Cube Café Design Document

Overview

Cube Café is a time management game in the tradition of *Diner Dash, Sally's Spa, Ninja Kitchen*, and many other casual game hits, where the player takes the role of a proprietor of a restaurant and fulfills the orders of customers coming in as quickly as possible.

Why Sifteo?

Though they are popular in their own right, all of the games mentioned above begin to blur together because in the end, they all use the same mechanic: use the mouse to click on different places on the screen as fast as you can. It's difficult to bring much that is new to this genre, but the Sifteo cubes' form factor provides exactly this. The physical nature of the cubes brings a satisfyingly tactile mechanic to the game, giving the user the feeling that they are actually moving foods around, rather than just giving orders to an avatar in the game world. And the gestures available with the Sifteo cubes really lend themselves to this particular game type.

In addition, after a survey of the Sifteo platform's landscape of games, there does not appear to be a time management game of this genre in the store, so it is a popular yet underserved game type which Sifteo owners will no doubt look forward to receiving as an option for purchase.

Some of the versatile kitchen cube screens.

Early Development and Testing

The first several prototypes involved much testing of different interaction mechanics, and we quickly settled on the core mechanic that you see in the current builds: bumping the "waitress cube" into the different sides of the "kitchen cube" and the "customer cube". Not only is this a particularly fun mechanic, but it also provides a mental framework for the player to cognitively manage the rather complex interactions with the game space. By having one cube act as their "avatar", the concept of how to interact with the game world is naturally understood.

However, there were still some concepts that needed explanation, so a tutorial was introduced. This was tested with both children and adults, and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Kids as young as five were able to perform the tasks necessary to play the game (although the difficulty would eclipse their skill level in the later levels of the game). This was the version submitted to the *Experimental Gameplay* competition's first round.

"Second Round" Development and Testing

During the second round of development and testing, we felt that we had a solid core gameplay mechanic, so we largely focused on refining and improving the existing gameplay, although a few new features were added.

Most of the feedback on the game centered around the fact that customers never got angry. Since this was a common trope of the genre – customers getting angry if the player is inefficient in serving them – we felt that this criticism was valid, and decided to add this mechanic into play. Typically, games handle this by either causing customers to storm off in anger, or give the player less money. After some experimentation, we felt that having customers actually go away angry wasn't a good fit for our game. This was mainly due to the fact that, despite the game running on the resource-limited Sifteo cube platform, this time-management game actually had more detailed and involved actions that the player needed to take in order to respond to orders. In many such games, responding to an order just takes a few clicks and you respond to far more customers. In *Cube Café*, however, you have fewer customers to please, but they are more demanding in what they require of you. As such, "failing" a customer would incur a much heavier penalty and feel weightier than failing a customer in, say, *Diner Dash*. So, we instead chose to just let the customer get really mad, but still let the player deliver a food they may have been working on for quite a while.

We also didn't feel like it was appropriate to track the player's money from level to level, since there was no gameplay reason to do so, so an explicit money bonus would mean very little. We also wanted to simplify mechanics like this so that they would take up less visual space on the cubes. What we settled on was a "tip bar" that filled up as the customers receive their meals. Filling orders quickly fills up the bar quickly, and filling them slowly fills the bar slowly. In order to pass the level, the player must fill up the tip bar.

This approach worked really well in testing. No one had any misunderstanding of how it worked, and it filled the gameplay role that we needed it to: put time pressure on the player, and block players from advancing if they hadn't mastered the skills from the current level yet.

Another major feature of *Cube Café* in round two was the "just in time" tutorial system. One "drag point" we noticed in our testing was that the first tutorial, which tried to cover all the skills you needed to play the game, felt a little long, and players just wanted to get playing. So we replaced our single long tutorial with several short tutorials designed to introduce players only to the new skills they'd need for a particular level. For instance, the first level tutorial only shows them how to take sodas out of the fridge and give them to customers, and the level itself only has customers ordering sodas. This system seemed to work much better in our tests, as players seemed much more engaged with the tutorials, and it got them playing much faster.

Finally, we added some new kitchen preparation features. The pizza oven was added late in the first round after most of our initial testing, and a new "chopping board" station was added in the second round which brought a fun "chopping" mechanic to the game. Both of these stations really made the game levels they feature in feel different.

Future Development

Though the game is fully playable and receives solid approval in testing from players, there are still some issues we'd like to resolve in the future. Perhaps the largest of these issues is the fact that the game needs a soundtrack and perhaps some sound effects. Since audio cues do not play a major role in the game, this is not a game-breaking omission, but it would still be nice to get it in. We also still need to do some level balancing and tweaking, such as getting the pizza oven into some of the later levels and doing more testing to ensure that the difficulty of the levels ramps up smoothly. Luckily, these are both things which are easy to "drop in" once we have them.