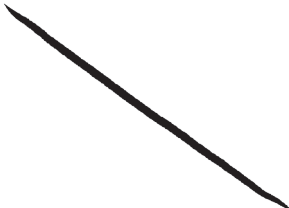


THE FIRST ROMANIAN ACADEMIC GAME JAM – THE SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE WORKING PROCESS

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Abstract: This paper aims to describe the process of turning a public event such as a game jam into a formal one. Preceded by a short history and definitions around this term, specific rules and methods are presented. It also explains the importance of establishing gaming events such as game jams at the heart of the academic medium, thereby bringing students, teachers and professional game developers together at the same table. Furthermore, the research of this process is directed towards the context of the Romanian gaming industry and the game curriculum offered by universities. The range of offers in the Romanian academic gaming landscape is still barren compared to the industry's present-day development and its growing requirements. Thus, any initiative in this framework represents a step forward in developing a strong scholarly collective not just for the formation of the students, but also for improving the quality and originality of future games. From every angle one may look at the situation, these events could be a key that unlocks a myriad of doors.

Keywords: game jam, game industry, game teaching universities, UNATC's Art of Game Design Program, March 2024 – First Romanian Academic Game Jam.

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Introduction

Romania became a game developer country in 1991 when Ubisoft Entertainment SA opened a branch in Bucharest and the industry began to grow, experiencing a veritable boom starting with the year 2017 – in terms of total revenue and year over year (yoy) growth, number of employees, and game studios (reports from Romanian Game Developers Association). The aforementioned numbers and the effervescent activity of gaming communities (game jams, game conferences and other events) demand new professional opportunities, but the academic environment is lagging behind.

It has only been since 2023 that the range of formal academic programs dedicated to game development started to multiply. Currently in Romania, there are only four universities offering students the chance to study video games at master's: Politehnica University of Timișoara (Game Development), The West University of Timișoara (Game Art), Politehnica University of Bucharest (Grafică, Multimedia și Realitate Virtuală - Graphics, Multimedia and Virtual Reality) and National University of Theatre and Film „I.L. Caragiale” (Art of Game Design).

The introduction of the job titles of video game designer (216614) and video game developer (251307) into the Romanian Classification of Occupations (COR) by the Ministry of Labour starting with 2022 represents another important aspect of the maturing of the local industry.

In this context, the first Romanian Academic Game Jam (2024) was a major step in bridging the academic and professional video game development communities for the transfer of knowledge and recognition of each other's work.

Short history of game jams

A Finnish university lecturer and veteran game jammer and organizer, Dr. Annakaisa Kultima, analyzed twenty research papers regarding game jams and based on her research, she proposed the following definition: “accelerated, constrained and opportunistic game creation events with public exposure” (Kultima, 2015). But if we were to dig deeper into the etymology, we may recognise the roots of a term with a history that is bound to this type of playful event:

The concept of a jam session is generally associated with playing jazz music – improvising, adding on, team playing, testing, challenging and provoking the other players and experimenting with new expressions. In a research context, it means the very same, albeit a jam session is the vehicle for finding as well as creating new knowledge jointly by business representatives and researchers. (Börjesson and Fredberg, 2003)

Starting from this idea, we may refer to a game jam as a competition for rapid game prototyping¹ (a practice of game iteration in which the focus is on the feasibility, fun factor, and gameplay potential, not the final product), usually addressed to multiple teams, with a strict time frame and an imposed theme. However, having characteristics of free admittance and voluntary participation – it is the choice of participants to register – the game jams are the proper places to explore creativity and breaking the boundaries or the rules of creation. Engaging in this activity with a team might create an unforgettable experience and lay the foundations of strong relationships, but, at the same time, working under pressure with the wrong people might hinder progress and cause intense conflicts.

The research has shown that the earliest game jams started in 1999 in the United States of America: *Speedhack* and later *Indie Game Jam*. Shortly, this idea spread in other countries and in 2009 *Global Game Jam* became the world's largest game jam (Fowler, A., Khosmood, F., 2023, p. 2-3). In Romania, the first initiative of this kind, at the time hailed as a veritable *marathon of creation*, dates back to the Ubisoft Game Jam of 2014. Later on, the country also became a pin on the Global Game Jam world map starting with 2017.

¹ rapid prototyping is also a technique often used in the process of fabrication.

If in the beginning game jams were addressed mostly to professional game developers, today we find a variety of them: game jams for board games, for women only, national and international, for fundraising purposes, for particular game genres only (text based games), for a specific technology (mobile, VR – virtual reality, AR – augmented reality), for academia, for children and so on. Also, these events can take place in a physical, hybrid or online medium.

Given this popularity, it is clear that participants are gaining some intrinsic value from participation. This appears to come in many forms including new friends, business partnerships, portfolio pieces, development practice, skill acquisition, and improved confidence in personal abilities. (Smith, P.A., Bowers, C., 2016)

In the sections that follow I will discuss the grassroots development and hands-on management of an event of this kind.

Rules of a game jam – a game itself

The key figures of the event, without which it would not even take place, are the jammers. They will accept the challenge of creating games within a given time frame (usually 48 hours, during the weekend). Some of them will succeed, some of them will make do and others might fail just at the end.

Furthermore, a big role is the game jam supervisor(s) who has to ensure the proper conduct of the event – it becomes indispensable when the average age is below 25 years old. He is the connection between all the participants of the jam: jammers, organisers, the jury, mentors, hosts, sponsors and so on. This role could be played by the organisers or any other member of the jam except the creators themselves.

Another significant role which provides the event with a beneficial influence is that of the mentor: he or she might be a lifesaver for the teams and their projects by giving objective advice or any other kind of guidance during the jam.

The last important pieces of this competition are the games and the jury. Without games, the event did not accomplish its purpose and the jury has nothing to judge. Without the jury or an audience the competition might have no point (some game jams operate without a panel of juries and leave the adjudication to the public). When these basic conditions are met, we can move forward with the customization of the competition's inner workings.

However, according to one of the first initiatives in game jam literature² these extra elements could be also found in the event:

Accommodation (sleeping, showering), Awards (if sponsors are involved), Catering (could be a method for setting a timeline for jammers), Codes of Conduct (rules for behaviours that will not be tolerated at the event), Types of Games (digital or physical), Games Presentations (showcasing the results), Group Forming (methods: preformed groups, pitching), Hardware & Software (brought or provided), Ice Breakers (relaxing), Internet (might be a must for sharing information between team via online platforms but could also be a rule for constraint), Keynote Speakers (motivating the jammers and setting the mood), Location (Physical/Online), Security (for all kinds of harassment), Sponsorships (media coverage, food, awards, gifts), Standup Meetings (sharing the progress through the jam), Tutorials & Workshops (before or during the event), Theme (a secret for a common challenge and for discouraging preparing projects in advance), Voluntary Constraints (diversifiers can expand on or enhance the theme of the jam and, along with our sponsored challenges, come in different categories: Accessibility, Art, Audio, Code, Design, Narrative). (Fowler, A., Khosmood, F., 2023)

I would add a final part that should be considered as a distinct element of the event, which is very important in game development: the playtest. A game should be tested in the early stages when a core loop of the gameplay exists (a series of actions – mechanics – that are repeated over and over as the primary flow), in order to see its functionality.

Having this recipe should be more than enough for a successful game jam.

Formalising a game jam – methodologies

The first Romanian Academic Game Jam took place in March 2024. It was organised by four Romanian public universities: Politehnica University of Timișoara, The West University of Timișoara, Politehnica University of Bucharest and “I.L. Caragiale” National University of Theatre and Film, all which have dedicated game teaching curriculums. As far as this special edition is concerned, we took the above listed elements and tried to leave an academic mark

² Alongside *Game Jam Survival Guide* (2012, Packt Publishing) by Christer Kaitila and *Global Game Jam Stories* by Lindsay Grace and Susan Gold (2018, LuLu).

upon them. These universities played the role of the organisers, the mentors and the jury of the event.

The Academic Game Jam was made possible with the support of the Romanian Game Developers Association (a strong organisation which connects video game communities, researches the national video game landscape/industry and organises events in this regard) and was sponsored by Gameloft, EA Games, Museum of Immersive New Art, and AMC Studio. The preparation for the event took months in which the parties involved discussed terms and other organisational matters.

Therefore, the first element that we changed in the rules of a game jam was the group forming method: group membership was closed-circuit, addressed only to participating universities' students, but we left the door open for two other public universities which only offer courses tailored to video game design or development: The Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urban Planning and The Bucharest National University of Art. Our primary purpose was to form interdisciplinary teams of programmers, artists and designers, get them acquainted and make them collaborate according to their skills. If possible, we aimed that each of the game jam teams be comprised of at least one student from each of the partnering universities.

We managed to apply this method of forming teams by building a clear and concise registration system in which they have to specify their university and master's program, their competences and skills they wish to learn or improve. Despite our fears that it would be hard to manage them due to their unfamiliarity with each other, all the teams delivered functional games at the end and some of them even built enduring friendships.

Another challenge in forming the teams was the disproportionate number of the students that our universities offer: both polytechnic universities have an increased number of students (up to sixty), whereas the art universities have less (five to twenty) because of their vocational study profile. The solution to this conundrum was that each team would have a single designer, a single artist and numerous programmers.

The last prerequisite in forming the teams was the number of games we want to have at the end for the jury. Starting from these principles, the results have been quantified in fifteen games created by fifteen teams: almost 100 students registered, of which one was rejected and 32 withdrew for various reasons (lack of time, lack of confidence in their game development skills).

The next element that we changed was the time frame: instead of the usual 48 hours, we extended the event to two weeks, in stages of one week of creating for the game jammers and one week of analysing and awarding prizes

for the jury. Some of the participating universities were more involved in the event by suspending classes throughout the duration of the jam in order for students to devote more time to their respective projects and also for teachers to provide extra mentoring to the teams. The pressure added by the 48 hours time limit could be too much of an extra effort for students, destabilising their routines and exhausting them, while more than a week could be discouraging to the students' enthusiasm and involvement.

The same practice seems to be applied by other universities (the University of Portsmouth and the University of Cumbria – both located in the United Kingdom) in which students and professors participate in the game jam during class hours³. Another reason for changing the duration of the event was due to the fact that the teams were composed of students from different universities, and thus needed more time to adjust and to familiarize themselves with each other.

Half of the participating universities are at a great distance from the other half (the distance between Bucharest and Timișoara is 577 km or eight hours by car), therefore, other important aspects we discussed were the location and accommodation. For the first edition, it was decided that the event would take place fully online via the use of Discord and Zoom. It would not have the same magic feeling as a live venue event but it would be fully functional for a game jam devoted to video games (a board game would be hard to test in an online setting). In this case, the location dictated the types of game that should be created in this jam.

We opened the game jam with the Rector of Politehnica University of Timișoara's speech in which he congratulated our initiative of bringing together universities of such prestige in an innovative event and remarked that it would only be the beginning of a future collaboration.

We continued with choosing the theme of the game jam. It was randomly chosen, in the form of a roulette, spinning it live in order to create suspense. Seventeen possible themes (together, future of learning, science, time travel, multiverse, no limits, illusion, freedom, journey, equilibrium, deeper, the end of the world, in harmony with nature) were collected beforehand and the lucky winner was *Evolution*. We are not aware if some teams discussed their concepts between themselves, but six of fifteen games interpreted the theme as a creature which evolves or turns into something else (entirely different types of gameplay though), while others interpreted the theme in terms of the level design (increasing the difficulty, adding power-ups), or just at the narrative level.

³ <https://sites.google.com/port.ac.uk/universitygamejam/home>
<https://www.cumbria.ac.uk/game-jam/>

An important part of the opening ceremony was the tutorial with tips and tricks about proper conduct during a game jam, offered by a guest from the gaming industry with experience from previous game jams. The message of the presentation was to keep it simple in the working process starting from what skills a team possesses. This section was followed by a question and answers session for the jammers, in order to address any confusions or doubts.

Moving forward, we formulated the code of conduct, voluntary constraints, judging methods, prize-awarding methodology and rules for choosing the game jam theme. These were written in a sort of rulebook designed in Photoshop. We kept updating the document with the mentors' schedules and final awards. This process had two goals: to be the jammer's companion and to be published at the end as documentation resulting of an event of such magnitude. Apart from the threescore jammers, the organizational team was comprised of eleven members, plus thirty-five mentors (twenty from the game industry and fifteen from participating universities – each with their own speciality) and ten members of the jury. We started organising this game jam by joining the forces of academic teachers, industry professionals and students with different aptitudes (programmers, designers, artists). One way of formalising this event was to turn it into a public competition and bring in specialised juries like an examination commission. In this manner, we established that each university should judge their respective domain (game art, game design, game programming effort and functionality) and to award according to these criteria, but we also added the category of best game overall. We were surprised during the judging process when some games ended in a tie and we had to offer a new prize called The Jury Award.

The judging process consisted in playtesting, the most important method of research, and gathering information about the games. A calculation formula between the judging sheets of the four participating universities (each had approximately two jury members) and two professionals from the game industry was applied for final results. In addition to our domain, we also had to pay attention to the interpretation of the selected theme.

We are truly impressed by the hospitality and engagement of the game industry professionals which promptly agreed to be part of the organizational team pro bono, supported the event with mentors and speakers, and last but not least, sponsored the game jam prizes (free video games and vouchers for an on-line shop). They also had a major part in delivering a proper awards ceremony atmosphere because they wanted to hold speeches about the games created and the event itself. This is plain to see due to the number of viewers (almost 100) on the premiere evening coupled with the fact that it was on a Friday and the

audience preferred to watch this event instead of going out with friends (as one juror mentioned). The opening gala and the premiere were public live events broadcast on the Romanian Game Developers Association's YouTube channel.



Fig. 1. Best Game Design Diploma

The game jam was not funded in any way and everyone did voluntary work (excluding the award-winning students). The entrance was also free (some charge additional taxes). Moreover, someone from the industry edited a funny review video of all the games created during the event and the endnote pointed out the opportunity that students nowadays have to learn game design and development, an opportunity the actual seniors in the industry did not have when they were starting out.

The outcome of the first Romanian Academic Game Jam

The primary result was that the event materialized: gathering and convincing such a large number of participants (over 100) from such different institutions to dedicate time for this game jam (months of voluntary work) says a lot. One reason for the event's success might be gaming serving as a hobby for many of us and a way to connect with each other. Another reason might be that universities are still an important hub for inspiring a student's creative-side.

The second result is the games created. As I mentioned above, all the teams managed to deliver a functional game, for a total of fifteen. This means that the team forming method was effective and each of the students found a place on a team. It was interesting when we recognised the artwork and other peculiarities (atmosphere, favourite topics, gameplay styles and mechanics) of our

students during blind testing (a method of testing games for the first time without knowing anything about them). All the games complied to the theme, a sign that everything was made from scratch. Moreover, the process of judging and award conferment was difficult because many games exceeded the jury's expectations.

The games are not only the result of this game jam, but also a piece of the students' portfolio. Both the students and their games did not remain isolated to the event, they were further reason for game development communities in Bucharest (DevKnights gatherings), and Timișoara (Molecula 3D Art meetings) to meet for playtesting: having fun and receiving feedback for improvements. The winner of *Best Game* was even mentioned during the Romanian Game Awards of 2024, alongside famous Romanian published games.

After analysing the feedback forms, the jammers appreciated the mentors section the most because they had the opportunity to network with and learn from industry professionals at a rapid pace. Other elements praised by the jammers were the organisation of the event itself and their team. The students also put forward their suggestions regarding the forming of the teams (the option to choose their teammates in the future).

But the most important result, hard to quantify is the experience gained during this game jam (because this was one of the main reasons they signed up, as the feedback forms prove): going through the all game development stages (a functional demo of a video game), working under time pressure (delivering the demo in only one week, starting from scratch – a serious aspect in game industry as well), working on a team with few unknown members (teamwork is a very important criteria in the hiring selection process). They are now one step further prepared for their future jobs.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from *Brain Storming*, Best Game Award

Conclusions:

I reinforce the idea, mentioned once again in the above results and their interpretation, that the biggest gain is that of the students: game development experience, teamwork, working under pressure, a video game for the portfolio, confidence in their own skills, learning new skills and software, networking and friendships.

Apart from these, the universities have strengthened their relationships for future collaboration and they have also validated their teaching processes.

Together with the students they undoubtedly proved that a video game can be developed in one week, and therefore, the academic practical projects lasting a semester or a year should not pose a challenge anymore.

The event can also be regarded as a promotional and informational method for the educational curriculums and for universities involved in game development communities.

The game industry also has to gain from working with the students by testing the talent pool for potential future employees.

As for the organizational side, I propose the following improvements: organised playtests in advance (testing games for bugs and for player's enjoyment and fun), a short list of simple and helpful tools and defining a better outline of the tasks for organisers (contracts should work well).

Borrowing the main principle from the jazz jamming session, which is the "open group research method" (Börjesson and Fredberg, 2003), game jams could work as an artistic method of research because it entails improvisation in the process of creation. This is translated in game creation as a rapid game prototyping which creates experimental games (with designs that defy convention). The free spirit of a jam could be a great place for pure creativity.

I strengthen these personal conclusions through the researched and formulated arguments by Global Game Jam Research Committee:

Due to its global nature, wide range of participants, and the active involvement of industrial and academic partners, the GGJ provides a unique opportunity for studying different professional, educational and cultural aspects of computer games. Among potential areas of research that can be done within the context of the GGJ are.

- Culture, motivation, and the skills sets of the young game enthusiasts who will be the future game developers.
- Communication, collaboration, development and management methods and tools for game projects.

- Effective experiential learning for skills required in game development projects including but not limited to programming, art, writing, management, testing, and communication.
- Regional and/or sub-culture variations in the game development industry with comparative or focused studies.
- Organizational studies for youth and/or volunteer-based activities and events.

Considering such a significant potential, and the limited studies done focusing and using the GGJ as research context, the GGJ Research Committee (GGJ-RC) has been established to promote, facilitate, organize and conduct scientific and technical research activities related to innovation, experimentation and collaboration. (Allan Fowler, Foaad Khosmood, Ali Arya, Gorm Lai, 2013)

I hope this will be the first event in a series of many to come because:

The findings indicate that game jams can be considered as processes that inspire creativity within a community and that the resulting performances can be considered as a form of creative artefact, thus parallels can be drawn between game jams and performative and interactive art. (Ryan Locke, Lynn Parker, Dayna Galloway, Robin Sloan, 2015)

And the fact that literature is only just at the beginning makes this article an important step in this research field. The reader can find more relevant details about the event in the appendices.

Appendices

<https://itch.io/jam/game-jam-universitar-2024> (downloadable games)



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJAzye6_9kc (award ceremony)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JLzuGfEhkQ> (opening ceremony)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWb4L7NDTHo> (interview with jammers)



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