

QA: a FreeCell perspective

OK, I admit it. I'm a FreeCell freak. I started back in 1996 when my 'gateway drug', Solitaire, became unsatisfying and I needed more...

Since then, my use has been mostly recreational, nothing hard-core. I'm not an addict, I swear! But that's beside the point. In my many hours of playing, I've developed somewhat of a list of 'best-practices' and upon further reflection, realized that many of them applied to my approach to QA.

Here's my list and how I use them. You may want to go home and play a bit of FreeCell to understand some of my comparisons.

1. Don't pass up a 'slam-dunk' move.
When you see an ace that hasn't been played and can be played, play it. Likewise, if you see that you aren't testing an important feature that the users rely on, test it.
2. Not all possible moves are 'slam-dunks'.
Generally, a bad strategy in FreeCell is to first get all the hearts in order then all the diamonds, etc. It may seem like an organized way to proceed, but you will soon find out that that strategy greatly complicates matters unnecessarily. Likewise, if you are trying to set up a testing strategy for an existing application, don't try to create all the testplans before you start to do testing. Start small, and build on small successes.
3. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice past work to make progress.
You work hard on building a series of cards only to realize that there's a 2 of diamonds you need under the series K,Q,J,10,9,8 ... Test plans are not set in stone. Once created, they may be difficult to implement or scale or interpret. Find out where they fail and work on re-designing them to protect you from repeating the same mistakes.
4. Don't make questionable decisions in haste.
I've found myself moving a card out to the empty slots in the upper-left side so that I could make a minimal gain with the card underneath only to find that eventually all my empty slots are filled and I'm essentially left with no moves to make. If you're unsure if your testing is complete or accurate, don't present it as such. You'll find that if/when there's a failure in the software you've tested and you didn't have confidence in your testing, you'll be at a loss to offer any helpful suggestions on what to do about it.
5. Sometimes rash decisions are the only options.
I've found myself in a situation where I have 2-3 moves left, none seem to be particularly fruitful and I'd like to finish the game soon anyway. Sometimes a guess works out for the best, sometimes not. Given a limited amount of time and too many tests to run, you sometimes have to pick the lesser of two evils. The best plan is to say, "Here's what we're testing, here's what we're not testing, we'll meet the deadline because that is the priority, but we're taking a risk."
6. The only thing better than planning is dumb luck.
As before, when I only had 2-3 moves and none seemed to be helpful, sheer luck is the only reason for any success. Similarly, when we choose our testing strategy somewhere from complete, to minimal, to non-existent, we can expect clear test results, sketchy test results and grab-bag test results respectively.
7. Think (aka, Don't just do something, sit there!)
Regardless of the activity, you often need to put lots of brain power into it to have any hope of a successful outcome. Not only do you need to think about what you're trying to do, but also what you don't want to happen and how you're going to avoid it.

8. Use your resources wisely.
In FreeCell, you have only the four empty slots to put cards and each of those slots can only hold one card. If they are all used, you have to clear them out before one comes available. As with QA, you need to make sure that when you've maximized your resources (testers, test systems, etc.), you have a plan on how to eventually recover them. Otherwise, you'll end up having resources tied up unnecessarily and can't respond to new needs.
9. Celebrate success
In the computer version of FreeCell, the cards bounce off the screen when you win, and it gives me a sense of accomplishment to see them do that. Likewise, you need to let everyone know when you've had a huge success. Not everyone knows the hard work you've done and everyone involved should be recognized for their contribution.
10. When there are absolutely no more moves left, start over.
Last time I kept track, my success rate at FreeCell was about 50%. That means that I am very familiar with failure. I don't dwell on it though, there's always the "New Game" option. Similarly, you can have all the best test plans, all the best test data, the most up-to-date specs, but you will not be able to control 100% of all situations that come your way. Do what you can, the best way that you can and hope everything works out.