

Multiplayer mastermind

When designing a game of any sort, it is important to focus on the play experience. The play experience should be designed to be pleasurable for the players, as it is what will drive the players to continue playing, to be engaged in the play. The game is simply a toy to facilitate the playful activity, while the rules creates structures and frames for the play and the mechanics are the methods that is designed for the player to overcome the challenges in a non-trivial way. All these are tools that should be used to create affordance for the play experience, and should not overtake the focus from the play experience. The way some games are design, however, indicates that the designer fell for the latter.

Mastermind is a game, which play experience I have been brooding over for a long time. The is designed for two players, but the players are not equal part of the play experience. For me the play experience is to experience superior intellect as you break your opponent's code or watch your opponent struggling to break your combination, and thereby show you are the mastermind. And here is the problem. The player that creates the combination is no longer part of the activity after she/he has created the code. There is no longer any challenge for the person, he can become a facilitator for the other players play experience. If we look at different classification of the term 'play', the role as code maker in mastermind does not live up to the requirements. E.g from Miguel Sicart's definition of play, the codemakers activity are neither expressive nor is it personal. The code maker simply gives feedback to the other player, which could have been done by a computer, and there is no way the player can do it in anyway that it expresses their emotions or ideas nor make a personal choice. There is no choice, but to give the exact feedback the game dictates, and without choices and challenge there is no gameplay. And since the code maker is regulated by the rules, it can neither be toyplay. Therefore I would argue that the code maker is not playing after the code has been made, and is removed from the play experience.

With these limitations in the game, it seemed like a good game to try to redesign. The design produced a mastermind game with three players, where everyone is a code maker and a code breaker. The game starts off with every player secretly making their color code. Then an arbitrary player starts, and the turn is passed clockwise. Rather than just trying to guess one code, the player has to choose which other player's code he tries to break. The 'attacking' player (the player whom has turn) chooses a player, and then writes down the color code guess, which is shown publicly. The defending player then receives the paper with the attack code, notes down the feedback and returns it. Only the attack player is allowed to see the feedback. Then it is the next player's turn, who then chooses who to attack. The game continues until two player have had their color guessed, thereby declaring the last man standing to be the true mastermind. A sketch of the setup can be seen on figure 1.

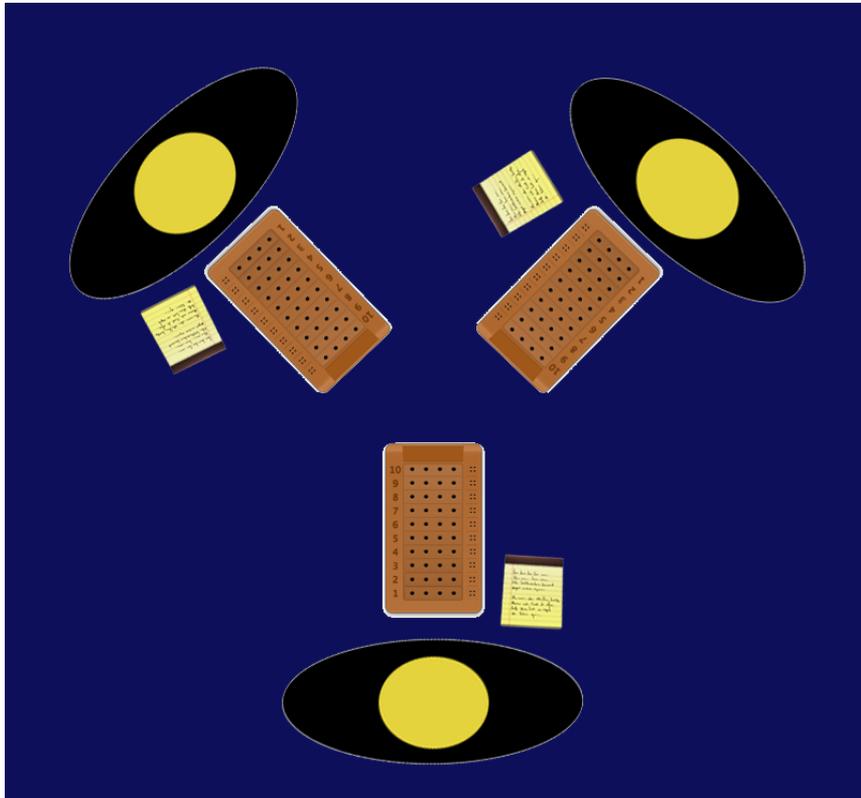


Figure 1: Overview of the setup

The goal of the redesign was to add more choice. It was considered early on to simply make both players code breakers and makers. However, this does not affect the choices of the players, neither bring anything new to the player experience. It is in essence a little more than just playing the original mastermind on two boards. The idea of three players introduces some variation to the loop and changing the game structure. The players now have to choose who to attack in addition to what code to attack with, adding that to core loop. The choice in player can become meaningful as it is a way for the players to express their aggression towards and can lead to gang ups based on the metagame(e.g. targeting previous winners). Its impact on the play experience will be discussed later.

Throughout the process it was heavily discussed the feedback from the defender should be private or public. Through testing it became rather apparent that public feedback had its disadvantage. Most often the first player to have been attacked twice would end up losing the game as he/she would be the easiest to code break. This would result in the player attacking a single one in order to try and break their code, and thereby only two of the players were being attacked. When one of them lost, the player who had not been attacked on would easily win, as the player was so far ahead without any viable catch-up effect besides luck. We experimented with adding a snowball effect for the one who guess the first code, but it tampered too much with the play experience as it became a race to guess the first one which afforded the same targeting of a single player.

The private feedback avoid these problems with targeting. Players no longer focused a player down as there was no obvious advantage in doing so. More elaborated thoughts behind the choosing was introduced. Rather than looking at the feedback from the entire board, the players had to analyse the way the other players deduced their color code attack,

and thereby introducing mind games, e.g. if a player suddenly changed target to the one who attacked him last, that player might be onto something? The choices requiring more thought and making challenge hard to accomplish positively affected the play experience, added further possible consideration to the loop for players to improve.

As the goal of this redesign is to make the winner of the game feel like the true mastermind among the players, we had to ask ourselves the question: What does it take to actually feel like a mastermind? It is by beating as many opponents as possible? Or be the last person standing, through outwitting all? At first we tried through by giving points for each elimination with the aforementioned snowball effect. This did not work well, as the rush for the first elimination determined the outcome: the first to eliminate anyone would either win or draw. While the other player could still play, there is nothing the player without an elimination could do to win, which made their effort unnecessary.

By making it last man standing, the play experience felt much more rewarding. It is not simply to rush down your guesses against a single opponent, but rather trying to play the two opponent out against each other, trying to lure them and conquer them through mental superiority. This is much more in touch with the intended play experience for mastermind, for as they say: he who laugh last, laugh best. And the best in a fight of wits, must be a mastermind.