Designing Inside the Box or Pitching Practices in Industry and Education

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ABSTRACT
Pitching, the act of trying to convince others to support the development of a project, has a long, storied tradition in the game industry. This practice has also been adopted by game educators and incorporated into their curricula. In project-oriented classes it is common for students to pitch games to classmates, industry panels, and faculty. Using a series of vignettes, informed by anonymous industry professionals, we explore the mores and myths of pitching. These vignettes reflect a variety of pitching practices in companies both large and small. We also present a pedagogical tool, the Design Box, discuss our experiences using it, including common critiques, and illustrate its use for creative ideation as well as persuasive potential. The Design Box is a method we present for adoption, critique and evaluation. 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.

Keywords
Industry practices, game pitching, qualitative interviews, Design Box, game education, audience, players, pedagogical tools, ideation

INTRODUCTION
Pitching holds an important and often romanticized role in games. There are books (e.g. Adams 2013; Fullerton 2008; Rouse 2004), trade conference talks (Rogers 2012) and websites (Kumar and Remo 2008; Tunnell 2007; Davis 2010) describing industry norms on pitching and best practices. In the context of game design education, pitching is often presented as a fundamental skill students should master. While there are excellent sources for what a successful pitch should look like (e.g. Schell 2008; Brathwaite 2013), less has been written on how to best help students learn how to go from ideation to pitching. More specifically, how to support students in developing their initial ideas into a core idea that is worth developing, iterating on, and pitching to others.

In this article we will describe what "pitching" is commonly like in small to large game development studios. We hope our observations, based on our analysis of interviews with industry professionals, will help dispel commonly held myths about pitching. Then we will outline the "Design Box," an iterative method we have developed to 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

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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.

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. Waern 2013; Zagal and Bruckman 2010; Zagal and Bruckman 2011). Another area of games education has focused on teaching the design and development of games (e.g. Ryan 2013). Here the emphasis is supporting students in developing knowledge and skills that will help them in the game industry (e.g. Caldwell et al. 2012; Fernández-Vara and Tan 2008; Kessler, van Langeveld, and Altizer 2009). 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 Zagal and Sharp 2011). Research has been done to determine how to evaluate these projects (Bourdreaux, Etheridge, and Kumar 2011; Linhoff and Settle 2009) with emphases placed on the process, development of soft skills (project management, teamwork, communication), and other important habits for iterative game design (Tan 2010). There exists is a gap in the literature when it comes to the ideation and concept development of games. More specifically, the process by which these ideas and concepts are developed and pitched. Research on game capstone courses rarely reports how the games students develop are determined (Linhoff and Settle 2009; Zagal and Sharp 2011). How do students develop ideas, pitch games, who do they pitch to, and how are the 'winners' decided? (for work on game ideation with professionals, see (Kultima et al. 2009)

This research aims to address that gap by presenting a game idea pitching tool that helps students understand the basic components of a pitch and iteratively 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 scalable and has been used by individuals and large groups to prepare pitches.

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 (White 2007). Many believe that by virtue of the power of an idea and the pluck and charisma of the person communicating it, great projects get started. Movie deals and game contracts are made on an elevator conversation and a handshake.

The narrative above is a myth that is often perpetuated by stories of serendipitous encounters that resulted in major deals. As our interviews will illustrate, the myth is usually based on nothing more than wishful thinking. Regardless, the idea still resonates in education settings. Students have assumptions regarding the value of their ideas and what it takes to make a game. They often think their ideas are valuable. Students are also frequently surprised at the speed at which pitches can be developed, and that ideas can come from any of their peers. Their assumptions also often neglect the relationships that clients have with developers and the importance of this in pitching (Schell 2008, 424).

The fear that someone may steal an idea or that there is a scarcity of ideas is another common misconception (Fullerton 2008, 354). It is not uncommon for students to guard their ideas and try to protect them (Rosen 2009). Students often resist sharing their best ideas for fear of theft.

Methods

While we have experience developing, teaching, and writing about games, we wanted our discussion on the myths of pitching and current norms to be situated in the communities we are examining, namely game developers and students. We were also motivated by the tradition of qualitative work used to illuminate game industry norms and practices (e.g. O'Donnell 2008). To this end we interviewed eight game developers, five of whom are alumni, and three who are not. This purposeful sampling allowed us to explore notions held by industry professionals and complement them with the perspectives of industry professionals who had been exposed to how we educate people about pitching. Our sample was diverse and included the studio head of a AAA company, a lead designer of a mid-sized independent developer, two associate producers at a large company making mobile games, two designers from two different AAA studios working on well-established franchises, a designer at a small independent games studio, and a creative director at a board and miniatures game company. While the sample size is small, we believe we reached theoretical saturation.

We utilized email correspondence and face to face interviews to collect our data. We then analyzed our data using open coding, allowing the codes to emerge from the data. We used a cloud-based qualitative analysis tool, *Dedoose* (Lieber 2012), to assist both in coding and identifying themes or categories. In the tradition of grounded theory we then used the categories we derived from the 53 codes we discovered to articulate common themes. We will use vignettes from the interviews to illustrate our analysis. All our participants have been anonymized and references to games they have worked on or companies they have worked with have been changed. The headings and subheadings are the themes that emerged from the coding.

Myths and Misconceptions

When asked about the dream of making the "off the street" pitch to a game company where someone approaches a company with an idea that the company proceeds to buy or pitch, three of the respondents literally laughed. One joked, "sign me up!" Our interviewees believed there are many myths on pitching and that the "off the street one" is perhaps the most pervasive.

"I think one that exists is that anyone can write a pitch letter (strongly-worded or not) to a developer and that it could possibly change the direction of that studio's work and focus. There are so many factors that go into what is being developed at any given company that the acceptance and implementation of outside pitches are practically unheard of."

The mid-sized studio designer informed us that "we have the secretary open anything that might be a pitch and send it back if it is." The studio head claimed that the practice of refusing pitches began in the first generation of consoles. "When I worked at [a first generation American game console company] if something even smelled like a pitch it went right in the trash, sometimes we might send it back unopened." One developer shared that their company has an explicit ban on unsolicited pitches.

Liability was the rationale. They feared that if a game company happens to develop an idea similar to one received in an unsolicited pitch they might have suffer through a costly lawsuit or bad press. The person who sent the pitch would claim they "stole" their idea. The film industry was frequently used as an analogy and possible cause for the misconception. Because there is supposedly a very small chance of getting someone to read a script and option it for production (Garant and Lennon 2012), the same is true of games. Here the "game idea" (e.g. design document) stands in for the movie script. In the game industry, presenting a prototype or an established team to a publisher is a more common practice. Analogies given were that of an indie developer showing a game on the GDC floor or an established developer approaching publishers to fund a new title.

Our interviewees admitted they had similar misconceptions prior to their employment in games or formally studying them: "My personal dreams [before school] were all about how I was going to bring these game companies the greatest and best ideas they'd ever seen, because I was a gaming genius. […] I had all the obvious answers that these guys were just dying for." We were implored to "tell your students that ideas are cheap. There's no lack of ideas in the world and if you think someone is going to make your idea it won't happen unless you're independently wealthy. Once other people get involved your ideas will change."

Another myth is the belief that there are opportunities that only involve pitching and selling ideas without having to work on them. The myth of the "idea person" is that their creativity is so valuable, that they will not have to work on the product pitched. In other words, "if you successfully pitch an idea, someone else will be building the product. Every single pitch I have seen has been under the assumption that the person or persons pitching will be building and responsible for the project, both internally and externally. You must instill confidence that you can execute on your idea, or at the very least, that you understand all the processes involved." Ideas are easy, the pitch is to build a game, not to sell an idea.

Our final myth comes from games education: students working at large companies will rarely get to pitch their own ideas, they'll simply be "cogs in the machine". We were surprised by how many of our participants had pitched as part of their job, even successfully pitched new games. When asked about this they mentioned that due to the shift towards smaller games, mobile devices, and more accessible publishing options, it is easier for internal teams to pitch games. Also, with the adoption of agile development methods, more team members are involved in pitching features and solutions.

Different Types of Pitches

From our interviews three types of pitches emerged as binary categories: formal and informal pitches, internal and external pitches, and problem solving and creative pitches. The interviews also focused on style, audience, and content. We use the categories to organize the vignettes.

Table 1. Binary Types of Pitches

Theme From Data	Defining attributes
Formal and Informal	Pressure and preparation
Internal and External	Familiarity of audience with content
Problem Solving and Creative	Top down vs bottom up pitches

Formal and Informal Pitches

Game companies have both formal pitches with scheduled presentations and support materials and informal pitches without these requirements. “At our small company, in a year and a half, we have had one call for game pitches requiring full presentations. While there were no guarantees of any being green-lit, there was significant pressure to perform if you decided to pitch. I pitched a title successfully, and have been building it since. That said, at least three games have been made through informal pitching. Everyone at the company is always introducing new ideas casually, over lunch or in office banter. The vast majority go nowhere, but some gain traction. Pitching is everyone's job if they want it to be.”

Formal and informal pitching seems common, but depending on studio culture, one or the other may be dominant. “In my job, rarely are my pitches as formal or prepared as they were in school. […] [H]ere my pitches are often fast and loose, usually without a PowerPoint presentation. Instead, things are rather informal, and questions are often fired throughout a pitch, which can sometimes make it a little challenging to present a concept, but at the same time, I'm usually pitching to other interested designers, and spitballing has become something of a common language to me.” There is a certain amount of pressure associated with formal pitches as well as an expectation to use presentation software. “At [our company], you fail if you don’t have PowerPoint skills.” In fact, there seems to be a sense of relief about having the opportunity to pitch informally, “once I was meeting with a CEO and he said ‘I’m so sick of PowerPoint, can’t we just talk?’ it was fantastic.”

Internal and External Pitches

Generally speaking, internal pitches are those that happen within a team or studio and external pitches are to other units in the company, in the case of a large corporation, or to outside potential partners, including vendors, investors, publishers, and the like. The purpose of the pitch may vary based on the audience. For example, internal pitches may or may not be for game ideas, they could be for new features or methods and processes of game development. “Because of the studio's established properties and business models, rather than regularly pitching game concepts, my team's pitches are typically for features that enhance the hook and framework of the game. Despite the size of the studio, however, pitching is often more casual than people might expect, too. It usually involves little more than some researched reference, a handful of images, a well thought out approach, and a conversational meeting with the right people.”

External pitches, on the other hand, tend to be formal and more akin to presentations than discussions. “External pitches are all about internal team alignment around the best pitche(s), cutting away the excess to find the meaningful core of a pitch, and carrying that idea forward as a well-formed and well-informed product pitch.” In the case of external

pitches, they tend to start at a higher level, as will be discussed under best practices later in this paper. Because the audience may have little to no background on the game or team, the pitches tend to start with abstractions of core concepts.

“Externally as a freelance, I was recently invited into [a major motion picture studio] to pitch a game for the upcoming [Hollywood blockbuster] based on a treatment I sent in. The game was well received and funding was offered, but the timeline was much shorter than anticipated, making production infeasible. I have made over ten sophisticated slide deck pitches as a freelance to other companies, some for very high profile IPs. Of those that garnered attention, none has moved forward under worthwhile or possible conditions.”

It should be noted that a third audience has emerged recently as a result of crowd funding: pitching to the general public. This sort of pitching requires a mix of formal and informal presentation skills. “The most critical form of pitching I do is in the form of Kickstarter campaigns, both internally and externally. Crowd funding is the most important form of pitching in the industry right now.”

Whether or not pitching is encouraged is a hallmark of a studio’s culture. While all of the studios represented in our interviews had some mechanism for internal pitching, some studios embraced the idea more than others. “Internal pitches… should be very much encouraged. If a company starts to place a stranglehold on their creative talent, that seems like it'd be a very bad sign. There should always be some type of venue where new ideas should be heard. Great ideas can really come from anywhere, and so it shouldn't just be the designers who are ‘allowed’ to pitch something. Instead, everyone should feel that they have the opportunity to contribute. Whether they actually want to or not, well, that's they're decision to make.”

Problem Solving and Creative Pitches

Some pitches are meant to address a specific problem, while some are the product of a “wouldn’t it be cool” moment. Problem solving pitches start with constraints and a goal. For example, “how do we take [an iconic game] and move it from a flip phone to a smart phone? People don’t play for the same amount of time. How do we fix that? 10-key works just like a d-pad, virtual d-pads suck. We had to create a pitch to redesign the game to work on modern hardware for modern players.” The term “top down” was used to describe these kinds of problem solving pitches. When the pitch is focused on a constraint, be it technology, a design, an established brand, then the team is attempting to solve a problem with a pitch.

In contrast, creative pitches were referred to as “bottom up”: “It’s like when we’re sitting around and I say something and you say it’s cool and we start building off one another’s idea, that’s a bottom up pitch.”

Best Practices

The professionals we talked to shared a variety of best practices. These ranged from advice like “know your audience, know your game,” to “it is always better to admit when you don’t know then look like you’re making it up.” There were common themes in the best practices category: practice, keep it high level, develop your pitching persona, and focus on great ideas.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

The admonition to practice is commonplace in educational settings. It was also the most frequently repeated best practice by our participants. “The hardest part of pitching is learning to be confident presenting ideas to an audience that knows the business. You may believe in your game, but you need to present it well and with confidence if you want others to get on board. School provided a unique venue to practice, practice, practice.”

Feedback was also described as essential for meaningful practice. “Practice. As silly as it may sound, I often practiced every pitch I ever gave a couple dozen times before I actually gave it a shot. I'd practice it in the mirror. I'd pitch it to myself while I was driving in my car. I'd ask myself questions that I thought might come up, and I'd come up with answers. Shoot, I'd even practice little jokes to toss into the presentations, reciting them until they came off as natural. I would snag passers-by in the studio and subject them to a quick version of the pitch. I'd ask for feedback. I'd do this especially if I thought I was getting close to a good pitch, because when you're working so close to something, you tend to start missing things, like details that you haven't explained properly.”

Keep It High Level

In addition to the admonishment to keep pitches short, there was an emphasis on keeping them “high-level” rather than explaining details. “Abstract it to its core components (once again, hook and razor), keep the pitch as simple and direct as possible, and know exactly why it's a good idea. If you really have a clear idea of why your idea is great, you're much more likely to get people on your side and to have the passion to push it into development.” It is important to keep in mind what the audience wants, “People don’t want a report. They want a deck. They want the high level view. They’ll ask for the details later.” Our participants explained that the pitch helps someone decide if they want to know more or not. Frequently, if the high-level explanation is enough, they will make a decision based upon it.

Develop Your Pitching Persona

The personality and attitude of the person pitching also matters. One of the industry veterans shared that though he had been a high-school debater and was in theater in college. None of his school experiences prepared him to pitch as well as a two-day course on how to behave in front of a television camera. He was required to take the course by his company, and while the class was designed for newscasters he argued it taught him more about having a persona than anything else. Other developers agreed on developing a pitch persona. “Creating a ‘pitching persona’ that is both comfortable speaking and can put your audience at ease is a skill. Now, it definitely helps when you have an amazing project that you're pitching, especially one that you're personally psyched about, but even if you're not, you can put together a great pitch, and get people excited on your behalf.”

To be fair, not all our participants agreed with the notion of a constructed persona: “It's incredibly cheesy, but be yourself. There's something to be said about being genuine with your audience. Also, practice your pitch a few times in front of the mirror. Make sure it's a product you believe in, and even if you're not excited, find the things about it that do make you excited - the people, the cool design hook that'll get players, etc. There's something worthy in the idea, so sell it.”

Only Pitch Good Ideas

Regardless of the type of pitch, the quality of the idea was more important that the quality of the pitch itself. This was brought up consistently in the interviews. "[T]he quality of the idea is paramount. In the many pitches I have witnessed after my education (maybe ten formal pitches, and countless banter pitches, and roughly twenty of my own) the vast majority of pitch opportunities are wasted on ideas that are poorly formulated or not unique. If you do get an opportunity to pitch, make sure the idea is worthy of pitching." Furthermore, they stressed that it is important only to pitch the ideas the presenter deems worth pitching.

In the spirit of reflexivity (Turner 1995), it is important to note that we entered into this study with a skeptical attitude. We had assumed that the pitch was often more important that the ideas it contained and were pleasantly surprised that novice and veteran developers still prized the core ideas over the pitch.

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. While agile development allows for iteration, our pitching methods tend not to. The Design Box explicitly encourages living pitches that can be iterated upon. The issue is that most pitching styles (e.g. elevator, internal, external, etc.) are tools for delivery and not for ideation or refinement. Ideation techniques such as brainstorming do encourage "Deductive Pitching" or "Hypothesis Based Pitching." However, these techniques tend to focus on generating lots of ideas and evaluating their merit. In short they tend to favor thumbs up or down propositions.

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 point where faculty have to impose content restrictions (e.g. no spaceships, robots, or ninjas) or descriptors (e.g. must not use the words "fun" or "visceral"). 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 randomly assigned constraints. 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, constraints serve to inspire. Good design solves a problem. Here the constraints create clever problems for the pitches to solve. As stated by Lehrer (2012)

"…imagination is unleashed by constraints. You break out of the box by stepping into shackles." In our case stepping into the box lets you think outside of it.

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: a design focus 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.

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, the players and the client. 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.

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. Participants 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.

The Aesthetic Wall

The aesthetic wall takes two cues from Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek's MDA framework (2004). 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.

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 change who is listed as the player (unless the stakeholders have a specific player requirement).

The Question/Theory/Play Wall

This is the "this game is 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 (Thompson, Baranowski, and Buday 2010), the implementation intentions theory of behavior change (Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006), and several theories on the use of avatars for education and health behavior change (Fox, Bailenson, and Binney 2009; Jin 2009; Jin 2012; Lewis Hobart and Hobart 2012; Watt 2010; Madigan 2013; Yee, Bailenson, and Ducheneaut 2009) including patient empowerment through a game (Bruggers et al. 2012).

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.

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.

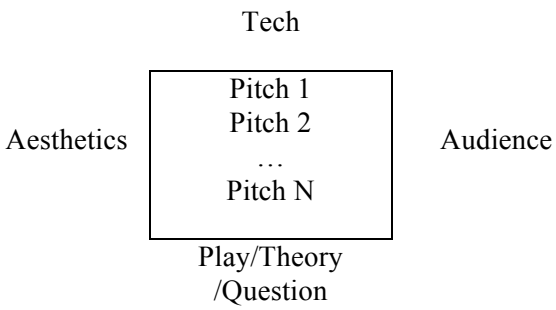
Once the box is full of short game idea pitches, the team can begin deconstructing them. The first round isn't to evaluate the pitches, but rather to see if common ideas are being explored. Oftentimes these ideas represent assumptions that should be made explicit and added to the walls. This is not dissimilar to the notion of open coding, where data leads to categories (axial coding) and theories (Corbin and Strauss 1998; Creswell 2006). 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 reach a point where the walls are so constraining that only a few pitches remain. This is similar to the notion of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1968; Lindlof and Taylor 2002). 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* (Keith 2010; Schwaber and Beedle 2002), 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 2. The Design Box



Design Box Best Practices

Software developers often state that, "agile is not a religion." 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.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have examined the practice of pitching from two perspectives: some of the ways it happens in the game industry and how it can be taught to students in game programs. For the former we have relied on our experience and insights shared with us by game industry professionals. For the latter we have presented a pedagogical tool: 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.

We believe the combination of qualitative research and discussion of pedagogical tools is useful for games education and games studies more broadly. When proposing new pedagogical tools, especially those that attempt to prepare students for professional practices, it is important that they be grounded in data and experience. In the absence of literature (or as a complement to it) we must seek out industry professionals to provide us with insights as to how they experience, use, develop, and perceive the practices we attempt to emulate in our classrooms. This allows us not only to think deeply about our own educational practices, but also to engage in a sort of equitable relationship by sharing with the industry professionals we study the tools we develop based upon said research.

Our analysis here is not intended to be doctrinal or normative, but rather to offer a well-lit snapshot at which we can gaze at a group comprised of veterans, and students entering the industry. By looking at both we can speak to the dissonance of what we teach and what is practiced and explore how our lessons can better equip students.

Pitching is a normal practice in games education. It is our hope that the insights we have provided by studying the norms of industry veterans and recent graduates working in industry will prove useful. We look forward to further developing these ideas and look forward to feedback and suggestions.

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