Smithsonian TechQuest began at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in the summer of 2014 with the goal of engaging new and larger audiences at the National Air and Space Museum’s satellite location in Northern Virginia. The game always follows a storyline and a historical period, though the challenges are fictional.

Evaluation of the game has largely been iterative and aims to see whether we are reaching intended educational goals. We do formal evaluation at least twice per year. Aside from the educational goals of the game, we ask visitors where they heard about it to help our marketing team. We work to understand the age appropriateness of the game elements and how families are interacting while playing. We talk with both the public and reserved groups to help understand how the process works for them, making changes in the short term and involving decisions on future games.

Smithsonian TechQuest aims to increase visitation at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center by increasing the onsite offerings for families on weekends. The game targets 10-14 year old kids and their families, though we have striven since our second year to include activities that would appeal to younger and older family members.

The game is run largely by the Explainers, student educators who interact with over 100,000 visitors per year at the Udvar-Hazy Center. The Explainers have been an integral part of the iterative process, not only giving feedback on the guest experience, but working directly with staff to do research, create interpretive plans, and train their peers.

Smithsonian TechQuest is an incredible experiment in creating new programming and iterating on it quickly. In the short term, we use visitor and explainer feedback to tweak and retool activities and gameplay. Once a year we get to start all over again, taking the great qualities of past games and leaving out the items that didn’t work as well.

In the most recent two games, we’ve added the goal of incorporating design and engineering and using historical figures from the time period to enhance the story.

Our biggest challenges are time and training. A small planning team means that once one version of the game is up and running, we already need to begin thinking about the next. The Explainers are part-time, intermittent staff, so making sure a large enough number are prepared to present an entirely new theme is a big challenge.

The game was funded for four years, with the intention of changing themes once a year. It began with a Cold War era reconnaissance mission in Eye in the Sky, followed by modern day training for a trip to Mars in Astronaut Academy. The third iteration, Flying Circus, transported players back to the golden age of flight in the 1920s and saw our first successful incorporation of design and engineering. The game continues until June 2018 with Race to the Moon, which follows the Apollo 11 Mission, highlighting the behind-the-scenes stars of the era.