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PDI Studio V

November 3, 2011

Ethnographic Description #3

Our third visit to the Ark Charter Community School expanded our understanding of our target user and helped to steer our group in the right direction for the final prototype. Once again, the sixth graders were quite amusing to interact with keeping all of us on our toes, but in the end they gave us some great feedback.

Our group is in the process of developing a game that focuses on practice with fractions while learning about color mixing; our game is completely flash-based. The user must go through series of levels that involves creating a color palette using their knowledge of fractions. The user learns that fractions of certain colors create another color when mixed together; following a color recipe, the user must assign each color to the right fraction in order to successfully create the new color. If time permits, our goal is to create additional levels that allow the user to paint products / displays with the colors they created in the earlier levels. So that is basically our group's game plan for the rest of the semester. However, user feedback is crucial at this point in the production of our game; this trip was immensely helpful in seeing how the kids responded to certain elements in our game.

For this trip to the school, we did not have the code completed for our game, thus we did not show them a flash-based version of our game. We decided to show them a simple mock-up of how the game works using a PowerPoint presentation. We animated the PowerPoint so that it played as if a user was actually going through the levels or 'slides' of the game. It showed a 'user' picking a color to make from a color swatch slide and a color recipe on the following slide. For example, if the user wanted to make green, the recipe would consist of 1/4 yellow and 6/8 blue. On the recipe slide, tubes or cylinders would be broken down into fractional segments. The user would have to put the right amount of each color in the tubes with respect to the fractional segments in order to mix both colors and make green. The PowerPoint displays what happens if the user were to succeed and fail. In addition to our showing of the PowerPoint, we wanted the kids to have an opportunity to play the physically game through a hands-on approach. Therefore we printed out worksheets with different color recipes and rectangles with fractional increments; we made it so that it was increments of one/twelfths. We cut pieces of construction paper to the certain fractional lengths that matched the scale on the tubes. We also incorporated a competitive element by adding a tic-tac-toe board; the user could place an ''x" or an 'o' down if they completed a worksheet. We showed the PowerPoint and played this interactive game with each of the four groups and recorded their reactions, responses, thoughts, and opinions of our game.

The first group of four girls attentively watched our PowerPoint and was more fascinated by the animation of the PowerPoint than the idea of our game. One girl, who we can call 'Girl A', kept saying "that's so cool" and "how did you do that?". When we went over the fraction portion of our game, many of the girls were initially confused so we slowly walked them through the concept a second time. Once they understood the game, we paired them up and handed out our worksheets. The girls were off to a slow start, struggling to find the appropriate lengths that went with the instructed fractions. The four members of our group took a girl under their wing and guided them through the process. I was with Girl A and, although she struggled to find the right fraction pieces, she was determined to get it right. I think the hardest part for the sixth graders was figuring out fraction equivalents. For example: if the color recipe stated ¾ yellow, the student would have to convert ¾ to 9/12 since the rectangles on each worksheet were incremented by 1/12s. When I wrote out the fraction ratios for Girl A, it facilitated the problem-solving process and she sped through the rest of the worksheets. I was fortunate enough to work with Girl A, who was very enthusiastic about our PowerPoint and the hands-on activity; when I looked around the table at the other girls in the first group, some were not as excited and almost seemed reluctant to do the activity. I also noticed that the girls were not overly concerned about the tic-tac-toe competition aspect of the activity. Girl A focused more on completing each worksheet than defeating her partner in the game of tic-tac-toe. When it was time to move to the next station, Girl A commented, “you’re game was fun! Thanks guys”, as she left the table. It is comments like these that make all of our efforts worthwhile.

The next group consisted of three girls and three boys. When we presented our PowerPoint, they were captivated by the simple animations, similar to the previous group. We appreciated their enthusiasm and decided to reveal some potentials graphics for our game. We had created some ‘cartoony’ characters that we thought would help guide the user throughout the game; what better way to see if we are going in the right direction than by asking the actual users themselves: the kids. Paula and I tackled the challenge of creating a ‘cartoony’ spray can that would serve as a guiding character in our game. We decided on this character idea because we felt that our user could identify more with a spray can man considering their urban setting. We are largely concerned with this playing up to urban African American stereotypes, but we still wanted to see what the kids thought of our designs. Before I reveal which one the kids liked better, our group thought that my design had more potential. The designs are seen below:

Pasted Graphic.pdf ¬Paula’s Design Pasted Graphic 1.pdf ¬ My Design

To our surprise, Paula’s Design was a huge hit. I think it was pretty much unanimously decided that the Paula’s spray-can was the better one in their eyes. They loved the glasses, the teeth or ‘grills’ and the chain—all the ‘bling’ that lives up to African American stereotypes is what they loved. With my design, they hated the color decisions for the hat, the body of the can, and the shoes; they also preferred Paula’s glasses to mine. One boy exclaimed that the color palette reminded him of veggie tales. It was quite entertaining to see the kids rip apart my design, as it did help us get a better understanding of what they did not want for the character. I should point out that there was an argument as to whether Paula’s glasses were ‘girl’ glasses or ‘boy’ glasses. The girls kept saying that they ‘girly’ and the boys refused to accept this idea. It was brought up that Kanye West wears these glasses and the argument came to a halt. It seems like the glasses are as close as we are going to get to a gender neutral pair of glasses. When we asked the group how they would improve the design, many suggestions were thrown around. With all the excitement over this character from the entire group, we decided it would be a good idea to put these ideas to paper. So we handed out sheets of paper and had them draw improvements to the existing character or create a new one. One boy drew a spray can with a red hat and dreads. One boy and one girl thought of a paint can idea; however, the girl thought it would be better if the paint can was more ‘girly’ so she gave it eyelashes and colored it pink. Their drawings helped us to understand what they were looking for in our designs. We made sure to collect all the drawings so we could use them to improve our game designs. We did not have time to play the planned activity, but it worked well as we gained some beneficial feedback from our user.

Paula’s design was once again a huge hit with the third group. This group, of four boys, also hated the colors on my design. They said that the hat should’ve been blue and the shoes should’ve been a darker blue or purple. One boy suggested that the spray-can should be wearing a backwards hat with paint spattered on it…not a bad idea. We spent less time discussing the characters and went right to the activity. With this group, we had groups of two working together against another pair. The boys struggled to get the hang of the game at first, but once they understood how to play they were far more concerned about beating the other team in tic-tac-toe. They would go as far as move the fraction pieces up to make it look like they had the right amount. We had to keep an eye on them to make sure they were doing it correctly. After watching this group, we considered adding a competitive element in our actual game.

The last group of just two boys was quite similar to the previous group of boys. Like all the groups before them, they favored Paula’s design and ripped mine apart. They went as far as to state that orange was a ‘girly’ color, which I was surprised to hear. We had them verse each other with our activity and they were just as competitive as the previous group. They even challenged us to see who could finish a worksheet faster. This competitive spirit further convinced us to add competition into our game.

The third trip was another great experience. Even though my design was ripped apart, I had fun with each of the groups and gained a great deal of effective feedback. My group has a lot to process regarding the characters and the graphics we use for our game. We will definitely use the feedback to our advantage.