Jamming Game Jams: A Discussion of Research-Through-Game-Jam-Design

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Figure 1: An invitation to Jam

Abstract

Game Jams and their phenomenological cousins hackathons can be tremendous sites of knowledge acquisition and skill development, collaboration, and research. This panel will present and describe different perspectives and provocations for deploying game jams as a research method, based on previous and current experiences with design research and deploying jams in/as research in relation to games and HCI. However, while panelists will engage in a dialogue on this topic, attendees will also be invited to contribute or share beyond standard/limited Q&A, to provide more than a single/linear line of dialogue.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Interaction design process and methods**.

Keywords

Game Jams, Jams-as-game-design-research, research-through-design, collaborative design, community-driven design, participatory design

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1 Background

Game Jams and their phenomenological cousins hackathons can be tremendous sites of knowledge acquisition and skill development, collaboration, and research [13, 14, 21], and for encouraging the participation and amplification of often excluded or marginalized communities [3, 14]. These activities can help participants, and perhaps researchers, "discover" or "adopt" new skills and practices related to design and media creation [28]. Fox et al. describe how hackathons—and so, perhaps, jams—and the curation of spaces for making can encourage exploration and the development of skills as discussed, but also of culture and values [14]. Jams can provide a setting to encourage "designing in the margins" [11, 15], or the sorts of "counterventions" Williams, Boyd, and Gilbert describe, meant to contend dominant socio-technical paradigms by privileging the lived expertise of community members [27]. However, jams can also help to emphasize playfulness while designing with various communities, including our own scholarly cohort who may be more used to pursuing utilitarian or "serious" approaches, even when studying games and game design [24, 26].

Several attempts have been made to explore the integration of jams and research. Some scholars have attempted to remodel the basic structure of jams to encourage different outputs [8], or their analysis [9]. For example, Abbot et al. suggest a model for "slow" jams that rely on reflexive and pedagogical practice integrated into jams for more collaborative serious game design/development [1]. Others have observed the outputs of otherwise straight-forward jams as analytical artifacts to expand or refine understandings of research-related concepts or topics [10, 12, 22, 23], or how jam structures can influence the experience of sometimes non-traditional participants [4, 17, 18, 20, 25]. More than a decade ago, Deen et al. even held a workshop at CHI to explore similar themes to do with jams as research [7], and then for more diverse game design [8]. Though, to be fair, some urge scholars to temper their optimism for jams and to be wary of negative dimensions of the format [19].

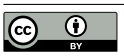
Much of this previous research attempts to treat jams themselves as the subject of study or leverage jams as a relatively straightforward replacement for more common design-research methods with emphasis on differing artifactual outputs. In this panel we instead interrogate game jams as sites of knowledge generation as tightly iterative, collaborative, and reflective experimental processes, through the lens of "research through design" [6, 16, 29], with an eye on intermediate knowledge, and "conversations with the material" [2] of game design that happen during jams.

Jams can be chaotic. The differing and competing priorities of jammers can make these events challenging places to conduct design research. This panel will present and debate different modes for exploring opportunities for data collection during and about jams, participants, and emerging artifacts, and different challenges with the premise of "research-through-game-jam-design." Panel members are experienced design-researchers and veteran jam organizers, for both students and public, with experience exploring different approaches to more deeply combine the ability of jams to build community and skills with collaborative knowledge generation. Together with the audience at CHI Play we will explore different modes for jamming that push design research further beyond surveying participants about contextually relevant experiences, using relatively brief and structured sessions to elicit design artifacts, or simply assigning a research-related topic to a jam and observing the results.

2 Goals for the Panel

We will interrogate different approaches to "research-through-game-jam-design." We are unlikely to discover, nor would we prescribe, a one-jam-mode fits all approach. In this panel, we will reflect on challenges with, and the tensions between, addressing our central research questions about how we can better integrate strategies of data collection and the observation of jammer choices and priorities, while ensuring support for jammer growth and the fun of jams as foremost priority. Panelists will introduce a series of provocative structures for jam modes to serve as starting point for discussion, such as:

- **Documentation Jam**: integrating additional "challenges" for recording design progress and decisions into the basic brief of Jam.
- **Paratext Jam**: Jammers create promotional material, guides, and/or other supplementary material about a game they



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might ordinarily make at a jam, but are not. That is, generate "gaming capital" for a game that doesn't exist [5].
- **The Least Game, Jam**: A variation on the "slow jam" [1], jammers' goal is to create a minimal unit of game addressing the provided theme, exploring their understanding of the core of both games and topic
- **Crime Scene Jam**: An ordinary jam, except facilitators routinely interrupt and evacuate jammers (dressed in crime scene investigator costumes) to observe and investigate the "evidence" of design they leave behind.

The Panel will discuss the different dimensions of jams like these. However, in the spirit of the collaborative research methods it centers, this panel will heavily encourage audience participation to facilitate a lively dialogue not only between those on a dais, but amongst all present. Jamming is a common practice familiar across the CHI Play community, and we want to make sure there is space for different voices. After success at a previous conference, we will adopt a "Questions and Discussions" section, rather than basic Q&A, encouraging participants to briefly and collectively brainstorm queries with neighbors that will then be shared with the panel/room to support additional lines of communication between panelists and attendees, and between attendees themselves.

3 Organizer Bios

Our organizers come from different backgrounds and disciplines, with different stakes in games and games research, and different topical and methodological approaches. However, they came together based on a shared interest in discovering how pushing the form of jams could lead to new and exciting means of knowledge production, and dissemination. The discussion in this panel benefits from the participation and perspectives of individuals in various positions related to HCI, design, research, practice, and personal positionality.

- **Daniel L. Gardner**: a lecturer of computing and game design at Robert Gordon University. He uses collaborative design research to explore, examine, and counter inequitable interactions with digital games and media, with and within historically excluded communities and has organized at least a dozen jams as part of local and global events.
- **Ben Kirman**: a senior lecturer at the University of York (UK), and on the leadership team in the UKRI centre for doctoral training in Intelligent Games and Games Intelligence. He is an experienced game designer in commercial and research settings and has organised dozens of game jams with students and the public.
- **Oliver Bates**: a post-disciplinary researcher and game designer at Lancaster University (UK) using design and computing approaches for sustainable and just futures. His research produces, hacks, experiments, and jams with games and zines to get people to think and act in service of emergent systems and possible climate change futures.
- **Verda Munir**: a lecturer and researcher in Games development at Robert Gordon University. Her research includes eliminating digital divide through 3D Scanning, Gamification, Immersive tech by producing cost effective frameworks using games technology for Education and Historic Preservation. She helps organize the annual RGU game jams and hackathons.
- **John N. A. Brown**: a lecturer at Robert Gordon University. He leads a research group on qualitatively studying how humans interact with technology and one another through technology. John has been involved in Game Jams for about 15 years and was a juror for the "Health, AI, and Gamification" hackathon at ACMMM 2025 in Dublin.

4 Conclusion

There is a desperate need to develop additional approaches to collaborative research, in and out of design, especially to invite those who are excluded by traditional, privileged, approaches. This panel will highlight and begin to discuss some of the challenges and opportunities with larger scale, more chaotic, and more community-driven approaches to design research.

The most essential goal of this panel is not to foreclose on how "research-through-game-jam-design" may be practiced, but to open up dialogues on potential jam-research futures. Attendance is strongly encouraged for anyone who is already skilled with collaborative methods, and those hoping to learn and evolve those methods, or the sort of community-driven research we can practice.

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Ethics and Privacy Statement

At this stage, the subject of this panel has minimal ethical considerations, as it remains a more academic pursuit in a classic sense. However, *any* implementation of research-through-game-jam design is likely to invite some level of ethical reflection, based on the topics or communities involved.

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