

# Deciphering Hackathons and Game Jams through Play

Lindsay Grace  
American University Game Lab  
4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW  
Washington, DC, USA  
(202) 885-1000  
Grace@American.edu

## ABSTRACT

One of the many challenges facing the growth and proliferation of game jam communities is the ambiguity between game jams and allied activities including hackathons and other high intensity events. This research identifies the distinguishing characteristics of games jams and uniquely identifies the technical, cultural and experimental differences that define the game jam practices. The benefit of such understanding not only supports the continued growth of such act activities, it helps to disambiguate game jam activities from other productive practices.

## CCS Concepts

•Applied computing → Computer games.

## Keywords

Game jams; hackathons; play ; play state ; distinguishing hackathons from game jams

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary parlance of game making activities the concept of high intensity, high commitment activities are widely recognized. Whether it is the Global Game Jam [10], White House Educational Game Jam [4] or the Tech Crunch Disrupt Hackathon [6] the contemporary appreciation for maker culture expounds the benefit of such activities. Continued growth has been supported by both an increasing appreciation of maker culture in the form of maker fairs and the renewed value of software making. Events like the esteemed Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Hackathon [13] and National Aeronautics and Space Administration [18] have committed substantial resources to supporting such activities involving thousands of people. Maker fairs of all sorts often incorporate events that are similar in structure.

The typical characteristic of these efforts are simple. Participants engage in a focused, typically thematic effort that is resource limited and goal oriented. The typical resource limitations are time and expertise. The goals are often prescribed, but the prescription may be as general as thematic notions or concepts.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than the author(s) must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from [Permissions@acm.org](mailto:Permissions@acm.org).

*GJH&GC '16, March 13 2016, San Francisco, CA, USA.*

Copyright is held by the owner/author(s). Publication rights licensed to ACM.

ACM 978-1-4503-4083-0/16/03 \$15.00

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2897167.2897175>

These include phrases like “As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems” (2009 Global Game Jam) and variety of achievement oriented tasks like “educational climate information accessible to a range of audiences” [19].

Broadly such activities are also structured as events. They have start and end times, have physical or virtual communities that congregate and reflect on the activity. For participants these activities by definition offer a few unique opportunities, First they offer focused practice or exploration of a discrete topic. Second they are community efforts employing some version of crowdsourced problem solving.

It is these two characteristics that most clearly focus the effort and define the fundamentals of games jams and hackathons. Participants understand that the constraints placed on them provide both structure and motivation. The benefit of focus is likely most evident. Focus gives reason, reason provides goal and at the least contextualizes the meaning of such work. The focus provides the what for such events.

Community on the other hand provides an essential psychological benefit – a bit of the why. Community legitimizes the effort, making the focus something worthy of attention by the sheer number of other individuals who share in the effort. In addition, community reduces the sense of isolation in confronting the often unfamiliar problems presented in such activities. Knowing, for example, that others are exploring the wilderness of game making at the same time as you diminishes the sometimes daunting sense that you may problem solving by yourself. If an event's focus is the rational goal, the community serves as the tide that pushes through the potentially irrational commitment and effort required to complete such activities. While any individual is capable of choosing a focus and vehemently pursuing it through relentless hours of work, the difference between doing such work by oneself and knowing that a physical or virtual community is pursuing the same goals distinguishing jamming from other activities. Hence the name jam, connotes the improvised musical collaboration of master musicians (e.g. a rock jam). This connoted meaning rarely affords for the sense of a solo jam, relegating the individual activity to practice (e.g. a person practices by themselves, and jams with others).

In analogy, running a marathon among other marathoners provides a distinct experience from running 26.5 miles by oneself. One might run practice or train for a marathon by running a marathon, but the solo endeavor is not the same as the communal effort. This is of course the likely product of a variety of psychosocial phenomenon identified by positive psychologist Csikszentmihalyi [3] and medical research Dr. Stuart Brown [1] although not explicitly attributed to game jams and the practice of hackathons.

The other way in which the marathon analogy clearly illustrates the distinction is in the rules of the activity. A marathon is run by

runners. It is an organized event in which people employ the same basic strategy, running, to meet their goal. Marathons are not competitions with cyclists, equestrians, dancers, and others. To jam, however, is to involve a wide variety of practices to meet a single unified goal. A game jam is not merely for developers and it is not merely for artists. It is a place in which audio technicians work with programmers, where 3D modelers work with concept artists, and where 50 year old first time game makers work with 21 year old veterans of game making. It is a harmony of many and varied instruments, not the chorus of one.

Unlike marathons, however, the contribution of spectators is negligible to these communities. Few, if any such efforts are to be watched as the hours pass by. They are not for a non-participator audience – they are for those who do. These events are action oriented. Participation is active and engaged. In this way game jamming or hackathons are less spectator sport, than community action. If you are a part of these communities, you are working within these communities.

It is tempting to misunderstand the difference between hackathons and game jams as a product of the work created. From this perspective, game jams produce games and hackathons produce non-game elements. To do so is however myopic and misunderstands the fundamentals of these activities. While game jams generally produce elements of play, their product is not all game. Likewise, hackathons are just as capable of producing game products as any other focused enterprises.

Instead, this paper argues that the defining attribute resounding in the character of a game jam is the experience of play. Game jams are largely focused on supporting play and imbue their events with a playfulness. For game jams, the benefit is not necessarily in the final product but in the process. This process is not necessarily the formalized conceptual framing common to business process [14] or software project management [20]. Instead they are more vicarious, unstructured and conceptual. Game jams have more in common with the natural human state of play than they do with the process of architecting and constructing a building.

## 2. DIFFERENTIATING THROUGH PLAY

Drawing from the literature of play, it is evident that play is first and foremost a voluntary state operating within and supported by a safe space. The notion of voluntary effort is common to the literature of historical anthropology [22] and psychology [17]. The sense of safe spaces is likewise articulated in Brown [1] and the foundational game reading of Huizinga [15]. The characteristics of this state are most commonly articulated in the games community through an understanding of flow [3] and its use in games [2].

The play state, as understood by psychological, is one rich with focus and creative energy [1]. It is a state that cannot be induced as much as inspired [1][15][22]. Play is distinct from ordinary life [15] but extraordinarily useful to it [1] [22]. Through their distinct design, successful game jams seem to inspire a play state. It is this play state that distinguishes and enables game jams in ways distinct from hackathons.

Hackathons, in comparison are often competitive events largely focused on a product. Consider a list of popular hackathons in recent years; Tech Crunch Disrupt [6], NASA Open Challenge [20] and Hack MIT [13]. These self-described hackathons share a few general characteristics. First, they are competitive events.

There are winners and there are losers. There are benefactors and those who benefit less.

It's also important to recognize that competition aims the focus less on the process and more on the product. Once competition is enforced, the state of play is summarily reduced. By analogy it is the difference between a dance competition and a dance party. A dance party, declares no winners and no losers, a dance competition sets the tone toward the dance as discrete, measurable and evaluated product.

Immediate to the design of a competition, beyond a sense of losers and winners is a sense of seriousness. Hierarchies are quickly conjured between professionals and amateurs, between styles and regulations to secure fairness in balancing competitive elements. A competition by nature creates and also conjures a new set of criteria. If the event is to be judged, competitors must ask what criteria the judges use. If the event is to be judged by objective criteria, how are those criteria calculated and judged? In short, competition adds complex layers of objective which complicate the main focus of an event.

In comparison, a dance party has but one goal – creating a fun experience. Fun, is the product of the play state. It is not easily understood as competitive. Party goers do not work to have more fun than their peers. They are not objectively evaluating their distance from fun. They are not worried about being ejected from the dance party for not having enough fun. The successful dance party is actually one in which the play state is so well supported that all sense of time and of non-play elements is diminished to meaninglessness. It is rich with the sense of characteristics of a flow state [3]. Dance party participants do not start with a list of goals beyond endeavoring toward a play state. A game jam is a dance party, not a dance marathon.

In short, a foundational difference between the two events is the assumption of a play state as operating state. Hackathons induce a work state and a competitive state, game jams embrace a play state.

Ultimately, game contests in the form of both competitive play and competitive design or implementation are nearly as old as games themselves. The creation of competitive spaces in which games are made under tight constraints competitively offers little new to a world who's industry is dominated by best-selling charts and annual profits. Competition it seems has long been a part of the game community, so competition itself is not particularly remarkable within it. Yet, it is clear that game jams are remarkable. It seems evident it may be their lack of competition that makes them so.

Admittedly, the experience of a hackathon may succeed in expanding the creative capacities of a community. They may also increase the range of products explored and produced. They do not however, typically expound the notion of non-productive play.

## 3. UNDERSTANDING GAME JAMS

Understanding these experiences requires organizers to recognize that solutions yielded in a weekend are not necessarily scaleable solutions. Instead they are prototypes at best. They demonstrate potential in a playable way, but they rarely produce products that can be immediately scaled for mass use. Instead, this process is one that moves the longer tradition of ideation forward. It is thinking through doing. It benefits from the many micro-decisions that move an idea from concept to product, as is championed by any of myriad of rapid processes (e.g. Scrum, rapid application

development, etc). This is a characteristic that both hackathons and game jams share. Both processes encourage a production orientation; they simply differ in their relationship to the product.

Thus the second distinguishing characteristic of such events is product orientation. From the language used to describe many game jams the focus is not as much on the product as the process. In such an environment making a game, any game is of value. The game's viability is not essential, only that it was made within the constraints provided by the community. A dance party in the truest spirit does not evaluate how you are dancing, only that you are or are not dancing. It does not matter what type of game you made or what technologies you used, it matters more that you participated with the rest of the community in celebrating the process.

Birthing a successful project is a valuable result of a game jam, but it is not the defining attribute. The widely popular games *Cards Against Humanity* [5] and *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* [16] were originally created at game jams. They were the product of the Nordic Game Jam and the Global Game Jam respectively.

Yet, their affiliation with game jams is hardly the defining characteristic of the product. As Kyle Gabler, maker of "World of Goo" the Global Game Jam's inaugural year first keynote states in a reflection on game jam like processes— no one cares how you made it [8]. With this single statement, the philosophical shift between product orientation and process orientation are voiced. Games are understood as products, but game jams champion the process and experience. Otherwise, game jams could not possibly be popular. Their product, often a large collection of mediocre games with a strong need for revision, does not compel participations toward jamming. Jamming doesn't always make great products, but the process is evidently engaging. This is proven by the growth of game jams, with events like the Global Game Jam witnessing year over year since 2009 to more than 28,000 participants in 2015. Likewise, it's generally understood that the process does yield excellent kernels for good projects and an entertaining experience. Repeated Global Game Jam keynotes champion risk taking and the opportunity afforded by game jams [11] [12].

Converting these efforts into their subsequent success stories proves more difficulty. It is not enough to merely continue to iterate on the product of a game jam. Likewise it is not enough to select winners, provide them with more money and produce high quality product. The complexities of converting the product of game jams into something scaleable and competitive in the marketplace of ideas or the marketplace of consumer attention is beyond the scope of this position paper.

#### **4. WHY GAME JAMS ARE EFFECTIVE**

Theories on the effectiveness of these focused efforts vary. It is often misunderstood that game jams themselves are an application of the much debated crunch experience of game making. In professionally organizations, game makers experience crunch in the form of long, unforgiving hours scurrying to make a pending and essential deadline. It is the subject of lawsuits [7] and negative critique. Even a cursory understanding of jams would raise the evident question – if game jamming is based on crunch why would people voluntarily engage themselves in such activities?

It is perhaps more accurate to say that games jams, and crunch are the product of a more widely documented phenomena – Flow.

From the framing of flow, the constraints of a game jam induce that focused state by retreat and focus. Game jammers dedicate their time and focus entirely to the game jam. They do not do errands, they do not pay bills and in many locations they don't even worry about when they are going to eat (if food is scheduled and provided). It is an environment perfectly suited for focus on a single activity. It is supportive of the required focus similar to play [1] and offers the essential elements for inducing a flow state[3].

This is, of course, also an opportunity environment for cultivating the play state. Particularly, when the stakes for failure are low enough to support the participant's safe space play requirement. Working with complete strangers, on a project you know will end in 48 hours, supports risk taking. There are few risks for social capital loss (unlike friends) or for financial capital loss (little financial investment in the game project is made at a jam). These play state inducing characteristics can be ebbed away by participating with co-worker, pre-forming teams with explicit non-jam goals, or otherwise allowing the non-game jam world to intercede in the game experience. Essential to inducing a play state is creating a distance from ordinary life. For physical locations, this is done by retreating to game jam space (e.g. the Finnish Survival Mode Jam). For virtual locations, this is done by committing mentally to participation or subscribing to the communal shared fiction of the event.

Lastly, the efficacy of the game jam as play state supports mastery of skills sets. In the Gladwell model of mastery, it takes 10,000 hours to become exceptional [9]. High intensity efforts like game jams support such work by providing the focus and high productive play state to log valuable hours quickly. They also do so in the hyper-focused state of play and flow. Furthering the tide of elements pushing participants toward mastery is a community of other individuals who serve as models and motivation.

This is the definitive paradox in a playful state experienced as a games industry employee. A playful state can be encouraged but it can't be induced – otherwise it would cease to be voluntary. You can't easily pay someone to be playful, as it is a state of mind. Yet, there are entire industries engaged in paid playfulness (e.g. entertainment, toys, e-sports, and more). This is where the hurdle to non-game industries arises in inducing a playful state.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Ultimately, the distinction between hackathons and game jams is somewhat evident in their English language usage. People game jam using jam as a verb of somewhat intransitive state. People do not Hackathon, they instead participate in hackathons. In much the same way people do not marathon, they participate in a marathon. People run and the framing of that run, whether 4K or marathon, frames the activity and the evaluation of its product or experience.

This position paper aims to illuminate the distinctions between hackathons and game jams through a formal understanding of their characteristics. There is an obvious ontology evolving from these and allied practices if highly focus high intensity practices. Each approach offers a distinct benefit. It is the organizer; leader and participant's responsibility to understand these practices to appropriately employ them for their unique needs. It is the hope that this writing helps those struggling to understand these philosophical and practical differences.

As more organizations aim to use hackathons and game jams as a means to explore creative solutions, generate new products and

practice the process of innovating thinking it's important to understand the differences between jamming and organizing any type of -thon. Returning to the basics, the one emphasizes a state and process, the other a measurable result standardized by a shared sense of competition.

## 6. REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, S. *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. Penguin, 2009.
- [2] Chen, J. *Flow in Games*. University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA, 2006.
- [3] Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial, New York, 1990.
- [4] Deloura, M. *The White House Education Game Jam*. 2014. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/10/06/white-house-education-game-jam>
- [5] Dillon, J., Dranove, D. Halpern, E., Hantoot, B. Munk, D., Pinosof, D., Temkin, M., Weinstein, E. *Cards Against Humanity*. [Card Game]. Ad Magic Inc. 2011.
- [6] *Disrupt*. <http://techcrunch.com/event-type/disrupt/>
- [7] Dyer-Witthford, N, and de Peuter, G. "EA Spouse" and the Crisis of Video Game Labour: Enjoyment, Exclusion, Exploitation, and Exodus." *Canadian Journal of communication* 31, no. 3 (2006).
- [8] Gabler, K, Gray, M. Kucic, and Shodhan, S. "How to Prototype a Game in Under 7 Days." *Gamasutra*, October 26 (2005).
- [9] Gladwell, M. *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Little, Brown, 2006.
- [10] Global Game Jam. <http://globalgamejam.org/history>. 2009
- [11] Global Game Jam 2009 Keynote [video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aW6vgW8wc6c>
- [12] Global Game Jam 2010 Keynote [video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cm4mgMTTN4Q>
- [13] Hack MIT. <https://hackmit.org/>
- [14] Harry, M. J., & Schroeder, R. R. (2005). *Six Sigma: The breakthrough management strategy revolutionizing the world's top corporations*. Broadway Business.
- [15] Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens*. Routledge, 2014.
- [16] *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*. Steel Crate Games. [Microsoft Windows]. July 2015.
- [17] Millar, S. "The psychology of play." (1968).
- [18] NASA Space Apps Challenge. 2015. <https://2015.spaceappschallenge.org/>
- [19] National Climate Game Jam. 2015. <https://www.climate.gov/teaching/professional-development/national-climate-game-jam>
- [20] Skytland, N. *World's Largest Hackathon*. April, 2013 <https://open.nasa.gov/blog/worlds-largest-hackathon/>
- [21] Schwaber, K., and Beedle, M. "Agile Software Development with Scrum." Prentice Hall PTR, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2002.
- [22] Sutton-Smith, B. *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press, Boston, 2009.