

Panel Discussion

Serious Game Design: Insights from Emerging Designers

Panel Overview & Core Mission

The session opened with Susanne Jul introducing Creative Crisis Leadership (CCL) and its core mission: transforming disaster preparedness into an engaging, collaborative experience through serious games. Jul emphasized that traditional preparedness tools often fail because fear is a poor long-term motivator. By replacing fear with the power of play, CCL aims to provide research-backed, easy-to-use tools for community leaders, workshops, and first responders. Facilitator Aaron Vanek introduced the student game design team—a mix of UCLA and USC game design students and officers from UCLA's ACM Studio—who collaborated over the summer to build the Wildfire Café Game.

Key Discussion Themes

1. Game Mechanics & Simulation Walkthrough

- **Grounding in Reality:** Garrett Dworman walked through a video demonstration of the game's **Evacuation Module**. Gameplay begins with a personalized household assessment where players determine their starting capacity (pairs of hands available) and household vulnerabilities (e.g., special medical needs, nearby vegetation).
- **Actions vs. Urgency:** During each turn, players must balance personal preparation (packing bags, securing pets) against community aid and immediate evacuation.
- **Event Card Injects:** Cards drawn during play introduce unpredictable real-world scenarios—such as fallen ash, communication outages, sprained ankles, or sudden fire advances. These cards recreate the chaotic, high-pressure nature of real wildfires without overwhelming the players.

2. Commercial Games vs. "Serious" Game Design

- **Adhering to Physical Constraints:** Student designers (Anush Vadodkar, Alex Dong, and Rahul Jogadhenu) discussed the challenges of designing for a serious topic. Unlike fantasy board games, mechanics cannot feature "magic" fixes or unrealistic outcomes; every rule must respect real-world physics and disaster conditions.
- **Intentional Inequality & Cooperation:** Alex Dong pointed out that standard competitive games strive for equal starting positions. In contrast, this game intentionally gives players unequal starting conditions to reflect real life, focusing the objective on cooperative neighborhood survival rather than individual victory.

- **Emotional Safety:** Dworman and Jul noted that in testing with past disaster survivors, participants did not feel the topic was being trivialized; instead, they valued the game as an "emotional workshop" to process memories and rehearse choices safely.

3. Adaptability, Modularity, and Real-World Impact

- **Micro-Modules for Workshops:** Jul highlighted that the game is designed in short, 15-to-30-minute modules (e.g., *Evacuation*, *Return*, *Home Hardening*). This modular structure allows facilitators to drop the game into brief community meetings or run multi-module workshops.
- **Customizable Decks:** The card-based structure allows CCL to swap decks to fit local environments—whether tailored to rural mountain towns or urban interface areas.
- **The "Takeaway" Checklist:** Dworman explained that the player board serves a dual purpose. At the end of the game, players take home their filled-out board to hang on their refrigerator, providing a personalized, post-game action plan that sparks ongoing family discussions.

4. Designer Reflections & Behavioral Impact

- **Designers as Learners:** Student designers Sienna Koizumi and Rahul Jogadhenu reflected on how working on the game reshaped their own awareness. Having lived through local Los Angeles fire threats, they noted that designing the game helped them realize how much time people waste "dilly-dallying" during evacuations and gave them a clear mental framework for real-life action.
- **Subconscious Retention:** Attendee Nitu shared that after playing an early iteration of the game, its constraints embedded into her subconscious, prompting her to run mental safety checklists whenever leaving home.

Closing Takeaways & Next Steps

The discussion concluded with a focus on community collaboration. Susanne Jul reiterated that CCL operates as a non-profit collaboration hub, seeking to combine the expertise of fire chiefs, local leaders, and game designers to rapidly deploy effective tools. Community attendees expressed enthusiasm for testing the game at upcoming local Firewise meetings, highlighting the strong demand for interactive, community-driven preparedness tools.