

Game Jams: Community, Motivations, and Learning among Jammers

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ABSTRACT

Game jams are events that allow game designers to develop innovative games in a time-constrained environment, typically within a 48-hour period during a weekend. Jams provide participants an opportunity to improve their skills, collaborate with their peers, and advance research and creativity in the field of game design. Having coordinated numerous jams locally and as one of the largest venues in the world for GGJ 2011, the authors present learned lessons on how to make these events into amazing collaborative opportunities and their results from research in surveying game jam participants before and after the authors' most recent jam weekend.

Keywords: Collaboration, Community, Design, Game Development, Game Jam, Learning and Retention, Student Performance

INTRODUCTION

Game jam events are a fairly recent phenomenon, and research into game jams are even more nascent. What are the characteristics of jammers (those who participate in game jams), and why do people jam? Additionally, is it possible that academic performance and learning is enhanced by participating in game jams? This research examines these questions and presents our findings as a result of hosting game jam events for the past three years.

In this paper, we examine the history, characteristics, and educational opportunities of game jam events. Further, we present results we obtained from pre- and post- event surveys with over 150 respondents that give insight into the demographics, expectations, self-described roles in the game design/development process, and motivating factors as to why respondents participated in game jam events. Our study is unique in that we discuss our experience and present respondent results from multiple universities – including art-focused and software-development-focused schools that have collaborated together. Finally, we conclude with

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an analytical comparison of game jam participation to academic performance—concluding that there is indeed a correlation between engaging in community-driven game design and development events such as game jams and academic success in first and second year courses. Our results indicate that while successfully implementing collaborative game jam events requires much diligence and preparation, the rewards in building students' skills and contributing to their academic success is significant to a game design and development program.

History of Game Jams

Chris Hecker and a group of 13 other game developers/designers captured the philosophy of open, independent game innovation when establishing one of the first game jams a decade ago in Indie Jam 2002; he states, "Participants can work on their own game, team up with others, do multiple games, do a new game every hour [...], or any combination of thereof" (Hecker, 2001). The modern Global Game Jam (GGJ) was inspired by and modeled itself after the Nordic Game Jam and has roots going back to the Indie Jam in 2002.

The Global Game Jam was formed by the IGDA Education SIG director, Susan Gold, in collaboration with Gorm Lai and Ian Schreiber (Gold, 2009). GGJ's intent was to broaden the outreach of the IGDA's game education goals of Curriculum Framework and to create games in the world's largest game jam. The GGJ focuses on collaboration in organizing and in teams making of games at each site.

The growth of the GGJ and our local game jam events is an amazing testimony to the efforts of the organizers and the insatiable desire of participants to create. The first GGJ (2009) had over 1600 participants in 23 countries and resulted in 370 games. In 2010, this more than doubled to 4300 participants and 900 games; in 2011, there were 6500 jammers from 44 countries, and over 1500 games were created. In 2009, we began with 14 jammers from two universities at our local site; this has grown to over 150 participants representing seven universities in 2011.

Characteristics of a Game Jam

As stated by the keynote for GGJ 2010, "gaming is this giant creative space, surrounded by a frontier, and beyond that frontier there are so many countries left to explore" (Curran, 2010). Game jams serve as a means to explore the frontier of game development in a rapid-fire, supportive, and entertaining environment. Knowing that thousands of other game designers and developers are collaborating all around the world alongside you is a rich experience that captures the hearts and minds of participants across cultures.

The game jams are communitarian events that support creativity and learning and establish spaces that support the indie game development ecosystem (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011). Additionally, game jams support the creative experimentation and prototyping of game ideas in a rapid, cyclic process of 48 hours. The immediacy of other participants at the jam event foster a culture of sharing ideas, play testing, and collaboration in an immediate setting. This rapid prototype model has been adopted elsewhere with success in allowing the best ideas to effervesce to the top by embracing the possibility of failure to encourage risk taking and by inducing creativity through constraint (Shodhan, 2005).

Game jam events support the process of learning by using (Rosenberg, 1982); this process of using a hands-on, learning-by-doing approach is a way for participants to explore new technology and refine their current knowledge of tools. Since jam events are intentionally rapid and short-lived, there is little "cost" associated with doing something wrong. This environment is liberating in allowing participants to dedicate a weekend with something new without feeling like they are wasting precious time. Participants have indicated in the past that they are willing to explore new technologies and techniques within a short, constrained weekend event such as a game jam because the jam weekend is an "extra" event and doesn't take away from their existing projects or work. This leads to more risk taking, exploration, and innovation in a

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