

# Enduring Play Season 2 Episode 3\_ Steve Bromley

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Game development, user research, playtesting, context of play, games industry, PlayStation, IGDA, community engagement, research methods, creative vision, risk mitigation, collaboration, generative AI, user experience, game education.

## SPEAKERS

Cheryl Platz, Enduring Play Computer, Steve Bromley

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- E** Enduring Play Computer 00:00  
Initializing enduring play podcast season two engine. Decompressing audio. Synchronizing waveforms. Reticulating splines. Launching podcast lobby.
- C** Cheryl Platz 00:16  
Welcome back to Enduring play, the podcast where we explore what it takes to create video games that don't just survive but thrive. I'm your host, Cheryl Platz, video game designer, director and author of The Game Development Strategy Guide from Rosenfeld media. Enduring play season two is about scaling our game development ideas beyond the individual. A common thread through most of our conversations is the collective through communities of game developers, through game education, through games research, and through the events and systems that support the releases and people making our games. Few games are released in a vacuum. So how do we scale together?

**C** Cheryl Platz 00:54

Today's guest, Steve Bromley is one of the world's best known games user researchers. He wrote "How to be a games user researcher." He has a long history of helping teams use player insight to create successful games. With over a decade of experience supporting teams such as Guerrilla Games Media Molecule Sega and Netflix. Prior to being freelance, he was a senior user researcher for PlayStation, and worked on many of their top European titles, including Horizon Zero, Dawn sing star and the Little Big Planet series. But this conversation is for you even if you're not a games user researcher, because many people in games need to run play tests or exist around play tests or learn from play tests. I guarantee there's something that you will take away from this conversation,

**E** Enduring Play Computer 01:40

Loading episode preview.

**S** Steve Bromley 01:42

When I speak to teams who are running low impact play testing and they're not feeling they're getting the value from it, they're often doing things like focusing on the wrong players, working with internal staff on questions that internal staff not can't necessarily answer, or getting friends and family in. They're not linking their playtest to specific decisions that they're making, and they've got quite vague goals about what they want to learn from it.

**C** Cheryl Platz 02:02

Let's get into the game.

**E** Enduring Play Computer 02:04

Player one, Cheryl Platz, pronouns, she, her. Player Two, Steve Bromley, pronouns, he, him. Podcast level start.

**C** Cheryl Platz 02:17

Welcome back to Season Two of enduring and I am so excited to have Steve Bromley, very accomplished author and user experience researcher here with me today. Thank you so much for being here, Steve,

S

Steve Bromley 02:28

Thank you for inviting me. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

C

Cheryl Platz 02:32

Do you want to introduce your body of work to our audience?

S

Steve Bromley 02:35

Yes. So my name is Steve Bromley. I'm a games user researcher. I've worked in the games industry for 15 years now. I started my career at PlayStation, based in London. That was quite a nice place to learn the art of user research and play testing. You get exposed because they're a publisher. You get exposed to working with very large teams on AAA titles where there's lots of voices in the room, and also very small teams through their Xdev program, where they might only get a single playtest throughout development. And so a nice way of learning, how do you work with different size of teams and the different challenges that different genres have? And yeah, I started at PlayStation, as mentioned. I spent a few years outside of games, but for last few years, I've been a consultant, helping teams run play testing, build their user research capability. And I also do a bunch of stuff around education, which I could talk about too, as well.

E

Enduring Play Computer 03:31

Podcast level paused. Begin Host commentary.

C

Cheryl Platz 03:36

Steve used a term called XDev. What does that mean to larger game development companies, primarily publishers and AAA studios? X Dev is a shorthand for external development. When building a video game, your need for labor is not always fixed, and that is part of the problem that can eventually lead to layoffs. Some studios build this flexibility into their business model by planning to work with external studios when demand for development capacity spikes, either in specific disciplines like quality assurance, art or user experience, or by assigning complete projects to a full stack development studio. Some of the games you perceive as having been developed by a single studio have actually been co developed by a complex series of independent studios coordinated by a publisher and possibly a smaller in house development team. And yes, that is just as complicated and challenging as it sounds,

E

### Enduring Play Computer 04:28

launching podcast level one: from in house to independent consultant.

C

### Cheryl Platz 04:34

You know, one thing I want to get into before we get into some of the specific questions, since we're talking about your career path, is you talked about working on PlayStation, right? And that's a dream for many people. And then you talked about moving into consulting, and we're in a difficult time in the industry, where many people are looking at kind of transitioning from what they consider dream jobs into going out on their own. Can you talk a little bit about how circumstances that motivated you to make that transition, and some of the things that made you successful?

S

### Steve Bromley 05:00

World, of course, I think part of the fact was I was aware when I was at PlayStation that we were running the very similar types of play tests, often usability focused ones or ones where we are getting lots of people through to look at appeal and or balancing difficulty or pacing of games, and I became increasingly aware that actually those aren't the only types of research out there that a researcher can be doing. What I saw when I worked in other industries was there's a lot of work you can do around understanding the context of play, where people are playing, and how they're engaging with games, particularly in things like mobile, where the space in which they're playing becomes increasingly important for how people play, but also for people's changing behavior with games, when often it becomes a second screen activity or a thing that you're doing alongside other things. And so in my time outside of games, I saw a lot about how actually we could be doing more work with understanding how people play and their context of play, rather than just putting games in front of people and seeing if they like it. I think coming back into consulting, that was nice combination of both taking that experience I've developed outside of games and looking at the breadth of research that was possible, alongside being able to work again with some of the teams I've worked with at Sony and some of the relationships I built in my time there, it was nice to be able to combine both these aspects and then come back as a consultant.

E

### Enduring Play Computer 06:29

launching podcast level two, discovering context of play.

C

Cheryl Platz 06:36

I love that perspective. I mean, obviously, because we're having these conversations about thriving games, but that how people play and not just putting a game out in front of them. Can you share an example of the type of insight that you can get as a consultant on the outside that you might not get if you just put a game in front of someone out of context?

S

Steve Bromley 06:55

I guess one of the obvious ones is thinking about how people approach mobile gaming. You're you're probably aware, for if you play mobile games yourself, that it's not going to have people's full attention. They're unlikely to have audio on. For most games, they're probably doing something else at the same time. And then it would be easy to fall into that trap of trying to run a usability study, where it you do just put someone in front of the first time user experience in a very refined setting that isn't actually realistic for their real context. Some of the things that learning that pushed me towards is understanding the value of doing studies and playtests in players owned homes, or going to see the context of use. That was quite big when I do a lot of work on VR titles as well, where you can think about actually the physical space in which people who are in it's very unique to their context and their living room and their living situation, and testing in a lab where everything is perfect doesn't necessarily represent what real life could be. It was a while ago now, but you're probably familiar with Microsoft's Kinect, and a lot of the work and the research behind that was done in the USA, where they have very large living rooms. Whereas, as you can tell from my accent, I'm based in the UK, the actual space that many people in the UK have or in Japan is a lot smaller than those games were designed for causing issues actually physically being able to play them. And so I think, yeah, a lot of that, that experience, seeing the value of in home testing and understanding the context of play does inform the recommendations I make to teams or how we should approach play tests in the future.

C

Cheryl Platz 08:36

I feel so seen right now, because I was at Microsoft. Be clear, I did not work on Kinect, but I was in the internal employee groups getting to use Kinect early. And I love voice interaction, and I loved the Kinect, and also I've written medium posts about that concept I was calling affluenza, right? Because it was clear even my living room didn't feel big enough for the device. And I'm like, wait, wait, though you're gonna release this in Japan. How on earth is this gonna work? And like, your point about European rooms as well, like, like in flats that have been out there for 100 years, that context of use is so important. And it was very much like that exposure to things like connect that drove me on my book to talk about, like, you gotta get out there in the crowd the character relationship, objective, aware, you got to figure out the where for people, because if you don't, it breaks my heart that the Kinect is gone. I loved the Kinect. I used it so much, but it was doomed to fail if it was designed for three people's living rooms. So it's such a great example. Like yes that. And there's this confirmation bias when you're inside a company and you're with people who all have the same lived experience that you do. And ethnography can be expensive. That was one thing we looked outside for when I was working on things like the echo look at Amazon was like working with external partners who could ease more easily, go and visit people in their homes and stuff like that. So that's all amazing. Well, I'm glad you're on the case.

E

Enduring Play Computer 10:00

Podcast level, paused, begin host commentary.

C

Cheryl Platz 10:05

In this case, when I talk about my book, I'm actually talking about my first book design beyond devices, which talks about cross device experiences. And to Steve's point, about context of use, discovering the context of use, especially where something will be used, is really important when you're trying to figure out how a really unique device will be used, and that's why I introduced an improv framework I used to use on stage character relationship, objective and where or crowd as a shorthand for people who aren't usually user researchers, to remember what kinds of questions you want to ask when exploring what the context of use is.

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Enduring Play Computer 10:44

launching podcast level three, career mentoring for games user researchers.

C

Cheryl Platz 10:51

You have "How to be a games user researcher." And when you released that book, what kinds of response did you get from people? Did it work? Were they surprised by the content? Did you kind of get, like, a new generation of people coming into the field. And you mentioned you're an educator now?

S

Steve Bromley 11:08

I was lucky, because I knew that the topic was, well, both important, I believe it's important, but also something that people were interested in a long time ago. Now I set up at the mentoring scheme for the IGDA, at the International Game Developers Association, for games user research, which was helping people learn - actually, what is the career like, and partnering them with people in industry who were doing the job already and answering some of their questions. And I think through that work, I'd seen that the same topics just came up again and again for someone interested in games user research as a career, things like, actually, what's the day to day job look like? What research methods should I be across? How do I interact with the other disciplines, and what are the other disciplines doing? And then just practical career advice, because the games industry is very competitive, and how do I get into that space? I because I've had lots of conversations with students or people switching from other industries who wanted to learn how to do that and then do it. I was reasonably confident that the topics were of interest and that people wanted to learn about this so that initial audience of students and learners was great. I had a good reception.

E

Enduring Play Computer 12:19

Podcast level, paused, begin host commentary.

C

Cheryl Platz 12:24

We've already heard IGDA, or the International Game Developers Association, referenced many times in this podcast, in research, we've talked to board members from IGDA, and in Steve's own work, IGDA is a nonprofit professional association whose stated mission is to support and empower game developers around the world in achieving fulfilling and sustainable careers, they also bill themselves as the world's largest nonprofit membership organization serving all individuals who create games. Their most notable distinguishing characteristic is the number of special interest groups for almost every discipline in gaming, and of course, a number of thriving local chapters and student support programs

E

Enduring Play Computer 13:04

launching podcast level four, better play testing for everyone

C

Cheryl Platz 13:09

You mentioned initial response, which implies that the response to that book, "How to be a games user researcher", evolved over time. Is that right?

S

Steve Bromley 13:19

I was also, I think, surprised or lucky that there was a secondary audience of people actually in industry currently who found it useful as well. It talks about the process of, how do you actually plan and run a play test using best practices from picking methods or recruiting participants and in the game industry, as you know, a lot of people who are doing other roles just have to organize a playtest alongside what they're doing. So they're a producer or a designer or a UX designer, and they just have to run a playtest and aren't necessarily given guidance on how to do it. What I found was they were very receptive to the book, even though they're not the primary audience for it. And a lot of the work I've been trying to do since through conference talks and writing articles and my newsletter is often aimed at that audience, someone who isn't a specialist in user research, but has to do a play test as part of their role. And again, I think that's for impact for actually people improving their play test practice. It's probably one of the more impactful spaces to be in helping people who actually have to do it and just need a bit of scaffolding to get there.

C

Cheryl Platz 14:29

And that brings us to your latest book, if I'm not mistaken, "playtest plus"

S

Steve Bromley 14:35

Yes, working on the third. Yeah, there's a topic that I'm, as I mentioned, interest in exploring further. So I've released, I've got an early access edition of play test plus, which is aimed at people who want to, want need to do this part their role, but they're not necessarily going to do it as a career. And so that's available on the website, currently still in the process of writing out a full. Book I've just done. Hey, here's a sliver of the core bits of the book and where the book would be, which I still think has a huge amount of value, but just struggling to find the time to to develop that further

**E** Enduring Play Computer 15:13  
podcast level, paused begin host commentary

**C** Cheryl Platz 15:17  
Free is a very generous offer from Steve, and if you want to take him up on that, you can head to [games user research.com](http://gamesuserresearch.com) or check out the show notes for this episode at [enduring play.com](http://enduringplay.com).

**S** Steve Bromley 15:30  
I have actually written another book before all of these books building user research teams. And building user research teams was from some of the roles I've done where I actually had to establish a user research team, just guidance on how to do that and how to set up a user research function if it's not something that you're doing currently, which is similar to what I'm doing with some teams in the games industry these days. So often teams might engage me, not just to run a play test, but also to help build that capability in house. And so a lot of the lessons and the guidance from that fed into building user research students,

**C** Cheryl Platz 16:03  
Quite a body of work and I can empathize with - trying to find the time, you're already doing quite a lot! I love the emergent audience. It's a compliment to your work that people who are outside the industry are finding it and finding it valuable.

**E** Enduring Play Computer 16:19  
Launching podcast level five differentiating play testing and usability research.

**C** Cheryl Platz 16:26  
For people who might be listening to this, maybe they're familiar with the concept of user experience research, but maybe not applied to games or something like that. What are a couple things that differentiate the concept of play testing from user experience testing in a traditional context?

S

**Steve Bromley 16:44**

Great point. I guess game development has a long history of play testing. Again, as you know that concept is used by teams to describe a whole bunch of different ideas, from describing a specific research method of getting a whole bunch of participants in a secure lab setting and getting them to play an extended period of the game. But some other teams might use it to just describe the idea of playing a game, playing your own build, might count as play testing for some teams. So game development has that nebulous idea of what play testing is, and teams have been doing versions of that for decades. You can look all the way back to the work in Atari, done by Carol Cantor in the 1970s of going to watch people in the arcades to play, to see that history of that coming in from other sectors. Though, I think some of the surprises are recognizing that something like you to research these play testing approaches are already happening, and so part of the role, if you're coming in into user research from other sectors, is to learn the language of game developers, learn their preconceptions about the process, and then think best how to frame what you're doing in that context. But there are other more significant differences too. One of the ones that I've seen is most surprising to people coming from outside of games is the method selection, because games have to be very secretive, and because of NDAs and the fact that we don't want leaks, we often lean very heavily into lab based research in a secure environment where we'll take away people's mobile phones, we'll screen them before they come in and do a testing in a secure environment. Despite that, though we often want to get a lot of people to see the game, you might have quantitative questions such as, how do players rate this game overall? Or how do they rate the difficulty, or is the pacing of the game okay? Where we won't get a lot of players through the game, and that's led to the development of methods that are unique to game development, such as that multi seat setup, where we use play test labs that allow 2040, some, some in the US I know have 80 or more players playing through the game at the same time, so that we can get lots of people through it ask some quantitative questions, but still have secrecy and avoid leaks, and that's probably quite surprising to someone coming from outside of games.

E

**Enduring Play Computer 19:11**

Podcast level paused begin host commentary

C

**Cheryl Platz 19:16**

A great researcher knows their sources, and I love that Steve referenced Carol Kantor, who was at Atari in the early 70s. There's a great article from the strong National Museum of Play about Kantor's work. Carol was at Atari with degrees in business statistics, Computer Science and Management Science and marketing, and combined all of that as one of the first people in video game development to really do market research with focus groups and surveys and things like that. And she managed to move the needle and led Atari to make major investments in market research,

E

### Enduring Play Computer 19:58

launching podcast. Level six, setting games research up for success.

C

### Cheryl Platz 20:05

Personally, it has been interesting, as a person with a background in user experience research to try to thread the needle when you've got QA and you've got people doing internal play tests to figure out what questions are the user experience questions, versus all of those other questions, and helping people understand that if you have a limited number of user experience research dollars for user experience research experts, like, which ones do you funnel down that path, versus the QA path, or, like, go talk to employees path, I think that would be fun to talk about for a second if I'm in that situation where I'm like, Okay, well, I could just, I could just bring my game to other employees. What's an example of a research question that is better served by bringing directly to players versus just bringing it to employees?

S

**Steve Bromley 20:51**

I think that's a great topic, and one that does come up very commonly with the teams that they end up working with as reference, because there is that history of informal play testing, or breadth of of the concept of play testing, it can be hard for teams to identify both what we should be testing, but also what does a good play test look like. And when I speak to teams who are running low impact play testing, they're not they're not feeling they're getting the value from it. They're often doing things like focusing on the wrong players, as you mentioned, working with internal staff on questions that internal staff not can't necessarily answer, or getting friends and family in. They're not linking their playtest to specific decisions that they're making, and they've got quite vague goals about what they want to learn from it, or using inappropriate methods to answer your question, though, about actually, what are the things that only players can tell us? There's a lot of really essential information about, do players understand this what they're meant to do? So things around tutorials or core mechanics, because players have different knowledge coming in to your staff, who obviously have a good understanding about what the game is and how it's meant to work. And how it's meant to work, and also they have different reference points to friends and family, because your target players would have played competitor games as well. You want to get genuine players, if you're looking at, do they understand how how the game works, or do they understand the mechanics? Other ones that are important to get real players in for are about balancing the difficulty or balancing the pacing where you want to see, does this feel too easy or too hard for players teams might go wrong by, for example, over indexing on their their staff or their internal community, or like a discord community that they might have who are likely to be much more Hardcore and play the game at a higher level than the actual target audience you're aiming for. And so teams have fallen to that trap of balancing the game too difficult because they're not working with a real, genuine audience. Yeah, or just the general appeal questions, do players like this, this idea? Do they like this concept? That does fall a little bit depending on when you're doing it and how you're doing it, into the range of what a market researcher might might be looking at. But there are versions of that that you might want to use playtesting or user research for as well launching

E

**Enduring Play Computer 23:17**

podcast level seven, aligning on creative vision to define success.

C

**Cheryl Platz 23:24**

Many good examples there you mentioned comprehension and tutorials and onboarding. Is there a right way to determine success there? Or is it really contextual? Because I've watched a lot of games decide basically that they don't need to solve that problem that other games are going to solve that for them. And I wonder, as you've tested games for comprehension and onboarding, Are there patterns? Are there games that do this right, or are there good ways to set up you're testing to know whether or not you're hitting a good segment of the market?

S

Steve Bromley 24:00

Yeah, good question, and I think it speaks to one of the fears that teams might have when they're doing play testing or considering playtesting or research where it's going to, for example, make the game too easy or not really be the experience they want to do, which is why I think it's really important when teams are considering what does success look like? For our test is to start by understanding their creative vision doing work internally, to talk about actually, what do we want this game to be? How do we want players to feel when they're playing it? How will we then recognize if it's achieving that or not, and set up their internal alignment about what are we trying to build that could be for some games, we want this to be someone's first platformer, and so help them be able to go through core platform mechanics like teach them how to jump or teach them how to move left or right. For other games, over the last year, I've worked quite a lot on Souls games, souls like, games like similar to Elden ring or Dark Souls. I. It's expected that people who play those games will come in with a huge amount of background knowledge as well, and so their creative vision doesn't necessarily mean require them to explain all these mechanics, because they know that people will be coming with that background knowledge beforehand. Yeah. So in order to judge success, as you asked about I think that first step is deciding internally what success means for your team having those alignment sessions, and then, once you're aligned on what your creative vision is, using play testing to see actually, are players experiencing the vision in the way you intended, or is there a deviation between what you think you're making and actually, what are you getting back from players when they've experienced it?

C

Cheryl Platz 25:41

Implicit in that advice is a sort of slow down to speed up, which I see a lot of teams struggle with, because, you know, I'm helping teams to their ideation processes, and they're like, What do you mean? We have to sit down and talk about our goals? What do you mean we need this creative brief for this? It's like, well, those those conversations which feel frustrating up early give so many gifts over and over and over again later in the process, when you go and test you're like, does this achieve the goal we agreed on, like back in the beginning, when we weren't distracted by wireframes and tech specs and everything. So I love that you brought that up. It's one of the many ways that agreeing of what game is early on pays off later on,

S

Steve Bromley 26:21

I agree, I alluded to it earlier, but a big pattern for failure, for teams who who are running play tests and feel like, actually, this isn't a good investment in our time, or we're not getting any value back from it, is that they haven't put the effort up front into thinking about what are the decisions that we have to make throughout development? What are the most important or the riskiest decisions we've got to make? What Player data would help inspire us to make more confident decisions about either early on big, big questions like, What genre should this be, or what what should the core mechanics be? Or even later on, implementation questions like, Will players know which way to go on level three if they're not spending that time to work out, what are the risks? What the decisions we have to make? What data from play tests will help with that they end up running low impact play tests and giving up on the whole process, where successful teams are spending more time upfront, defining what they're looking for, and get a lot more value from from research and play testing.

E

Enduring Play Computer 27:31

Launching podcast level eight, the risk of avoiding risk mitigation.

C

Cheryl Platz 27:37

I love that you brought up leading with risk because, you know, in Jesse Cheryl's book, part of game design a book of lenses, really lenses, risk mitigation is pretty early in the lenses, and I've learned very early on in product development too. Like, you build trust with stakeholders by letting them know you know where the problems are, and that invites the people who might know how to solve the problems to come and and like, jam with you on it. You don't hide them till the last minute. You're like, Hey, we're going to go try this thing, but this part is really hard, and everybody needs to rally. But that's a shift for a lot of people. If you don't create a space where people understand it's okay to talk about that, you can end up in some really nasty situations. So I love that you're talking about risk. There's this pivot in thinking that a lot of teams need to make to avoid becoming one of those failures to thrive.

S

Steve Bromley 28:20

I like your point about getting the people together being the important part, because, again, teams who are running any sort of play testing recognize that the types of things that might ruin a player experience could be related to any discipline. It could be about the business model that's being employed. It could be about the implementation of art in the game. It could be about a design of how combat works. Playtesting throws up multidisciplinary issues, and so making sure that you do have the whole team together, so that a, you can identify those risks, B, you can play test to mitigate them, is really important, and that focus on, on bringing the whole team together through this process,

**C** Cheryl Platz 29:05

sometimes, to lean on the multidisciplinary angle just a little bit further, because that's something we talk about quite a lot in game development strategy guide, the wide variety of disciplines, a problem in one discipline doesn't always get solved in that discipline, right? You know, maybe you have run up against an engine limitation, and so you need to use game design to get around to the engine limitation, or this was core to the game design. And you need to use UI to help people to make it just easy enough for them to discover without compromising the core difficulty of the game. It's not like just It's game design. Go fix game design. Often there's multiple people leaning in.

**S** Steve Bromley 29:42

I agree. One of when I'm running playtest for teams, my recommendation, I'm sure you've run and been exposed to play tests before, teams will often come up with a report at the end of it and think, Oh, the report is, is the deliverable and is the point. But I. Find actually a lot of the value is unlocked after the report, when we get all the leads together, go through the top issues and give them that space to ideate. Okay, what are some ways that we could fix this? Which are the most appropriate based on our context and our time and budget we have, and recognize that actually, any of the disciplines could, well, in many cases, many of the disciplines could resolve that and then decide, across the disciplines actually, how we're going to deal with this, rather than just delegating a fix to one team by default.

**C** Cheryl Platz 30:31

Quite honestly, it's something I need to make more time for on my teams. But thank you for the reminder

**E** Enduring Play Computer 30:37

launching podcast level nine, the games user research community

**C** Cheryl Platz 30:42

let's shift gears a little bit. One of the other sets of questions I shared with you before we got started was around community and education, and you mentioned that part of your career journey has been community engagement with IGDA and other organizations. Can you share one example of community engagement that you found fulfilling or successful?

S

**Steve Bromley 31:03**

Yeah, I think we're quite lucky, and the games, user research discipline and space, because we do have a very active gda community. There's a discord and previously, a LinkedIn group that's been going for possibly 20 years now, and I've been part of it for the last 15 I suspect why this has sprung up is because it was, and to some extent still is, a reasonably niche discipline, and so it's been helpful to find allies across different companies and work together on sharing and solving problems. But some of the really nice outputs of that have included, I mentioned the mentoring scheme we ran for a long time, but specifically their conference series as well a long time now, they've been doing often an annual conference, either online or in person, and that's been really helpful, because often there's only one or two researchers inside each studio. Publishers might have more, and so you're often quite alone on trying to solve problems or work out how best to encourage your team to run studies or run play tests or fix these problems, and so creating that space where teams can share best practice, share case studies of what's worked well, obviously they're constrained based on non disclosure agreements, and people can't share internal secrets about the games they're working On, but the approaches and how to solve internal problems is often very valuable and okay to talk about that's not about a specific company. And so I think creating that shared space, both through conferences and through their discord, has been a great way to share approaches expertise and find allies in what can often be a job that you're just doing in quite a lonely position.

C

**Cheryl Platz 32:42**

What advice would you have for somebody looking to join that community, like, what's the right time in someone's career? How would they go about finding you and what can how can they expect to contribute to that community?

S

**Steve Bromley 32:56**

So a lot of people do join as either a student or someone looking to enter the games industry. And probably the best entry point is they do have a very active discord. I think their URL is gamesur.com and then they have a big button on the front that says discord. But also googling ichter IGDA games user research will will throw it up that Discord is a great place to get started. They do initiatives like "Question of the week" and ways that you can start to join in in a low key and low low pressure way. They do online events, as mentioned. So that's a high level of commitment. But as well as just participating, as well as actively participating. I think being in that space and just seeing the type of discussions that games user researchers have, or people sharing their advice and how games user researchers do their job in industry, I think is an incredible learning process for people early in their career and then later on, it's good for finding peers. And as your own career develops, finding other people who you can talk to in a more private setting about some of the challenges that exist in the games industry.

E

### Enduring Play Computer 34:16

Launching podcast level 10, collaborating for optimal impact.

C

### Cheryl Platz 34:23

Speaking of people early in career. What's one thing you wish you knew when you were starting out?

S

### Steve Bromley 34:29

Good question. So my early assumption about what the job of a game researcher would be is it's running studies. It's running play tests, and so their core skills are design and run a usability study or write a survey or interview a participant, and yes, that is that is the job, but it's also not the most important thing for impact. Eventually you recognize that actually, if you want anyone to care about the fact that you run an interview or designed a survey. Survey, you need to work with other disciplines and frame what you're doing in terms that are important to a designer or a producer or a creative director. Because of that, I think, yes, you do need to learn research methods and be able to apply research methods, but you also need to learn what other disciplines do. Learn their language, learn their priorities and what's important to them. Learn from individuals, what their preconceptions about playtesting or research are, and in particular, their fears and what might put them off the process. And so that focus on relationship building, understanding other disciplines and understanding how to frame and put what you do in terms that other disciplines will care about is probably the most important thing, I think, to not the most important thing, but an important thing that I didn't recognize was important early on.

C

### Cheryl Platz 35:51

I just want to point out I didn't know you were going to say that, but obviously, like I feel very seen, because I put whole chapters in my book about other disciplines because I agree very much that one of the biggest challenges in games, in particular is just jam a cloud service into a movie, and researchers have to deal with all of that, the art and the technology. But that word impact is really important. And you know, I find myself using that a lot right now because it's sort of performance season, and it's a good one for people to reflect on. It's you hear it when you talk about social issues and like intent versus impact, but you also use it in a corporate context. Is like, what? When I see younger career people, they list a bunch of tasks. When I see more senior people, they talk about impact. I'm glad you used that word, because, like a lot of what I do in coaching my teams is shifting that mindset from I did a bunch of work to the impact. And once you shift that, it doesn't, it's not about the amount of work you did, it's about the alignment and making sure it was the right work.

S

**Steve Bromley 36:57**

Exactly that, as I mentioned earlier, one of the traps you could fall into is thinking your job as a user researcher is to make a user research report or a playtest report. But what's commonly true is you'll present the report. Everyone will say, That's a lovely report, and then never think about it again. Instead, the success in your job is making people make better decisions. So they've taken some sort of action after the study, not just you've written a beautiful report and so encouraging people to have that mindset for doing play testing, user research. I think it is important, as you've alluded, to

E

**Enduring Play Computer 37:36**

podcast level, paused. begin host commentary.

C

**Cheryl Platz 37:41**

This might actually be some of the hardest advice for some game developers to hear, to truly hear. Because I've talked to many game developers, some of whom have reported to me, about the importance of collaboration, and they've said, "Well, I'm an introvert, so I can't do that." And here's the problem with that. This is a deeply interdisciplinary field, you can't opt out of working with other people just because you don't like working with other people. If you're introverted, that means you have to find some other way of bringing in those other opinions. If you don't like face to face communication, if you don't like live communication, try figuring out how to get really good at Slack or email or confluence, but you can't opt out of those other opinions. That is how games fail. And it's not discriminatory to say that, "Oh, you need to collaborate." The accommodation is, "hey, well, okay, if, if meeting 1:1, isn't right for you what is?, what is the way that you're going to get the opinions, concerns and ideas from your co workers, so that together, you are greater than the sum of your parts?" That is your responsibility as a creative in the games industry, regardless of whether you are an introvert or an extrovert. And I need everyone to hear that. And if you're nervous because you don't understand those other disciplines, that's why I wrote the game development strategy guide. It's your handbook for understanding what other people do without judgment. It's there for you when you're ready. But this advice is not specific to user experience research. It's come up again and again in the podcast. It comes up again and again all the time. This is the essence of video game development, working across disciplines. So no matter who you are, your greatest challenge in this industry is other people. So how are you going to rise to that challenge?

E

**Enduring Play Computer 39:33**

Launching podcast level 11. Perfect is the enemy of exists.

C

**Cheryl Platz 39:40**

Sometimes I've worked with usability research teams that shoot up flares halfway through a test that are like, Look, we're not gonna have a report for a while, but I think you need to know that this part is on fire, and because they were early, we had not crossed through a one way door and we were able to adapt. Or they've tested everything, and they're like, hey, here are some themes. Ones do you think it's most worthy for us to spend time on because we are human beings, and we can only spend so much time coding and like, I can't change that one, but that one I'm really interested in. Can you chase that rabbit for me? And then, you know? You know, both sides know that the thing is going to be more impactful because it's aligned with something that can change.

S

**Steve Bromley 40:19**

Yes, one of the things that was drilled into me at PlayStation is that importance of giving results as early as possible and giving high level notes as soon as you can. Teams aren't going to stop and wait for you, for you to make a beautiful report. They're going to keep on working regardless of what you're doing. And so finding a way to get in front of that and just get the right information to the right person at the right time. Is, is one of the challenges we have to deal with.

C

**Cheryl Platz 40:46**

And that is general advice for anyone listening, perfect is the enemy of exists. And I see that a ton, and not just in this industry, but many of them I've worked on. It's like, Did you document the thing? I don't mean, like, make a beautiful thing. Did you like just write down a few paragraphs in Confluence and give it to someone else. Like, you can work out the bugs together. But like, if you just wait, it's never going to be there, and nobody else can benefit from it. And often, you need the power of multiple people to have impact. If it's in your brain and no one else sees it, no impact. It's just a line item. So thank you. Those are that's all great advice.

E

**Enduring Play Computer 41:27**

Launching podcast level 12, coping with industry instability.

C

**Cheryl Platz 41:33**

Have you ever experienced any sort of studio shutdowns or layoffs, either as a consultant or as an individual yourself, and if so, like, Do you have any advice for people going through that transition?

S

Steve Bromley 41:45

I'm lucky enough that when I was in house, I didn't directly experience that myself, but especially with the state of the games industry. Currently, a lot of the teams I've worked with as an external consultant have eventually either have projects canceled, or, in some cases, the whole studio has wrapped up, hopefully not due to my time with them. It's just the state of the games industry currently. And as you can imagine, it's very hard to see people who you know do great work and are great developers, struggling to find the next project or even just seeing games that you have worked on for many years, you've seen develop, and you've seen has huge potential, and then it will never get released and not see the light of day. So yes, I'm definitely second hand seen those challenges. I think one of the things that I have seen has been helpful to people in that situation is just recognizing the value of community and relationship building and finding both peers in similar situations, but also reaching out to people you worked with before, and talking to them through my own work as a consultant. A lot of the people who end up working with are people who I've worked with in other studios, and they've moved elsewhere and are taking that, that relationship that we've built, to new places. And because of that, I can see that similar thing happening for people who are out of work, that actually it's the relationships you've made in your role and maintaining those relationships are probably the most active thing you can do to help in those situations. But as you, as you said, it it's very difficult.

C

Cheryl Platz 43:25

Community is all we have. And one thing I mentioned in another episode is like, build your community before you need it.

E

Enduring Play Computer 43:32

Launching podcast level 13, the difference between theory and practice in games education.

C

Cheryl Platz 43:39

What have you learned as you teach your own games, user research class? Are there specific approaches you take to your curriculum that seem to resonate with your students?

S

Steve Bromley 43:48

I think what I've found valuable as the course has developed. So I run the courses you've mentioned twice a year, and each year try and each cohort, try and iterate it, or think about how we can improve it, and work work on it. And one of the things I think, has been most impactful is being able to move from theory like what how do games get made and how should this work similar themes to the things you'd find in my book, to actually be able to do it in practice, in the reality of game development, there's a lot of cases where what you end up doing isn't necessarily the best practice as defined in a textbook. There are things that we all know, such as the limitations of focus groups aren't the perfect research method, but in practice, because of the pragmatic, pragmatics of planning running tests, sometimes focus groups happen or that you might end up doing unmoderated testing, whereas ideally, you'd do a moderated session, or you might end up working with a less than perfect build just because that's what the build is, isn't existing at that time. So there is that difference between theory and practice, and one of the ways in which the course has evolved over time is just leading to more practice. I'm lucky that I've partnered with a playtesting platform so people can. Actually run a play test on a real game as part of the course, getting real players in front of it, and actually seeing what this looks like in reality. And I think that's had a huge impact on the success of people doing it, that they have not just learned the theory and what they should be doing, but had a chance to try it for real, see what a play test really looks like, and then see what it will actually be like an industry where often you do have to make those kind of pragmatic decisions for what's actually possible in our context

C

Cheryl Platz 45:29

that's so valuable that that hands on experience, when you say, partnering with a play testing platform, is it like you're helping to test real games, or is it like a fictional games that you're testing in sandbox environment.

S

Steve Bromley 45:42

Yeah, so in the original one, in the original iteration of the course, it was a I had found a developer who were prepared to share an early build, and we were just using that as the case study. These days, I'm working with playtest cloud, who are a popular playtest platform, and they just give people on the course credit for their platform. What that means is some people are free to to select any game and work on any game that they choose. Some people go and partner with developers or indie or hobbyist developers, to go and find an in development build and then do a real case study in that case, but others are looking at live games, particularly in and just working on a game that's already out there. So it is real games. Some students are using that to create connection with real teams as well. Yeah, it's a genuine study with objectives that they co define with with their partners or decide for themselves, and they can execute on a real study in that context.

**C** Cheryl Platz 46:43

That's so excellent. One of the hardest things about as you know, being in the user experience discipline, whether it's design or research, is that portfolio issue, right? And like I see so many aspirants come in and be like, "I did a Google certification" and like, that's not road tested. But that - what you're describing is a genuine engagement in concrete work where external stimuli are changing what you might think the right answer is, and that's what we were getting at at the end of the day, is, how do you respond to things you can't expect and report back? And that's, that's That's amazing.

**E** Enduring Play Computer 47:20

Launching podcast level 14, starting a games user research educational journey.

**C** Cheryl Platz 47:27

What kinds of students would you recommend pursue your training?

**S** Steve Bromley 47:31

Yes. So the core audience is often people who are, for example, in their last couple of years of university and thinking about games user research as a career. Also people who have worked in user research in in other sectors and are interested in games. Often they love playing games, and want to know, hey, can I work in this industry, and what does that look like? So it is ideal for those but much like with the book, I think I've also found a secondary audience of people who just need to run play tests. So some people already working as a producer or designer in games companies and just want to feel more confident how they're they're approaching that by doing a course and having that opportunity to do a practice project as well in a safe setting.

**C** Cheryl Platz 48:16

Now, in the context of teaching games user research, you know we talked about cross disciplinary collaboration. But are there any harder skills that user researchers need, especially in games, that either you teach or that they tend to bring in?

S

**Steve Bromley 48:29**

Yes. So I guess the core skills of it are being able to design the study in in a real games context, a team won't come to knowing what the study should look like, or what questions should be asked, or how to analyze this data, and so being able to go through that process of, how do I take some sometimes very abstract questions from a team, like, do people like our games, turn that into some research objectives, decide the right method, and then be able to execute on that method? So whether you can design a survey, analyze quantitative data back from a survey, whether you can run an interview, whether you can design a moderated study where you're watching someone play a game and looking out for behavior observations. That's the core skill set that the course goes through. But a lot of people who end up in games user research have also come from a science background as well. So would have done something like that at university and be bringing that skill set with them.

C

**Cheryl Platz 49:29**

One thing I was trained in is statistics, but it's interesting because like that now there's the parallelization of sort of analytics and data. Do you feel like game user researchers also need a grounding in statistics, or is that something that has sort of split off

S

**Steve Bromley 49:45**

Because of that split, I found, although I do use some statistics in my role, it's often very light statistics. I wouldn't by far describe myself as a statistical expert. We talked out about multi seat tests, and so you might have day. Sets that are 100 players, or if you're doing something online, you might have 500 players and who have given you survey responses. And the type of questions that teams will have are, do they rate level three better than level four? The level of statistics that I personally am comfortable with and that I see are most common in the role is, can you work out? Are the differences between level three and level four statistically significant? Or do players break them both? The same is the level of stats that that we're after? So not particularly deep, but probably a 101, or introduction level again, there's a bit of this on the course, although I also recommend a book called quantifying the user experience by Jeff sorrow, which I found very helpful my own practice, have given you just enough stats to be able to do the role

E

**Enduring Play Computer 50:50**

launching podcast level 16, the changing role of cognitive psychology

**C** Cheryl Platz 50:56

in games, user research. Speaking of those other knowledge sources. How much cognitive psychology Do you think a user researcher in games needs to have in their toolbox to be able to build those, make those choices about techniques and to build their reports efficiently?

**S** Steve Bromley 51:16

I think it depends, and I also recognize it's changing traditionally, that hadn't been a huge part of the role when our focus was just on evaluating do players like this? I think you can follow a reasonably Oh yeah, do players like this? Whether they understand this, you can follow a reasonably formulaic flow chart to work out what's the right method to do it. Where I do see that changing is, I talked earlier about learning from other sectors and the importance of understanding people's context of play, and also, as you cover in your book, motivation to play as well. So I think as the type of research questions that teams will have evolve, and there's as we move to a more mature research practice, that that can become very helpful as a as a knowledge source to draw upon. The other reason it might come out as well is some research teams don't just find issues. They also say we're going to give some recommendations about how to resolve the issues we've seen as well. And so being able to draw on that expertise can be very helpful for making recommendations as well, but Recommendations is a big can of worms about whether researchers should be giving recommendations or not, that we may or may not go into this,

**E** Enduring Play Computer 52:33

launching podcast level 17, the joy of iterative Strategic Research roadmaps,

**C** Cheryl Platz 52:40

a couple of last questions. What are you most proud of in your past work?

S

Steve Bromley 52:45

Oh, that's a nice question. I think it's the work that I do with game teams. It's really exciting, especially as often a team will start by just wanting to run a single play test. And that's fine, but where you really unlock impact and as teams relationship with you deep, deepen you start to recognize that research is an iterative process, and help teams come up with their roadmap of here's the big decisions we're making, here's how we should align playtest with those, and here's what we should learn with each so I think it is building those relationships with teams and deepening those relationships so that rather than just doing a single playtest, we're creating a roadmap of studies throughout their development. Is the area I find really interesting myself, and something that I'm really happy for on the titles that I end up working on with.

C

Cheryl Platz 53:31

Thank you so much for this conversation. Steve, as we as we head out, what are you most excited about coming up is it? Is it the book you're working on? Is it your next class? Is it just just having some time to yourself? What excites you in this moment?

S

Steve Bromley 53:48

Sure, I like the problem that we talked about earlier. Of a lot of people in the games industry have to run play tests and have to run user research when it's not their core discipline, they're never going to have the job title of games user researcher. That area has interested me for the last few years, which is why it's where I want the next book to go, where a lot of when I do conference talks or when I write articles, it's about that topic. So I'm really interested in helping people who are already in the game industry and are a producer or designer or creative director or an indie developer, run better play tests through the best practice that we've learned from user research,

E

Enduring Play Computer 54:34

launching final boss level generative AI and user research for games.

C

Cheryl Platz 54:40

I ask this because I know it's on a lot of people's minds. It's not always the most fun thing to talk about, but I think it's important we address it so generative AI exists and it creates a lot of angst. Does it play any role in or around your work? Like, How are you coping with that change in the industry?

S

Steve Bromley 54:55

There's a lot of noise around it. In the research area, lots of tools out there that put. Promise, either to replace participants, players with AI as a way of automating out that bit, or replacing the analysis process with AI, where you pour in all your data and it will just tell you what the conclusions are. I Well, obviously the first one to me, at least, is nonsense idea of replacing the participants, the players, with AI, they won't be able to tell you any unique or interesting behavior that your real players won't the second one using research to do analysis, I have concerns about so far, due to that risk of hallucinations. One of the things I've seen in my own practice as well is actually the most important thing that for us to do with the teams we're working with is build trust. I want to be seen as authentically representing player sentiment and players behavior and hallucinations risk that trust of telling, telling teams something that isn't true or doesn't stand up to interrogation. And because of that, I'm hesitant about it. So yeah, there's a lot of noise about it, a lot of tools promising to automate bits of it. It hasn't replaced my own practice at the moment. And also, as we've talked about a lot in this conversation, the hard bit isn't necessarily running the study. It's bringing the team along and getting the teams to articulate their decisions in a way that fits attestable hypotheses. And so a lot of that is just a human job to do that AI can't do currently.

C

Cheryl Platz 56:25

Well said

E

Enduring Play Computer 56:28

loading final podcast level: links and follow up.

C

Cheryl Platz 56:31

How can people follow your work if they want to keep up with you after this podcast?

S

Steve Bromley 56:38

Super so I write a lot about games user research on my website, which is games user research.com there are regular articles about how to guide on how to run play tests or how to increase the impact of your play tests. That website has a an email list where you can sign up just to get new articles from me, and that's probably the best way of keeping up with what I'm doing.

**C** Cheryl Platz 57:01

Of course, we mentioned a couple of books and links during the course of this conversation, and those will be in the show notes at [enduringplay.com](http://enduringplay.com) or [gamedevelopmentstrategyguide.com](http://gamedevelopmentstrategyguide.com) - Thank you so much, Steve. It has been a delight, and I look forward to our paths crossing in the future. But thank you for centering players and helping games thrive.

**S** Steve Bromley 57:21

Thank you for your time.

**C** Cheryl Platz 57:24

Continue exploring the craft of game development with my book that inspired this podcast, *The Game Development Strategy Guide* available worldwide from your favorite online bookseller or from my publisher, [rosenfeldmedia.com](http://rosenfeldmedia.com) and during play, listeners can get 15% off at [Rosenfeld media.com](http://Rosenfeldmedia.com) through July 31 2026, using the code `enduring play s2` check out season one of this podcast for the interviews that helped inspire the book, or tune in next time for interviews that help expand our understanding of what it takes to create games that don't just survive but thrive. I'm your host, Cheryl Platz, until next time, keep thriving,

**E** Enduring Play Computer 58:09

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**E** Enduring Play Computer 58:31

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**E** Enduring Play Computer 58:57  
Thank you to David Demma for episode QA.

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