Michael Bishop Case Study

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Identification of Key Stakeholders

As evidenced by the title of this case, Michael Bishop is the primary stakeholder in this case. He is trying to find a home within the school system for his science educational game, “Rigglefish” in order to maintain funding for his project, but currently only has an in to pilot it with pre-AP and gifted students (Pedersen, 2014, p. 31). After meeting with several key players in different schools and later a self-assembled advisory team, Michael is still struggling to find an answer to his dilemma.

Nancy Levin and Tara Jones are the former and current science curriculum specialists in the district in which Oakdale Middle School resided within, respectively. Nancy was on board with Michael’s implementation plan, but was demoted, presumably due to worsening standardized test scores under her tutelage. When Tara took her place, she chose to withdraw from Michael’s implementation plan, citing the need for emphasis on the essential pieces of learning and the amount of time the game would take away from regular classroom learning. In short, Tara felt a game, educational or not, was too risky in this tumultuous time.

None of the science coordinators in neighboring districts, Bailey Richards, Laura Kenner, Daniel Brown, or Jim Harrington, voiced concerns over the game itself; rather the general consensus was that each was impressed. There is a great deal of pressure for districts to perform on their state-wide standardized tests though, and Michael wasn’t able to sell a comfort level with integration of Rigglefish into the regular school day and audience to any of them. Concerns ranged from the time commitment and access to computer resources, to teachers not knowing how to effectively integrate it into their plans or being able to effectively utilize the game as a
teaching tool once the developers were no longer involved, to bugs in a game that hasn’t yet made it to a final ready-for-market form, to time required by students on surveys and other evaluation-specific items. While each gave Michael the red light on bringing Rigglefish to their districts, doors were opened to try the program on pre-AP students, after school science clubs, and summer programs in one district each.

Craig Dawson, a state level science education director, Bob Blanchard, a game designer, and Antonia Fisher, a science professor at Michael’s university, were decidedly fans of Rigglefish during the first hour of their four hour brainstorming session in which they received an introduction to the game, and then were given time to play it. The tide turned a bit though once Michael moved the focus of the conversation to the goal of implementing the game in regular middle school classrooms. Craig pontificated on educators wanting to find the most effective use of classroom time, and how any addition to a curriculum needs to come out of the gate boasting a significant boost to standardized test scores, as they are the current measure for success. His primary suggestion was to incorporate multiple choice testing into the game in some way to show quickly and often that the game is meeting that ultimate goal.

Bob, as a designer himself, disagreed with Craig’s suggestion, citing that multiple choice questions would suck the motivation out of gameplay. He also brought up the point that once the development teams leave classrooms to their own devices, teachers often go off script and down unanticipated roads as they’ve never been prepared to facilitate this type of learning as a rule.

Antonia too disagreed with Craig, and passionately fought for the idea that there should be alternatives in education to what has become, ultimately, a place where standardized test prep takes place. After hearing everyone’s arguments, her final suggestion was to consider alternate
markets, such as summer school or home school, to build up some data about effectiveness before taking another run at the mainstream school system.

**Design Challenges**

Quite a few obstacles were identified throughout this case. The biggest challenge in my eyes was that the game goes in depth on a set of topics rather than covering a wider array of topics, as the learning consultants almost all mentioned as one of their goals. This is a very difficult challenge because each school has different objectives and would place emphasis on different items. It’s also a huge hurdle to overcome in the fact that the game is already written one way, so it would require a great deal of rework and reimagining to change it to fit new specifications even once Michael signs up new clients. Also because of the situation, it will be very difficult to work out the bugs in the game until there are actual users, and Bob had a great point in that even once Michael go into a school, less than stellar results can occur when teachers aren’t prepared to take over facilitation. Lastly in this vein, Michael doesn’t have strong connections to the the curriculum specialists in the school districts, so he is going in essentially blind to pitch the program.

**Suggested prioritization of design challenges**

First and foremost, Michael must find a way to connect to his audience before pitching his team’s services. No matter what changes are made, the diversity between districts will be a divisive factor without more information up front. Once he has in to make meaningful connections rather than essentially cold calls, the next priority must be playing to his audience’s needs. No other potential solution will be of much help unless he can show value in the program itself. Once he has a few clients signed up and work has begun, a plan how to work through any
bugs prior to implementation should be ironed out, as should the issue with teachers not being prepared to facilitate it.

**Informed by my previous experience**

As an instructional designer, I’ve sometimes found myself in the luxurious position of being able to anticipate my client’s needs rather than addressing existing fires. As wonderful as it is to be ahead of the curve, this variety of project can become quite difficult in the marketing stage, as clients are often used to waiting for the fires and not acting on anything until they absolutely have to. The key with marketing of this variety is to A) find a way to make a good connection with at least one key stakeholder, and B) listen to and act on their main concern. Similarly, Michael Bishop is offering a solution to a problem that no one seems to realize that they have. His number one issue right now is a marketing issue. If he can find a creative way to connect with decision makers in the various districts and be prepared to work towards their main need rather than trying to sell a prepackaged product, the biggest hurdle would be out of the way.

**Potential solutions**

The first solution I offer will start by going back to the curriculum specialists with whom he’s already made contact, and who he already knows like the idea of games as teaching tools. By going in with an idea of their needs and sitting down and offering to listen to the rest in order to learn more about what items the middle schoolers need to be coached toward to better succeed on the standardized test, he will create allies. Once he and his team have gone back to reimagine Rigglefish to be a bit wider reaching and simultaneously packaged in smaller pieces, he could go back to them and try to sell a few pieces to each district. The pros of this plan: the smaller resource investment by the schools and the customization will make it much more enticing, and
Michael’s team could start extracting details surrounding its success in order to bring the programs to more districts. The cons are that it will almost certainly require large amounts of rework, and it doesn’t address the issues of mitigation of bugs during gameplay, or preparing teachers to facilitate the game as a teaching tool.

My second solution is to start with the teachers, and set up demos of the software at conventions and teacher’s meetings in districts, alongside making it available online for them to continue playing at home. This will help them orient to the game and its goals right out of the gate, and with smartly placed bug reporting options, they will start getting more info about issues during gameplay early to work, which creates answers to two of the challenges outlined above. A follow up with teachers could ask them their opinions of the game, and close with questions regarding whether they think it would be effective in their classrooms. Those marked positively would get a return call in hopes of introductions and meetings with stakeholders to pitch the product. Another twist on this one is to start with summer school as suggested, and working from the students up through the teachers to a referral. In either of these scenarios, with the great warm up he gets from people in their district, he may be able to sell use of the product as is, or at least it gets him to the table to work through issues as described in the previous scenario, which is a definite pro. Also on the pro’s list would be that this scenario has an answer to all of the challenges outlined above. The one con here is that this plan too will likely incite rework.

Between these two potential solutions, I believe the latter is the better choice between the two. Building more excitement from the ground up about a product that no one seems to doubt will go a long way in the fight to find the game’s acceptance in the middle school classroom. This plan mitigates all of the cons entirely from the first solution except for the potential for rework, and even on this one it becomes less likely.
REFERENCES