet having been tutorialized.

Data

- P02 - The player assumed the staff menu showed members. The player was quite focused overall on understanding the role of individual clients in terms of the game's goal, which possibly informed the player's immediate association of the staff names as member names. [07:48]
- P02 - Player assumes that the role of the gym staff is to monitor clients so that they don't hurt themselves. The game never confirmed this assumption, so the player kept on playing according to this assumption. [13:35]
- P02 - The game lacks visibility into why some staff members are paid more than others. "I don't know anything about my staff, and I can't click on any of them [to learn more]." [25:03]
- P01 - "Oh, I have staff! I don't know what that does." [11:01]
- P01 - "Why am I employing this many people? And how can I fire them?," said when first looking at the Staff list. The player did not realize that the Staff list was a list of available-to-hire, and not already-hired. [18:38]

Limitations

This Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) user playtest report is limited in one, inconsequential way. The sample size is less than ideal (we would prefer 5-7 participants). However, given the consistency of issues across the two participants as well as the pervasive nature of the issues, the limited two-person participant size is suitable enough to instill confidence in the findings.

Conclusion

Overall, how successfully does the tutorial for the game Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) prepare the player to earn a "good amount of money?" Not successfully. Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) will require substantial changes in the form of goal milestones, a cleaner UI, and making client manipulation consistent.

Neither of the two participants were able to complete the tutorial to satisfaction. The tutorial lacked specific milestones for the player to aim toward, leading to players not only unsure *how* to progress, but more importantly whether or not they were progressing at all. This lack of direction was exacerbated by a UI that resisted conventional navigation and client manipulation mechanics that were inconsistent.

Once clear milestones are introduced and the rules dictating the profit number are exposed, the recommended next step for Gym Empire is to conduct a second user playtest session focusing on progressive skills such as managing staff and buying additional gyms.

Appendices

Playtest Interview Protocol

The following playtest interview protocol includes the script used to introduce participants just before the playtest sessions begin as well as questions asked during the playtest session debrief.

This interview protocol was developed for a 90-minute interview with a first-time player of Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3), a Tycoon-like simulation game in which players aim to grow their fitness business by engaging with clients, expanding their selection of exercise equipment, and increasing the number of gyms in their portfolio.

Overarching Question

How successfully does the tutorial for the game Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) make a player feel prepared to play the full game? At the conclusion of the tutorial, do players feel adequately prepared to play the full game? In short, how successfully does the tutorial for the game Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3) teach the player to earn a "good amount of money?"

Introduction [script]

Hi, my name is Caleb Ross, and I'm here to understand how helpful the tutorial is for an upcoming, in-development video game. The specific game in question is called Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3). This interview and play session will last between 60 - 90 minutes, with probably 45-60 minutes of gameplay, during which time I'll ask some questions, but there will also be periods of time in which you are allowed to simply play the game without me asking questions. Throughout this session, I'd like you to speak out loud as you play. Verbalize your thoughts using as much detail and with as much frequency as you are comfortable.

After 45-60 minutes of play, I'll have you exit the game and we'll use the rest of the time for a more traditional interview format,during which I'll ask you questions about what you just played. And please know that I am not part of the development team. I did not make this game. So please don't worry about hurting my feelings. I want you to be comfortable with being as honest as you can. After all, I'm here to learn from you.

Similar to that note about not hurting my feelings, please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers today, and we're not testing how good you are at this game or games in general.

A couple of final things before we start. To the extent possible, I will take your comments to be confidential. I will aggregate all the comments from several interviews I'm conducting so that your comments are not easily traced to you. If I quote you in my final report, I will do so without identifying your name or any personally identifiable information. If there's anything you really don't want on the record, even if it's anonymized, please let me know that, too. Also, this interview is entirely voluntary on your part – if for any reason you want to stop, please let me

know. We can end the interview at that point with no repercussions for you of any kind. I can also throw out anything you've told me until that point.

Do you have any questions for me? All right, then, let's proceed.

Once the interview gets underway… [script]

Oh, and by the way, do you mind if I record our audio conversation as well as video of your gameplay? This is just so that I don't miss anything – no one other than me and the game developer will have access to the full recording. [If participant doesn't object, start recording and then once recording starts, verbally state that the session is now being recorded]

Pre Interview / Warm up

How often do you play simulation video games (examples in case the participant is unfamiliar with the genre: Rollercoaster Tycoon, The Sims, Farming Simulator, Two-Point Hospital, Civilization)

- IF YES: Tell me about the most recent simulation game that you played?
  - Thinking back to when you first started that game, did you find the game difficult to learn in any way?
- IF NO: what has kept you from playing simulation games?
  - IF "hard to learn" or "intimidating" ask for elaboration. Thinking back to the last time you tried a simulation game, what made the experience hard to learn?

Playing the Tutorial of Gym Empire (alpha test v0.3)

Task for participant:
You are playing Gym Empire for the first time. Play through the tutorial. Then we will have a chat about your experience.

I might ask (post-play):	I will observe:	This answers:
1. Having played the tutorial, what do you understand the main goal of Gym Empire to be? ● What about the tutorial gives you that impression? ● How well does the tutorial set you up for success in completing that goal? ● How did you determine your progress toward completing the tutorial?	Does the player verbalize (think aloud) an understanding of the game's goal (to grow the gym footprint and revenue).	Does the player understand the goal that the tutorial is attempting to teach towards?
2. Having played the tutorial, how	Does the player make the same	Does the player

comfortable are you with training new clients?
   ● How did you determine that level of confidence?
   ● What role does a client injury have in meeting the goal of the game?
   ● Tell me about a point when training a client did not go as you would have expected.
	mistakes repeatedly, particularly related to assigning clients to equipment?
	
	Does the player verbalize (think aloud) confusion related to the client-training process?
		understand the role of training clients in relation to the goal of the game?

3. How does the client stats window impact your progress toward the goal of the game?
 	
   ● What part of the client stats window did you find yourself paying attention to the most?
      ○ Why do you feel that is?
   ● What part of the client stats window did you find yourself paying attention to the least?
      ○ Why do you feel that is?
	Does the player appropriately act on client statuses presented in the client stats window?
	
	Does the player verbalize (think aloud) the most goal-oriented aspects of the client stats window?
		Does the player understand the role of training clients in relation to the goal of the game?

4. How does the client's happiness or unhappiness impact your progress toward the goal of the game?
 	
   ● How did you control for client happiness? How did you impact client happiness?
   ● Tell me about a point when a client's happiness or unhappiness did not reflect what you expected.
      ○ How did you adjust your strategy to change this outcome for further client interactions?
	How many times does the clients' emotional status turn unhappy? How does the player respond to this change in status?	Does the player understand the role of training clients in relation to the goal of the game?

5. How prepared do you feel you are regarding placing exercise equipment?
   ● How did you determine that level of confidence?
   ● How is the exercise equipment related to the main goal of Gym Empire?
   ● Tell me about a point when placing/assigning equipment did not go as you would have expected.
	Does the player attempt to place additional exercise equipment outside of what the tutorial explicitly instructs?
	
	Does the player consider the type of equipment placed in relation to client needs?
		Does the player understand the role of equipment in relation to the goal of the game?

Follow-Up Questions:
- What did you think overall about the Gym Empire tutorial
- Anything you particularly liked about the tutorial?
- Anything you particularly disliked about the tutorial?
- What was difficult about completing the tutorial?
- What was confusing about the tutorial?
- If the people who made it could change one thing about the tutorial, what would you change?
- Do you have any questions or things you've wanted to say?

Conclusion

Thank you – those are all the questions I have for you. If anything else occurs to you after I leave, please don't hesitate to let me know by email. I may be in touch with you again to ask a few follow-up questions. If you'd like, I can send a version of the report that we'll write based on this interview. Do you have any questions? Thanks again!

Participant Survey

Sign up to help make games better!

Thank you for your interest in signing up to playtest!

We regularly invite people of all ages, abilities and video game experience to play games

Please fill out the following form if you would like us to reach out to you for upcoming playtest opportunities.

* Required

First Name *

Your answer

Last Name *

Your answer

I'm signing up on behalf of... *

○ ...myself (and I'm over 18)

○ ...my child (because they're under 18)

Your contact email address *

Your answer

Your contact telephone number (not required if you can be contacted reliably via the email address listed above)

We prefer a cellphone number because we might contact you via text message.

Your answer

Date of birth *

This information is used to assign a demographic age group when research studies require such grouping.

Date

mm/dd/yyyy ▢

Gender *

○ Female

○ Male

○ Prefer not to say

○ Other:

Select the gaming devices you actively play more than 1 hour per week. Kindly note that there are no wrong answers, as we are looking for participants with little or much experience with gaming. *

☐ Computer with keyboard and mouse

☐ Computer with a game controller

☐ Portable console (Switch [portable mode], PSVita, Nintendo 3DS)

☐ Console (Xbox, PlayStation, Wii, Switch [docked mode])

☐ Touchscreen (iPad, iPhone, Android)

☐ Virtual Reality on computer (Oculus, VIVE, PSVR)

☐ Virtual Reality with a mobile (GearVR, Daydream)

☐ Retro consoles (PS1, Xbox or earlier)

☐ ... I play less than 1 hour a week

☐ Other: _____

What genres are you interested in playtesting?
Please be honest, there are no wrong answers as we are looking for a wide range of participants!

... on console or PC? *
Please be honest, there are no wrong answers as we are looking for a wide range of participants!

☐ Action-Adventure

☐ Card Games

☐ Casual/Party

☐ Fighting

☐ Hidden Object

☐ Horror

☐ Multiplayer-only/MOBA

☐ Platforming/Running

☐ Puzzle

☐ Racing/Karting

☐ Role-Playing (RPG)

☐ Shooter (First/third-person)

☐ Singing/Dancing

☐ Sports

☐ Strategy/Management

☐ Story-driven

☐ I don't want to playtest for console or PC

... on mobile or tablet? *

Please be honest, there are no wrong answers as we are looking for a wide range of participants!

☐ Action-Adventure

☐ Card Games

☐ Casual/Party

☐ Fighting

☐ Hidden Object

☐ Horror

☐ Multiplayer-only/MOBA

☐ Platforming/Running

☐ Puzzle

☐ Racing/Karting

☐ Role-Playing (RPG)

☐ Shooter (First/third-person)

☐ Singing/Dancing

☐ Sports

☐ Strategy/Management

☐ Story-driven

☐ I don't want to playtest for mobile

In what language do you usually play videogames *

Your answer

What is your favorite game of all time?

We know it can be hard to choose, but you have to pick one!

Your answer

Because of any physical, cognitive or emotional condition, do you/your child

often experience any difficulties in playing video games?

Why do we ask this? Game developers are often interested in making their games more accessible to persons with impairments, and we therefore seek individuals with whom to collaborate on improving these games. You are not required to disclose an impairment, however we request that you make us aware of any physical access requirements you may have, if you're invited to playtest.

○ Yes

○ Not at this time (or I prefer not to say)

Are you, or any member of your immediate family, involved in the games industry or games media?

○ Yes

○ No

Have you ever playtested for us?

○ Yes

○ No

Is there anything else we should know about you?

Your answer

While playtests would ideally occur in-person, we must often resort to playtesting from home. Do you consent to participating in an at-home playtest? *

At-home playtesting requires 1) that you stream your gameplay to the playtest moderator using Discord via PC, 2) that you have a microphone and headphones which can be used to communicate with the playtest moderator, and 3) you understand that your screen will be recorded during the gameplay session.

○ Yes

○ No

I confirm I would like to receive emails about attending game research opportunities (including playtests) with Caleb J. Ross. *

Please contact Caleb J. Ross at caleb@calebjross.com if you have any questions or would like to withdraw your consent at a later point.

☐ Accept and sign me up!

Submit   Page 1 of 1

Participant Consent Form (unsigned)

You've been selected to help make video games better!

You are receiving this email because you've previously indicated your interest in participating in a playtest. You have been selected to be a participant in a playtest on the following date and time.

[DATE OF PLAYTEST] at [TIME OF PLAYTEST INCL. TIMEZONE].

This consent form must be completed by [DATE OF RETURN] in order to participate in the playtest scheduled for the date and time listed above.

* Required

First Name *

Your answer

Last Name *

Your answer

I'm signing up on behalf of... *

○ ...myself (and I'm over 18)

○ ...my child (because they're under 18)

Your contact email address *

Your answer

While playtests would ideally occur in-person, we must often resort to playtesting from home. Do you consent to participating in an at-home playtest? *

At-home playtesting requires 1) that you stream your gameplay to the playtest moderator using Discord via PC, 2) that you have a microphone and headphones which can be used to communicate with the playtest moderator, and 3) you understand that your screen will be recorded during the gameplay session.

○ Yes

○ No

Consent to use your participation in research studies (including playtests).

We're glad you are excited about helping make video games better! This section outlines how we may use your information and for how long that information is stored.

What information is being collected

During a game research study we will record video and audio from the study, including the answers you give to questions and what happens on the computer screen. We will also be taking notes to record your comments and actions. If you have any questions about the information being collected, please contact the name listed at the end of this form.

How will information be shared and stored

Caleb J. Ross, game developers, or other parties (for the purposes of case studies and professional portfolios) may be watching the recording live, or at a later point. These recordings may be uploaded to video storage sites such as YouTube, but will never be listed as Public, and will only be listed as Unlisted. Any data will be anonymized if included in any research reports we publish, and will not include your name or image. Video and audio recordings will be deleted if you decide to withdraw your consent.

By submitting this form I consent to the following (please check all boxes) *

☐ I consent for people to observe my on-screen actions during the research.

☐ I consent for the session to be recorded.

☐ I consent for the other parties, including but not limited to game developers and Caleb J. Ross, to view the recordings in the future (recordings will be scrubbed of any personally identifiable information.)

I confirm that I agree to the all of the terms listed on this page. *

Please contact Caleb J. Ross at caleb@calebjross.com if you have any questions or would like to withdraw your consent at a later point.

☐ Accept

Submit   Page 1 of 1

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

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