

GDC

March 20-24, 2023
San Francisco, CA

Never Skip Playtest Day!

5 Tips for Running Better Playtests



with Mike Salyh & Wyatt Bushnell

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#GDC23

Who Are We?

- Founders of Coin Crew Games
- We used to build arcade machines for places like Dave & Buster's.
- Pivoted in 2020 'cause *reasons*.
- We're now the developers of **Escape Academy**.





WELCOME TO ESCAPE ACADEMY

Welcome to Escape Academy. Train to become the ultimate Escape Room master. Solve Puzzles. Hack Servers. Meet the Faculty. Brew the perfect cup of tea. Entirely playable in single player or co-op with a friend - local or online!



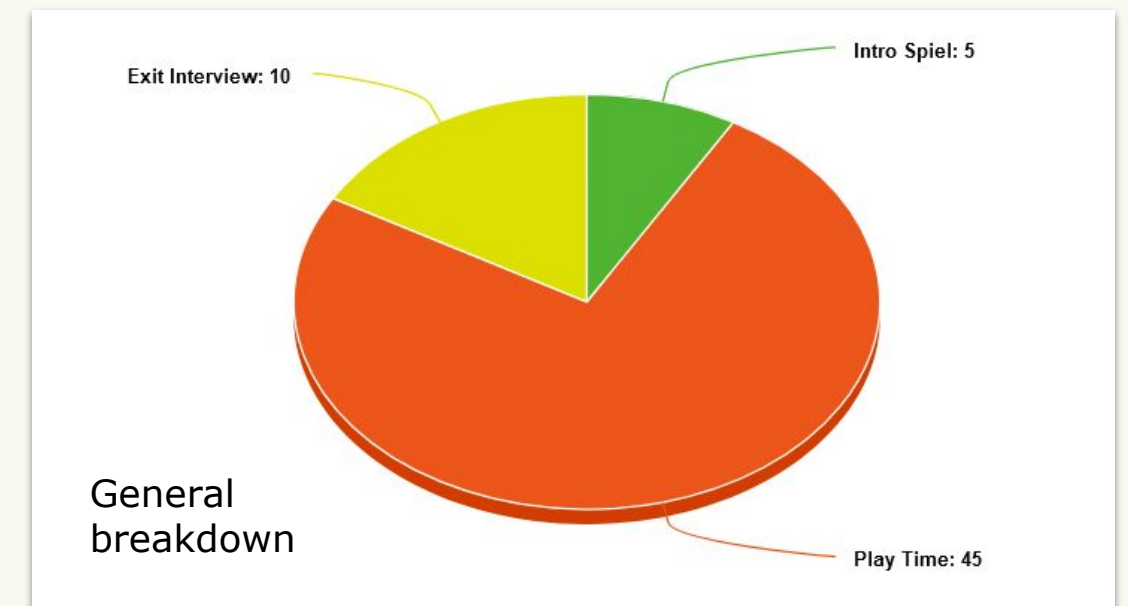
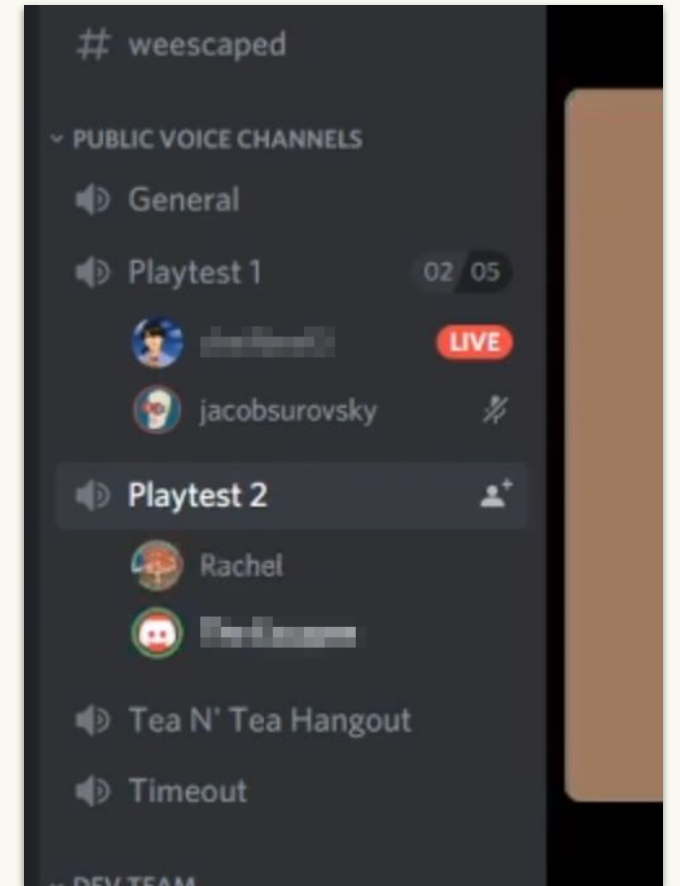
What's A Playtest?

A **controlled** play session where the developers **monitor** the results in order to **test a hypothesis**.



Our General Session

- Invite player(s) to test
- Give short intro spiel.
- Let `em play
 - Silently monitor play session
- Conduct exit interview
- Show `em the door (nicely)



Why We (Originally) Cared

- Arcade games are **SHORT!**
 - Under 3 minutes playtime.
- There's no room for tutorials.
- Any familiarity == bad tester
 - Your dev team can't test.

Playtests are integral for usability.





But wait... there's more!

The Gains

- + Design/UX problems caught early.
- + Tested weird & wacky ideas.
- + Focus stayed on playable progress
- + **No assumptions, only data**
- + Also a perk: ***Team Morale Boost!***



We playtest a lot.

Over 18 months of development on *Escape Academy*, we've had 400+ playtesters.

We really like playtesting.





Ok, let's get to the tips:

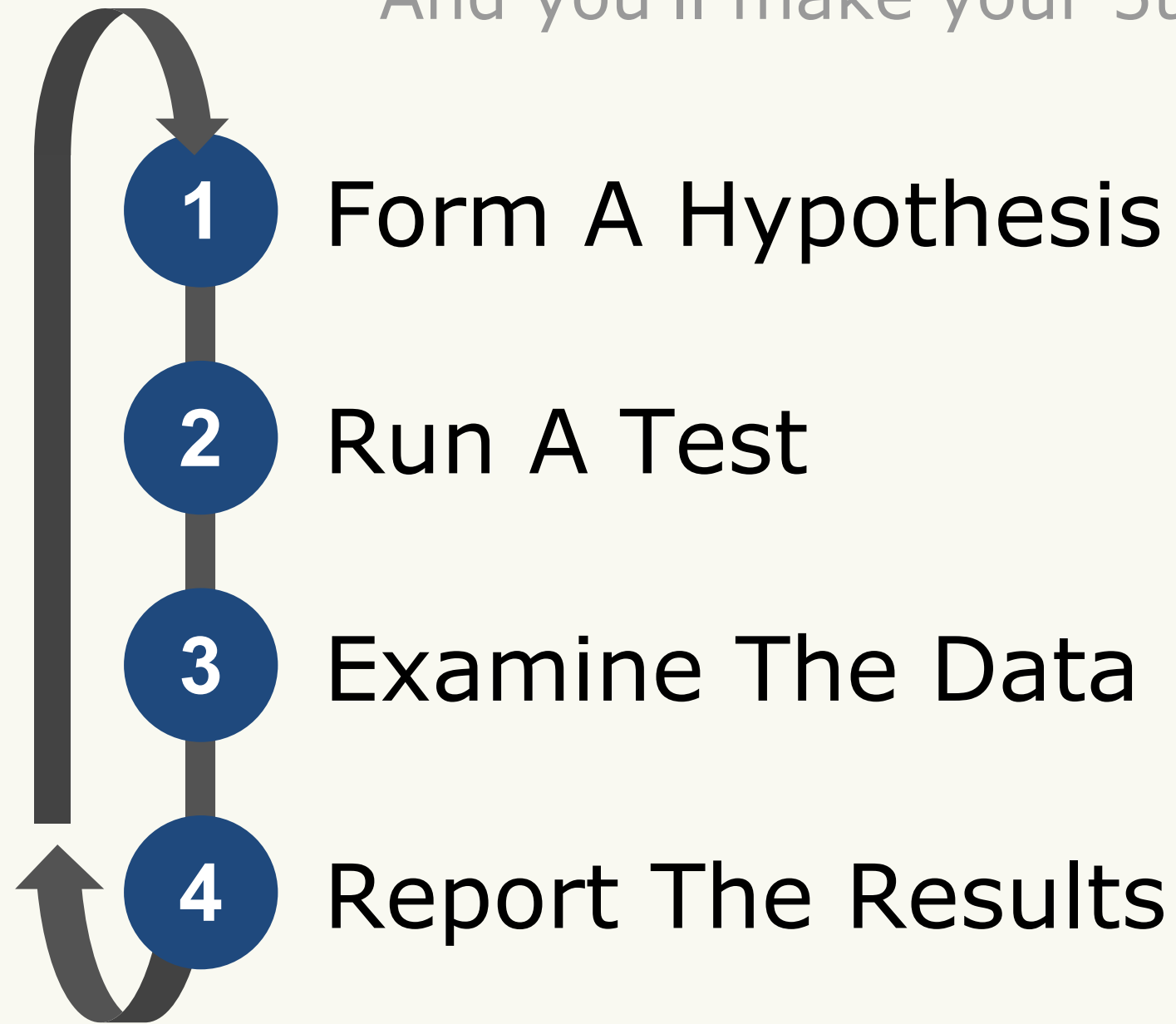


Tip #1: Be A Scientist



Remember The Scientific Method

And you'll make your 5th grade science teacher proud.



Example: Escape Academy's Clock

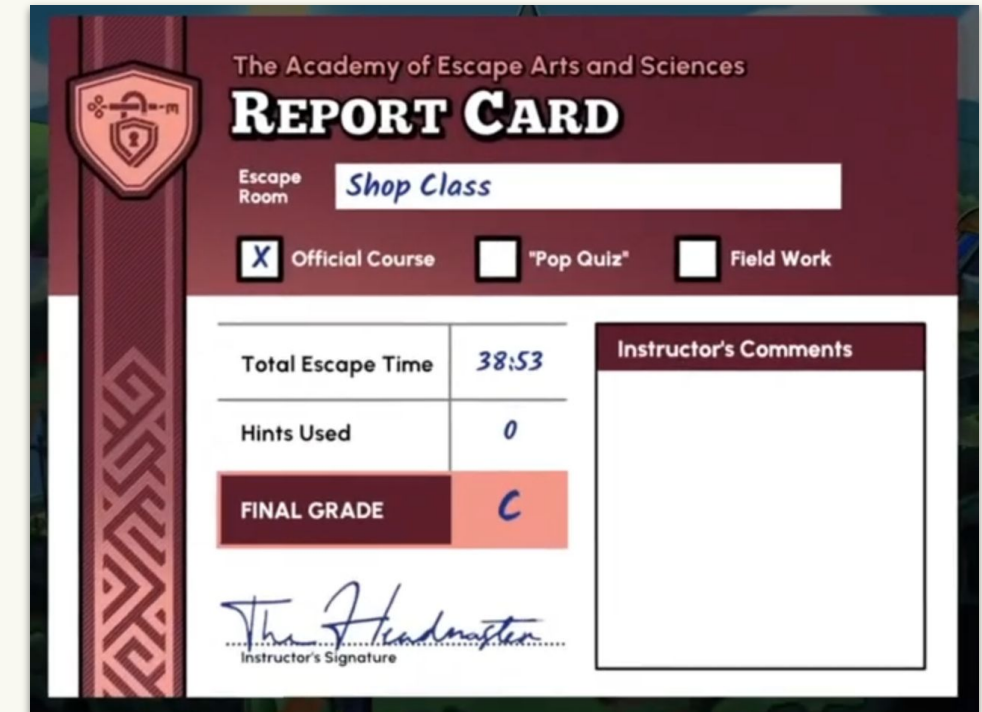
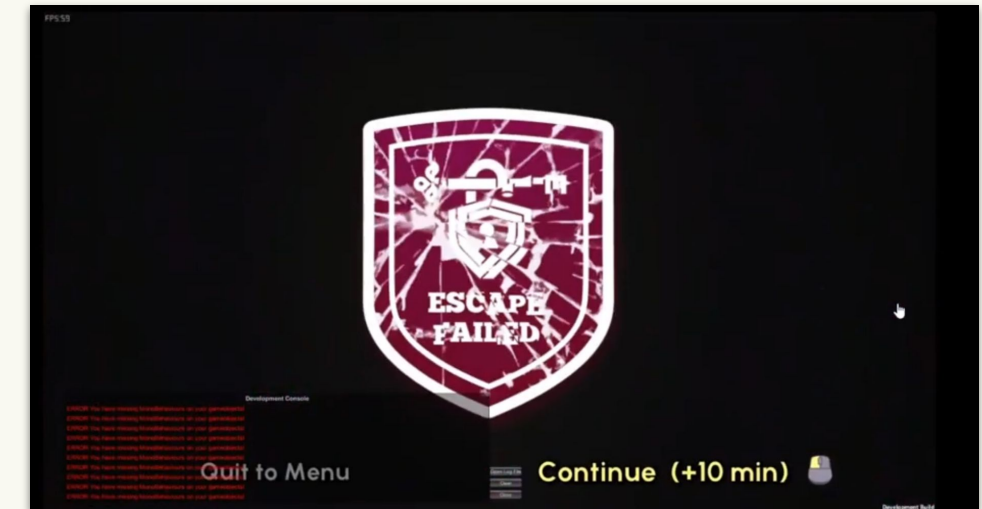
Hypothesis: Having a clock will make the game feel like a real Escape Room.

Results: Yes! But players hate restarting when they run out of time.

Hypothesis: Giving players a “continue” option will make game less punishing.

Results: Yes! But now the timer doesn't matter.

Hypothesis: Grading players based on how fast they escaped will strike the right balance.



**IF YOU MUST SCREAM, PLEASE
FOLLOW PROPER PROCEDURE:**



Tip #2: Be Invisible



Shut up and watch.

- Don't compromise your **data**
- *Their Pain, Your Gain*
- A playtest is not a demo
 - Demos need to be fun
 - Playtests don't.
- The goal is **learning!**

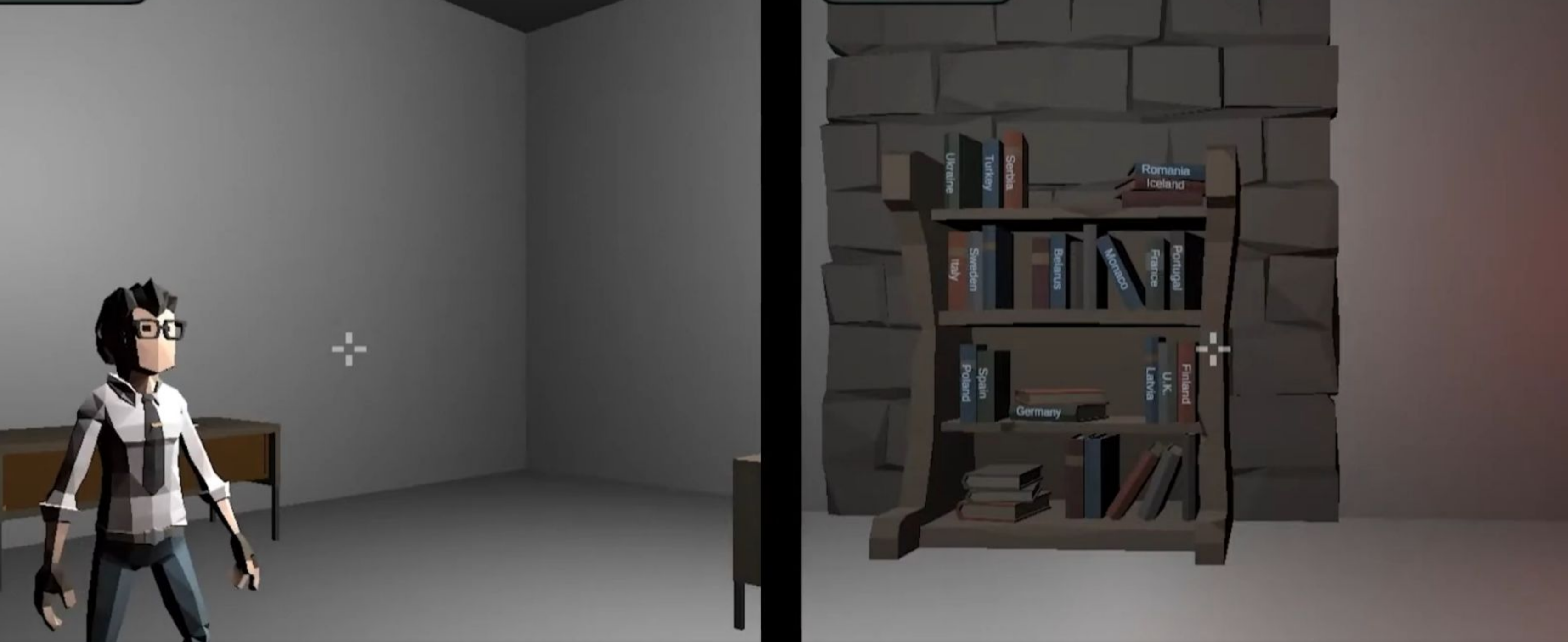


Watching keenly, from a nice social distance.

Scrawl, you maniac

- Watch and write **everything** down.
 - Details are hard to remember.
- Playtests = unofficial design sessions





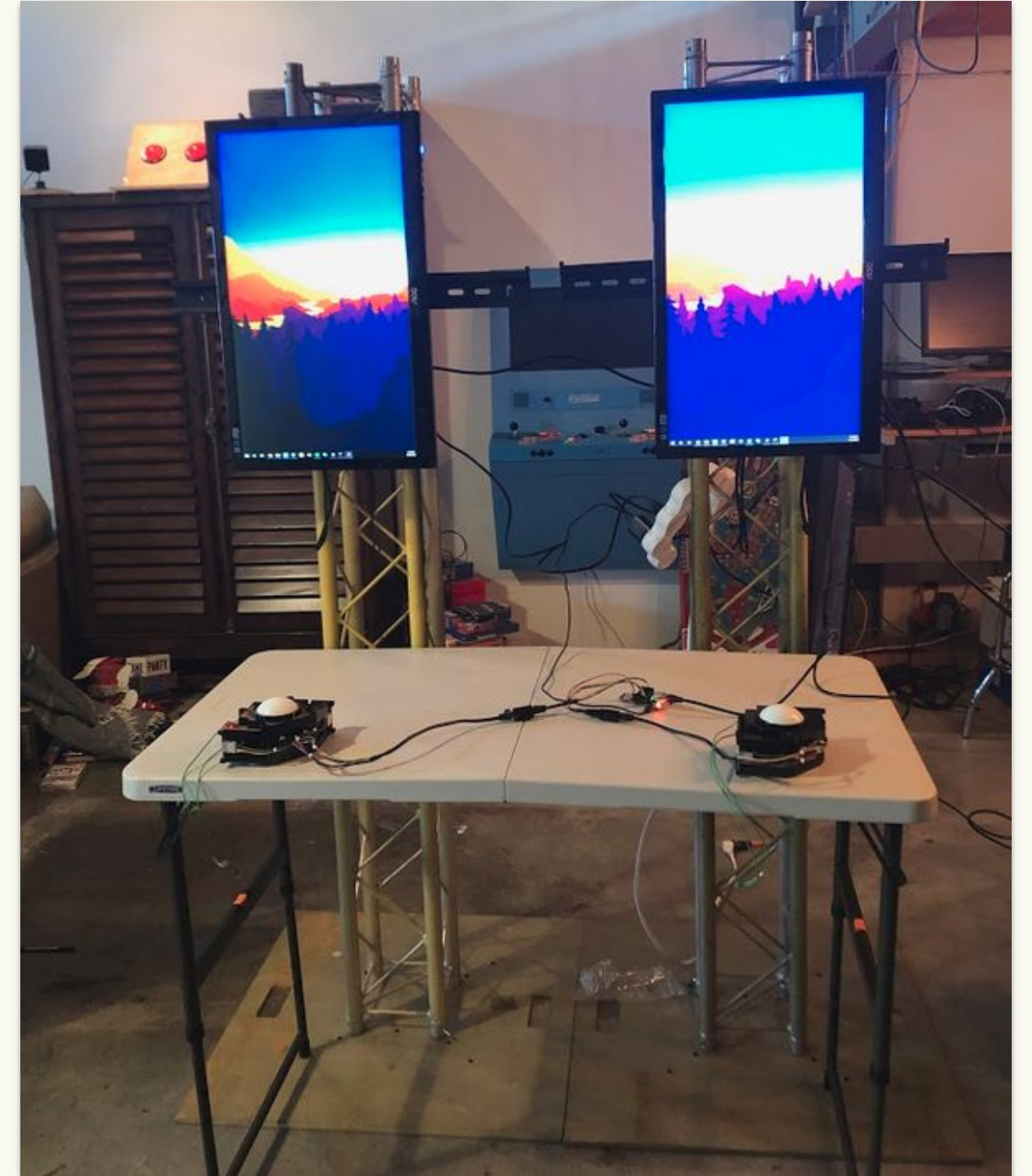
Tip #3: Start Early



Quick and Dirty

- Don't wait till the game is "fun enough" - start early!
- The biggest danger = surprises

"Bad news isn't wine, it doesn't improve with age" - Colin Powell



"Prototype Arcade Cabinet" aka trackballs glued to a picnic table.



What are your game's "cupholders"?

Paper is Powerful

- Allows for speedy iteration
- Answers questions **cheaply**
- Leverages tester imagination

🔑 *More than half the puzzles in Escape Academy were tested on paper!*





Tip #4: Read Between The Lines

Reading Nerds

- Interpreting playtesters is nuanced
 - *What are they doing?*
 - *What are they confused by?*
- People aren't good at giving negative feedback to your face
 - *They need Steam discussions for that*



Reflection > Interrogation

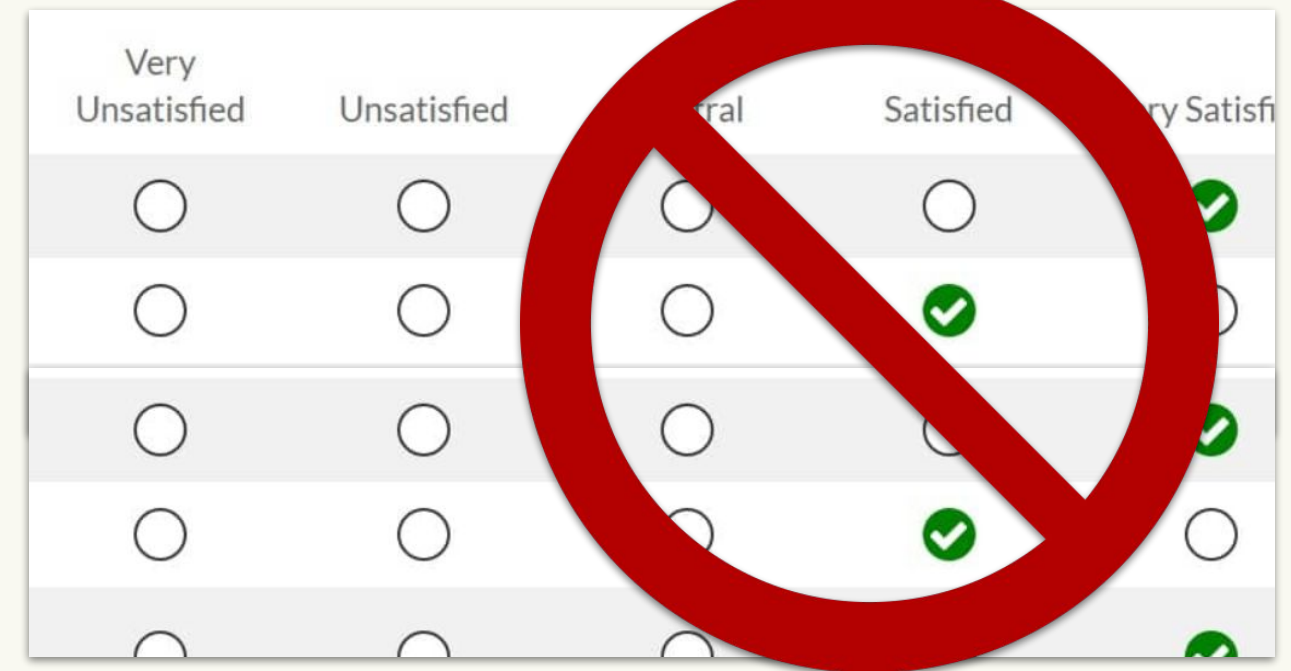
- When interviewing playtesters:

- ✓ Open Ended Questions
- ✗ "On a scale from 1-10?"

- You saw what they **did**

- ...Now, learn what they **thought**

Less of these, please.

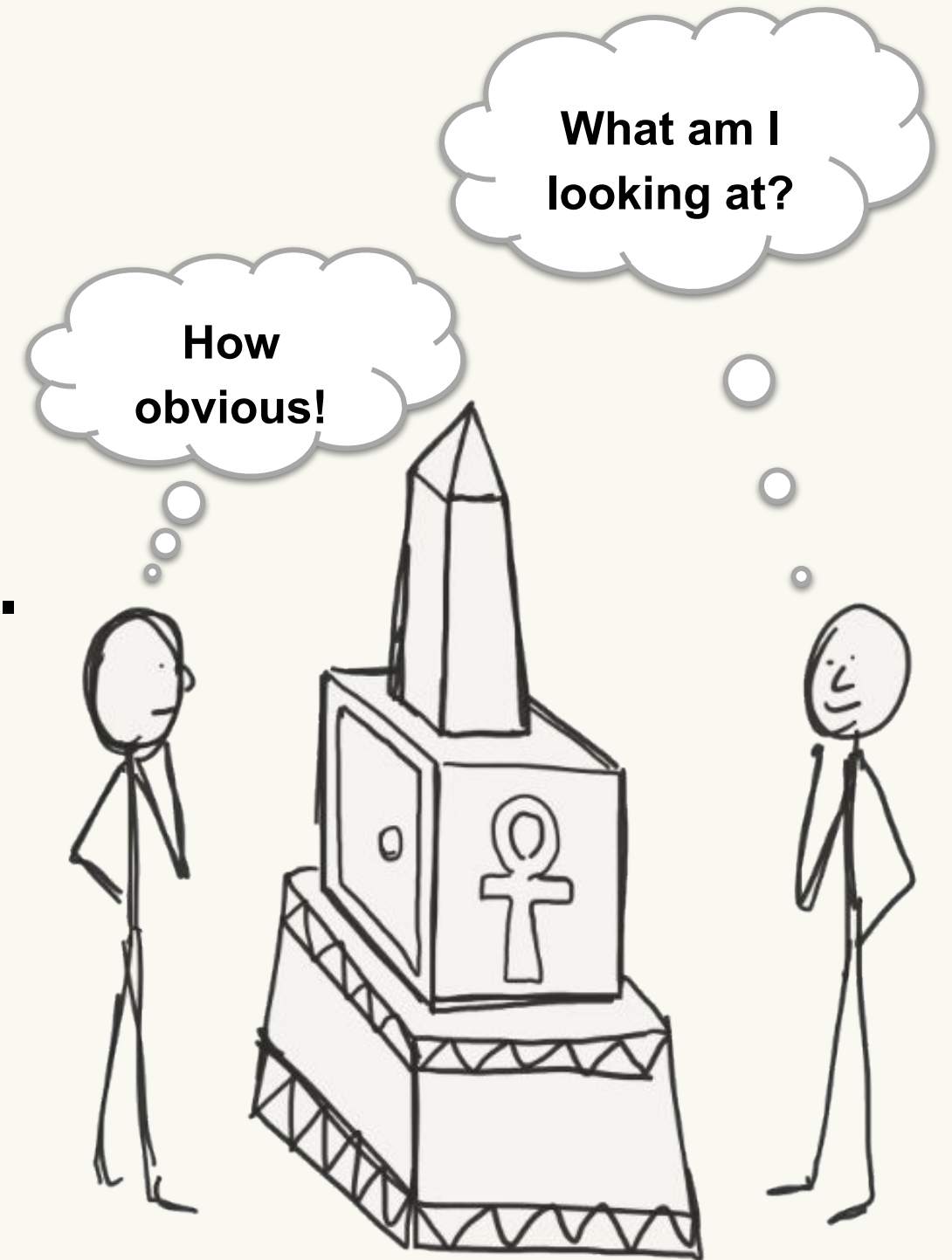


The image shows a survey form with a red prohibition sign (a circle with a diagonal line) overlaid on it. The form has five columns of radio buttons labeled 'Very Unsatisfied', 'Unsatisfied', 'Neutral', 'Satisfied', and 'Very Satisfied'. There are five rows of radio buttons. The first row has a green checkmark in the 'Very Satisfied' column. The second row has a green checkmark in the 'Satisfied' column. The third row has a green checkmark in the 'Satisfied' column. The fourth row has a green checkmark in the 'Satisfied' column. The fifth row has a green checkmark in the 'Very Satisfied' column.

| Very Unsatisfied | Unsatisfied | Neutral | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
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Hold your Horses

- Before rewriting your whole game, find another
- Try to run each test on two+ groups.
 - “Once is coincidence... twice is a pattern.”
- While all feedback is valuable, sometimes you get outliers.





Tip #5: Automate!

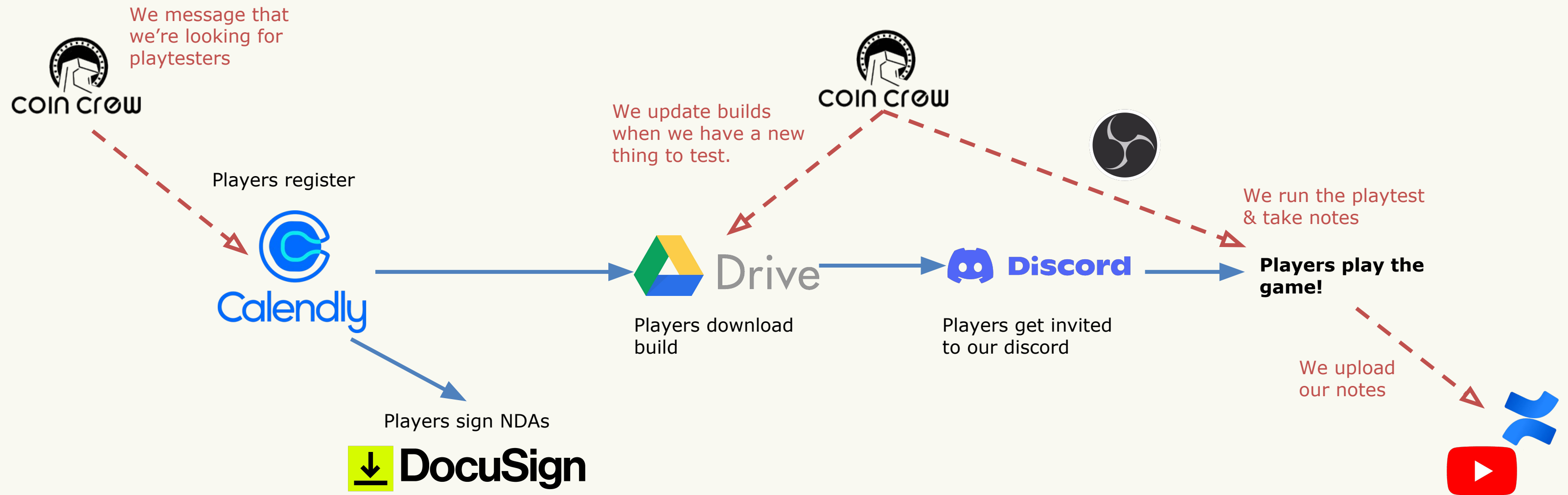
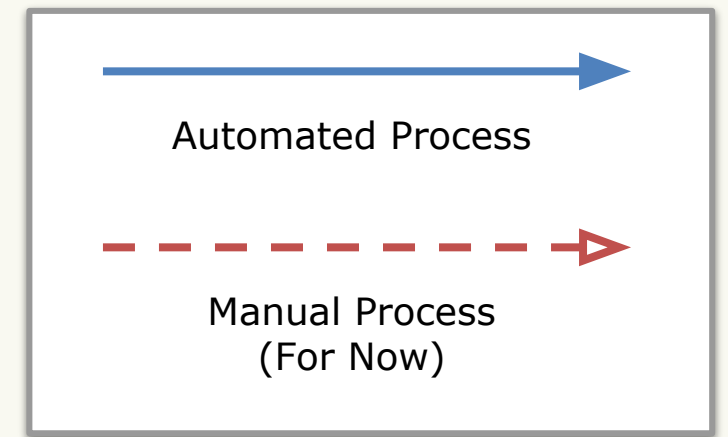


You Don't Need The Big \$

- We're **Indies**. Our budget is small.
- Running tests well \neq spending money.
- Team buy in is the most important thing.
- We use tools to keep up with the big dogs.

Our Process

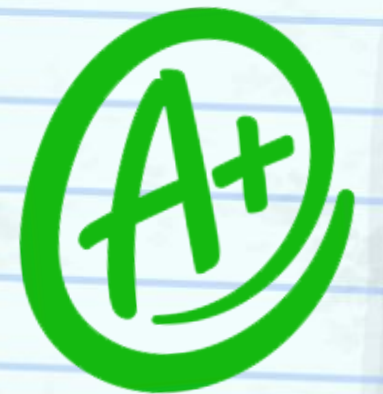
For the production nerds out there.





To Recap:

1. Be A Scientist
2. Be invisible
3. Start Early
4. Read Between The Lines
5. Automate!



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Thank You!

Questions?



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Appendix



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Our Tech Stack: **Operations**



- We host builds in a **Google Drive** folder.
- Players get a download link from Calendly before their session starts.



- Playtests are held on our **Discord** server.
- Two devs run the session. (One talks to the player, the other takes notes)
- Players screen share while they play.

Our Tech Stack: **Sign Ups**



- Testers sign up via our **Calendly** page.
- We specify which days/times are available.
- It sends reminders and populates our calendars.

 **DocuSign** ■ We use **DocuSign** to generate and collect NDAs.

Our Tech Stack: Documentation



- We use **Confluence** to save our notes
- But **Google Docs** is also a good choice.



- We record the sessions with **OBS Studio**.
- *Always get consent before recording (CA law!)*



- We save our recordings to a private **YouTube** channel.