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WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE INTERACTIVE MEDIA AND GAME DEVELOPMENT

Master's Project Report

August 22nd, 2022

The Heights:

An Educational Social Work Virtual Community

ABSTRACT:

The Heights is a virtual community that provides users with an opportunity to understand the complex and reciprocal nature of the environment upon an individual, family, group, or community through case-based learning and simulation. The purpose of The Heights is to augment and support learning and training and prepare social work students for a complex practice world. This project transformed case studies from within The Heights into interactive narrative experiences, providing a more engaging and immersive method of learning and practicing skills important to social worker responsibilities. Playtesting one of the new case studies suggested that the new design is entertaining and engaging. Further testing, such as comparing the old style of the case studies against the new style, as well as testing with social workers would provide valuable information about how effective the new design is at acting as a training simulation for social work students.

Authors: Alexis Boyle and Gaurav Randive Advisor: Jennifer deWinter Reader: Ben Schneider

The Heights: A Social Worker Training Simulation

The Heights is a simulated learning environment. We created it with the objective of providing social work students with an educational environment that allows them to apply their knowledge and experience to real-world cases. The goal of The Heights project is to test the efficacy of training simulations, and how they can prepare students to face scenarios in their line of work.

To do this, we created 4 interactive modules in the simulation that provides its users the agency to choose between multiple lines of action. These 4 modules are:

- Randy James Case
- Vincent's Case
- Dolores Jones Case
- Resident vs Education System Case

The main goal of our project is to allow students

a) to learn from decisions and make mistakes in a controlled environment; b) to allow meaningful application of education and bookish knowledge to real-world case studies. We believe that students will be able to gain useful insights via the interactive case studies. We also believe that the student's future social work career will be greatly enhanced by the the educational experience that we provide.

Social Worker Education

Social workers focus on a variety of areas within the categorization of helping individuals and families create a stable and healthy foundation for improving their lives (Walden, 2021). For example, some social workers focus in the subfield of child and family social work in which they often work with neglected and abused children, working to help create a better future for the individuals (Gram, 2021). As working in such a field can provide the opportunity to cause strong impacts on those that one is working with, training to handle a variety of intimate situations is essential.

Steps towards becoming a social worker vary depending on state and country. Although, according to the Association of Social Work Board (2022) one of the first steps an individual typically must take in order to become a social worker is to earn a bachelors degree in social work. Then, there are different steps one can take depending on their desired career. Options such as earning a master of social work degree (MSW), earning a license, or finding an entry-level job. Fieldwork, sometimes referred to as an internship is usually carried out during an individual's BSW program. This is the time when students can apply what they have learned in their courses in the field under supervision.

Although fieldwork provides unique experience-driven learning, there are some downfalls of such a method, such as what could happen when an inexperienced student is introduced to a case without having an understanding of the effects their actions may have (Erisken & Gradovski,

2020). This is where an opportunity for simulated experience-driven gamified training presents itself as a potential solution.

Education and Social Rehearsal Games for Human Services

Lateef (2010) said that "a training simulation is a version of an educational serious game in which the user is placed in a realistic setting and allowed to interact with the environment in a way that provides direct feedback, similar to feedback one may receive in a real-world scenario". Simulation games are a mockup of real-world systems. These mockups are not necessarily a ditto representation of their real-world counterparts. The purpose of these mockups can be multifold. Some games like Safety VR Training and Hot Work VR Training provide its users with training for real-life situations in a safe setting. Others like Second Life provide an open-ended experience where users can (in terms of training), practice skills like sculpting and painting, or just live entirely different lives from their real ones. All these games provide is social education or rehearsal in a relatively safer environment.

These games have gamified elements such as a point system, or accelerated time. Some other simulation games may have no set objectives of play, but often focus on elements of cooperation through multiplayer gameplay. Some more can also be non-digital in nature, often using a game board as the medium of play.

However, simulation games or games as simulations are not always useful because of a number of issues that they possess. One of these issues is that training simulation games often require VR or AR headsets. For example, games like Fire Safety VR Training, City Car Driving, Hot Work VR Training all require a VR headset to work. The issue with VR headsets is that in addition to the fact that you are bound to a room or machine, you also need to combat VR sickness (Chang, Kim, & Yoo, 2020).

The other issue is one of oversimplification. For example, in Age of Empires: Rise of Kings, the player is given scenarios that correlate to historical events with a remarkable level of realism. However, this type of simulation cannot be used reliably for learning because of several oversimplified concepts such as a) the time taken to build buildings or advance through ages (Classical -> Medieval -> Modern).

b) The simplified terrain which generally consists of three to four biomes (desert, sea, grasslands, and forests). Real-world terrain is more complicated than that. c) Finally, the level of control given to players to complete their scenarios. Historical events follow a specific set of values and structure - position and number of troops, specialized tactics, logistics, and a lot of paperwork. All this is oversimplified to make the game enjoyable for players (Robbins, n.d.). The same is true for more modern simulation games such as Cities: Skylines. Setting up buildings and constructing roads takes several years, departments, funding, public support, and paperwork to finish.

Therefore, we decided on a number of design factors that would go into making *the Heights* following our research on simulation games, which are as follows:

- Desktop Client: We decided to mitigate the issues coming out of VR by focusing our interactive system on a desktop client using Twine.
- No badges or achievements:
 Atypical to most simulation games,
 we decided to opt out of gamified elements such as badges, points, or levels. The goal of our system is to inform and educate, not entertain.
- Use of Illustrations: We provide illustrations wherever necessary within these interactive cases to give users a better idea of what's happening in a scenario.
- Point-and-Click Mechanics: Similar
 to old detective games like the
 Blackwell series or Myst, we created
 our interface using Twine's
 branching paths. We did this
 because we wanted to provide users
 with the agency to go back and
 revisit previous dialogue outcomes,
 scenario paragraphs, before
 committing to a decision. An RPG
 experience prevents this because
 there is no option to go back
 immediately, without pre-saving and
 reloading the game.

Redesigning The Heights

The Heights is a spatially based social work training simulation utilized by students undertaking social work courses at Yeshiva University. The Heights was designed as a simulated community withholding a variety

of locations, allowing students to "traverse" the world of and visit the numerous characters and locations within. Through it, social work students train by way of augmented and simulated case-based learning.

The Original Case Studies

The Heights provides a multitude of virtual fieldwork exercises called case studies. These case studies can be categorized into two types of design: text-based and interactive simulations.

The text-based designed case studies were presented to the user as paragraphs on text containing vital information about the case study. An example of this type of case can be seen in Randy James's case study, presented in Figure 1 below.

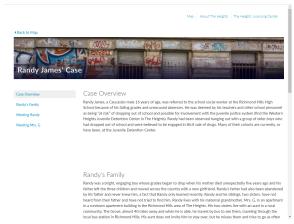


Figure 1: A screenshot of the Randy James case

This format of case study is not considered a simulation as there is no interactivity with the content.

The interactive case studies can be described as images with overlaying text at the bottom of the page that describes the situation the user is simulated within (this will be referred to as a scene). Alongside this text there are buttons to control the scene being shown, allowing users to go

back to the previous scene, move forward to the next scene, etc. Figure 2 below provides a clip from an interactive case study.



Figure 2: Capture of the Dolores Jones Case

At some points within the interactive case studies, users are presented with options. These options allow the user to customize their experience within the case study. For example, in the scene presented in Figure 3, these options affect the knowledge that the user learns from the scene, influencing the rest of their experience.

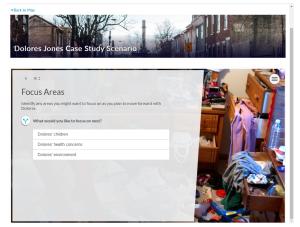


Figure 3: Choice within the Dolores Jones Case

However, in some of these situations, a user is only able to follow one path and is not able to gather information from the other passes unless they restart the entire case study. The case study also is not programmed to react to the decisions the user has chosen within the case study,

leading to areas which ask repeating questions, breaking the sense of immersion the user has within the simulation.

The Redesign

The main objective of the case study redesigns was to convert four case studies into interactive and immersive simulations. The team redesigned one text-based case (Randy James) and three interactive cases (Dolores Jones, Vincent, Mothers versus System of Education).

To begin a case's redesign, the team first read through, summarized, and then analyzed the case. The team then created a planning document containing all of the important information in the case such as key locations, characters, learning goals and story points. From this planning document, the team designed a storyline flowchart for situations in which the user would experience. This includes different settings, characters the user would speak to, and options the user would have within those dialogue scenarios. Once approved by the client, the team then began creating dialogue for each scenario and all of the dialogue options presented to the user. Each option caused new dialogue options and interactions to be possible, ensuring that the choices one made within the case study had outcomes seeable within the case. Dialogue went through an iteration process of being tested and revised multiple times to provide realistic options and responses. This dialogue was then implemented in the game engine Twine. At this time, original artwork was also being created. The team created both background and character art unique to each encounter within each of the four case studies, ensuring that a unique experience was had for each case study. Figure 4 below shows

a case encounter with the completed artwork.

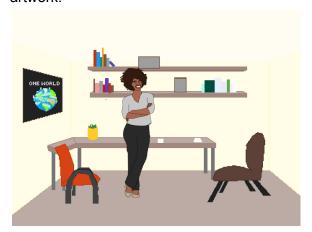


Figure 4: Randy James Guidance Counselor

Playtesting and Feedback

In order to determine how effective the new case study design was at implementing our goal of making the cases more interactive and engaging, the team performed a playtest with the Dolores Jones case. This playtest allowed the team to gather information regarding how engaging the players found the case study, how invested they were in the outcome of the case, and gather general feedback on how to improve the experience.

Method

Participants in this study were recruited through various means such as through the Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Interactive Media and Game Development discord page and through the team sharing the link with various personal social circles. In order to participate, individuals followed a link to a website created by the team.

This website hosts the case study overview (text which provides details about the case study and what the user will be doing within the experience), an informed consent form, the zip folder containing the case study, as well as the feedback form. A screenshot of this website can be seen below in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Dolores Jones Case Testing Website

All participants completed the informed consent form before partaking in the study, detailing that the study was voluntary in its entirety. This informed consent form can be seen below in Appendix A.

After completing the informed consent form, they were directed to download the zip folder containing the executable, extract the folder, and then run the html file. Once the participants completed this step, the case study would begin the run in their browser. The image shown in Figure 6 below demonstrated what a participant would see when running the case study file.

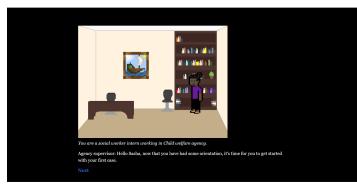


Figure 6: Beginning of Dolores Jones Case

Once the user has completed the case and reached the ending page (as seen in Figure 7 below), they would partake in the feedback form.



Figure 7: End of Dolores Jones Case

This feedback form focused on four sections of the design: the overall entertainment and interest, understanding of the game, engagement in the game, and the larger game themes. The form contained 26 questions; eight of which were open-ended and 18 of which were on a 7-point Likert scale. The entirety of this feedback form can be seen below in Appendix A. The final page of the survey provided information on how to contact Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Student Development and Counseling Center in case participants felt the need to reach out to mental health professionals after participating in our case study playtest.

Results

The team hypothesized that the participants would report high levels of engagement and interest (specifically, that the majority of participants would report higher than 50 percent on both the section regarding engagement in the game and the section measuring overall entertainment and interest). The results are presented in three sections: the first addressing the overall entertainment and interest and the second providing information about

engagement and the final discussing the other sections of the feedback form.

Overall Entertainment and Interest

The team looked at the data to determine if the majority of participants rated their overall entertainment and interest at above 50 percent. The team first looked at the individual questions to determine any specific areas within the overall category that may need more revision in the next iteration of the case study. All individual questions in the section of overall entertainment and interest had reported levels over 50 percent. Total, 78 percent of responses in this section were above the halfway mark. All question responses can be seen in Appendix B below.

Engagement in the Game

The team followed the same procedure as the previous section to determine if the engagement reports were above 50 percent. Only six out of the seven questions had total reports over 50 percent. The question with below 50 percent asked "How confusing did you find it to gather information and provide resources without being told where to go". For this question two participants responded 1 - not at all, two responded with 2, two responded 4 (the halfway point), one person responded with 6, and the final two participants responded with 7 - very much. This means that four participants responded under 50 percent. To support our hypothesis, this question needed at least five participants to respond with 4 or below. The responses to this question suggest that the case study could benefit from providing more guidance trousers in regards to how one gathers information and provides resources. All of

the questions and their total responses can be seen in Appendix B below.

Results From Other Sections of the Feedback Form

The other sections within the feedback form focus on the participants' understanding of the case study's story, larger game themes, and a section providing the opportunity for open-ended feedback.

Understanding of the Case Study's Story

There was a high understanding of the story told throughout the case study. Specifically, responses to the questions asking for the participant to explain Dolores Jones's story as well as the role of their character within the case study aligned directly with the narrative design of the case. This was reinforced by the high reports of understanding the story and roles characters played in the story.

Understanding the Game's Larger Themes

According to the self reported answers, this case study succeeded at having the majority of participants consider the larger themes of the case, including how one's words may affect others, wanting to change decisions, and how family member's problems relate to each other.

Open-Ended Feedback

Much of the open-ended feedback responses discussed the same topic: adding more meaningful choices. Participants expressed that they would enjoy it if the case study would "offer more real choices" or even "allow for more

choices, even if they're superficial and lead to the same conclusion".

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to redesign parts of *The Heights* to become more immersive, engaging, and interactive. To do so, the team redesigned some of the case studies within *The Heights*, creating more interactive simulations to replace four case studies.

The playtesting of one of these redesigned cases supports the team's hypothesis of the new case study design being engaging, interesting, and entertaining. The playtesting feedback also provided the team information on what areas of the case study they could adjust in the next iteration to improve the experience users had while participating in the case study.

Although users had reported their decisions felt impactful within the case study, the reported number was not nearly as high as the team had expected. This along with the feedback requesting more meaningful choices present the idea of implementing more decisions that have an effect upon the outcome of the case. These decisions were designed and implemented in the Randy James case study but were not designed and implemented for other case studies. Testing on the Randy James case could provide more information as to how beneficial adding in more impactful changes can be upon the experience a user has while participating in the case study.

Another area of feedback that presents opportunities to improve the case studies lies in the responses to how confusing participants found it to gather information and provide resources without being told where to go within the case study.

Three users found it significantly confusing to perform these actions without guidance. As these actions are key to the case study experience, the team provided more details and instruction to the users to ensure that future users would not find these actions confusing. Users also had lower reports on how control they felt they had within the case study. As the case studies are meant to be simulations of a real case, the level of control an individual has within it is a delicate balance to strike between technologically possible and realistic representation. To improve the users sense of control within the case study, the team provided more opportunities to make decisions. More options with represented outcomes will allow the user to feel as though they are making a difference in the case study with their decisions, providing a higher level of control in an implementable method.

More interactive narrative design is one thing the team would have continued to move forward with if it were within the scope

of the project. The team had faced technical difficulties and complications presented at the beginning of the project. Initially, the team was planning on transferring The Heights over to a new platform by utilizing Game Maker alongside redesigning a case study. In order to complete this, the team was given access to The Heights on Yeshiva University's Canvas page. This access came halfway through the second term of the first semester of this project, causing a time crunch on the transfer of The Heights. The team worked from the end of November to the end of February on transferring The Heights to the new program and redesigning the Randy James case study. However, the team's focus was then shifted from transferring the entirety of The Heights to redesigning four case studies within The Heights. This shift caused strict timelines to be created and upheld in the second semester and third term of the project. Despite these challenges, the team met their goal of redesigning four case studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the team faced scoping challenges and project-focus shifts but still accomplished their goal and re-designed and created four case studies with original artwork and easy exportability. Future work could include comparative testing between the two case study versions. Testing the difference between the old case study and the new case study design would provide information about if the redesigned case studies are more interactive and immersive than the old versions. This could give valuable insight into what the benefits of each version are and if one case study version is more impactful in a learning setting than the other.

Running the playtests with social workers is also another future path that could provide information as to how to improve the case studies. These case studies are designed with the purpose of

acting as social worker supplemental field work training simulations. Running playtests with social workers could provide valuable information on how effective the case studies are at achieving that goal as well as the possibility of one case study version being more effective at achieving that goal than another.

There are many possibilities on how to continue this work, however the team provided a valuable first step in redesigning four case studies, documenting how they went about the redesign process to allow others to follow their procedure, and playtesting the redesigned case study to gather information about how engaging it is. This project took a step in providing a training tool for social workers that is both entertaining and effective and the team hopes that this technology will continue to move forward, giving social workers a risk-free training ground to prepare for the impacts they make in their careers.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form



Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to obtain feedback on the project in order to facilitate design improvements and find/address operational bugs

Procedures to be Followed You will be asked to play a brief game lasting less than ten minutes. After completing the game, you will be asked to complete a brief, anonymous survey describing aspects of your subjective experience.

Risk to Study Participants
We do not foresee any major risks to
participating in this study, rather there are
minimal psychological risks that are similar to
those experienced in everyday life.

Benefits to Research Participants and Others

Benefits to Research Participants and Others You will have an opportunity to enjoy and comment on a new game under active development. Your feedback will help improve the game experience for future players.

Record Keeping and Confidentiality
Records of your participation in this study will be
held confidential so far as permitted by law.
However, the study investigators and, under
certain circumstances, the Worcester
Polytechnic Institute Institutional Review Board
(WPI IRB) will be able to inspect and have access
to confidential data that identify you by name.
Any publication or presentation of the data will
not identify you.

Compensation or Treatment in the Event of Injury

There is no foreseeable risk of injury associated with this research study. Nevertheless, you do not give up any of your legal rights by signing this statement.

For More Information or About the Rights of Research Participation or In Case of Research-Related Injury, Contact:
The student researchers can be contacted using the following information: Alexis Boyle (aboyle@wpi.edu), Gaurav Randive (grandive@wpi.edu).

The faculty advisors can be contacted here: Professor Jennifer deWinter (jdewinter@wpi.edu).

In addition, here is the contact information for the IRB Manager (Ruth McKeogh, Tel. 508 831-6699, Email: the-wybi.edu) and the Human Protection Administrator (Gabriel Johnson, Tel. 508-831-4989, Email: gjohnson@wpi.edu).

Your Participation in this Research is Voluntary

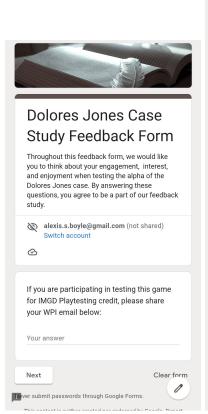
Your refusal to participate will not result in any penalty to you or any loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. You may decide to stop participating in the research at any time without penalty or loss of other benefits. The project investigators retain the right to cancel or postpone the experimental procedures at any time they see fit.

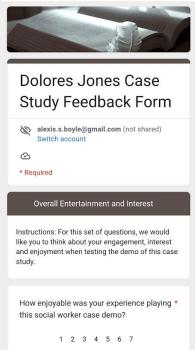
By Signing Below,

you acknowledge that you have	been informed
about and consent to be a partic	
study described above. Make su	
questions are answered to your before signing. You are entitled t	
of this consent agreement.	то гетант а сору
Study Participant Name (Acti	ng as virtual *
signature)	
Your answer	
Date *	
Date	
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Submit	Clear for
Submit	Glodi Tott
er submit passwords through Google	Forms.

Google Forms

Dolores Jones Feedback Form





Not at all OOOOO Very much

How interested are you in playing the full *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very much

How engaging did you find talking with

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very much

How much did you want to make choices

that helped Dolores?

NPC's within the case study world?

case once it is completed?

How much did you want to make choices * that helped Dolores?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOVery much

How engaged did you feel in the case? *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

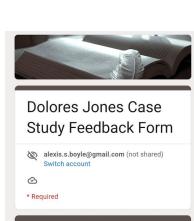
Not at all OOOOVery much

How much did you care about the outcome * of the case?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOVery much

Back Next Clear form



Understanding the Game

Now, we would like for you to focus on your understanding of the case and how the case played out.

Please explain Dolores's situation in your own words below (a few sentences is fine):

Your answer

Please explain what your character's role was in this case study using your own words below (a few sentences is fine):

Your answer

How well did you follow the story as the case unfolded?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very much

How well did you follow the roles each character played in Dolores's situation as the case unfolded?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very much

Back Nex

Next

Clear form



Dolores Jones Case Study Feedback Form

alexis.s.boyle@gmail.com (not shared)

0

* Required

Engaging in the Game

Now we want you to think of your time in the game when you went through the world as the social worker in training.

How much control did you feel you had over what steps you chose to focus on next?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOOO Very much

How confusing did you find it to gather information and provide resources without being told where to go?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very much

How well did you understand your ability to * make decisions within the case?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very Much

How much empathy did you feel towards * Dolores?

How much empathy did you feel towards * Dolores?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very Much

To what extent did you try to help Dolores * to the best of your ability?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOOO Very Much

How impactful did you feel your decisions * where on the outcome of the case?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very Much

How much consideration did you put into *making your decisions while working within the case?

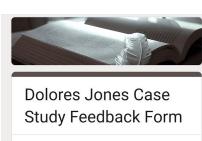
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all OOOOO Very Much

Back

Next

Clear form



alexis.s.boyle@gmail.com (not shared)

0

* Required

Larger Game Themes

For the next set of questions, we would like for you to indicate how strongly you agree or disagree to the statements regarding your reactions and thoughts while playing the game.

As I played through the case, I learned about how my words may come across and affect other individuals

1 2 3 4 5 6 7



While playing through the case, when I made a decision with an outcome I didn't like, I wanted to go back and choose another option.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Strongly Disagree



This case did NOT make me think about how family member's problems relate to each other

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Strongly Disagree



Agree

Back

Next

Clear form



Dolores Jones Case Study Feedback Form

alexis.s.boyle@gmail.com (not shared) Switch account

Open-Ended

Where there any aspects in the alpha that were confusing, out of place, or seemed unnecessary while you played through the case? If so, please explain below

Your answer

Do you have any thoughts or suggestions for ways in which to improve the user experience while playing the game? If so, please explain below

Your answer

Do you have any other thoughts or concerns about the game based on the alpha you played? If so, please explain below

Did you run into anything you believe may be a glitch or bug? If so, please explain below

Your answer

If you are willing to be contacted for clarification on feedback, or for updates on future iterations of the game, please write down your preferred contact information below:

Your answer



Dolores Jones Case Study Feedback Form

alexis.s.boyle@gmail.com (not shared)

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Resources

Due to the sensitive nature of this video game and its surrounding themes, resources can be found

SDCC (Student Development & Counseling Center)

The SDCC offers free, confidential mental health counseling and consultation services for individuals, couples, and groups, as well as crisis intervention and referrals to local specialists as necessary. Without exception, each student will be treated with compassion and respect, and counselors will work with them to set goals, identify obstacles, and move in a valued

Website: https://www.wpi.edu/offices/student-

Phone Number: 508-831-5540

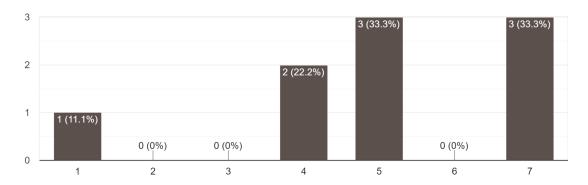
WPI Email: sdcc@wpi.edu

Address: 16 Einhorn Road, Worcester, MA 01609

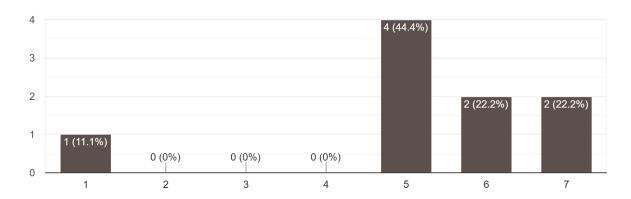
Appendix B - Playtesting Results

Overall Entertainment and Interest Results

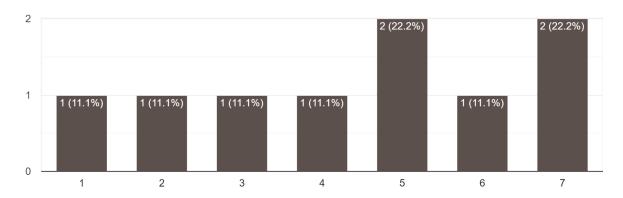
How enjoyable was your experience playing this social worker case demo? 9 responses



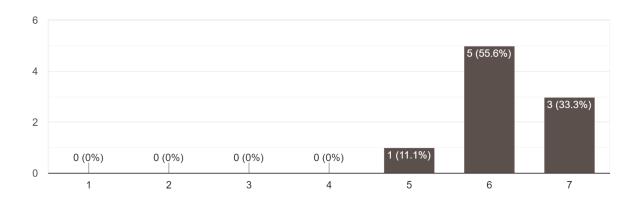
How interested are you in playing the full case once it is completed? 9 responses



How engaging did you find talking with NPC's within the case study world? $\ensuremath{\text{9}}\xspace$ responses

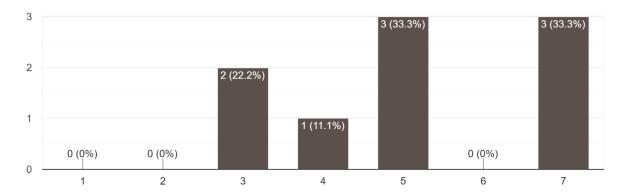


How much did you want to make choices that helped Dolores? 9 responses



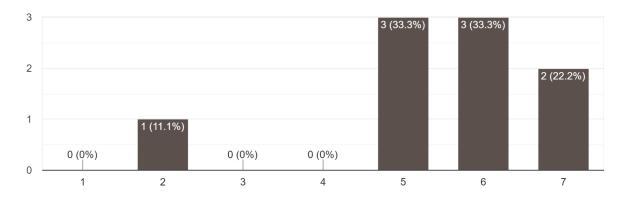
How engaged did you feel in the case?

9 responses



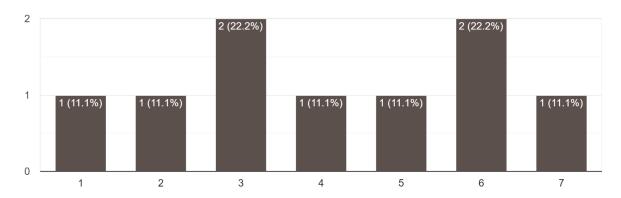
How much did you care about the outcome of the case?

9 responses



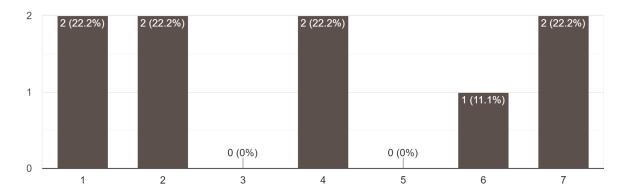
Engaging in the Game Results

How much control did you feel you had over what steps you chose to focus on next? 9 responses

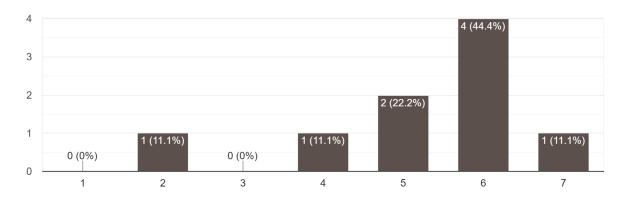


How confusing did you find it to gather information and provide resources without being told where to go?

9 responses

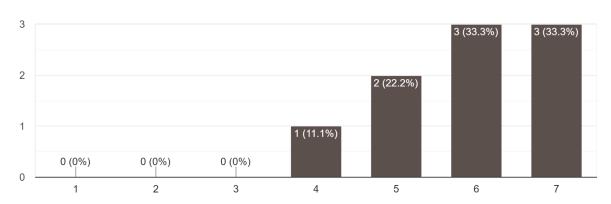


How well did you understand your ability to make decisions within the case? 9 responses

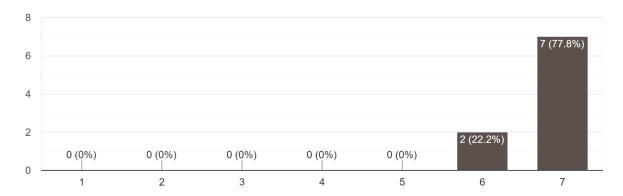


How much empathy did you feel towards Dolores?

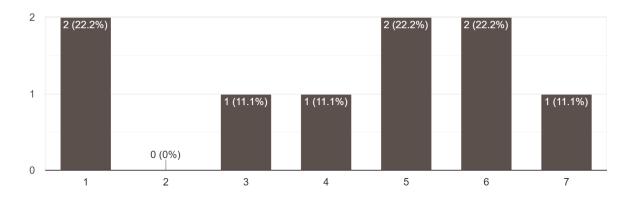
9 responses



To what extent did you try to help Dolores to the best of your ability? $_{\rm 9\,responses}$



How impactful did you feel your decisions where on the outcome of the case? 9 responses



How much consideration did you put into making your decisions while working within the case? 9 responses

