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Objects and Design

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User Interface Rebuttal

Team SXSI received a usability evaluation from Team Shake, composed of students Michael Cantrell, Ryan Sloan, and Ben Litowitz. We will here seek to reply and respond, determining the best possibilities for addressing their concerns.

Team Shake evaluated our Oregon Trail application using a usability heuristic method. They based their system on Jakob Nielsen's "Ten Usability Heuristics", but revised it, eventually selecting 5 particular heuristics to focus on, Game Status, Language Clarity, What next?, Simplicity (of design and control), and Aesthetics.

Team Shake had several concerns about our presentation about Game Status. They felt our BuySellItemDialog and death dialog might not show the item name or cause of death; however, this information will be supplied dynamically. For BuySellItemDialog, they suggested noting weight, which we'll consider. They suggested that in the death dialog, the wagon's current quantity of food could be mentioned, given the "Use for food" option; we will consider this. Team Shake wondered when the EditPersonDialog was used, and suggested that the leader's profession should be editable. This is a debugging UI, but profession editing might be useful. For the profession selectors, it was suggested that we allow comparing professions side-by-side; we will consider a single window. For the broken part dialog, it was noted that we could describe how the part broke, and provide the quantity of spares and odds of fixing the part. We agree that the number of spares should be added. For the ferry info, it was noted that the odds of crossing and current total money were not included. We agreeing with including at least the money total. It was suggested we have excess information in our River dialog. We could possibly remove inventory, ration, and distance to next landmark. They noted that

IllnessSpec does not include the inventory. We will consider adding relevant items, such as food and medicine. Team Shake mentioned that StoreMainSpec does not include item prices. We will consider whether they can be included without clutter. If not, we will rely on ViewItemDialog.

Team Shake generally found our Language Clarity acceptable, but had issues with tone and vocabulary in a few cases. They believed AddMember was too "commanding"; we will try to find alternative vocabulary that is less imperative. The phrase "Special ability" was considered unclear, so we will consider a replacement, such as "Distinguishing feature of profession". They also noted isolated spelling errors, which will be corrected. In the AddMemberSpec, it was suggested we be more clear about the meaning of "specify 4". We can distinguish by using language such as "up to 4". It was suggested that our Ferry dialog was not descriptive enough, so we will consider adding longer explanatory labels in place of "Cost" and "Wait time."

Team Shake expressed serious concerns about the Aesthetics of our application. They felt that we made a "contrived effort to offend the user." While we certainly did not intend to offend the user in any way, this concern does indicate that we need to seriously reconsider our design choices. The main suggested problems were our orange backgrounds and teal buttons. Team Shake suggested the color made it unpleasant. They also noted that they considered the default window color boring, so we need to consider what if any colors would be pleasant but not bland. They noted that some windows were significantly larger than their contents, and that some of our graphics were too large. We will consider resizing the graphics and adjusting our window dimensions.

Team Shake identified several issues with our application's Simplicity. The primary problem they saw was unnecessary information in windows. For instance, they found LandmarkSpec and RiverSpec redundant to our main window. They also felt that when two windows had the same information, the presentation should also be the same. These concerns are valid. We will try to trim the content of subsidiary windows, and simplify the presentation of remaining information by

choosing a standard layout. It was also noted that our input button layout was inconsistent. We will probably address this by choosing a single layout, most likely side-by-side as suggested by Team Shake.

When evaluating the "What next?" heuristic, Team Shake identified instances where they believed our program flow was unclear. For instance, they wanted more information about how each of three choices of the broken part dialog would affect the game. They wondered whether or not a successful outcome was guaranteed with every choice, and if not, whether an additional choice be made afterwards. We should probably indicate that each choice will succeed or fail within a fixed time period, and that failure will return them to this screen. They also mentioned that we could distinguish different forms of program flow through different buttons. For instance, in the fort dialog they suggested we use radio buttons for the rations, and action buttons for the choices that would exit the window; will strongly consider this. Finally, they suggested more information be provided in the Death window. In particular, they suggested information about how much food would result from the "Use for food" option, and whether "Bury" would consume a turn. We will consider how this can be made more clear without cluttering the dialog.

Team Shake provided valuable insight about user interface problems in our games. They noted real aesthetic and functional problems, as well as instances where the correct behavior was uncertain or undocumented. We are grateful for their assistance and will strive to use it to make our game more usable.