

# Game Jam Diplomacy - The Enticing, Entangling, Expanding Role of Game Jams in Establishing Communities of Social Impact and Creative Praxis

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## Abstract

This paper aims to provide 5 lenses from which game jams can be perceived as supporting diplomacy and creative practice in the context of examining complex social issues. These lenses demonstrate how game jams can serve to encourage communities to think creatively and pro-socially through a myriad of global problems. Drawing from the first-hand experience of helping to lead and support social-issues-focused game jams in India, Japan, Malaysia, Turkey, and the United States, this brief paper highlights the ways in which game jams are a means for encouraging engagement with complex social issues through creative practice. The work highlights how both the pressures and constraints of game jams not only encourage a deeper understanding of social issues, but also entice participants, subject matter experts, and localized communities to engage with topics in ways that expand established understandings of them. The observations emphasize the value of the creative process of digital game-making in games jams as a means for encouraging dialogue, solution finding, and furthering understanding on topics participants and their players may not have engaged prior. The lenses provided are game jams as art therapy, safe discussion spaces, experimental spaces, solutions focused praxis, and as relatively neutral spaces.

## Keywords

Game jams, creative problem solving, game making, diplomacy, social issues, social impact, art research, hackathons

## Introduction

Research into games jams has persisted alongside work for hackathons through the past 20 years [1]. Seminal work in this domain typically includes an emphasis on the value of such events in learning [2] and their value in the domain of serious games [3]. Notably much of the work published on game jams focused on the outcomes in the production of game and the development of specific skills [4]. Similarly, observations about the educational value of game jams emphasizes their value in learning both soft skills like collaboration as well as concrete skill based outcomes like science, technology, engineer, arts and mathematics educational

development [5]. However, little research examines the outcomes of such work on the participants beyond the practicalities of designing and developing games. This work extends the authors' previously published work on how game jammers experienced greater understanding of the social issues about which they produced games than on the art of game-making [6]. From those findings, the themes of the 2025 International Symposium on Electronic Art and the experience of co-organizing six game jams in the last five years, the author aims to provide insight on the value of game jams.

While much of the foundational research on game jams empathizes their propensity for creative and educational development, less research has discussed the opportunity to not only develop community but encourage in-depth critical thinking and creative exploration. This insight in this work draws from the experience as a game jam co-organizer, game design for social impact trainer and consulting on 6 game jams over the last 5 years. These jams were the Kyoto Game Jam-Games for Good [7], Young Southeast Asian Leadership Initiative Game Changers [8], JAM PACKD : Games Jam for Social Change [9], Games Bagus, TechCamp Istanbul [10], and Newsjam 2019 [11] in Japan, Malaysia, India, Malaysia (a second time), and the US respectively. These were operated with the support of several embassies, regional non-governmental organization including Biji Biji in Malaysia, Innovator's Path in Japan, and commercial game companies including Konami, PlayStation Studios Malaysia and others.

The aforementioned game jams all had social impact foci, which game themes that included combatting climate change, countering misinformation and disinformation, gender equity, and producing newsgames. Each of these jams was conducted in person in their respective countries with participants that were both local and international visitors. None of these events involved virtual participation. Each of these jams were designed around 48-hour jam session from concept creation to game implementation. The majority of games produced for these jams were digital, at an average exceeding 75% of all games produced across all the jams referenced. The game jams in India, Japan, and Malaysia

each included 10-15 total hours, over two days of pre-training on social impact game design and implementation by the author and in some cases, co-trainers. The jam in India was the only one in which a mix of pre-trained participants joined participants who did not receive any specific training in game making.

In addition, the author served as a jury member for 3 other global community games jams during the same period, with similar themes, although these were primarily virtual jams with no in-person convening. Examples of such include Complexity Jam[13] and Jamming the Curve [14]. The observations from both leading and evaluating the outcomes of these events informed the content of this brief paper. From these experiences, the author offers insights as 5 lenses for framing game jams as art-related practice, means for supporting diplomacy, and engaging individuals and communities with social, complex issues. The hope is that these lenses help situate game jams and their value among the wider community of electronic arts.

### **Five Lenses for Game Jams**

This work highlights some unifying themes through which game jams can be understood in relation to the broader contexts of electronic arts, creative practice and their impact on community. These themes are presented as lenses, offering perspective how game jams can be framed for better understanding of their propensities. These lenses may serve the larger community of researchers and practitioners with direction for employing game jams as problem-solving activity and as means for supporting creative practice.

#### **Lens 1, Game Jams as Art Therapy**

This lens frames game jams themselves as a kind of contemporary art therapy. Fundamental to the understanding of the value of art therapy is the ways in which it has been demonstrated to enrich individual communities through creative process and shared human experience in the service of social transformations [7]. Game jams are in themselves a kind of collective art-therapy, in which jammers are oriented toward shared problems and work through the challenges with which they are presented. This is particularly true in non-competitive game jam environments, where the aim is the collective creation of games on specific topics over the idea that one person or team may win and others may lose.

In the design and implementation of the jams for which the author was responsible, the typical structure was two days of training following two days of game making. The training days structure a foundation in education on social issues, but also work to build team and inspire a sense of community. This prefaces the work of game making, which is explained before the event and supported during the event with mentoring and practical feedback. However, the bulk of the action within the game jam is the meditative practice of making a game from the varied sets of skills for team members. Common to each jam references in this work are the

opportunity to focus only on what is being made, because the events provide the practicalities of food and housing for participants as well as technical infrastructure needed. The art therapeutic lens of game jams emphasizes the separateness of a jam from the everyday, allowing focused praxis in much the way an arts residency may work. However, unlike many artist residencies game jams are often focused on creating an open and welcoming environment for amateurs who may be very new to game making. This openness is crucial to lens 2.

#### **Lens 2, Game Jams as Safe Discussion Spaces:**

The dialogical qualities of game jams begin in the ideation stage as participants, typically working within groups to understand the problems and the ways in which they may be translated to a playful experience. This includes negotiating sometimes uncomfortable topics as well as aiding to understand that which might have previously seemed overwhelming. Topics like climate change or gender equity are complex, but in order to successfully create a game that explores the topic, creators must find common language, interrogate their own assumptions and aim to share a fundamental understanding.

The constraints of a game jam, both in time and scale of completed works, facilitates discussion that often requires focus and simplification. Those same constraints typically also inspire an openness to discussion as teams of game jammers seek to understand each other in the service of collectively creating something meaningful.

Essential to this character, is the reminder that game jams should be fun, inclusive environments. While game jammers may be working on very serious topics, they are also encouraged to understand that the stakes of the outcomes of a game jam are relatively low. This is emphasized in think-aloud-brainstorming sessions, in democratized ideation sessions and team formation as well.

Admittedly, even when there are fundamental disagreements about the source of problems or how they are understood, jammers seek to work together in the pursuit of completing their common project. The result is often an opportunity to examine problems in the abstract, discuss them and explore plausible solutions.

#### **Lens 3, Game Jams as Experimental Spaces:**

The limited investment in time that typically involves game jams, supports an experimental mindset. This is particularly true when pre-jam training encourages participants to think less about competing and more about the creative opportunity game jams create. That is, when participants understand game jams not in terms of winning, but instead as opportunities to try something new. This experimental frame supports open creative solution finding because when compared to the average development time and budget of a commercial game, participants are investing fewer resources.

These characteristics are why, previously game jams have been analogized to improvisational music playing [16]. The benefits of creating the game jam experimental space are not only in the outcome after a few days of game making, but instead in the ways in which it inspires the seeds and resulting rhizomes of further development. Game jam participants are shaped by the experiments created by their temporary community, in much the way musicians are shaped by the music they perform and hear during improvisation.

The very nature of needing to make a game in a short amount of time, means that improvisation or just-in-time solutions are the norm. The practice of making things work as a quickly as possible supports an experimental mindset aimed at finding any solution, not just the optimized one. While such solutions may not be ideal for scale, they often reveal alternative paths, creative opportunities and new ways of thinking. All submission in the academic call will be reviewed in a double-blind manner.

#### **Lens 4, Game Jams as Solution Based Activities:**

Game design at all of these game jams, was introduced as it is in within the Book, *Doing Things with Games* [17]. That frame described games as sets of problems and solutions, where game designers author problems and offer the player the opportunity to solve them. Games are then read, through the language of play, and the meaning of a game interpreted through the action of play. Using this frame, game jammers explore specific social issues and seek to understand problem-solution pairs to design and implement their games. While in some cases this results in a fairly linear set of problems (e.g. to improve the climate, encourage more recycling), the problem-solution pairing also inspires dialogical synthesis and deeper understanding through analyzing social issues. Simply, where topics and jammer topic analysis go deeper, the problem and solutions pairs are far more complex.

As an example, a team in India had started working on a game about climate change. As they did research to complete the game and started interpreting the problems, they created a game that not only showed how detrimental floods were to certain communities. Instead, they added layer upon layer of problem-solution pairs, demonstrating how the politics of land-zoning had turned arable land into flood-prone suburbs, which in turn created economic incentives for further redistribution of natural resources and exacerbated regional floods zones while discouraging appropriate urban planning to avoid floods. While this team didn't have time to implement each of these problem-solution pairs into a complete digital prototype, they had found themselves interpreting the problem of climate change in much more complex and entangled ways.

Through their design, and several playtests, jam participants were finding that many of the solutions they had offered players were in themselves creating new problems that further illustrated what was happening in the regional politics

of land zoning, use, and economic development. By needing to build a model of the system which players engaged, the designers were learning about the depth of that system and the ways in which when gamed, there were needs for more complex solutions. This process helped synthesis new solutions to be proposed.

#### **Lens 5, Game Jams as (Seemingly) Neutral Spaces**

Because games themselves are associated with a kind of political neutrality and linked with the pervasive nature of fun, they share the kind of seeming innocuousness of art. While artists, like game designers, recognize that neither is actually neutral nor innocuous, their universality across cultures and pervasiveness across time afford them a unique space for certain types of discussion, exploration and critical thinking.

From a political perspective, work in the service of art, like work in the service of making a game, may be afforded less political reservations than formal meetings and official discussions. While this is likely to evolve as more people understand the persuasive nature of games, the contemporary environment for game jams remains relative safe from political reservation. Like watching a sports event, or listening to popular music, games and game making remain a relatively neutral act among vast populations of the global community. Similarly, and in contrast to some arts, the commercial success of games makes them a lure where the potential of profit invites disparate communities and creates a common less-politicized place to meet.

Furthering this sentiment are the constraints of most game jams, which limit all forms of budget including time, financial and human resource. This scarcity of resources creates an environment where participants may agree to put their difference aside to accomplish their main goal. The pressure of a game jam, even when focused on social issues, can create an environment where open discussion must be had, but one in which the end result trumps many types of discord. The scarcity of resource can foster community and reliance across participants that might not have otherwise aimed to engage. Theoretically this is in part because participants employ a myriad of practical responses commonly referenced to as emergency decision making [18] and the same kinds of game theory, like Nash equilibrium [19] and the traveler's dilemma [20], that have shaped global diplomacy for at least 100 years. In short, the pressures of a game jam are fertile environment for finding limits, prioritizing compromises, and facilitating diplomacy among disparate aims and goals. The typical jam is a place where the aim of game-making brings harmony to variety of differing voices in pursuit of the shared goal of creating a game.

#### **Conclusion**

The aim with this work was to provide lessons learned about the benefits of facilitating game jams as creative practice. The work is provided to help others frame the value of game jams while designing experiences that facilitate open,

collaborative, solution-focused creative electronic art. While these experiences are often games and digital toys, the outcomes are often not nearly as important as the process. In a world that seems to be increasingly more fractured, the game jam experience may offer some opportunity to bring creative problem solving toward 21st century solutions. These 5 ways of viewing game jams, the lenses of game jam efficacy and value, are provided as a way to approach the continued use of game jams to support creative work while fostering community and seeking real world solutions.

While there are limitations to this work, the aim is to help support practice-based research in recognizing the ways in which game jams can be used to support dialog, engagement with critical issues, and further creative practices. The work offers a multidimensional framework for understanding the significance and potential of game jams through five thematic lenses. These lenses emphasize the versatility of game jams as spaces for creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving within broader social, artistic, and educational contexts. Together, these lenses showcase the broad potential of

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- game jams as tools for creative expression, community building, and problem-solving. By situating game jams within these diverse contexts, this framework provides researchers and practitioners with valuable insights for leveraging game jams as impactful, interdisciplinary spaces for innovation and social engagement.

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