On the Local Value of Game Jam Games: Beyond Learning from the Process

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Keywords

Game jam, game design, game development, culture, meaning

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Game jams, intense yet typically cheerful development events organized frequently around the world, produce thousands of games every year. In 2019 alone, the participants of one of the biggest such events, Global Game Jam, created more than 9,000 games in one weekend. The combined number of games made during three Ludum Dare jams in 2018, meanwhile, was nearly 9,000 as well.

Most games made during game jams are quickly forgotten and serve mainly to train the social (Pirker et al. 2018), innovation (Alencar and Gama 2018), technical (Reng, Schoenau-Fog and Kofoed 2013), and design skills (Goddard, Byrne and Mueller 2014) of the development team members. In the same vein, prior research emphasizes the educational potential of game jams as facilitating collaborative development processes (Preston et al. 2012; Yamane 2013; Fowler at al. 2013). From Kultima's (2015) review into 20 research papers expressing definitions of game jams, the outcome of the jams, an actual game, seems of relatively little importance when participants and researchers consider the value of a jam.

Based on her review, Kultima combined different understandings to postulate that 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" (2015, n.p.). Accordingly, there is an interest and a general agreement to share the results publicly. However, it is unknown who, if anyone, views and plays the games once created. The academic interest in the actual outcomes of the jams, too, has been minimal. Only some games turn into international, commercially viable success stories. The play and research communities outside of jam sites have widely learned about games like *Surgeon Simulator* (2013), *Superhot* (2013), *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* (2014), *Goat*

Simulator (2014), *Höme Improvisåtion* (2015), *I Am Bread* (2015), *Mini Metro* (2015) and *Pony Island* (2016), for example.

In this paper, we suggest that there is value in studying also the outcomes of the arguably valuable learning processes that take place at game jams. Particularly, we are interested in approaching the regional, collectively produced meanings through game jam games. This paper examines how game jam games function as a tool for young people to express culture through a variety of views. We take the Hong Kong (S.A.R. China) site of Global Game Jam as our primary context. Founded in 2013, Hong Kong has been one of the largest of the hundreds of Global Game Jam sites around the world for several years and been participated by hundreds of jammers annually (339 in 2018, 408 in 2019).

Since 2013, 293 games have been created at the Hong Kong site of Global Game Jam. Among them are numerous examples of interpreting the annual global theme to match with a local current issue, political or otherwise. The latest 2019 theme 'What home means to you' elicited particularly many games with themes exploring the living conditions, family relationships, and the urban landscapes of Hong Kong. In short, the local jammers have efficiently brought their experiences, concerns, interests, and meanings into the games they have created. While personal, these experiences are also collectively shared, which can be from the on-site audience reactions.

Some examples of games bearing local value include a game representing rush hour on the MTR (Hong Kong's metro system), learning Kung-Fu, reacting to the hoisting of the typhoon signal, and unblocking 'Qi' with the power of foot massage. Local slang and pop-culture references are also very popular, with caricatures of local celebrities or even deities appearing regularly as game characters. Political references have also featured in several games, most notably after the political 'Yellow Umbrella Movement' of late 2014. In such a context, our paper tackles the different approaches to 'local' in the games categorizing them under occasionally overlapping themes of political, historical, cultural ('Chinese'/'Hong Kongese'), and everyday life representations/simulations of Hong Kong.

Significantly, the ways in which the games deal with the 'local' represent particularly young people's views on Hong Kong as most participants at the jams are university students or young professionals. This paper investigates the game themes while simultaneously acknowledging the high expectations put on their young developers. Hong Kong's youth is known of wide-spread mental health problems and academic pressure, and cases of student suicides are frequent in newspapers (i.e. Zhang 2018). Cross-generational differences in political views and packed living conditions caused by world's highest rents further add to the complexity of their daily challenges. The study discovered that negative takes on everyday life and generally depressing or daunting themes are common among the Hong Kong site's game jam games. This prompted our interest in looking into the games more carefully to map out the frequencies of specific themes and approaches.

Alongside introducing the categories and prominent themes as well as discussing some games in detail, the paper explores how the game jam setting facilitates the emergence of such viewpoints and considers the games within a broader context of game development and game content themes globally. For game studies, the paper also provides a perspective into what local and non-commercial games are today as well as into young people's development cultures. It offers game jam games as a vast future source for analytical and critical game studies. We demonstrate the importance of development contexts for specific game themes to emerge, and finally speculate on

how game jams might provide a safe, authority-free environment for addressing difficult aspects of young people's lives.

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