

Pitch Perfect or Exploring Pitching Practices in Industry and Games Education

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ABSTRACT

Pitching, the act of trying to convince others to support the development of a project, has a storied tradition in the game industry. This practice has also been adopted by game educators and incorporated into their curricula. In project-oriented classes in particular, it is common for students to pitch games to classmates, industry panels, and faculty. This work in progress presents a pedagogical tool, the Design Box, our experiences using it, including common critiques, and illustrates its use for creative ideation as well as persuasive potential. We conclude with a call to explore more practices that find their referent in ‘the industry’ and the development of appropriate pedagogical techniques we can incorporate in game education programs.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [Computing Millieux]: Personal Computing – *games*.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

Keywords

Industry practices, game pitching, Design Box, game education, audience, players

1. INTRODUCTION

Pitching has holds an important, and often romanticized role in games. There are books [1]–[3], trade conference talks [4] and websites [5]–[7] describing industry norms on pitching and best practices. In the context of game design education, pitching is often presented as a fundamental skill that students should learn and master. However, not much has been written about how to best help students learn how to pitch and how to ensure that the skills developed will transfer appropriately to whatever their post-graduation situation may be.

In this work in progress we outline the “Design Box,” a method we have developed to teach iterative pitching as well as help students learn and practice how to pitch. We will describe a few of the different ways we have used it over the years including some lessons learned as well as ideas for how other educators could adapt it to their own pedagogical needs. This discussion will include some of the common misconceptions that students have regarding pitching process and its role in game development.

1.1 Challenges in Games Education

Games education is concerned with a variety of issues. These include encouraging students to reflect deeply on games, to analyze and critique them, situate them in broader social and cultural contexts, and understand their meanings and messages (e.g. [8]–[10]). Another area of games education has focused on teaching the design and development of games (e.g. [11]). Here

the emphasis is often placed on supporting students in developing the knowledge and skills that will help them in the game industry (e.g. [12]–[14]). These learning goals are generally included in practical or project-based courses where students typically work in teams developing a game (for an overview see [15]). Research has been done to determine how to evaluate these projects [16], [17] with emphases placed on the process, development of soft skills (project management, teamwork, communication), and other important habits for iterative game design [18].

While there is work examining these project-based classes, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to the ideation and early development of games, more specifically, the process by which these ideas and concepts are developed and pitched. We note that research on game capstone courses rarely reports on how the games students develop are determined [15], [17]. In other words, how do the students develop their ideas, pitch their games, who do they pitch them to, and how are the ‘winners’ decided? (for work on supporting game ideation with professionals, see [19])

We feel that there is an opportunity to address this important step of the game development and design process. In particular we will present a game idea-pitching tool. This tool helps students understand the basic components of a pitch and iteratively begin to practice them. The “Design Box” is a collaborative, inductive, and iterative approach to pitching games. It is designed to move groups away from pitching ideas “off-the-cuff” and towards a design-minded approach to problem solving. It is useful when working with clients who want to pitch games as well as students who have never pitched a game before. It is scalable and has been used to by individuals and large groups to prepare pitches.

2. AT THE PITCH

Pitching is a trope in the popular narrative of the entertainment industry. Someone has a great idea, is able to secure a short amount of time with someone important who can fund that idea, and then the magic happens with little more than said idea. This myth has been woven into the tapestry of public imagination since the golden age of cinema, when movies like *Shark Love* were made with little more than a great idea [20].

Many still believe that by virtue of the power of the idea together with the pluck and charisma of the person communicating it, great projects get started. Movie deals and game contracts are made on the basis of a short, impressive spiel and a handshake.

The narrative above is only a myth, but it is a powerful one. All it takes is one wildly successful example for the myth to grow and perpetuate. This myth often resonates in game education settings. Students often come in with assumptions of what it takes to make a game as well as the value of their ideas. They often think that their ideas are inherently valuable. They are not. Students are frequently surprised at the speed at which pitches can be

developed, and that ideas can come from any of their peers. This is not the only misconception they struggle with.

The fear that someone may steal an idea or that there is a scarcity of ideas is a myth [2, p. 354]. This myth affects classroom practice. It is not uncommon for students to guard their ideas and either try to protect them [21], we have experienced students not wanting to share their best ideas for fear of theft. The extension of the argument is that their idea will someday be pitched, and made, thus it has value.

Misconceptions surrounding the value of ideas and pitching prompted us to conduct the following interviews. Fortunately, we learned that just as our students have idealistic views about the value and practice of pitching, our own stance might be overly cynical in the current game development climate.

3. THE DESIGN BOX METHOD OF PITCHING

The Design Box is a solution to a problem: pitching methodologies have largely remained unchanged even as techniques for design and development have evolved. For instance, agile development methods such as scrum have motivated teams to move away from traditional design bible-style design documents. The main issue is that most pitching styles (e.g. elevator, internal, external, etc.) are tools for delivery and not for ideation or creation. In general someone suggests an idea of what a game should be, using a variety of delivery methods. Brainstorming also encourages “Deductive Pitching” or “Hypothesis Based Pitching.” In essence folks come up with a variety of ideas and evaluate their merit using various criteria such as voting or client buy-in. In short the pitch tends to be a thumbs up or thumbs down proposition. Most importantly, while agile development allows for iteration, our pitching methods tend not to. The Design Box explicitly encourages living pitches that can be iterated upon.

Perhaps one of the most significant problems we have observed in the classroom is that students engaged in game pitching activities tend to present ideas that are highly derivative. Anecdotally, this can get to a level such that game faculty have to impose restrictions in terms of content (e.g. no games with spaceships, robots, or ninjas) as well as descriptors (e.g. must not use the words “fun” or “visceral”). In Jazz, musicians riff off of a scale, lick, or each other. They do not improvise and create from nothing. In the case of game pitching, how can we scaffold students so that they don’t fall back on simply playing the ‘music’ they know and is familiar?

Our inspiration comes from practices we have encountered at AAA studios. In some of these companies it is not uncommon for designers to be given interview tests where they pitch game concepts using constraints given to them at random. Imagine randomly selecting five ping-pong balls one each for a genre, game mechanic, target demographic, theme, and platform. Upon drawing the ping-pong balls you might be given 10 minutes to devise a pitch using all of constraints you drew. You could end up having to pitch a role-playing game using small team tactics in the sports genre for middle aged men who like high fantasy on the web. You could call it “Kingdom of Fantasy Football, With Friends.”

The above example is but one variation of multiple pitching tests we have observed at different game development studios. What they all have in common is they try to solve the “design paralysis” problem that designers (especially novice ones) face. Rather than limiting creativity, the constraints serve to inspire. Good design

solves a problem. Here the constraints create clever problems for the pitches to solve.

3.1 Description of the Design Box

The Design Box is a tool that encourages ideation and iterative pitching. Unlike the traditional pitch, designed to be accepted or rejected, the Design Box combines brainstorming/ideation, design, and pitching into a pedagogical tool that promotes team buy-in. It also helps students reflect and unpack their pitches as they are developed.

Rather than focusing on competing ideas and camps this process encourages iteration and collaboration on ideas that are owned by the group and meet needs defined by the group. It also illustrates that games are not just content, but are dynamic systems with which players engage.

It was inspired by the notion that every idea develops once it is introduced to a group, so why not develop pitches within a group? It also helps students see that ideas are “cheap and easy.” There is no scarcity of good ideas, but not all of them fit the needs of the audience.

Finally, the Design Box reinforces a particular perspective on pitching: good design focuses on problem solving. Rather than ‘spitballing’ until an idea captures the imagination of participants, the Design Box has participants defining a problem, pitching, deconstructing the pitches, refining the problem, and repeating the process until the team ‘buys into’ a solution.

3.2 Utilizing the four sides of the Design Box

The Design Box is a conceptual space in which participants pitch ideas. Each side of the box poses an area for which a constraint must be defined. The boundaries of the box are: technology, aesthetics, audience, and play/question/theory. The technology wall focuses on the technical systems that afford the game, be it digital or physical. The aesthetics are various content the player will interact with, focusing on the emotions they may encourage. The audience wall focuses on the people the pitch is being created for. Finally the play/question/theory wall makes explicit the mechanic, problem, or idea the game will explore. All four walls will be explained in detail in the following sections.

Participants must then pitch ideas that fit in the box (i.e. that meet each of the four constraints). During this process participants are encouraged to riff off of one another’s ideas. They must also be careful to record each individual pitch inside the box.

After a set amount of time (we recommend between 15 and 20 minutes), or if the group feels the box is “saturated” (all of the pitches start sounding very similar), the pitches are then used to further clarify the four walls of the box. This usually involves discussing each idea and explaining how it meets the constraints of the sides of the box. Deconstructing the pitches yields naturally occurring thoughts on the four boundaries (usually different from the initial defining of the box) and allows for the walls to become better defined thus making the box, metaphorically speaking, smaller.

Once all four walls have been revised, pitching again occurs. Participants should act as if they are starting from scratch with a new box. Some ideas may be derivative, but many will be entirely new.

The process should be repeated until the box is “small” enough that a couple of the pitches appear to be excellent games based on the parameters set by the group. The group should reach some form of consensus on when this occurs.

3.3 The Technology Wall

The technology (tech) is the first of the four ‘walls’ or constraints that define the edges of the Design Box. While a team can start with any of the four walls, tech is a good one to start with. This wall is frequently defined by a variety of external circumstances and it is usually the least contentious. As such, teams can usually define the wall together, encouraging a spirit of collaboration.

The process of defining the tech wall can be started with a few questions. These are offered as suggestions and not a script. Readers should feel free to use or riff on any of the following:

- What platform will this end up on?
 - Mobile, Tablet, PC, Console, etc.
- Is there any software we are required to use?
- Perhaps by the client or the platform holder?
- Do we have any licenses to software that may be useful?
- What technologies do we have knowledge and experience with?

It is important to note that some questions may be more productive after the first round of pitching. For example, a pitch may be for a specific audience who would benefit from the use of a specific tech such as a peripheral or specialized input device.

3.4 The Aesthetic Wall

The aesthetic wall takes two cues from Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek’s MDA framework [22]. The first is in consideration of the emotions the player will feel. What will the content the system outputs, the sounds, the visuals, the haptic feedback, the narrative, evoke in the player? The second is in their list of 8 kinds of fun: *sensation, fantasy, narrative, challenge, fellowship, discovery, expression, and submission*. It should be noted that the list is open and teams should add any terms they desire to move them towards more detailed notions of what they consider fun, engaging, or to narrow down the emotional response they are going for.

A moderator asking questions may help a team fill out this wall. Remember there is no need to ‘get it right’ or even to have a robust list on the wall, as the content will change after the first round of pitching. The goal is to get to a constraint that is defined enough so as to enable a team to ‘pitch deeply,’ that is to pitch to solve a problem based on a nuanced understanding of the constraints it poses. The following types of questions may prove useful:

- What has our client (if there is one) said about this? Have they asked for a specific type of ‘thing’ we can translate into an emotion?
- How do we want our players to feel as they play the game?
- How much time do we have to make assets?
- Do we have any talents or experience with a particular style?

Again, after pitching any item can be revised or deleted when revisiting what comprises the walls. Teams will often have a better understanding of what the aesthetics of their game are after they have reviewed them a few times.

3.5 The Audience Wall

In earlier versions of the Design Box, this was labeled the players wall. However, as the box is used to develop pitches, it became useful to expand the notion of audience. Players are the central

members of the audience wall, but clients, publishers, retailers, the press, and anyone who hears the pitch should also be considered. A pitch for game for health, for example, might fail because it only considered the patients and players (i.e. end-users) and did not address the partners necessary to get the game into the hands of the players. It takes a village to play a game.

Ideally this wall will help the team understand who the pitch is for and tailor it accordingly. They may choose to list someone, and table them for discussion at another time. For example, while a retailer may be important, it could be possible to tailor the final pitch to meet their needs.

Questions useful in filling out the audience wall for the first time may be:

- Does our partner have a particular group of players in mind?
- Who do we see playing this game?
- Who needs to sign off on this game?
- Where will the game be played?
- What’s the physical context?

Many times pitches will require a team to reconsider who the player is. If the team keeps pitching games for a different group of players or a subset, then it may be wise to simply change who is listed as the player, if all the stakeholders do not have a specific player requirement.

3.6 The Question/Theory/Play Wall

This is the “so were supposed to *blank*” wall. If there is a mechanic, a genre, a theory, a question, or an activity that the team has either already decided upon or been assigned, it is put on this wall. There is still room for discovery and refinement, in fact if nothing has been assigned this wall frequently sees the most iteration. Questions could come in the form of a traditional pitch question, “Wouldn’t it be interesting to play a role playing game where all the characters are cats?” It could also be related to an IP, “Can you turn Super Mario Bros. into a free to play game?” With games for health or serious games a theory often is the driving constraint on this wall. For example, on a game we are working to help adults manage type II diabetes, we started by considering a conceptual model for serious games design [23], the implementation intentions theory of behavior change [24], and several theories on the use of avatars for education and health behavior change [25]–[31] including patient empowerment through a game [32].

Questions that aid in the first round of defining the wall may include:

- Have we been asked to make a specific type of game?
- Are there any theories driving our design?
- What’s the problem we are trying to solve with this game?
- Can we phrase it as a question?

This wall can take time, but again it is best to leave it open to revision. Sometimes this wall starts with a robust list, others it only has one or two items on it.

3.7 Pitching Inside of the Box

Usually the Design Box is drawn on a white board, though students sometimes use large sheets of paper. Once the box is drawn, all of the walls: tech, aesthetics, audience,

question/theory/play are populated with bullet points for each category. Teams can, and should start with whichever category they wish. Then the team should pitch game ideas that account for all four sides of the wall. The pitches should be abbreviated and written inside of the box. Teammates may opt to hold pitches accountable in the moment, or wait until pitching has stopped.

Once the box is full of short game idea pitches, the team can begin deconstructing them. The first round isn't to evaluate the pitches, but rather to see if common ideas are being explored. Oftentimes these ideas represent assumptions that should be made explicit and added to the walls. This is not dissimilar to the notion of open coding, where data leads to categories (axial coding) and theories [33], [34]. To service the metaphor, the goal of the first round is to make the box smaller by providing clarity to the four walls of constraint.

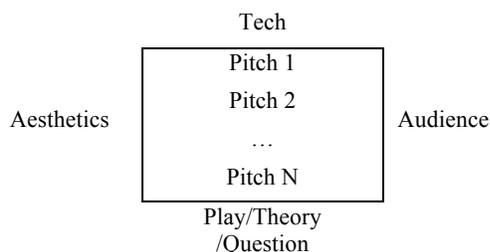
Resistance is important in refining the walls. If an idea is listed on one of the walls, and the team believes it is not relevant nor helpful then it should be removed. However, the team should resist removing it simply because it is difficult. Perhaps it needs to be revised or clarified, but sometimes the constraints are difficult.

After revising the walls the game pitches inside the box should be erased and the process repeated. Some pitches will return, and they should, so long as they have a supporter and they still meet the requirements of the newly revised walls of constraint. The team may revise the walls and resume pitching as much as they need to.

Eventually, the team will arrive at a point where the walls are so constraining that only a few relevant pitches remain. This is similar to the notion of theoretical saturation [35], [36]. Once at this point the team has their design pitch.

One of the advantages of the process is that, much like agile software development methods, such as *scrum* [37], [38], the Design Box encourages revisiting pitches. As an iterative process, if the design changes the pitch can be updated. If the design does not seem to be meeting the needs of the team or stakeholders the process can be revisited. We have seen teams use the Design Box in conjunction with build reviews and backlog meetings.

Table 1. The Design Box



3.8 Design Box Best Practices

Software developers often state that, “agile is not a religion.” [39] By the lack of churches and tax write-offs for agile development, we can only assume they are correct. The same is true of the Design Box. All of its components are easily modifiable. An instructor might choose to change one of the walls and impose different kinds of constraints. The goal is to scaffold and encourage two things: collaborative ideation and iteration. In terms of its use, the core best practice is to keep it useful. Some students might need help with iteration, while others could use

more support with ideation. As with any pedagogical tool, we encourage refinement based on feedback from teams.

We have found that students find that focusing on constraints and the refinement of them is new and challenging. Pitches in the box change dramatically week to week, while the walls evolved. It can be useful to point out the number of quality pitches developed in a session to encourage participants to realize that it is ok to erase them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this work in progress we have examined one method for pitching that can be taught to students in game programs: the Design Box. We have described how we have used this tool and provide suggestions for others who wish to adopt it as well. We welcome suggestions, critique, and alterations such that we may better serve our students.

Pitching is a normal practice in games education. It is our hope that the tool we have provided will prove useful in early ideation and pitch development. We look forward to further developing these ideas and look forward to feedback and suggestions.

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