That's My Jam:
Understanding the Value of Game Jams

GAIN Game Arts International Network

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White Paper at a Glance

For over two decades, emerging and established game developers have turned to game jams as sites of training, experimentation, networking, and fun. Inspired by musical jam sessions, game jams are public events where participants (commonly referred to as "jammers") create videogames from scratch within a set time limit while following a central theme.

While early game jams established weekend-long in-person events as the default model, jams have grown increasingly eclectic in both format and focus. Regional groups such as the Toronto Game Jam (TOJam) and the Winnipeg Game Collective organise numerous types of jams and related events in collaboration with their local game development scenes; game studios and universities have experimented with internal game jams as part of their training and creative workflows; and the digital games marketplace itch.io is home to an endless selection of online jams with varying lengths and themes—including the venerable Ludum Dare and the popular Brackeys Game Jam.

Despite their ubiquity around the world, the role of jams in relation to the Canadian game industry is not well understood. While there is a wealth of academic research on the events—particularly emerging from the International Conference on Game Jams, Hackathons, and Game Creation Events (Falk et al., 2021; Kultima, 2021a; Lai et al., 2021; Pirker et al., 2016)—most of this is focused on high-profile international events or, occasionally, the potential of jams as research methodology (Colpitts-Campbell et al., 2022; Custodio et al., 2024; Staff, 2024). Exacerbating this issue is the lack of in-depth journalistic coverage, which tends to simplify jams as experimental novelties for high school or university students (Cole, 2019; Prentice, 2024; Rishaug, 2024; Soloducha, 2018). Finally, game jams often fall outside the scope of industry research (Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) – IGDA, 2023; Legault & Weststar, 2015), even though they are often cited as job training venues.

Regardless, game jams have exploded in popularity in Canada and across the world. The 2023 iteration of the Global Game Jam hosted "40,000 people at 800 locations in 108 countries" (About, 2024) and was attended by game professionals, students, teachers, and numerous other stakeholders (Borg et al., 2020). TOJam is one of the world's oldest game jams and is representative of the numerous locally organised events held in industry hub cities such as Vancouver, Montréal, and Edmonton. Game jams clearly occupy an important place in the game development landscape.

This white paper is an attempt to better understand what game jams are, why people attend them, and how they benefit game makers with diverse creative and professional aspirations. Through interviews and surveys with emerging and established developers, we provide a valuable snapshot of the place of jams within the Canadian game industry.

Methodology and Research Participants

We completed all research for *That's My Jam* between August and December of 2024. The primary methods we used were long-form interviews (26 participants) and an online survey (51 participants). Research data was also supplemented with news articles, academic papers, industry reports, and some data sourced directly from game jam administrators. All surveys and interviews were conducted in English.

Interview Participants

We recruited interviewees by circulating a recruitment form through email lists, social media posts, and Discord servers. We also directly reached out to a number of participants who matched our criteria and had public-facing contact information, with 60-70% of these direct inquiries resulting in interviews. While we targeted Canadians in our research, we also included a small number of international interviewees as, through preliminary discussions, we found that they encounter many of the same challenges as Canadian developers. Surveys were conducted over Zoom and typically took between 30 and 60 minutes to complete. Participants were offered a $50 gift card as compensation.

Game Jam Administrators

People who organise game jams, usually as part of a non-profit or an informal collective.

Gina Hara	Co-Founder and Co-Director, GAMERella	Québec
Alex Bethke	Senior Organiser, TOJam	Ontario
Daniel Voth	Director, Winnipeg Game Collective	Manitoba
Vanessa Capito	Founder and Main Organiser, Alberta Game Jam	Alberta
Kyle Van Winkoop	HR Lead, BUSGDA	British Columbia
Jani Gröhn	President, Finnish Game Jam	Finland
Alexis Launay	Organiser and Board Member, Indie Collective	France
Frederick Freund	Co-Organiser, Berlin MiniJam	Berlin

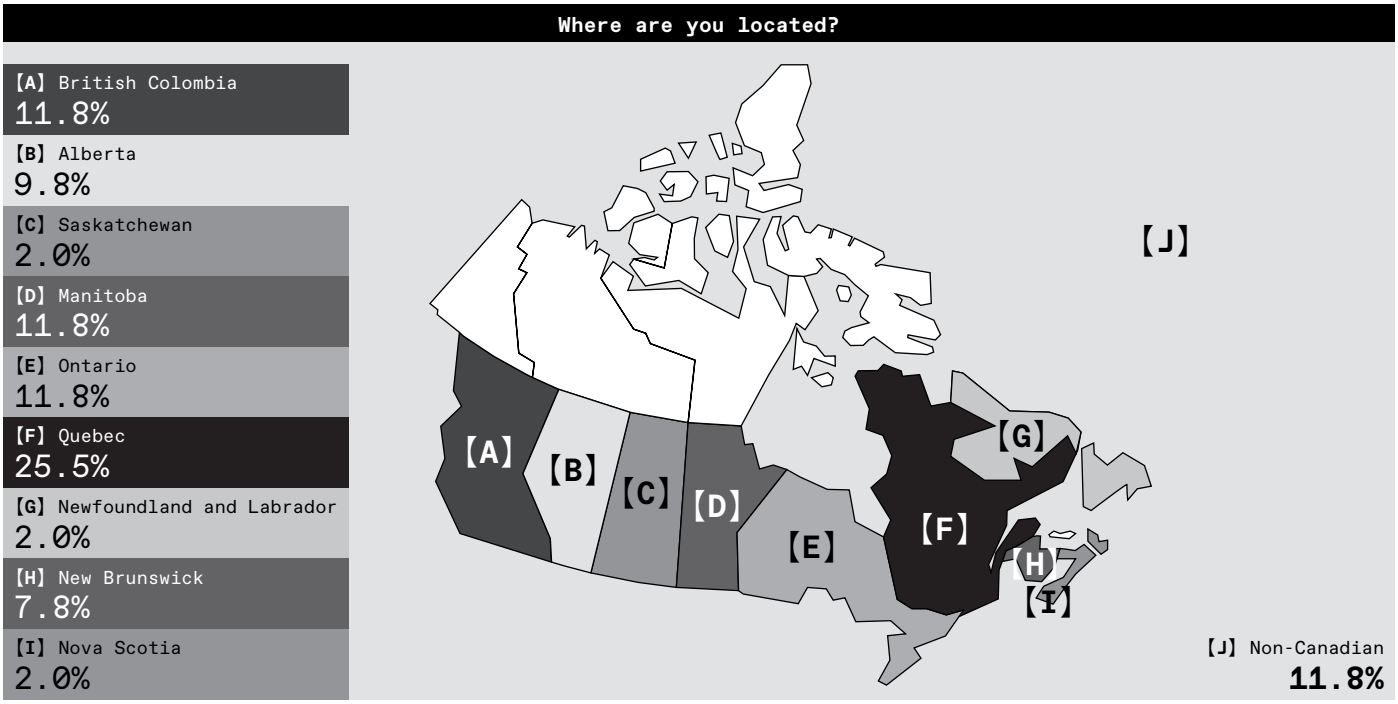
Game Developers

Game developers and makers who have continued working on a game jam project after the event has concluded and/or who have used jams internally at their studios.

Antonio Miceli	President, Mega Power Games	Ontario
Goose	Developer	Ontario
Matt Woelk	Game Developer, Space Wagon Games	Manitoba
Matthew Satchwill	Artist and Game Designer, ThirtyThreeGames	Alberta
Jeremy Burns	Programmer and Game Designer, ThirtyThreeGames	Alberta
Owen Hellum	Game Developer	Québec
Rebecca Harrison	Founder and Creative Director, Flightyfelon Games	Manitoba
Tabby Rose	UX Director, Mighty Yell	Ontario
Christophe Torin	Game Developer, SuperSAZ Studio	France
Daniel Klautsch	Director, Team Iota	Luxembourg
Michael Blodgett	Founder, Halftone Gaming	United States
Simon Cubasch	Game Developer, Firepunchd	Germany
Alexander Martin	Game Maker	Ontario
Daril Camilo	CMO, Team Kraken Hunter Games	Alberta
Lloyd Summers	CTO and Co-Founder, Red Iron Labs	Alberta
Richard Atlas	CEO and Creative Director, Clever Endeavour	Québec
Tanya X. Short	Captain, Kitfox Games	Québec
Anonymous	Game Developer	Alberta

Survey Participants

Participant Location



We distributed our survey through email lists, social media posts, and by directly reaching out to Canadian game studios and game jam organisations. Our target demographic was prior game jam participants, with a focus on those who continued to work on their projects past the end of a jam. While we mainly targeted Canadians, we also allowed for a small number of international participants. Participants were offered a $15 gift card as compensation.

We created and managed our survey using Qualtrics. While we received over 200 respondents, Qualtrics flagged many of them as fraudulent due to suspicious responses: AI-generated text answers, straight-lining (i.e., selecting the same multiple choice answer uniformly), and duplicate submissions. Our final sample consisted of 51 respondents that exceeded a 95% confidence score from Qualtrics and passed manual review by the research team.

Game Jams

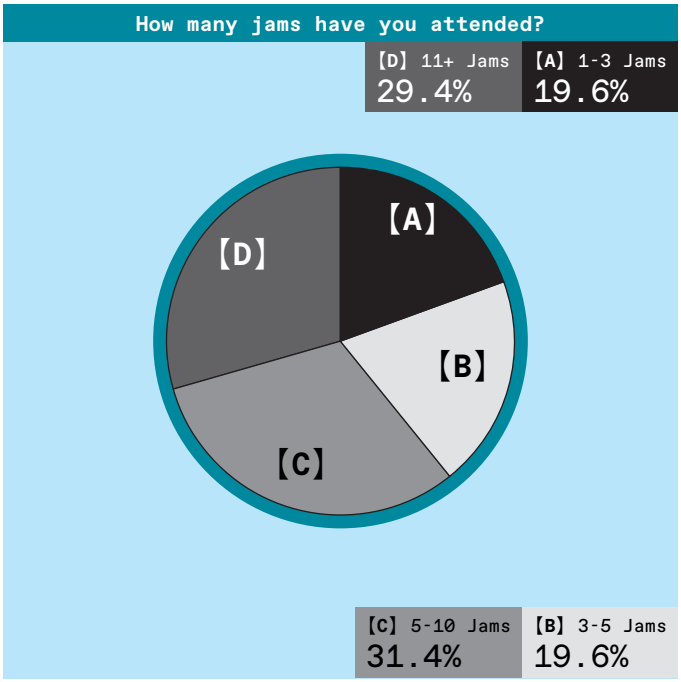
When people think of game jams, the first thing that likely comes to mind is a large room filled to the brim with young people racing to complete a videogame. Although stereotypical, this scene is reflective of a common jam structure: a weekend-long event held in a community space where participants rapidly build digital games following a central theme. Jams of this type typically begin with a number of orientation activities (introductions, team-building exercises, game design tutorials) and culminate in a celebratory showcase where entries are shared and, occasionally, judged and ranked.

However, this structure is just one of the many ways that game jams are organised. In our research, we learned of month-long slow jams on Itch.io, single day mini-jams held at universities, internal prototyping jams at commercial game studios, jams integrated into undergraduate course curriculum, and even wilderness jams where participants make games as part of an outdoors retreat. Reviewing the field, game jam scholar Annakaisa Kultima defines game jams as "accelerated opportunistic game creation event[s] where a game is created in a relatively short timeframe exploring given design constraint(s) and end results are shared publicly" (2015, p. 1). While this definition certainly casts a wide net, it helps cement the central idea of creating games within time and creative constraints.

Building on this loose definition, it is important to note that game jams are rarely singular events. Administrators (often acting as part of nonprofit organisations or informal collectives) put on activities that take place before or after the jam: workshops that teach participants game development tools and techniques, public talks featuring industry professionals who provide insight on the challenges of commercial game development, and showcases of completed jam projects. These events represent the growing desire of both jam organisers and attendees to build community and sustain resources all year round.

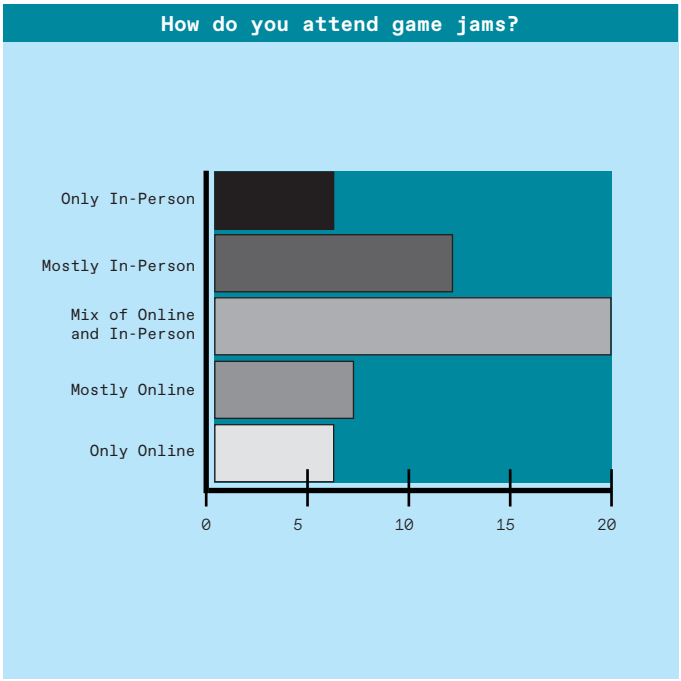
In this section, we draw upon survey and interview data to learn more about Canadian game jams, who attends them, and what resources they provide. While the focus of this white paper is the professionalisation potential of jams, our research echoes other studies that establish jams as places for prototyping and skill-building (Pirker et al., 2016), competition (Eberhardt, 2016), socialisation and fun (Germaine & Healy, 2023), and more. As Kultima has noted, game jammers are opportunistic—two attendees may leave the same event with vastly different experiences and takeaways (2015, p. 7). Learning about jammer motivations, expectations, and reflections is a vital starting point for discerning the role of the events in Canada.

Number of Game Jams



Through our surveys, it quickly became clear that those who attend game jams tend to attend a lot of game jams. Nearly a third of our participants reported attending between 5-10 jams in their lives (31.4%) and almost as many have attended 11 or more (29.4%). Jammers tended to join a mix of online and in-person events, with very few participants (11.7% each) exclusively attending a single modality and most claiming they attended an equal mix of online and offline events (39.2%).

In-Person or Online



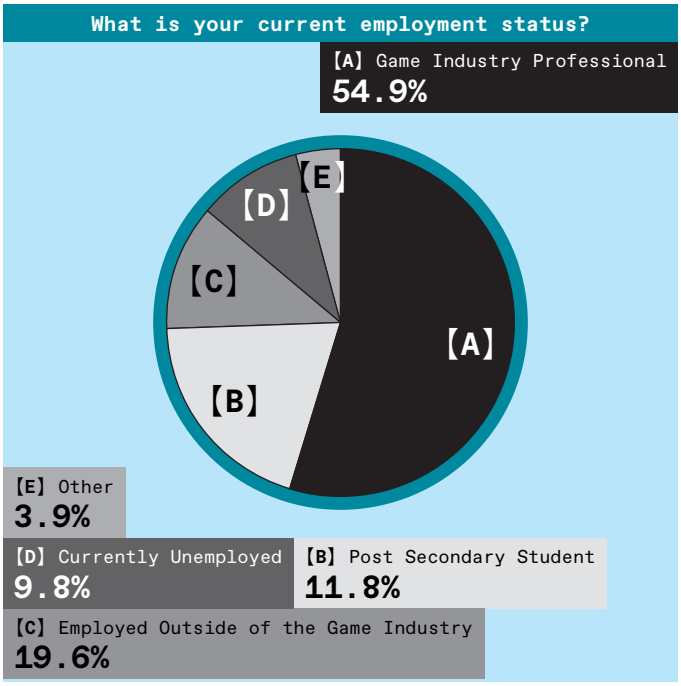
However, just because jammers participate in both online and offline jams, does not mean that they are ambivalent about modality. Many noted that they missed the camaraderie of in-person game jams during the early days of the pandemic, when organisations shifted to fully online models taking place on Itch.io, Discord, and other platforms. Conversely, others felt that in-person game jams were too difficult to attend due to their physical location—as most events take place in game industry hub cities, they can be quite arduous and expensive for people living outside of them to attend.

Student, Hobbyist, Professional

There are only a handful of game jam organisations that track participant demographics, making it difficult to know who exactly is attending the events. For the purposes of this white paper, we divide jammers into three overarching categories: students (high school or university), hobbyists (people who make games in non-commercial contexts), and professionals (folks who work in the game industry).

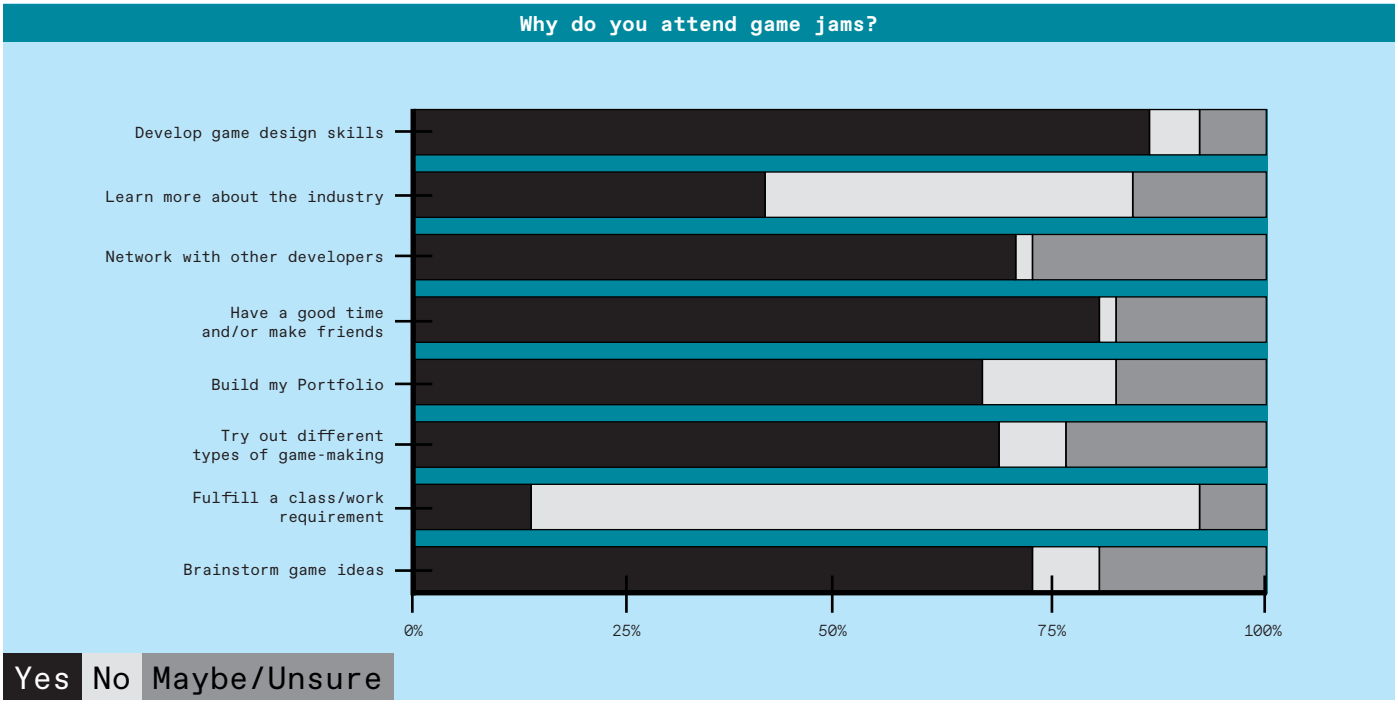
Global Game Jam (GGJ) is a useful demographic baseline due to its scope and circulation of post-jam surveys (*Global Game Jam 2024: Jammer Survey Data*, 2024). Jammers from the 2024 iteration of the event were split between students (35%), hobbyists (27%), and professional game developers (35%) in almost equal measure. While GGJ does hold events in Canada, we also sourced data from TOJam in Toronto and GAMERella in Montréal to see if their numbers reflected a similar trend. Between 2020 and 2024, TOJam hosted a fairly even mix of students (27.2%), hobbyists (33.5%), and professionals (39.3%). GAMERella only made a distinction between students (50.5%) and non-students (49.5%) in their voluntary post-jam surveys distributed between 2010 and 2024, and the higher proportion of students was likely due to their prior affiliation with Concordia University. While these numbers are not conclusive, they indicate that game jams are similarly attended by students, hobbyists, and professionals.

Employment Status



As a methodological note, the vast majority of our survey participants were industry professionals (54.9%) with only a small number of students (11.8%)—a much different ratio than reported by game jams themselves. This discrepancy is likely due to recruitment bias, despite the fact we circulated surveys through student-oriented jams. Professional game developers tend to have public-facing portfolios and contact information, making them much easier to get in touch with than hobbyist or student jammers.

Motivations to Attend



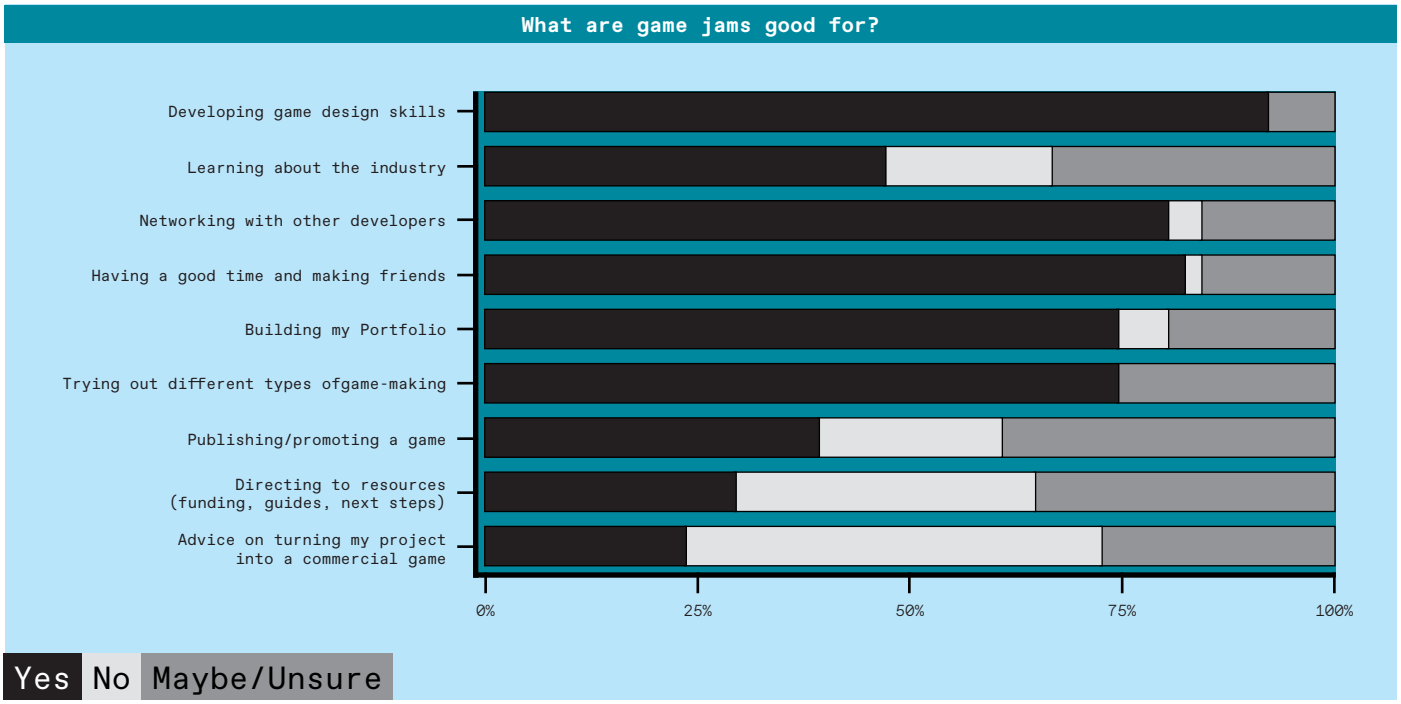
Game jams advertise themselves as spaces to cultivate development expertise, and our participants confirmed this as one of their main reasons for attending. Developing game design skills (86.3%) and trying out different types of game-making (68.6%) were two common motivations. Curiously, participants were not overwhelmingly interested in learning about the game industry (42.2%), even though a great deal of them attended game jams to build their portfolios (66.7%) and network with developers (70.6%). Having a good time and making friends (80.4%) and brainstorming new game ideas (72.5%) were strong motivators, signalling that many participants view game jams as creative, social, skill-building events and not exclusively professionalisation venues.

Both interviewees and survey participants expressed that they attended game jams for the support (mentorship, technology, resources) and motivation (time pressure, encouragement, themes). The events gave them the excuse and the resources to pursue creative work in a fun and social environment. Participants commonly reiterated the importance of having bracketed-off time in a space separate from their home, work, or school to complete a project.

Game Jam Takeaways

As a follow-up to our question about motivations, we asked participants how game jams had helped them creatively and professionally. Unsurprisingly, jammers overwhelmingly felt that game jams aided them in developing their game design skills (92.2%) with not a single participant responding 'no' to the question (7.8% were unsure). Still, there appears to be a satisfaction gap between personal- and industry-focused resources.

Participants believed game jams were excellent venues to network with other developers (80.4%) and have a good time and make friends (82.4%), highlighting their value as social venues. They also noted their success in cultivating personal game design practices, such as building a portfolio (74.5%) and trying out different kinds of game-making (74.5%). However, participants typically felt that game jams were not the most helpful for commercial pursuits. Less than half of our participants felt game jams helped them learn about the game industry (47.1%), and smaller proportions believed they provided enough resources about promoting or publishing a game (39.2%), accessing funding and other resources (29.4%), or turning a jam project into a commercial release (23.5%).



"Game jams were good for teaching me that games were something that I could make. It was a bunch of demystification. I didn't have to spend my entire life studying it. It was approachable even for someone like me who hadn't gone to school for it."

Goose, Developer

We will further discuss game jams as sites of professional development in the next section, but it is worth unpacking the recurring sentiment that jams are predominantly suited for creative and social game-making. Respondents commonly felt that game jams were spaces to foster creativity outside of professional game development rather than a pathway into it. Jams allowed them to "work on an experimental idea that may or may not be commercially viable," "hang out with friends and make something stupid," or "find another creative outlet outside of my industry job." Jams provided an opportunity for attendees to engage game-making on their own terms, echoing research that frames the events as opportunistic rather than prescriptive.

[‘Any time you get a group of young people together and tell them to do their best work without advice from somebody who has experience, they will recreate terrible working conditions on their own without any help.’]

Tanya X. Short, Captain of Kitfox Games

By far, the most common critique participants leveled at game jams is that they can replicate a number of harmful game industry norms. As game jams commonly feature strict timelines, they can foster a form of crunch—a widespread industry practice in which game developers are forced to take on large amounts of overtime in order to meet a deadline. Participants commonly recounted working for hours that far exceeded a normal work day, pulling all-nighters or sleeping at game jam venues, and forgetting to eat while pushing to complete a project. While it is easy to dismiss these harmful activities as part of the thrill of the jam, they potentially contribute to the normalisation of crunch and burn-out in the game industry at-large.

As jammers sometimes bring this crunch-oriented attitude along with them to the jam, it is not necessarily an issue that can be fully solved by savvy facilitation. However, jam administrators recounted that they actively discouraged around-the-clock work, provided snacks and meals as part of the event, and had volunteers occasionally check in on jammer mental and physical well being. Some jams also played with alternative structures—such as month-long slow jams or single day experimental jams—to help mitigate crunch and burn-out among attendees.

['One of the things that we hope participants take away from this experience is the idea you can make a game and have fun doing so without having to burn yourself out. So when they have to crunch, they can be like 'I don't think I do.' They've seen firsthand that it is possible to do good work and not crunch.']

Vanessa Capito, Founder and Main Organiser of Alberta Game Jam

One concern that game jam administrators and attendees shared is that, while the sentiment behind end-of-jam judging and awards is well-meaning (rewarding good work), they risk turning a convivial game jam into a competitive event that is less welcoming to newcomers. This reflects prior findings that found competition and incentives can negatively "affect the behaviour of a significant portion of game jam participants" (Germaine & Healy, 2023, p. 16) and lead to social friction (Kultima, 2021b, p. 56). In response to this, many Canadian game jams have moved away from competitive structures in favour of inclusive showcases, door prizes, and awards that are not strictly tied to perceived quality (e.g., best use of theme).

['We explicitly don't use ranked judging—my perception is that it can create a less inclusive environment. The biggest problem that we face as a community is people feeling like they don't have enough experience to participate, and ranked judging can contribute to that.']

Daniel Voth, Director of the Winnipeg Game Collective

From Jam to Bread

One of the central questions of this white paper is if game jams can serve as a launchpad for commercial game production. While we can look toward Canadian success stories as potential models for success—Maddy Thorson's *Celeste* and Asteroid Base's *Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime* both have game jam roots—there are a wide spectrum of outcomes that exist between a blockbuster hit and commercial failure. Thus, it is not enough to ask whether a jam prototype can be transformed into a full release but, also, what success means for jammers aspiring to be commercial game developers.

As jammers have expressed through their motivations and desires, there is no definitive answer to this question. However, in this section we provide some insight on the (often tumultuous) transition from "jam to bread" by drawing upon two pools of research. First, we asked our survey participants who had transformed their jam projects into commercial games (28 total) a number of follow-up questions related to their professionalisation journey. Second, we interviewed 13 game developers who continued working on their projects post-jam, transforming them into portfolio pieces, commercial releases, or otherwise bringing them into professional contexts. Together, these results begin to paint a picture of potential post-jam trajectories.

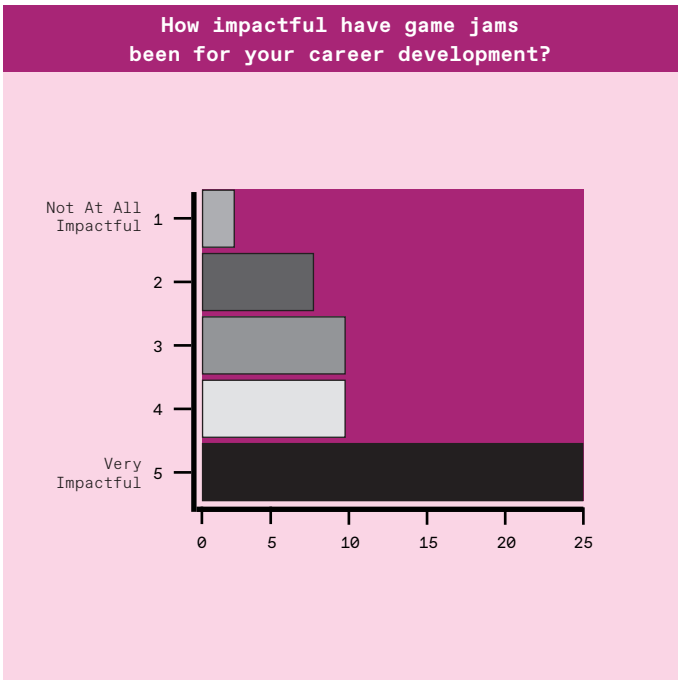
We begin this section by honing in on the perceived value of game jams as professionalisation events and how they could be improved in this regard. Next, we dissect the challenges and rewards of taking a game jam prototype and developing it into a full game release. Finally, we study the usefulness of game jams as portfolio-building and how even fully published projects are viewed predominantly as stepping stones into employment.

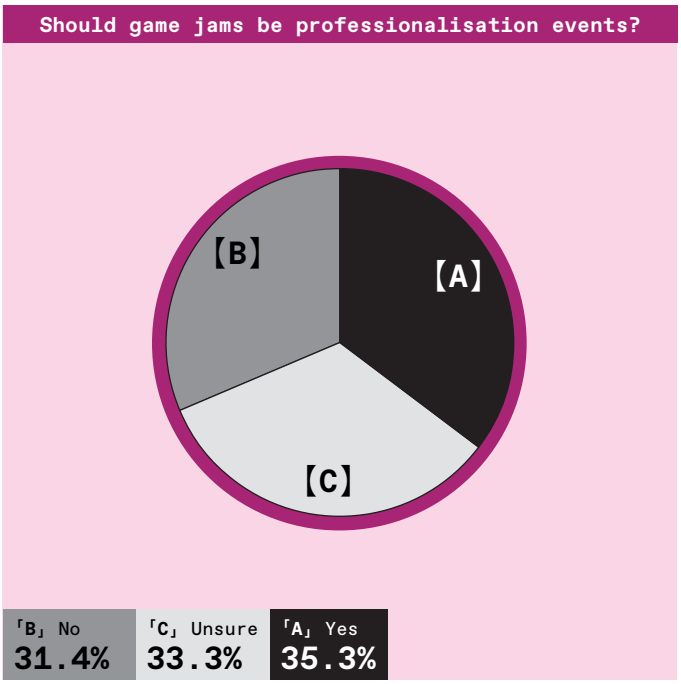
Career Development

As we have previously discussed, our participants overwhelmingly believed that jams helped them learn about game development. However, many viewed them less as professionalisation venues (i.e., a direct path for entering the game industry) and more as social and skill-building spaces. In an attempt to gain some clarity about the perceived commercial usefulness of game jams, we directly asked survey participants if they felt the events should be geared toward job training or professional development.

Professionalisation

Survey respondents were almost evenly split between yes (35.3%), no (31.4%), and unsure (33.3%); a somewhat surprising breakdown considering that over half our participants were professional game developers (54.9%) and that almost all of them (92.2%) believed that game jams helped them cultivate game development skills. Most noted that game jams had been important for their career development: they viewed them as either very impactful (47.1%) or impactful (17.6%).





['I've never used the words 'job training' or 'networking' but it is a very welcome side effect. We value game making as a craft just as much as game making as a profession.']

Gina Hara, Co-Founder and Co-Director of GAMERella

['I feel like a game jam is a nice way to quickly figure out these atoms of your creative process. Maybe you think a one day game jam is great but a one week game jam is terrible. Maybe you liked working with a friend but didn't like working with a team of people or working alone. I think game jams are often as much of an experiment about process as they are an experiment in game design.']

Alexander Martin, Game Maker

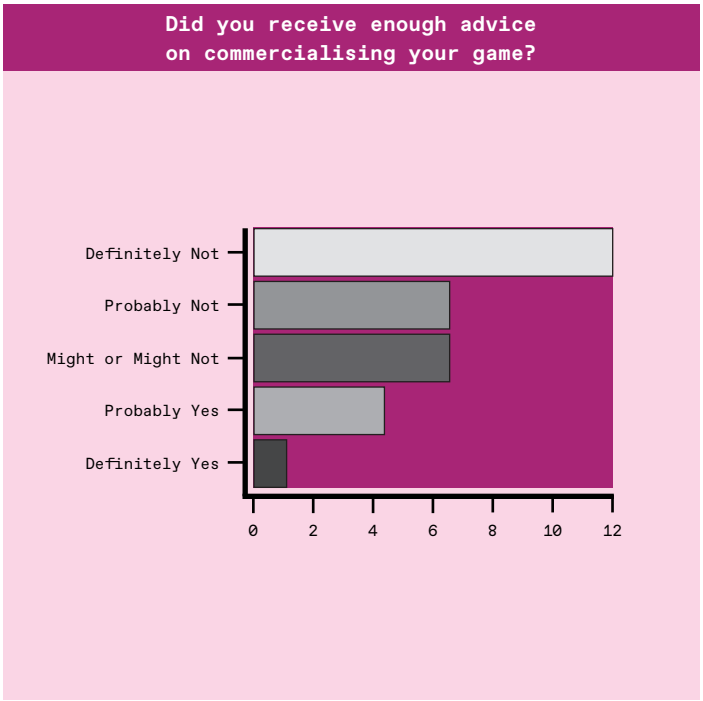
This focus on personal development makes sense, as our interviewees overwhelmingly believed that jams were invaluable spaces for learning about creative processes. The events allow prospective developers to try out different team structures (solo, team) and compositions (friends, strangers), receive (and give) constructive feedback on game projects, experiment with different roles (artist, programmer, writer) and implementations (3D, 2D, virtual reality), and acquire a rough idea of what making a game is like. While many recounted that game jams were one of their first steps into the industry, this was not because they were directly given commercial resources or job opportunities. Rather, jams served as an opportunity to experiment with game-making.

In a similar vein, developers frequently mentioned that game jams helped them recognise the value of their ideas. As most jams feature showcases—curated events where completed projects are shared with other participants and, occasionally, judged and ranked—jammers are provided with a valuable opportunity to figure out what parts of their games resonate with audiences (and what parts still need some work). A few folks who continued working on their jam projects noted that showcases were useful for validating game ideas, pushing them toward cyclical processes of prototyping and feedback.

['Our minds are really terrible gameplay simulators. Sometimes you can think of and describe an idea, and it sounds so fun, but it actually sucks. The game jam is often just a way of knowing if one of your game ideas is fun or not.']

Matthew Satchwill, Artist and Game Designer at ThirtyThreeGames

Improving Commercial Support at Game Jams



Of the 28 participants who had attempted to turn their jam projects into commercial releases, the majority felt that game jams did not provide them with sufficient advice on this process (39.3% definitely not; 21.4% probably not). Building on our prior question, we asked prior game jammers how they would like to see the events improved to better support their commercial aspirations. While there was still hesitancy among participants to frame jams as strictly professionalisation events, they did point out some potential areas of improvement. We have grouped these sentiments into three overarching categories: game-making resources, mentorship and networking, and tangible development support.

Game-Making Resources

Participants commonly mentioned that they would like greater access to professional-level tools and assets at game jams and, ideally, to have continued access to them after the events concluded. Popular game engines (Unity, Godot, etc) often offer free installations, but participants requested 2D and 3D asset libraries and pre-made templates to ease production and provide learning opportunities. Additionally, a few respondents requested temporary use of specialised hardware, such as virtual reality (VR) headsets, to give them a chance to experiment with platforms that were out of their price range.

Mentorship and Networking

Many game jams already facilitate mentorship and networking—GAMERella, for example, makes numerous mentors available during the jam—but participants strongly desired sustained support. The ability to connect with professional game developers, specifically from independent studios, in one-on-one settings (e.g., speed meets) was commonly mentioned. Additionally, participants felt that a shared space to reconnect with mentors and other attendees after a jam culminated would be extremely useful, such as a Discord server or through follow-up events. Mentorship was not just desired for game production techniques either, with many participants expressing an interest in areas such as labour rights, business development, and game marketing.

['Something that our industry doesn't have a lot of is long term mentorship opportunities. We would love to run something that ends up with three to six months of paid shadowing experience at a game studio.']

Gina Hara,
Co-Founder and Co-Director of GAMERella

Business Support

The biggest demand expressed by participants was for guidance that extended beyond game development skills, with business intelligence being highly requested. Participants wanted jams to teach them more about incorporating their game studios, creating budgets and production timelines, understanding freelancer and developer contracts, and gaining access to initial funding. Marketing information was also requested, with many jammers curious about making their jam projects (and their subsequent commercial iterations) visible to broader audiences.

['Even coming from a business background, I still underestimated how much goes into the business side of making and releasing games. Marketing, networking, keeping on top of events, showcases, discounts, promotional materials, trailers, etc. There are all these things you need consider in addition to just 'making the games.'']

Michael Blodgett,
Founder of Halftone Gaming

Beyond advice, jammers strongly desired material resources to help them continue working on their game projects. One participant noted that it would be "a miracle" if jams could provide preliminary funding for games, while others felt that free software licenses, marketing and publicity help, and business intelligence (templates for contracts, budgets, and incorporation documentation) would aid them immensely. While there are grants and incubators that can help new game developers, there was a perceived gap between jam resources and these programs.

Jam Precarity

Game jam administrators are aware of attendee desires for sustained support but, as non-profit organisations or informal collectives with shoestring budgets, it is difficult for them to meet this demand. Speaking with Canadian administrators, it is evident that the lack of funding to support their events, the unpredictable nature of corporate donations, and the growing cost of resources (space rentals, catering, etc) have made game jams increasingly difficult to organise. Notably, every single game jam administrator we spoke to ran their organisation as a side-gig and lamented that they heavily relied on volunteers to keep things going. Thus, while there is a strong desire to increase the scope of their support, they often find themselves directing jammers to competitive funding applications or oversubscribed accelerators and incubators.

Support That Game Jammers Want

■ "Information about unions and labour conditions in the game industry."

■ "Do a formal rescoping of the project after the jam, to decide what should be added to the game."

■ "In a miracle world I'd love if jams could somehow hand out funding?"

■ "Providing temporary licenses for licensed software would be sick."

■ "Having mentors is always the most helpful, and I enjoy having workshops leading up to the jam. A free space to link/share/rate/promote the jam games, like Ludum Dare provides."

■ "Post-release support and marketing (e.g. Twitch streams of jam submissions) and post-release feedback."

■ "More representation from indie game studios, for networking opportunities."

■ "Access to types of hardware or software attendees may not usually have access to (VR/AR, AI, etc) so they can experiment with them."

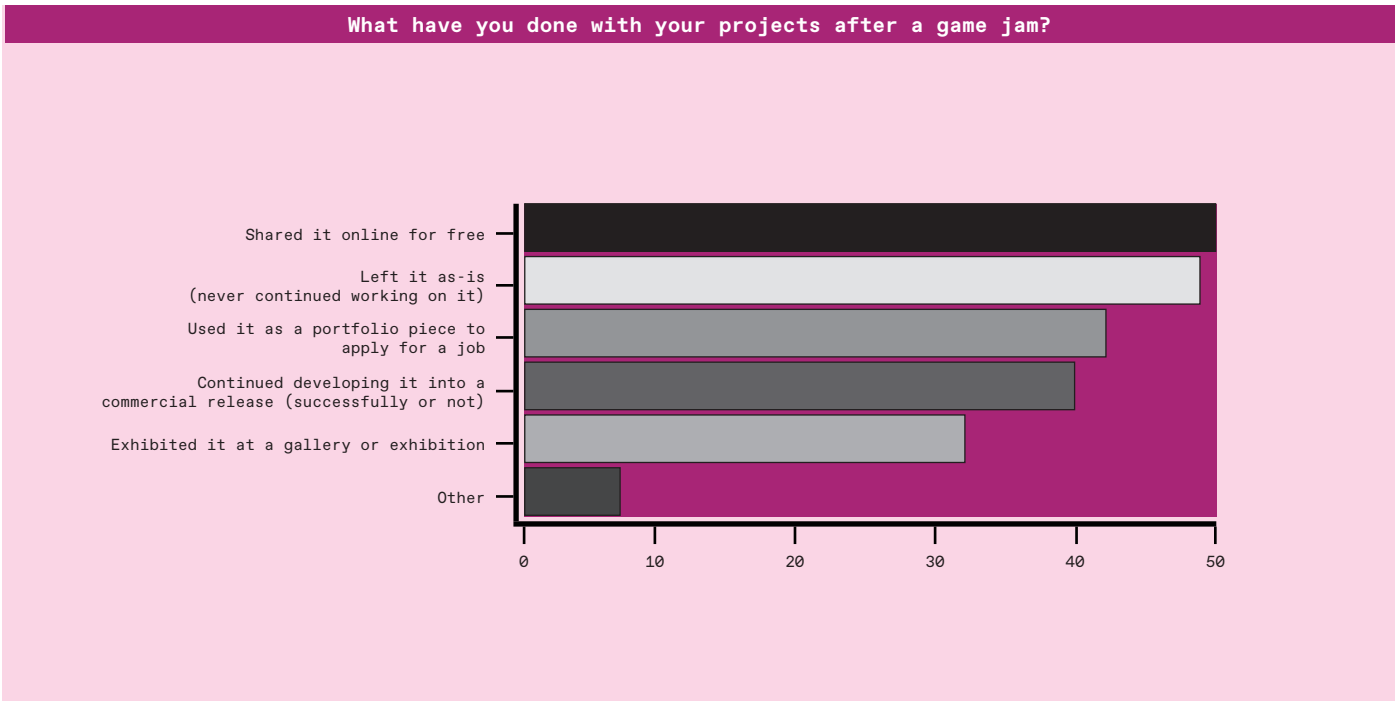
■ "Funding, public visibility, community."

■ "Beginner-friendly guides for specific engines, templates for common mechanics, and access to free or discounted tools like asset libraries or sound design software."

■ "Having some free asset libraries available for both 2D and 3D games would be nice."

■ "One-on-one time with industry experts."

Commercial Development After the Jam



When we asked participants about what they did with their game jam projects after an event had concluded, the most common trajectories were non-commercial. Most shared them online for free (86.3%), used ideas from their projects in other contexts (84.3%), or discontinued working on them entirely (72.5%). Still, over half noted they continued developing a jam project into a commercial release (54.9%) or used it to help build their portfolio (68.6%) in some capacity, showing that jams are still somewhat treated as industry launchpads.

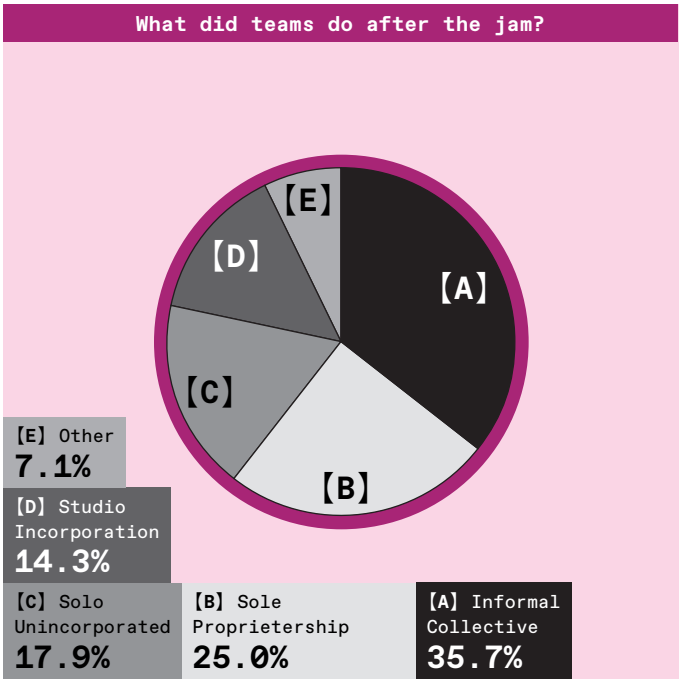
Moving past the game jam itself, we asked participants about the biggest challenges they faced when they attempted to transform their projects into commercial products. The main categories that emerged from these discussions were team management, scale and scope, and funding.

Team Management

At the beginning of game jams, attendees are commonly grouped into teams with friends or strangers. While our participants generally regarded this as a positive aspect of the events, they also mentioned that these ad-hoc groupings did not always survive post-jam. Roughly half kept their jam group together when entering commercial development, either by carrying over an entire team wholesale (35.7%) or continuing to work alone (21.4%). It was slightly less common for portions of teams—either one member (7.1%) or several members (35.7%)—to keep working on a project.

Additionally, while some jammers decided to incorporate when pursuing further development (25% as sole proprietorships, 14.3% as corporations with more than one employee), informal collectives (35.7%) and solo development (17.9%) tended to be more common pathways. One game jam administrator felt that recent industry tribulations—namely layoffs and harassment scandals—have made jammers hesitant to fully dedicate themselves to commercial game production.

Post-Jam Team Structures

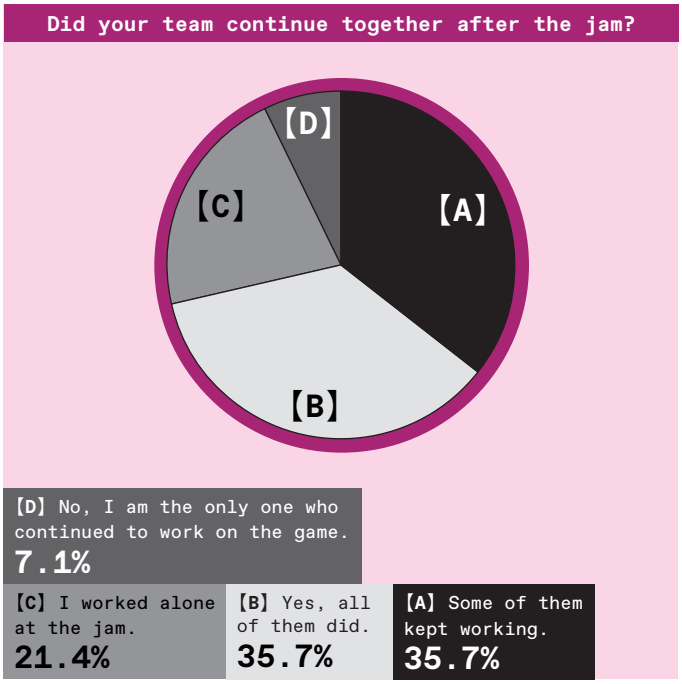


When we asked participants about what they did with their game jam projects after an event had concluded, the most common trajectories were non-commercial. Most shared them online for free (86.3%), used ideas from their projects in other contexts (84.3%), or discontinued working on them entirely (72.5%). Still, over half noted they continued developing a jam project into a commercial release (54.9%) or used it to help build their portfolio (68.6%) in some capacity, showing that jams are still somewhat treated as industry launchpads.

['Within game jams, everyone is available and has put aside that time specifically for that project. It is harder to get people to work on a project/meet when there are so many other things going on, whether it be other projects or school or jobs, etc.']

Anonymous

Creator Carryover



That being said, there were still complications. A few developers mentioned that problematic or unproductive team members had to be let go shortly into professional development. Furthermore, many had informal agreements in place that, if a game went on to be profitable, some of the revenue would be shared with the initial game jam team. Curiously, very few game jammers proactively established contracts—either during the jam or in the aftermath—to flesh out future project expectations. Thus, if ownership over a jam project became contentious, things could potentially get quite messy. As even successful jammers can struggle to transition into formal development roles, jam post-mortems or preemptive work agreements could be quite valuable for those with commercial ambitions.

['It's tough! If you did the game jam with a bunch of other people, you have to get them to be as on board as you are with it or, alternatively, buy them out—make them sign a thing that says they don't own the thing they made. Which is something that no one likes to do, and feels weird and gross and lawyer-y.']

Matt Woelk,
Game Developer at Space Wagon Games

Game jams are all about creating a small game in a short period of time in a fun, somewhat chaotic, atmosphere. Expanding on these projects post-jam can be difficult as they are hastily assembled with little forethought about how they could grow into a proper commercial release. It is no surprise, then, that scoping was an issue mentioned by almost everyone who had decided to continue working on their game jam projects.

["We went to the game jam with the intention of making a very small game (the game before we made our real game). But then afterwards, we thought we could quickly turn it into a small published game. That was in 2012 and the game didn't come out until 2019!"]

Tabby Rose, UX Director at Mighty Yell (formerly Axon Interactive Inc)

"Scope small" is a common industry mantra, especially for new game developers, but so many of our participants mentioned that they had trouble recognising just what "small" meant in regard to their own projects. One common piece of advice passed along by veteran developers was that, as part of game jam post-mortem, project scope should be determined by imagining a desired outcome.

Creating a portfolio piece? Then the game should be small, very polished, and published with lots of documentation (screenshots, text, video, etc) and rationale. Looking to pitch to a publisher or funder? Create a vertical slice of a game that shows off its different layers, from code to art, while emphasising its fun factor. Aiming for a full commercial release? Look at other games in the same genre and try to match the amount of content they have. Still, even with the best laid plans, scope creep is almost inevitable. Developers commonly lamented that it took them years longer to complete projects than they originally imagined.

One of the reasons project scoping is so difficult is that jams tend to produce specific genres and styles of games. Developers and administrators both agreed that jammers tend to make games with short gameplay loops, experimental themes, and little adherence to industry norms. At game studios, it is common practice for producers and directors to undertake market research to figure out what types of genres, mechanics, and styles are commercially viable (and can be realistically completed by an established production team). Game jams effectively invert this model, asking participants to start with an idea first before figuring out commercial viability in the aftermath.

[‘The scope of the game that you can make in a weekend is not one that will necessarily stretch well to an entire commercialized project.’]

Alex Bethke, Co-organiser of TOJAM

However, game jams projects are certainly capable of phenomenal success. *Baba Is You* and *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* are genre-defying hits that emerged from the Nordic Game Jam and Global Game Jam, respectively. Still, projects produced without careful market research tend to be more difficult to iterate upon and harder to pitch to risk-averse funders and publishers.

Speaking more to genre, developers felt that game jams were better suited for testing out a single idea and less effective at designing complex games. Some mentioned that going into a jam with the goal of validating a single gameplay loop (e.g., can throwing a frisbee be a fun game mechanic?) could be more productive, from a commercial perspective, than attempting to cobble together a complete game. Furthermore, a few developers believed that game jam development cycles closed certain design spaces off entirely. Games that rely on complex systems—such as real-time strategy or simulation games—cannot be realistically produced or even tested in the scope of a weekend (or even a month-long) game jam.

[‘There's a huge swath of games that I don't even know how you could prototype them in a way that we normally use the word prototype. Crusader Kings 2 and Civilization are great examples. You can make a minimalist interpretation, but the way that highly systemic games get developed—it’s a very different approach to production.’]

Tanya X. Short, Captain of Kitfox Games

The most common challenge cited by our participants was securing stable funding to continue working on their projects. Most funding sources at the municipal, provincial, and federal level are highly competitive and other types of investors have tightened their pursestrings in recent years, making them less willing to take a chance on a budding game developer. Unfortunately, that means that even the most promising game jam project has trouble securing money to continue development, and even those that did had rarely covered their costs.

Developers mentioned that proof of prior professional experience was helpful—perhaps even mandatory in the face of increased competition—to secure government funding. For example, the Canada Media Fund uses criteria such as "experience and achievements of the studio," "professional experience and achievements of team members," and "experience and track record of team members working with one another" in assessing applications for their Commercial Projects Program (Canada Media Fund, 2024). With little-to-no industry work under their belts, students and hobbyists felt some funds were not accessible to them post-jam.

> ['The fact is, gaming right now as a whole is very oversaturated, and if anybody decides to come up with a new source of funding, it's going to get oversubscribed immediately. It's not sustainable to rely on those sources of funding.']
>
> *Antonio Miceli, President of Mega Power Games*

Consequently, the most common pathway for developers was to develop games as side projects—usually in addition to holding a full-time or part-time job—over a long period of time. While there are some success stories that have emerged from this approach, it is an unsustainable industry pathway and leads to impossible workloads and burnout (Whitson et al., 2018). It also reflects the overall lack of industry funding: in their 2025 report, GDC noted that there was generally "less money to go around" and that 56% of indie developers self-funded their projects (GDC Team, 2025). The need to personally invest in a project means that indie developers without a certain level of financial privilege are effectively gated from the industry.

Developers also considered crowdsourcing and publisher agreements as potential funding avenues, but not as reliable ones. Axon Interactive Inc's *Quench* and Clever Endeavour's *Ultimate Chicken Horse* are two examples of successful Kickstarter campaigns that partially funded game jam projects, but building enough of an audience to make crowdsourcing viable is tricky. While publisher contracts and platform deals are another way to acquire funding, we were not able to study them deeply for this project due to participant non-disclosure agreements.

"I was one of the few people who had a polished-looking game on Steam with my name on it. And game companies can't tell how well it's sold or not. It doesn't really matter to them. But I made a big thing and I saw a game through the whole process."

Matt Woelk, Game Developer at Space Wagon Games

Interestingly, many participants elaborated that, while they followed all the steps of making a commercial game (completing a project, uploading it to a digital marketplace, and creating press materials), their goal was not to make money off of the release. The majority of our survey participants said they had transformed game jam projects into portfolio pieces (68.6%), and even ostensibly commercial releases were commonly viewed as a way to build industry qualifications rather than a pathway to starting a studio or generating reliable income.

There are many reasons why completing a jam project and publishing it on a digital platform is important for aspiring game developers. Students recounted that their explicit goal was to make their jam project polished enough to publish on Steam, which they believed greatly increased their chances of getting an industry job. Several of the game developers we spoke with—many who influenced or controlled hiring at their own studios—reinforced the value of these shipped titles. For them, it was important to see: a) what types of games a job candidate was capable of producing; and b) how well they could navigate industry-standard platforms. Several participants noted that spending a few months refining a jam project and publishing it on Steam had directly led to them getting an entry-level job at a AAA or independent studio.

It is also important to recognise that many developers who publish their games online may not interested in commercial success at all. Just because a game is on Steam does not mean its creator is interested in becoming a professional game developer. As the de facto platform for distributing games, a number of participants told us they only published their games on Steam to increase circulation and visibility, despite the upfront cost and complaints about its archaic user interface. Itch.io was also a common venue the developers used to share games and, unlike Steam, the platform hosts games for free and encourages the publication of titles that may not fit in commercial contexts (prototypes, experiments, and oddities).

"If you're a student, game jams are a great way to meet someone who's working in the industry and to build up your portfolio. I would guess that 60-70% of our attendees are students and their main goal is to make something for their portfolio."

Kyle Van Winkoop, HR Lead at BUSGDA

Commercialisation Advice

■ "Take the very smallest version of the thing that you're thinking of and release that, and time box it. You can always add to it but it’s really hard to scope down after you start."

■ "Do a formal rescoping of the project after the jam, to decide what should be added to the game."

■ "If you’re aiming for a commercial release, do a post-mortem analysis of the project, make a SWOT chart, and rebuild project files if you need to. Sometimes game jam projects are messy and it's OK!"

■ "It's something small and it's already working, get some eyes on it. If you feel like there's more to it, just keep working on it."

■ "Try to write down some conditions for your collaboration with the teammates—even an informal contract is better than nothing."

■ "If you want to use a jam to ideate and you are not relying on it economically, just follow your heart. If you want to make a successful commercial game, then you need to do market studies and analyses."

Internal Game Jams

In addition to studying the role of game jams as professionalisation spaces, we were curious as to how jams had been adopted as production tools within Canadian game studios. After all, professional development cycles share many similarities with game jams: developers work under tight deadlines, are constantly prototyping and iterating, and push for public-facing releases. In fact, one of the reasons that game jams have been so heavily researched by game scholars is that they are often viewed as "compressed development processes" (Kultima, 2015; Zook & Riedl, 2013)—albeit with much lower stakes than professional development.

In this section, we provide some insight as to how Canadian game studios have adopted jams as part of their production process. Game jams are certainly not replacements for existing production structures, but their compressed timelines can prove useful for ideation, team-building, and other applications. While we were only able to interview five game developers whose studios met this criteria, they provided valuable insights on the potential role jams in production environments. Through our discussions, we have identified three ways that professional game studios have leveraged jams—to varying degrees of success—to aid their production processes: skill and tool improvement, team-building, and ideation. We also reflect on some less-common motivations for adopting game jam structures, as seeds for future research avenues.

"The problems you will encounter during a 48 hour game jam are some of the same problems that you will run into in a 2-5 year development cycle. The difference between those two is that with a game jam, if your game doesn't come out the way that you were hoping it would, there's way less at stake versus a commercial project."

Vanessa Capito, Founder and Main Organiser of Alberta Game Jam

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"For one of our games, we were working on this DDR-esque system. I coded it initially very poorly, and we needed to take some time to make it good, so we decided to do a game jam as a studio where the focus would be improving the rhythm aspect."

Rebecca Harrison, Founder and Creative Director of Flightyfelon Games

A number of professional developers noted that their studios leveraged game jams to quickly learn new development tools and techniques. They would run day- or week-long game jams to learn a specific game engine (e.g., Godot) or production modality (e.g., virtual reality) that they were not already familiar with. Game jams provided an opportunity to dive into new tools in a time-limited but low stakes manner and, since jams demanded fast problem solving, they were also useful in devising efficient production techniques.

Building upon this, game jams were also used to improve and expand upon ideas and resources within studio workflows. Jams gave developers the impetus to improve existing tools (e.g., building libraries for existing game engines) or refine gameplay loops (e.g., figuring out a fun rhythm-based game mechanic) for studio projects. Unlike traditional game jams, which focused on the creation of finished game prototypes, these jams resulted in modular pieces that aided in future development or cleared current technical hurdles.

Echoing sentiments from jammers who touted the power of the events to figure out their personal creative processes, studios similarly leveraged jams to see how they worked together as a team. While game jam timelines are quite different from commercial ones, they are an effective litmus test for collaboration and creativity under high-stress situations.

"The goal was to see how well we work together, to see if we wanted to eventually start a company and make commercial products. The idea was not initially that it would become a commercial product; we wanted to see if we could work together under high stress situations."

Richard Atlas, CEO and Creative Director, Clever Endeavour

One way that studios tested out collaboration was by signing up for external game jams as a team. For those looking to start a new studio, the goal was to see if aspiring co-founders could successfully work together under tight deadlines while developing something creatively fulfilling. In many ways, a game jam is a hyper-accelerated production cycle, allowing folks to test out working relationships before diving into financial and creative risks together. Similarly, some studios attended jams together to see how new hires meshed with their existing team. One studio mentioned that they had signed up to a game jam with a new employee who did not possess a traditional game development background, to see how well they could adapt to the peculiarities of game development with their new co-workers.

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The average person at Kitfox, no matter how much they enjoy their work, is typically working on something that is not their idea, will take years to finish, and is very challenging. And since we have multiple teams, there's a lot of people who don't get to work together. I see our annual game jam as a morale boosting time: people get the creative fulfillment of finishing something quickly that is their own idea, decide everything about whatever they're doing, and get to collaborate with new team members. It's also opt-in, so inevitably some folks decide to do their normal work instead."

Tanya X. Short, Captain of KitFox Games

Another use for internal game jams was for building morale and taking a break between projects. Senior developers who had used external game jams as creative outlets while they were employees at larger game studios felt that internal game jams could potentially scratch the same itch for their own employees. These jams typically took place during work hours and studio members were encouraged to work on their own projects, maintaining ownership over whatever they decided to build. As an added bonus, developers were encouraged to branch out into different roles (programmer, artist, etc) and production modalities (2D, 3D, etc) while collaborating with co-workers they may not typically interact with. Oftentimes, the projects emerging from these jams would be shared as part of an internal showcase.

“Game jams align with one of our core values, courage ahead of confidence. Confidence is when you do the same thing over and over again. Courage is when you do something you've never done before to see if you can get a different outcome. Game jams are an opportunity to do that—to come up with a game or an idea or something we've never done before, see how it works, and try to get it into a brief concept as fast as possible.”

Lloyd Summers, CTO and Co-Founder of Red Iron Labs

The success of these game jams was mixed, with a general sentiment that they were not as useful as initially hoped. Jam projects often had to be changed dramatically to make them commercially viable, as their conception was not rooted in industry research. Others mentioned that there were challenges in controlling the scope of the jam—while external game jams have very strict time limits, studio members would frequently request extensions for internal game jams to polish up their games, eating into studio production time. Furthermore, a number of developers lamented that game jams often produced dirty or scrappy code that had to be rebuilt entirely, serving better as a provocation rather than the foundation of a full release. One studio we spoke with had implemented a very successful structure that saw studio members creating, banking, and then ranking projects they had developed in short production sprints (usually a few days). As the studio did work-for-hire and often pitched projects to clients or funding organisations, having numerous game concepts ready to go proved enormously useful. Once prototypes were completed they were viewed by the entire team and ranked on their viability, with the most celebrated projects selected for further development. Poorly-ranked projects were not completely discarded, and studio members could revise and re-pitch them down the line, allowing for iteration but not necessarily timeline bloat.

Other Jam Motivations

While only representing a minority of participants, we believe it is worth mentioning three additional ways that our participants noted using game jams: self-imposed solo jams, external competition, and funding validation.

Self-imposed game jams were occasionally used by solo developers, outside of game studios, as a way to bracket off time in their lives to make games. They mentioned that they wanted to find "a good, legitimate reason to innovate or experiment" and develop their skills, and that the structure of a game jam helped facilitate this. After a jam, they would often publish the results on easy-to-use platforms such as Itch.

One game studio mentioned that they would actively seek out external game jams, particularly those that featured judging, whose parameters matched projects they were already planning or working on. Their goal was to showcase their work and win competitions, raising the profile of their studio. While this proved difficult—it was challenging for them to find a jam that matched their predetermined theme and timeline—they felt it was helpful in motivating their team and building their prestige as a studio.

Finally, as funding organisations often desire that companies have at least one commercially released game under their belts to qualify for grants, a few game studios signed up to jams to quickly establish the nuts and bolts of a small commercial release. Framing these jam projects as liminal (e.g., "the game before we made our real game"), the goal was to finish and publish them within a few months to validate the studio in the eyes of funders and commercial stakeholders.

Closing Notes

We hope that **That's My Jam: Understanding the Value of Quick Game Prototyping** offers some insight into the role of game jams in the Canadian videogame industry. As we close this white paper, we offer a few culminating thoughts to help guide future game jam scholarship, funding initiatives, and commercial ventures.

There is a gap between game jams and other support for game developers.

After leaving a game jam, participants felt there were very few resources to help them take the next step on their professionalisation journey. Jammers desired sustained mentorship focused on business development, marketing, and project scoping that extended well past a weekend-long jam. There is a clear need for more long-term programs such as incubators and accelerators to help fledgling game developers find their footing in the industry, before they begin applying to competitive grants or pitching their ideas to publishers.

Game jams create diverse opportunities for their participants.

People attend jams to improve their game development skills, network with industry stakeholders, compete with their peers, learn more about commercial production, or simply to have fun in a supportive environment. While the format of a game jam certainly affects what people take away from it—with administrators constantly experimenting with different supports and structures—they are flexible events that can foster outcomes that lead to commercial, personal, and artistic success.

Game jams are precarious and resources are limited.

Though effective venues for aspiring game developers, jams are typically run by non-profit organisations or informal collectives with shoestring budgets. Speaking with administrators (most of whom ran the events as side-gigs) we learned that the lack of funding, the unpredictable nature of corporate donations, and the growing cost of resources have made putting on events increasingly difficult. Jams are widely regarded as useful game development events and there is huge demand to expand their scope, yet most are struggling to operate even at their current levels. Game jams, and other intermediary organisations, desperately need more funding to allow them to sustain themselves and meet the needs of their participants.

Success has many different meanings.

Creating a successful game is a shared goal for many jammers, but there is no singular definition of success. Some aspired to make a financially viable game, others wanted to create a compelling portfolio piece, and others simply needed a finished project to access formal funding and resources. Any commercialisation advice directed toward jammers should account for these varied trajectories and desires, while keeping in mind that many ideas of success are non-commercial. So many jammers simply wish to cultivate their creative process and have continued opportunities to make games.

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