

Sentiment Final Design Update

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The first major step in my third iteration of *Sentiment's* design was when we spoke after class the day I showed you my second iteration. Once we had agreed upon a final scope for the project, I knew what I had to focus my energy on to ensure I could have a design and product I was proud of. My goals were to:

1. Finalizing the Happiness and Anger decks for play testing
2. Create a portfolio of cards from each of the other emotions that demonstrates their strategies, aesthetics, and play style
3. Create a finalized rule set that leads to balanced, interesting game play
4. Develop the visual and learning design in a way that is both appealing and clearly displays important game information

Over the last few weeks, I have scoped down my design from trying to create huge numbers of cards in each emotion, to trying to develop a distinct identity of each emotion in just a few cards. Although I do feel it's important to have a wide range of different expressions of each emotion in the game, the timeline I was on caused me to instead focus on expressing each strategy through a few cards, which actually proved to be quite helpful in thinking about my design, because I could no longer have each card be one part of a larger puzzle - each card had to express the emotion fully on its own. This ultimately led to tighter design, where each card was more focused than many of them were originally. I received positive feedback about this during my testing and surveying about the game, which reinforced my positive feelings about the design decisions that resulted from this constraint.

Finalizing Happiness and Anger Decks

Through my testing during the second and into the third iterations of *Sentiment*, I feel that the two decks are balanced well against one another, and are at a power level that is fun and interesting. Both decks can do powerful and unique things, and they each have a play style that players find reminiscent of the emotions being expressed within them. I have received lots of positive feedback on how the emotions are expressed within the cards. As a result, I have only tweaked these decks slightly to balance them with the Combat Rating update, among a few other minor things.

One of the updates biggest updates I had to make to the Happiness deck was to include art for the deck, to help finalize its polish as a playable prototype. This led to an interesting breakthrough I will discuss more later on in the Visual Design section of the paper - when researching art for the Happiness,

deck, I stumbled upon one artist - Terese Nielsen - whose



Figure 1- Heroes Reunion by Terese Nielsen

artistic style captured much of what I was trying to convey with the happiness cards. When adding art for the anger cards, so much art was available that I was able to easily pick a few images that depicted generally what I want. With happiness, however, there was much less readily available, which led to me distorting the art around certain visual styles, which later because something I was very interested in - developing a distinct art style for each emotion allows the art to convey a certain tone that supports the underlying emotion. This was a positive design consideration that emerged from exploring the constraint of finding art for the happiness deck.

I have also continued to playtest the decks against one another and have explored how much complexity I can have within each deck. I have allowed each deck to have 1 or 2 cards that play outside the 'normal rules' of the game, cards like Contentedness or Amicable Defense, that do things beyond the scope of the game's primary mechanics. I have found that these cards, as well as the cards that involve choices - are often players favorite cards to play and think about, because they enjoy finding unique ways to use them.

The only major consideration that remains for these decks is how they would fare against other decks of different emotions. Because Happiness and Anger have been iterated in reference to one another since the game's first iteration, they check each other in many ways, and are balanced against one another. Although I have tried to balance all of the different emotions against one another, this task is ultimately too large for me to complete in this current iteration, and will need to wait to be further developed when the other emotions have more cards to develop decks from. Ultimately, this is only a temporary factor, as the game is meant to have a deck building element, and these decks are just samples for playtesting. If Sentiment were to be fully developed, much more robust playtesting would be necessary to ensure that different strategies involving the different emotions are not inherently broken. This robust type of playtesting is beyond my current abilities, but will be crucial for the production success of a final product of the game.

Creating Portfolios for Each Emotion

While the second iteration was largely focused on balancing overall game mechanics, this cycle was spent developing those designs into each of the individual emotions, and cards that reflected those emotions. Although many card designs were already developed, redesigning them to showcase each emotion's strategy and mechanics I felt was important. My goals were to reduce overall complexity across each emotion, while allowing each card to act as an individual rule or piece that changed the game in a certain way that reflected the associated emotion and card flavor. Managing complexity was the overall biggest goal of my design with Sentiment, but I feel that in the final iteration, between the art, mechanics, and visual presentation of information, the game manages complexity well, and has room for complexity, and has the possibility to explore additional design space where the game can grow over time.

I developed each emotion by considering what I wanted to be its strategy to be, and as a result, what its primary mechanics would be, and then developed secondary mechanics that would support it. I wanted keyword mechanics (**bolded**) to support the primary mechanic and strategy of each emotion, but I did not want the emotions to be defined by their keywords, as I felt this would constrain future design space.

Emotion	Strategy	Primary Mechanic	Secondary Mechanic	Secondary Mechanic
Anger	Aggro	Direct Damage	Aggressive	Damage to All
Happiness	Go-Wide	Allies	Bolster	Supportive
Love	Value	Card Advantage	Protective	Healing
Fear	Tempo	Resource Leverage	Removal	Dreadful
Sadness	Control	Resource Denial	Recursion	Removal
Serenity	Ramp	Impulse Generation	Efficient Spells	Impulse Outlets

I feel that the present design paradigm for the game is in a very strong place, and that if I do continue to develop the game beyond the scope of this project, that I will have a strong framework to develop each emotion's portfolio in an interesting and unique way that will have a fun and interesting strategy that reflections to emotional strengths and weaknesses of the associated emotion.

Finalizing the Rules

Through my final playtests, as the game became more and more balanced, I was able to focus on more granular elements of the game, such as the benefits of going first or second, how much Impulse players should begin the game with, how to manage activating manifestations, and some superfluous elements of the game, such as how to manage a 3+ player game. This was both a result of my increased understanding of the game from playing it more, and from the benefit of having a more balanced game overall.

Once the Happiness and Anger decks were well balanced against one another, I noticed that the player who went first typically was able to secure a board position early on, and win the game. I iterated on this by allowing both players to start the game with 2 Impulse in their Impulse Well, and having Card Selection come after determining who goes first, so the player going second can elect to aim for a more reactive hand, if they think it's necessary to do so. However, I still found that the player who went first most often won, which led to my current iteration, where the player going second gets an additional Impulse (3 total), as well as an additional card. This small resource boost will allow the secondary player to be reactive to the opponent *and* try to get ahead, without expending all of their resources to do so. I do feel that the present system is well balanced, but this will be an area of continued focus in development of Sentiment in the future.

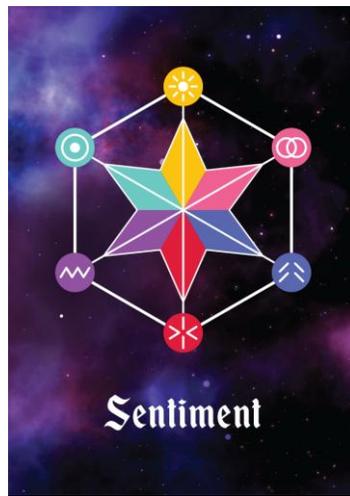
I have had to explore the Impulse cost of cards, to allow for enough granularity for the game to feel robust and interesting. In my earlier designs, cards only cost 1 or 2 Impulse, which would lead to players feeling underwhelmed when they had up to 4 Impulse and nothing to do with it. Additionally, having only 1 or 2 cost cards felt like a very limited design space, whereas having 4 power levels offers more room to create cards that feel different and unique. This also opened up different strategies - such as Anger primarily using 1 and 2 cost cards, while Happiness has an even distribution of card costs, and Sadness has primarily 3 and 4 cost cards. This is another dimension where the game's emotional texture can be felt, when a Sadness player looks at a hand full of expensive cards and not enough Impulse to cast them, knowing they're going to take

a big hit before they can get back in the game. The ‘speed’ of each deck says a lot about the experience of playing it, and the embodied experience associated with playing at different speeds is part of the underlying design for this system.

I have focused in my latest iteration of the rules on making the overall game rules as simple and straightforward as possible, and using them as a framework within which each card to act as an individual new rule in the game. Macro game rules such as the steps of the turn and the elements of the card are complexity that should be managed through the game elements acting as scaffolds such as the cards themselves and game board until players are sufficiently experienced with the game that they are no longer complex. Beyond those rules, the game’s design acts as a system within which each card is an individual rule, where complexity and balance can be managed at an individual level, rather than at a systemic level.

Developing the Visual & Learning Design

The visual design for Sentiment is one of the parts I knew I had to save for last, as it would be something that would change dramatically depending on what the game required. Once I was confident in the overall design of the game, and was only tweaking details, I began drafting a visual design mockup, which I then realized into a final design with the help of my friend Javiera Valle as an illustrator.



I had several goals with Visual design of the card frames. First, I wanted information to be clearly readable and understandable, with little room for misinterpretation. Second, I wanted each emotion to be clearly distinct from the other aesthetically and stylistically. Finally,

One of the things I knew I had to fix in this iteration was how I presented complex information on the cards. I had already reduced combat stats from 2 (Offense and Defense) to 1 (CR), but having two competing numbers on the cards was unnecessary. Instead, I chose to use the emotion’s icon to represent its Impulse cost, represented visually at the top of the card. This also allows players to quickly fan their cards to see how much their different cards cost during play. The only number on the card is its CR, which is the most important number mechanic in the game.

I also wanted each emotion to be expressed through the aesthetic styles of each card. I chose to use a different material for the border of each card, and selected a color palate to go along with it, making each emotion distinct, and reinforcing the emotional context through the visual style of the cards.

Emotion	Happiness	Anger	Fear	Sadness	Love	Serenity
Border Material	Sunflower	Cracked Earth	Smoke	Stone	Silk	Rippling Water

The card back is meant to symbolically represent the interconnection of the six emotions. This starburst symbol will serve as Sentiment’s icon, which will be part of the branding and marketed for the game, if it ever reaches production. The symbol unifies the different elements of the game into one, and displays them grouped with the positive emotions above the negative ones. The background of the card back is meant to be one that is neutral to all the elements of each emotion, and reinforces the magical nature of the game. Finally, the game’s name must be somewhere on the cards, and thus has that space reserved. Presently, the name text is not meant to draw attention, as it is the least appealing part of the card back, but eventually the game’s name can be professionally illustrated, which will then have a more prominent focus.

In addition to the explicit visual design of Sentiment as a whole, I had a breakthrough with the visual design of each individual emotion. I had been searching for one more big way to draw together each emotion through the game’s aesthetics. As I described before, when exploring options for Happiness cards, I found that having a distinct visual style for each emotion led to a sense of unity among those emotions, and in my limited surveying about the game, led to greater interest and understanding of how the cards work together. Although my prototype was greatly limited by only being able to get art off the internet, as opposed to being able to commission artists, I was still able to broadly collect a set of visual styles for each emotion that embodied the aesthetic I was striving for in the game, and evoked a more powerful affective response from players, generating greater situational interest.

Emotion	Happiness	Anger	Fear	Sadness	Love	Serenity
Aesthetic Style	Impressionism / Terese Nielsen / Frescos	Dark Gothic Fantasy / Kev Walker	Horror / Surrealism / H.R. Giger / M.C. Escher	Post-Modern / Abstract / Realism / Steve Argyle	Art Nouveau / Rebecca Guay	Wood Block Print / Mild Psychedelic / Noah Bradley

I believe that the key to generating interest and affect in card games is through the art, and by discovering this unifying effect through the similar art patterns, I believe I can generate interest in the associated emotions and effects that relate to the cards. I recall numerous times throughout my life when a favorite game element of mine used a word or phrase I didn’t know, and I looked it up – authentic, self-driven learning. My hope is that by tying these drastically different art styles together in the game, I can appeal to a wide audience of players and audiences who might be attracted to different aesthetics. I also hope that I can inspire players to explore these different aesthetics, which are themselves a worthy subject of study.

Although being able to commission art is a large task, I do believe that aesthetic is an essential part of what makes games fun and interesting, and developing a way to actually get good art in the game will likely be the biggest hurdle I face in turning Sentiment into an actual product. The result, though, I believe will be great.

Finally, there is the learning scaffolding embedded in the game mats that will come with the game. There are three primary areas of complexity in the core elements of Sentiment – they are the parts of the turn, understanding the parts of the card, and tracking damage and healing. One area of lesser complexity that the game mat also helps new players manage is knowing where to

place their cards. The mat helps players keep track of the parts of the turn in two locations – simple reminder text near the front of the mat, and a more thorough explanation near the back, where more experienced players can easily look past it. The details area also contains a quick breakdown of the parts of the card. Players who need a more careful breakdown of the rules of the game will need to keep the rules pamphlet nearby when playing.

If I was going to use a physical scaffold for the game, I wanted to be able to offload as much of the bookkeeping as possible to that scaffold. Including metrics such as each players' stress level or the parts of the turn, and having a defined area for their Impulse Well make it simple and intuitive for players to progress through those less meaningful parts of the game, freeing up cognitive space for them to focus on the more important strategic elements of how the cards work and interact. I also strove to make each of the zones distinct and obvious to prevent any kind of confusion or mix-ups during play. Finally, I wanted to add an aesthetic element that would make the players feel good about using the mat, so I chose to include an iconic art from each emotion to represent to play field for that emotion's play mat.

Concluding Thoughts

At the end of my development of Sentiment, I feel proud that I accomplished what I set out to do. Although there is much more work to be done to turn the game into a market-ready product, I have taken great strides towards that end, and have done the meaningful design work to have a strong basis to develop the game further. I have learned an incredible amount about designing both games, and products in general by needing to develop every aspect of the game myself. Every iteration, every design idea was something that I ultimately chose to include and implement, and so each of the game's shortcomings was a direct result of my work. Every time something didn't work, or I needed to change something, I learned why my initial idea didn't work.

One of the biggest lessons I learned by developing Sentiment was that I need to let a game find its own identity. Many of my friends initially teased me during my first iteration that I had made "Emotions: The Feeling", a bad rip-off of Magic: the Gathering. As I developed the game, though, I made important decisions that made some of my earlier assumptions awkward or obsolete, and I often had to be willing to let go of my assumed way of doing things in order to let the game become its best self. One example of this was in the conversion to the CR system. Pretty much every other CCG on the market uses an Offense/Defense 2-stat system, which allows for a lot of flexibility in the storytelling within each character – some characters have low defense and high offense or vice versa, a character with high stats in both is very powerful – but I found in my testing, having two stats was very complex when managing the damage, healing, and bolstering system, a unique element of the game that really stood out. Ultimately, I decided I had to reduce the complexity of combat math, and changed to CR. This system greatly streamlined combat, and made it quick and easy, which is fairly unique amongst card games. Accepting the simpler system was something I had a hard time doing initially, but after testing the new system, I know that the game has benefitted greatly from the change. There were numerous other examples of this throughout the design process, where I had to let go of my preconceived notions of what the game should be or look like, and to focus on what will make the best product. Learning to do this

was essential to making Sentiment the game it is now, and it is the lesson I will take most strongly with me into my future designs.

I have also reflected on how each part and stage of the design process influence one another. Early in the design, I was primarily working as a writer and designer. During the middle of the design, I worked equally as a writer, designer, and producer of the game – allowing each element to influence each other as I frequently iterated the different parts of the design. As I have neared the end of the design cycle, though, I have found that I have ended up having my focus on design and production influencing the narrative elements of the game. As I was ‘commissioning’ art, I would discover pieces that fit in with the rest of the designs that would inform new designs, or I would discover a mechanical gap in the strategy needed to make a deck, or realize that a certain emotion needed to be able to answer a card from another emotion. As the development process continued, so did the influence of each of the major groundstones of my design. This is an important lesson that will help me better understand and organize my design processes for the future, both as a team member on future projects, and as a team leader when organizing groups larger than just myself. I was fortunate to work on this project on my own, as I was forced to grapple with each of the different perspectives of the design process in reflection only to myself. No social influence or personal politics governed the design, I answered only to myself and what was best for the game.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to explore and try to make a game entirely on my own – to test and iterate, simply practice the craft for its own sake, start to finish. Though I do plan to continue working on the game, as a game design exercise, designing Sentiment has been superb.



I really feel that I understand the process better having tried it myself. Bringing an idea from a line on a notebook to a fully playable thing that people can laugh with and enjoy is an incredible feeling, and there were numerous moments throughout the design process where I truly felt exhilarated by seeing my idea come to life. For my entire life, I have known the power of games to move and change people. It’s why I love games, and it’s why I want to be a game design. When I was playtesting Sentiment with my brother or my friends or classmates, watching them laugh and plot or groan in dread, I knew that the feeling I love so much – coming together to learn and play – was happening. I’ve always wanted to contribute to that feeling, to make people feel the way that I’ve loved to feel for my whole life. And now, for the first time, I have.