EdLT Encyclopedia of Ludic Terms

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Game Jams

Wirman, Hanna

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Over the past 20 years, collective and typically light-hearted development events – game jams – have solidified their role as part of professional, hobbyist and beginner game development cultures alike. During game jams, 'jammers' create games with a particular constraint, within a timeframe of typically 48-72 hours. Game jams can be used in formal education as well as in companies but are typically based on voluntary participation. While the size and location of game jams can vary from a few friends to hundreds of participants and from computer labs to fully catered corporate locales or even train carriages, they all share a function to provide a safe development environment where exploration and innovation are encouraged under time constraints. Through participation, jammers build networks and communities, train their development skills and experiment with ideas that do not match the pressures of commercial or educational environments.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, collective and typically light-hearted development events – game jams – have solidified their role as part of professional, hobbyist and beginner game development cultures alike. Game jams are used in formal education as well as in companies. In the context of games education, game jams provide a quick glance into the full cycle of game development and help in networking among students. Jams' contribution to learning is varied – for example, programmers "are learning a number of techniques, some quite advanced, for solving various programming problems" (Law and McDonald, 2015). In company settings, game jams support team building, but they also serve as an alternative space to try out ideas and methods that remain unexplored in the daily operations that commonly assume less risky solutions. Traditionally, they are built by volunteers for free-willed participants. For example, "Nordic Game Jam, which would later grow to be one of the largest single-site game jams in the world, began in 2006 as a collaboration between the Denmark chapter of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), IT University of Copenhagen, and local game companies" (Cornish et al., 2017).

The size and location of game jams can vary from a few friends to hundreds of participants and from computer labs to fully catered corporate locales or even train carriages. Yet all jams share a function to provide a safe development environment where exploration and innovation are encouraged under time constraints. Common time limits of game jams are 48 or 72 hours. These constraints are crucial for exploration and innovation, as game jams additionally require participants to deliver at least partially completed games. Such partial completion, then,

enables the sharing of results with other participants and the wider community.

These two aspects – the artificial acceleration of a development process through time constraints, and the public sharing of (partial) results – are fundamental aspects of a game jam: "A game jam is an accelerated opportunistic game creation event where a game is created in a relatively short timeframe exploring given design constraint(s) and end results are shared publically [*sic*]" (Kultima, 2015).

Kultima's definition brings forth another key element of game jams that serves to focus developers' attention, make the resulting games more relatable to each other and render the actual development work easier: design constraints. While ordinary game development projects typically come with constraints regarding expected technology, target audience, platform, story, genre or art style, among others, game jams simulate this by providing one or more relatively arbitrary constraints to avoid placing participants in front of a daunting blank canvas. A design constraint is often a theme or a prompt and can, for example, be presented as a single keyword, as an image or as a description of the intended player experience. Constraints can also be technical limitations ('a VR game'), development tool requirements ('use the Unity game engine'), graphics requirements ('use only black and white') or any other variations that restrain creativity and force a certain viewpoint to one's creative practice. Finally, game jams can also be organised around a charitable topic (e.g. Fukushima Game Jam or Games 4 Diversity) or around a specific technology (e.g. Intel XDK Jam or HTML5 Jam Paris; Fowler et al., 2015).

History

"The earliest known game jam, dubbed the 0th Indie Game Jam, was founded by Chris Hecker and Sean Barrett in March 2002" (Cornish et al., 2017). It was a physical event of 14 people organised in Oakland, California. The history of online game jams is not much shorter than that of in-person events. Per the initiation of the Ludum Dare online game jam in April 2002, online game jams have been part of the game jam culture for 20 years already. Notably, the gaming site itch.io makes the creation of online jams effortless by providing many necessary tools for inviting, promoting and running a game jam. According to the page, nearly 200.000 game jams have been hosted on itch.io so far.[1] Ludum Dare, meanwhile, remains one of the most prominent online game jams and has, due to its established community, incorporated a feature for participants to vote for the theme of future jams on their website. While it is difficult to estimate how many jams are organized annually, it is fair to acknowledge that there is a high likelihood for anyone in a game education program or the independent games industry to have partaken in one. During game jams' 20 years of history, the games industry has seen considerable changes towards easier access to development, tools and publishing. According to Lai et al. (2021), "game jams have played a significant role in this democratization process, as many successful games have had their initial prototype made at a game jam and makers of game engines, such as Unity and Unreal [*sic*] have become major sponsors of game jams" (p. 7).

Game jams today are organised for various reasons and in a range of institutions as well as beyond any

official attachments. It is common, for example, to invite people to a jam where participants are encouraged to build games around a shared theme, which in turn invites participants to think critically over the topic. Alongside STEM skills, then, people may pay attention to a new group of users (e.g. Orangutan Game Jam) or a global issue and activism (e.g. Sustainability Game Jam, Anti-Fascist Game Jam). Some jams are targeted at children (e.g. The Kids Game Jam), while the world's largest game jam, Global Game Jam, introduced GGJ-NEXT for youth in 2018 (cf. Arya et al., 2019). And while game developers may be the primary target audience for game jams, the format can be adapted for other uses as well. One example is inviting chemical engineering students to apply and demonstrate their knowledge through a technically low-barrier game jam that results in educational or serious games (e.g. Fornos, 2020).

Culture and Motivation

While active communication between participants does not always take place at game jams, Guevara-Villalobos' (2011) accounts on Ludum Dare suggest that receiving feedback from other participants motivates jammers to share early versions of a game during the jam. Ludum Dare's devoted developer community creates notable value in being able to invite highly professional feedback to be given between participants. Haaranen (2017) suggests that live-streamed programming during an event like Ludum Dare can have the opposite function where the developer of a game answers to questions about programming, serving as an expert parallel to 'jamming.' Such social aspects of game jams echo Grace's (2016) distinction between game jams and

hackathons: "the one emphasizes a state and process, the other a measurable result standardized by as hared sense of competition."

Some of the key reasons for people to join jams, then, are to improve development skills through useful feedback and to explore new ideas (e.g. Gama, 2017). These often take place in the context of a new team composition, leading in turn to welcoming social networking. According to Reng et al.'s (2013) study on the 470 participants of Nordic Game Jam 2013, meeting people is one of the key reasons for people to join jams. By participating, jammers may gain specific skills that can be technical (Reng et al., 2013) or related to game design (Goddard et al., 2014). Essentially, game jams are informal learning environments where learning happens spontaneously (e.g. Goddard et al., 2014). This reflects the voluntary participation and easy-going atmosphere of jams.

Game jam games can be made in teams or alone and opinions vary as to whether ready-made teams are welcome and preferred or not. Game jam organisers' motivations to create jams, however, include an interest to educate local development communities as well as to support community building (Kankainen et al., 2019). The community is often seen to include hobbyists, businesses and educational institutions alike. Large jams such as Global[2] Game Jam[3] gather participants with a range of backgrounds from 2D or 3D art and animation to game design, programming and project management as well as writing and storytelling (cf. Pirker et al., 2018). This reflects professional game development – where teamwork is typically multidisciplinary – and therefore offers a possibility to communicate and collaborate across areas of expertise. Game jams also offer a testing

ground for exploring one's own position in a development team as new roles can be comfortably adopted. As minority participants, typically women, are more comfortable and daring in the company of other minority participants, participant limitations are sometimes applied to create supportive events (e.g. Game Girl Workshop, cf. Ferraz & Gama, 2019).

Transfer to Industry

To better engage with the industry, especially larger game jams typically engage with various commercial partners and hand out sponsored prizes to selected development teams. While prizes can encourage participants to join in the first place, they also encourage them to realise more ambitious projects. In some jams and for some participants, however, "prizes are the least important aspect" in terms of participant motivation (Gama, 2017, p. 554). Similarly, a major survey on Global Game Jam events suggests that "Prizes, Audience Choice awards, and official judges detract from the experience. They may not always be a good addition to a site, depending on the participants" (Steinke et al., 2016). Business partners are often also invited to give workshops or keynotes as additional educational content is common, particularly in on-site jams.

Since game jams exist for purposes like the creation and maintenance of communities, honing up one's development skills and coming up with creative ideas that can only emerge outside of the pressures of everyday commercial or formal educational infrastructures, games that result from these events are often of less importance. "Most games made during game jams are quickly forgotten" and very little

academic attention is currently paid to the results of game jams (Wirman & Jones, 2019). Every now and then, however, game jam games find their way into commercial circulation and become successes. Some examples include *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios, 2013), *Superhot* (SUPERHOT Team, 2013), *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* (Steel Crate Games, 2014), *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014), *Höme Improvisåtion* (The Stork Burnt Down, 2015), *I Am Bread* (Bossa Studios, 2015), *Mini Metro* (Dinosaur Polo Club, 2015) and *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2016). From the point of view of academic interest, game jam games serve to reveal local interests, trends and even political events as these are often used as props or themes in jam games (cf. Wirman & Jones, 2019). More often it is new developer partnerships, individual game mechanics, development practices or technologies that get transferred from game jams to academia and industry game-making, thus advancing game development through the grassroots.

As cited widely in this entry, academic research on game jams has been typically published across journals and conferences of game studies, design research and HCI. The International Conference on Game Jams, Hackathons and Game Creation Events (ICGJ) is a conference in the area and has been held annually since 2016.[4]

Summary

Game jams are commonly understood as friendly and social, however aggressively timeboxed, events for exploring new ideas and developing one's skills. During their 20 years long history, online and offline jams have significantly contributed to the

democratization of game-making and become a part of game students' and professional developers' professional practice.

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1. https://itch.io/jams↵

2. 'Global' in game jam names commonly refers to a jam being hosted simultaneously in multiple locations around the globe.↵

3. Every year, Global Game Jam attracts tens of thousands of people in hundreds of locations to make games in 48 hours. In 2020, 9601 games were created at Global Game Jam.↵

4. The first conference was organised at the David Brower Center of UC Berkeley in California, USA.↵

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Author information

Hanna Wirman is an Associate Professor of Games and Play Design at the Center for Computer Games Research of the IT University of Copenhagen. She writes about game fandom, animal play, game design, serious games and marginal ways of playing and making games. She currently serves as the Vice President of DiGRA, founded and organised Global Game Jam in Hong Kong for 6 years and (as related to the entry 'Game Jams') served as the Program Chair for The International Conference on Game Jams, Hackathons, and Game Creation Events (ICGJ) in 2020, where she continues to be an active reviewer for the conference series.

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