

The 2009 Global Game Jam:



The Vancouver Experience

a reflection by Cody Church

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Foreword

This document is a reflection of my thoughts and opinions on the IGDA 2009 Global Game Jam, written from the perspective of the Vancouver Game Jam. The document's intent is to give a summary of key aspects of the Vancouver event and critically evaluate the coordination of the event and the efforts of the participants. I encourage the coordinators to use this document as descriptive feedback when planning future extensions of the event, and for participants to augment their own learning experiences with. If you have any additional questions on my comments on or off this document, my email is given on the final page. For a live-blogging of the event including photos, please also see the final page for the link.

Quotations that have been included in this document are credited to their owner when applicable: comments that were indistinguishable from teammates due to audio recording issues have been instead credited to the team out of necessity. If you recognize a specific quote as your own and wish to be credited, I will make the correction if informed.

The Beginning

A little before 2 o'clock on January 30th, I arrived the Simon Fraser University Harbour Centre campus with my fellow SFU student Peter Gao. Peter was to participate in the International Game Developers Association's Global Game Jam, an amateur game development event in which teams work toward the completion of a fully functional computer game in only 48 hours time. While some of the participants at the event possessed professional and amateur experience in game development, Peter was one among many who were about to enjoy their first (albeit compressed) taste of the work. For myself, it was the first time I'd been responsible for observing and chronicling an event of this magnitude. And I would be remiss in not mentioning one final group that was also about to enjoy new experience:

The world.

Jump ahead to Sunday afternoon, February 1st. The first annual Global Game Jam comes to a close, and the enormity of the event has finally begun to dawn on me. Accompanied by Mitch Lagran, a local game designer and guest mentor for the Vancouver Game Jam, we check the event's website in search of freshly-submitted games created by other participants from around the world. We browse the list of cities involved and the games their participants had published. Participants from Hamar of Norway submitted 12 games. Kyoto, Japan: 2 games. New York City, United States: 17 games. Tel Aviv, Israel: 9 games. Cape Town, South Africa: 3 games.

Paris. Boston. Glasgow. London. Detroit. Toronto. Madrid. Perth. Rio de Janeiro.

1,600 participants in over 50 cities within over 20 countries across 6 continents. Over 300 games were produced within the same weekend by people all over the world, working in teams of 3 to 5 on average. All were volunteers who had decided to spend their weekend working with complete strangers to craft a video game within 48 hours. Never before has an event such as this been attempted on such a scale . . . or accomplished.

My perspective comes from Vancouver, Canada, which was among the last of the cities to submit their games — a result of the lateness of our time zone. While I am charged with describing the Vancouver Game Jam for you and reflecting on the entire event from my own perspective, allow me to first give a brief background into the Global Game Jam.

The Global Game Jam

Susan Gold, a former faculty member of the Masters of Digital Media program and a chairperson of the IGDA Vancouver chapter, was previously invited to the Nordic Game Jam in Copenhagen, Denmark. The event has run for several years, and was so successful that it prompted a stray comment from Susan about wishing to attempt a similar event on a global scale. She received an expected amount of skepticism: the mere scale of the idea made it very unlikely, after all. So she went ahead and did it anyways. “This would be an excellent way to do student outreach,” said Gold, “but also for them to network with professional people in the industry and work together, to learn from each other, and also make new games. My goal had been to get at least 10 locations to participate.”

For such a coordinating challenge, the Global Game Jam was made as flexible as possible to cater to the individual needs of the host cities. Through contacts of the IGDA, sponsors and volunteer organizers were found around the world who were willing to contribute to the event. Finding a venue and enlisting participants was left up to each city’s head organizer, so their efforts would determine whether or not their city would be hosting one of the many Game Jams.

The only concrete conditions for the event might have been the most arduous for the participants to adhere to. Each city must begin their event promptly at 5 PM on January 30th, and conclude at 5 PM on February 1st: the 48 hour time limit for the participants. They are given to a specific development theme and conditions to follow while producing their game, to be reflected in some facet of their game’s design. Finally, each team had to upload their entry to the Global Game Jam website, and be playable to anyone wishing to give the game a download. That’s it. ‘Find a place to work, be there at this time, create a game according this theme, be done within 2 days and submit it.’ There’s much that I’ve left out behind the scenes, but the event was simple enough to easily conform to the needs of each host city.

The Vancouver Game Jam

The Vancouver Game Jam itself was organized by Dr. Magy Seif El-Nasr, the game design professor of Simon Fraser University’s School for Interactive Arts and Technology. Assisted by many of the graduate students working with Magy, months were spent searching for a location that would be able to host the event. Local game companies such as Electronic Arts were unable to provide space due to intellectual property concerns, and others were simply unable to sacrifice the time or space. Issues with costs limited the event’s commercial possibilities, such as recreation centers and hotels. Finally, problems with liability costs caused the group to originally abandon such ideal locations as SFU’s Surrey campus, the original location intended for the Game Jam. The fate of the event was looking grim, and with only a few weeks left before the event there was no guarantee it was still on: no participants had even been officially invented to the event yet.

Thankfully, a lucky break was just around the corner. With *barely* enough time left to send out the call for participation, the organizers were finally given space at SFU's Harbour Centre campus. Preparations were made, registration requests began to flow in, and last minute arrangements were made. The room itself we were given forced the organizers to limit the number of participants: only 40 people were permitted in the room. With organizers, mentors and myself already taking up around 10 of those spots, that left 30 participants, of which 26 attended. While we certainly weren't one of the largest Game Jams on the planet (other cities had upwards of *130 or more* people in attendance), it was amazing just how many of the registered participants showed up! It exceeded even our optimistic estimates.

In another stroke of luck the Global Game Jam's creator, Susan Gold, is based in Vancouver: she was onsite the entire time while handling her duties. Although Vancouver was within the latest time zone of all host cities, Susan provided us with regularly updated information and instructions whenever we had questions about how to proceed during the event. Ironically, it meant we were always the last to act, but the first to know.

The Participants

The lower mainland of British Columbia houses a very respected game development industry. Despite the event's focus on amateur game development, we had participants with industry experience from Electronic Arts, Relic Entertainment and Blue Castle Games. Students comprised of roughly the other half, with SFU, the Vancouver Film School and the Master of Digital Media Program all fielding about equal numbers. It seemed that each of the resulting teams possessed at least a single individual with some degree of games industry experience, although unbalanced in distribution. For instance, most team members of *One Tonne Punch* and *Treelings* had industry experience, while the remaining teams had considerably less.

Once the last few participants had trickled in, one issue became immediately clear to me: this was a fine group of fellows. And *mostly* fellows. While over half the coordinators of the event were female, only a single woman actually participated. A second arrived to register, but had to back out due to her schedule. It was a little disheartening: even with my minimal experience interacting with game industry professionals, I knew that this was not an accurate reflection of women in gaming. In an interesting twist, however, artist Rachel Curtis was one of the few attending who was *not* studying game design: classical animation was her background. "I figured the (Game Jam) would be neat," says Rachel on her choice to participate, "and I was not surprised when there were not many girls . . . it was a little weird." Hearing about the event through an obscure link from a fellow artists' web page, Rachel signed up on a whim. "I have some experience in game oriented things because I am interested in the art aspect of games, like concept art, but I've no experience." Rachel's background did bring to my attention another interesting outcome of the participant turnout: she was one

of the few dedicated artists. There was an abundance of programmers and designers, but each team typically had no more than single dedicated artist, if any. One team, who appropriately named themselves *Need Artists Inc.*, found they had formed a group with no artists whatsoever. Even Rachel's team *Treelings* described every member of their team as a programmer in the game credits, save for Rachel herself.

This lead me to wonder just how successful we had been at advertising the event to potential participants. The rushed nature the Vancouver Game Jam forced the organizers to spread word through the fastest, most convenient way possible: word of mouth. Magy Seif El-Nasr, the event coordinator, has many contacts among academic and industry communities, which accounted for many of the Masters of Digital Media participants and guest mentors. "I got an email from my school," commented participant Alex Kolosov, "saying 'Hey guys, you should participate, this is an amazing event'." This was the case for most participants. Other coordinators — and myself — spread word through SFU, signing on fellow students for the event. Between both groups we still only managed to attract participants with a strong background in programming and design: few artists, and even fewer sound specialists. Announcements were sent via the internet, but even the most well-crafted email isn't always as persuasive as a casual suggestion from a colleague. Had the organizers been able to nail down a venue for the event earlier on, the mix of participants may have more well-rounded . . . although looking at the final products you wouldn't think they'd been really hurting for more artists. Each team managed exceptionally with what they had.

The Vancouver Conditions

One of the most intriguing and motivating parts of the Global Game Jam was the suggestion of several conditions for the participants to develop their ideas within. In my spare time I run a club at SFU dedicated to discussing concept ideas for games, and experience has shown me that beginning with a theme is always an excellent way to motivate people and focus their attention. Without it, minds wander and ideas become less relevant, which ultimately wastes too much time to produce a solid concept. The same truth is shared with the Game Jam. To expect the participants to collaborate and come up with a unique idea — plucked from all the realms of possibility available to them — then hastily work out all the details and make a fully functional game . . . all within 48 hours? It would have been nearly impossible with so many creative minds, personal preferences and divergent opinions butting heads.

Introducing these conditions cleared up this issue very nicely, and would allow individuals such as myself to really see how radically different cultures around the world would approach identical conditions. Each city around the world had to follow these rules:

- 1. The complete play session must last no more than 5 minutes.**

Although I'm sure it was disappointing for the odd participant's unrealistically epic design goals, I believe this was the most essential of the conditions submitted.

Many experienced participants understood need to pare down their project scope, but first-timers might not be privy to such knowledge. If they wished to complete a game in 48 hours, this condition helped to ensure that.

2. **“As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems.”**

The meatiest of the conditions, this interesting (and challenging) theme would eventually yield some amazing results worldwide. What I appreciated so much was the complexity of it: there were countless ways to interpret this theme and express it through gameplay because it did nothing to specify who, what, when or where. Had the theme been simply ‘Winter’ or ‘Flying,’ the predictability of the resulting games would rob them of their intrigue. Although the vagueness might have proved difficult, the moment I heard it I couldn’t help but laugh at its brilliance: this theme would give the opportunity for some truly spectacular ideas.

Finally, the third and final condition was a list of adjectives that the participants would have to select from to apply to their design. However, I understand that each city was permitted to come up with their own list of 3 to choose from. Vancouver’s adjectives were:

1. **Thin**
2. **Evolved**
3. **Rotating**

Unlike the previous two, I felt this last condition was simply not as strong, or even necessary. While the theme seemed extremely well thought out, these adjectives felt tacked on by comparison. Being given such a clever theme so open to interpretation stimulated up all manner of possibilities . . . and suddenly they needed to twist those ideas to work with one of these terribly mundane terms. I understand each city chose their own, so some adjectives might have been more creative or exciting than Vancouver’s selection. I got the impression that most of our teams choose the adjective that would affect their original idea the *least*, instead of shaping their game around it. While at least one team, *Scorched Physics*, incorporated the adjective ‘Rotating’ into their design, I have still yet to figure out what part of several other games related to one of these adjectives. If the adjectives had been a little stronger (perhaps something more along the lines of ‘Futility’ or ‘Linear’ and more open to interpretation) they might have had a more significant impact on the designs.

Collaboration

One of the original goals of the event was to promote the ‘spirit of collaboration’ between individuals: that despite unfamiliarity with one another participants would use their mutual passion for video games to drive their creative abilities to overcome the challenge before them!

Or at least, such was the intent . . . but to be frank, it’s something that just didn’t happen. One common fact about the Game Jam was that it was voluntary: participants were not obligated to enter (unlike some other, better sponsored locations, Vancouver had to charge admission), and would not be punished or otherwise stopped if they didn’t follow the guidelines of the Game Jam explicitly. For instance, had a team decided they didn’t want to follow the development conditions, well . . . nothing would have stopped them from doing so. Restricting their creativity would have been acting against the intentions of the Game Jam. The other encouragement given to participants before arriving at the event was to *not* form teams. The intent was to meet new people and adapt, instead of merely sticking with friends and colleagues. Let’s take a look at the breakdown of the teams:

- *Treelings* had over half their members from the Masters of Digital Media program.
- 5 of the 6 members of *Blobboy* were from SFU.
- Two thirds of *Scorched Physics* were also SFU students, and they only had 3 members.
- And finally, the teams *Need Artists Inc.* and *One Tonne Punch* contained all but ONE of the participants with an educational background from the Art Institute of Vancouver or the Vancouver Film School.

The result was much like reaching into a bag of jelly beans and pulling out nothing but red ones. You *love* the red ones, but wish you’d gotten at least another flavour to make for some variety. Each of the teams worked very well together: that much I cannot deny. There was little tension, they worked efficiently, and each team completed a game that they could present by 5 PM on Sunday.

With the knowledge I have of each team’s background, I now wonder what each team’s success was attributed to. Were they truly able to work well with new acquaintances with totally unrelated backgrounds and the match-ups being mere coincidence (which I know they were not), or were they only able to work so efficiently because of the history they shared with their team? If we had forcibly separated acquaintances and ensured that teams were (mostly) comprised of strangers, we could have *ensured* that the participants were challenged to prove just how well they collaborate with others under pressure. But . . . I suppose we’ll never be sure. It is understandable that some participants planned a team ahead of time to ensure they had a varied and compatible skill set: being unexpectedly shy a programmer is no laughing matter when mere hours remain until the end. To everyone’s credit, before the final teams were formed there

was a great deal of discussion that was not restricted by existing relationships. It would have been nice to see that carry through to the final teams, though.

Idea Pitches and Team Formation

Many of the participants began planning their game designs and scope before the initial registration time had even concluded. Several of the more experienced participants, such as Stephen Danic, quickly began discussing technical goals and plausible engines with other participants. I found it interesting that some would look to define the technical scope of their project without first considering their design, but considering the time constraints, it made a great deal of sense to ensure a team doesn't try to bite off more than they can chew.

Participants divided themselves into 3 skill groups, a common division I've seen many times before. The groups were designers (obviously those who design and craft the game mechanics and overall experience), artists (including 2D/3D artists, animators and audio specialists) and programmers (the coders who make it all work). It didn't take long for everyone to get talking, and shortly specific ideas began to form. Says programmer Matthew Miner, "It was really exciting trying to come up with an idea so fast, and hearing other people's ideas and trying to formulate in your mind what they would look like. It was a real rush."

Considering the presentation of the game conditions didn't start until 5 PM, participants were asked to pitch their ideas to the group after only about 25 minutes, at 5:30. Now, knowing the outcome of the event, my concerns are perhaps unfounded, but I felt as if the concept development phase was needlessly rushed by the organizers. To quote the master himself:

"A delayed game is eventually good. A bad game is bad forever."

- Shigeru Miyamoto

Creating a good concept for a game is *hard*. Looking at some of the games created around the world, I am simply astounded by just how brilliant some are (how did they think of these ideas so quickly?). I understand that the pitching phase is intended to form teams that share interest in a base idea, and it's possible (even likely) that the idea will evolve into something completely different by the end. But there's still that phase of personal reflection that is crucial to creating a concept that is simple, powerful and yet untainted by the opinions of others. There's plenty of time for a design to change once exposed to the combined scrutiny of a team, but only so much time for an individual to dream up an idea without politely having to consider the opinions of others. If only an additional half-hour, I would have liked to see more time given to participants to create their pitches: it felt pointless to rush them through this stage so early into the event. They only get one shot to present their idea to everyone: let's ensure they're pitching the idea they *want*, not the idea they settled for.

Once the pitches were finished, it didn't take long for teams to form . . . a little over a half-hour, maybe. While participants appeared to have no issue discussing ideas with new acquaintances during these last few steps, once making teams was an issue it was back to business. Individuals familiar with one another came right back together, and groups were quickly established around certain key partnerships. Although the team was ultimately formed by almost entirely SFU students, team *Blobboy* came together over their compatible (and quite similar) pitches. Andrew Osborne, Andrew Pope and Bruce McLavy all pitched ideas where the player is somehow shackled to a non-player character (NPC) that they must control and guide through each stage. Of all the teams, *Blobboy's* final product was the closest to their original pitch (unsurprising, considering half their team pitched ideas with such similar visions).

Creation

There were two primary activities the Global Game Jam was created to promote. The first (collaboration) I have discussed. Remaining is the largest and most significant activity of the entire event: creation. Collaboration, enthusiasm and hard work are all excellent and compelling parts of the Game Jam, but there was a substantive way to measure the efforts of each team: their final game. The abilities, work ethics, project development structure and efficiency of each team determines the quality of the final product, and I did my best to follow the approaches each team took to complete their game. In the end, this event was about the teams: the quality of their experiences dwarf all else, so I will spend some time to summarize the efforts and results of each team in turn.

What became obvious was the difference experience made in the workflow and structure of each team. The teams *One Tonne Punch* and *Treelings* were, arguably, the teams with the most industry experience, and their expertise was reflected in their development approach.

Treelings

With one of the most polished final games of the Vancouver Game Jam, *Treelings* captured a fair amount of my attention, but their intensity forced me to keep my distance most of the time and to avoid interfering with their progress. *Treelings* worked on a 'core mechanic' approach. Until they had all but perfected the most essential part of their game (and ensured it was *fun*) they did not bother finalizing other areas of the design. In fact, they scrapped a few functional versions of the core mechanic before deciding on the one that would appear in their final product. Their design hinged upon the fact that the entire game must first have solid base that everything else is built on: until they had hit that milestone, they could not move forward since any changes would mean wasting valuable time. Besides this goal, *Treelings'* work was quite straightforward. With their familiarity with one another, they had no issues setting work boundaries (made even easier since they had but one dedicated artist on the team) and working efficiently. With 4 designers/programmers working on gameplay, artist Rachel

Curtis was able to spend basically the entire time creating art and animation for the final game. *Treelings* game was undoubtedly the most attractive game at the event. What else stood out was the level of reflection I noticed as they progressed: occasionally the team would stop working altogether to discuss how far they had gotten, and consider what to do with the time that remained. They would break down what they had accomplished, what they needed to finish, and what they could afford to include or remove. They used not one but two(!) of the precious notepads distributed around the room (which, admittedly, only *Treelings* used extensively). By the end, the notepads were covered with milestones, mechanics and extras that were crossed out, circled and otherwise tracked over the course of the Game Jam: the pads could have very well passed for their game design document (of sorts).

One Tonne Punch

However, *Treelings* was not the only team to employ paper heavily in their design process. *One Tonne Punch*, the largest team of the event, gained my attention for their obvious and considerable use of paper prototyping. While I'm sure most teams used paper prototyping to varying degrees, *One Tonne Punch* continued to employ well into the halfway point of the Game Jam. Of all the teams, they had the most detailed (and challenging) puzzle elements in their design which they laid out in explicit detail well before getting a functional prototype. Covering half their table with large sheets of paper, the team sketched out their level layout and puzzle structure, eventually transferring the designs into digital mock-ups that included open areas, moveable items, NPC locations and more. A unique challenge encountered by this team was that they were just too *big*. There were 8 team members in *One Tonne Punch*, and coordinating their activities proved to be a difficult. Having so many opinions and ideas flying around, the team actually found themselves split. The original pitch of Nick Halme about a vertical puzzle platformer was found very interesting by certain team members, while others wanted to incorporate elements of that pitch into Alex Kolosov's story-driven game where the player's goal is to escape a group of pursuers. This led to immediate issues that were (somewhat) countered by the team's size: even with a smaller group working on another design simultaneously, they still had more manpower than *Scorched Physics'* 3 members. What was a greater issue is that their skill sets weren't so evenly split, forcing members to take on roles they had not anticipated.

Despite all this, *One Tonne Punch* distinguished themselves with the greatest focus on narrative. Of all the final games, their deliverable had not only some degree of narrative structure (beginning, middle, end), but also dialogue, morally-influenced decisions and character development. Creating a game with a clearly defined beginning and ending was one of the team's top priorities, and they even tackled a darker theme than I expected many teams would dare attempt. The team also had issues with resource management, as they constantly found themselves relying on the efforts or materials of team members not physically present: on both nights certain members went home for rest or to work on the game from their home computers. According to the team, with only a couple hours left before submission they had still not plugged any art into the game! Talk about cutting it close. Interestingly, the team actually managed *two* games

for the final submission . . . a result of their earlier development division. One was their main deliverable, and the other — although a prototype at best — was functional with distinct differences from their main game. An impressive accomplishment given the time constraints, but if they'd managed to focus their efforts more finely, I believe they might have created an even more impressive game. They would have *greatly* benefited from increased top-down management: by their own admission, there were just “too many chefs in the kitchen.” If the coordinators have more strictly controlled the size of each team, they might have solved this problem before it even began.

Scorched Physics

This was a problem not shared by the smallest of the event's teams. *Scorched Physics* included only 3 team members, and I confess I didn't manage to learn as much about this team as I did the others. The game pitch by team member Alex Lorimer — the basis for the team's final game — did not change too significantly from the original idea. With only 3 team members, they could not afford to have their duties overlap, so there were no noticeable issues with asset creation and collaboration. They shared similarities with *Treelings* in that they were heavily focused on establishing a core mechanic that their game would be based around, but it was of a different nature from *Treelings*. *Scorched Physics* game was more driven by the *technical* part of their game rather than the design. Implied in their very name, they were worked on a simple, gravity driven physics system that allowed the players to alter gravity to work in their favour. The complexity of the system ate up a large part of the team's resources, causing sacrifices to be made for the sake of completion, added to by the fact they synched 2 Xbox 360 controllers to the computer to handle the controls. By the end, they did not actually manage to develop . . . well, a game. Their final product resembled more a technical test or tool rather than a challenging game experience. The player could alter the gravitational pull in certain areas of the game's environment, which in turn controlled the movements of groups of ships that each player was attempting to guide into the 'black hole' in the center of the game screen. *Scorched Physics* game was one of only two teams that made a strictly two-player game. In this game, the player could only win by impeding the flow of the other player's ships into the hole . . . or so was the intent. The final game had simple (but polished) graphics and multiple player actions, but due to a shortcoming in the design it was impossible to significantly control the outcome of the game and actually *win* the game: skill was inconsequential. While I can't honestly say the team lacked a definitive design background, their priority on programming the game's complex back-end hit them hard in the end. Without challenge or relevance for a player's actions, the team's efforts to make a competitive multiplayer game instead resulted in a rather solid tech demo: with just a bit more time, the team could have easily worked out some gameplay issues and made an extremely engaging game.

Need Artists Inc.

The other team attempting a multiplayer game was (the amusingly named) *Need Artists Inc.* The second smallest team with 4 members, they were full of dedicated programmers and designers, but no artists. The team was forced to take on new roles to fill the gaps in development, which led to a few interesting results. Of all the teams participating, *Need Artists Inc.* was a team of extremes. In my eyes, they had the most ambitious game design, the most sophisticated graphics and the most entertaining gameplay. Full 3D graphics and animation, dynamic player-defined environment and challenge, simultaneous multiplayer gameplay using split-screen . . . it was a delight to play and watch! They lacked the polish of other teams, but were able to both experiment *and* succeed. They were originally two separate teams of two that were forced to merge (a member minimum was at the very least enforced), but both had an idea too cherished to give up. “So . . . let’s try and give it up and make something totally different,” said Steven Pugh on their solution to that problem. Sacrificing their personal interests for the greater good was a notably selfless act, although it forced them to make up for valuable lost time.

Another thing I noticed about this team is . . . well, what I *didn't* notice. They were the quietest and most unassuming of the teams, being so focused I was afraid of disturbing them. The team quickly synched with one another and settled into their roles, and there was certainly no shortage of work. While *Treelings* had originally intended to make their game in the 3D engine Unity (provided by one of Global Game Jam’s sponsors), they eventually changed to Flash when they realized it better suited their game idea. *Need Artists Inc.* both designed and implemented their idea in Unity, making it the only 3D game at the Vancouver venue. Like *Scorched Physics*, they also introduced multiplayer control through external gamepads (an excellent choice for both teams, I may add). Their design allowed each player to race across the game field earning points, then use those points to setup traps and obstacles for the other player: this was the *only* game where the player could permanently sculpt the game environment during gameplay. And because it was a multiplayer game, strategy became a factor. Using a 3D minimap (they actually had a fully functional one!), players could see one another, and upon reaching certain checkpoints they could construct an obstacle. I played the game against another player, and I enjoyed the gameplay enough to actually find a broken element of the game and spam so many obstacles the other player couldn’t escape. It was great! For such a quick game, though, it was difficult to get a grasp on the controls and gameplay. For all the team’s efforts, it seems they’d truly tried to do too much in too little time. Many other mechanics had to be trimmed down over the 48 hours, but they never achieved the polish that other teams found with their core gameplay. More attention could have been spent in refinement, but their combination of gameplay mechanics was fun . . . and really, that’s what it’s all about.

Blobboy

Rounding out this gallery of rogues is team *Blobboy*, the second-largest team with 6 members. Consisting of mostly SFU students, this was one of the younger teams with comparatively little industry experience. Unlike most other teams, they had the luck of finding not one, but *three* pitches at the event that had near-identical concepts, and the team formed around them. A more traditional platformer, their design uniquely partnered the player's character with an allied NPC that they had to influence to successfully complete the level. Surprisingly, this was the only team that interpreted the theme so that the two principal groups involved had to cooperate instead of compete. Their game featured a playable 'blob' that could morph itself into different shapes, which the player would use to guide the 'dummy' NPC through the level and protect him from harm. The team planned to have no more than 2 playable levels for the final submission, and an interesting game mechanic to allow the player to move their blob character around. Ultimately, both had to be scaled back heavily, resulting in a single level and simplified mechanic for the blob. It was unfortunate, but the decision really was a result of the team's inexperience. Their programmers were forced to hastily learn the basics of Flash programming, forcing their blob's original ability to move by stretching and grabbing to be cut back to unfurling a tentacle that would act as a barrier to the NPC, reversing his direction. It was simple . . . a little too simple, but necessary. Graphics had to be created, animations made, and the level designed and tested: a steep workload for the team. As I said, each team managed to deliver a functional product, but *Blobboy* was lacking in depth more than the rest. Their committee-driven decisions at the very least assured fairness in decisions while allowing for input from the entire team, and the members learned more over the 48 hours than perhaps most teams did. New skills, work approaches, asset management . . . problems were encountered early on, but they adapted well and corrected their workflow to compensate. "I was really impressed with the programmers that hadn't ever used Flash before but managed to pick it up," said one team member about their rapid adaptation. However, even with all that learning *Blobboy* was hard pressed to achieve even their scaled back goals. I suppose it was a distinct indication of the advantage experience held for a development blitz like this one.

The Teams in Review

As it turned out, volunteer participants make for excellent company. Crammed into a stuffy room and forced to work elbow to elbow for 48 hours would make many people cranky, but for the whole event there wasn't a single incident of blatant conflict. Heck, there wasn't even moderate conflict. It was amazing just how well the teams got along with one another. "It just sort of went," said the members of *Treelings*. "It just gelled and flowed and we're going to do this and this, you do this part I'll do that part." The fact that people were not only volunteering their time to participate, but also *paying* to be there speaks volumes about their dedication. Obviously, they were not *too* stressed going into this event, as they had no qualms about sacrificing an entire weekend to participate. I believe that once they were on the premises, people understood what they

needed to contribute for the event to succeed, and were willing to push their ego to the side and cooperate with others to make the event work. Seriously, not even a minor conflict. I was almost disappointed. “I didn’t expect that everybody would know how to begin, and I was very impressed all the ideas they came up,” commented Vancouver coordinator Magy Seif El-Nasr.

But I was disappointed in at least one way, as much as it pains me to say it. With a group of 26 bright individuals participating, I was hoping that at least one team would present what would be the ‘definitive’ vision of the event’s theme, “As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems.” Somehow, nobody swept me off my feet with their interpretation. Not to say I wasn’t impressed by some of the games, of course: they were great. But as I mentioned before about the sacrifices made by adhering to the adjectives and rushing the pitches, it felt as if none of the teams conveyed the theme through their game in a manner that screamed “YES!” It’s hard to put into words. Imagine having an itch on your back that you just can’t scratch, and asking your partner to scratch it for you. You can tell them ‘higher, lower, to the left’, but they’ll never know precisely where to scratch until they randomly stumble across it. There was no right or wrong interpretation of the event’s theme, which meant it was harder to evaluate just how well each team managed to incorporate it.

A more constructive criticism comes not from myself, but rather the judges who were invited to critique the games at the event’s end. Despite all the experience some teams had to work with, and the polish that went into some designs, every team but *Treelings* failed to properly play test their game externally before the end of the event. It would have been as simple as switching seats for a few minutes to introduce a build of the game to member of another team and ask them to play test the game and offer feedback. Even I — who had nothing but time on my hands throughout most of the event (particularly when the mentors were absent) — was never asked to play test any of the games for feedback. This was prominently criticized by the judges during the final presentations. “If they’d just gotten someone to sit down and play it for 5 minutes they would have known that. Even when you’ve only got 48 hours, play testing is *really* important,” said mentor and judge Dan Taylor on this matter. I understand teams were rushed and kept their games mostly to themselves for the sake of speed, but the minor sacrificed required seemed inconsequential compared to potential benefits they might have reaped from an external perspective.

Global Perspective

Thanks to the vigilance of our technical coordinator, we were one of approximately half the host cities in the world broadcasting live video of our Game Jam, and one of only a handful with audio. As it was, I happened to be sitting immediately next to the camera out of view, and my voice was reported to be perfectly clear to those tuning into the stream. I hope I didn’t embarrass myself *too* much. While it was a little jarring to realize we were being broadcast worldwide, there was rarely more than 7 people watching the feed . . . and half of those people were likely inside the room.

Browsing the streams of other events, there was quality footage of London, Chicago, Glasgow, and a host of other cities. In reality, the cameras . . . had no real effect on the participants at the Vancouver Game Jam. They had their hands full trying to get their games finished. The same went for other cities: sure, it's great to see people in Brazil working away, but . . . that's all they were really doing. Working, just like us. While it made me understand that each city was trying just as hard to get their game finished, the participants weren't really able to benefit from it. There was no system setup for communication between cities. If it did happen, it was through hastily constructed signs with chat information placed in front of the cameras. It didn't really cut it. I did my best to maintain a blog of the Vancouver Game Jam, with images and comments posted about once an hour on average, but it didn't appear as if anyone else was doing the same for other cities. I wasn't even asked to maintain a blog: it was for the sake of the participants and interested others that I did so. In the future, I think it would be an *essential* role for each location: much more informative than just streaming video.

The only way we could really get a feel for the other events (and we tried!) was to browse their games as they were submitted, which wasn't until about halfway through our event due to the time difference. We got to see the finished products of certain cities, but no perspective on what they did, how they worked during the event, or any other information. You can only infer certain details from the finished product, but a few photos of hard-at-work participants can speak volumes. Otherwise, I can't offer many other suggestions to make the participants feel involved at an international level. They just had too much work to do to let it worry them.

Reflecting on the Event

The Global Game Jam is quite a challenge to evaluate. To my knowledge (and that of creator Susan Gold), the event was the first of its kind: a worldwide amateur game development event with locations on every major continent — simultaneously! There were more games created over that weekend than in a *month* of industry releases. There's nothing really to compare it to, which leaves me a little with little choice but to hope for the best and press on.

The Good

To look at the event as a contained entity, there was little to complain about. Wonderful participants, impressive final products, and easy access to hundreds of games produced worldwide. To access the Global Game Jam site and find all these games to play and enjoy was a breeze (granted they're compatible with my computer), and information about the event was easy to find. Once things were in motion, there was never any loss in momentum on the behalf of the coordinators or the participants. The mere fact that it was voluntary guaranteed that only dedicated people would be involved (and trust me: only the most dedicated people are willing to spend \$25 to be hard at work and sleep deprived for 48 hours). "Awesome, but tiring," was the summary Peter

Gao gave to me at event's end. "I'm just going to go home and crash as soon as I get home."

I'd like to state again that I *loved* the theme selected to guide the development of all the Game Jams around the world. I don't know who thought of it, but it was both inspiring and challenging: I wish I'd been able to participate so I could take a crack at it!

There was overwhelmingly positive feedback from the participants. "When people come together in the spirit of collaboration without thinking about on how to capitalize on on this, even though that is there," concludes the members of *One Tonne Punch*. "But when it's a Game Jam and you know this is a revolution: it's people across the globe making games in 48 hours. The kind of innovation that unleashed in people blows my mind away and truly inspires me. That's why I loved these participants."

The event was a hit: they loved it, they learned from it, they wanted more and they'll be back next year if its still on. There's little more satisfying than being patted on the back and told 'good job' over something that took such a tremendous amount of work to organize. The mentors and judges had nothing but praise for the event, which gives even more reason to do it all again next year. Susan Gold apparently got a few critical comments from some veteran game developers stating the event should have gone at least 4 days, but in my humble opinion that's *crazy* for a voluntary event. Our student participants wouldn't have been able to spare so much time, and it wouldn't fit into even a long weekend. 48 hours seemed *just* right, which artist Alex Kolosov agreed with: "48 hours, in my opinion, is a pretty good time to basically come up with something fast and something valuable,"

After riddling the judges and mentors with questions, I also discovered that many elements and demands of the Game Jam overlapped key parts of the professional development cycle in the industry (simplified, of course). Judge and mentor Mitch Lagran comments that "It obviously relates directly to rapid prototyping. You've got your idea, then after that most of the teams did proper pre-production and paper prototypes, planned it out, made schedules, and divided up the work just as you would in professional game development." "You're basically boiling down an entire product cycle into 48 hours," agrees Dan Taylor, another judge and mentor for the event. "I think that level of crunch is fairly indicative of working on a proper game team. People on game teams are very dedicated, very passionate, they put in the extra hours to make sure that their game is as awesome as possible and ships on time. This is going to be quite a good indicator of the level of stress."

The Game Jam was also an excellent source of industry stimulus: there was a good deal of buzz about the event in the lower mainland of British Columbia, and many North American news sites ran stories on the event (most are accessible from the Global Game Jam website). It was good way for some eager young game developers to get their foot in the door, make some contacts, and will be great entry on any resume.

The Bad

I suppose 'The Bad' is a rather nasty title, but 'New-But-Needing-Polish' isn't as catchy. The event was brand-spanking new: there's no helping that. Things needed to be experimented with, people organized for the first time, and precedents set for the future. Lessons learned from this year will (hopefully) allow next year's to evolve into an even more successful event.

The odd bits on managing the event and imposing conditions on participants or providing communication between cities I've already gone over, but what really summarizes them is *lack of assertiveness*. The event was just too soft, on the whole. Caution was taken in too many areas out of fear that it would discourage creativity and collaboration, but I feel it weakened key parts of the event. Challenge the participants. Make people communicate with one another. Enforce conditions. Offer feedback on designs. Organize learning sessions for tools. These are either newcomers who are learning for the first time how to make a game in a time crunch, or experienced developers looking to challenge themselves. They'll be able to handle what we throw their way: after all, there's ultimately no penalty for not having a complete game to submit. That's not failure: it's just a learning experience.

What bothered me most about the entire event had to do with logistics and support. It seemed that as soon as we were no longer dealing with people directly involved in the event, we had problems. It took months to find a location that would meet the event's minimal needs for space: stopped by unreasonably high liability agreements, rental costs, lack of sponsorship . . . even the home SFU campus of the event coordinator demanded too much to provide us space to use, and it wasn't until the last minute that we were given space at another SFU campus to use. Hired security was lackadaisical in allowing participants to enter and leave the campus for food, and we weren't even able to bring bottled water to the participants without being told about the strict 'catering food only' policy. The food we were forced to pay catering costs for was average at best (and when compared to prices for food in the immediate area, much too expensive).

The coordinators were operating on a bare-bones budget. Using volunteered equipment and renting everything else, costs were kept as low as possible and reserved for renting event space, internet access and paying for catering. Electronic Arts was kind enough to donate 5 PC games to reward participants with, and it turns out that was just enough for one game per team (who then had to decide themselves what to do with the game). If we'd had more prizes to give away we might have been able to rank the games and reward teams accordingly, but donations were difficult to find. Vancouver is *full* of all manner of game development companies, but it was a challenge to find *any* sponsorship or donations.

We even had a hard time getting a large enough space to hold the event. Our power requirements were nothing major, and we could have adapted to just about any kind of location, but the room we received was just *barely* big enough to fit an adequate number of participants. As I said, 40 people was the legal maximum, and with the

coordinators there that limited our participant count to no more than 30. In hindsight, though, we easily filled those 30 registration slots, and had we aimed for getting more participants we might have been in trouble. Hopes for having more participants in the future was mirrored by most teams when questioned during the event.

The Promising

If you're hoping for a simple evaluation of the world's first Global Game Jam, it was a success. People loved it. We now *know* it's a good idea and can guarantee a substantial turnout next year: heck, we had a substantial turnout this year and nobody in Vancouver could have predicted how it would turnout. There is absolutely no reason not to try it all again next year. But not the same way.

Improvements can be made. More time can be spent on finding a venue, promoting the call for participation and gaining sponsorship. The Vancouver event was hanging by a thread for far too long, and we need to use the success of this year's Global Game Jam to prepare for next year and strike while the iron is still hot to find support. The new-found confidence of the organizers of the Game Jam should be utilized to make next year's event, bigger, more ambitious and more demanding.

To convey parting comment from *Treelings* near the end of the event, "To be perfectly clear for anyone who (reads) this, building a game in 48 hours is ridiculous and stupid and insane and you absolutely *must* do it!"

Finally, we need *more people*. Not in numbers per se, but a more even distribution worldwide. We got cities from all over participating, but the North American contribution to the game jam was the most significant, but they only represent part of world's leading game developers. Japan, home of both the Playstation and Nintendo brands, had only Kyoto involved in the event, with 3 participants in total. This is nowhere *near* an accurate picture of the distribution of successful game companies: I would have loved to see some Korean made games as well, where online games such as Starcraft remain immensely popular a huge part of their entertainment industry. But we can only hope to inform as many people as our contacts allow, making this a huge challenge to overcome.

Closing Comments

8,000 words later I find myself finally out of things to say. Susan Gold, I applaud your efforts in making the Global game Jam a reality: you have created a meaningful experience for enthusiasts in cities around the world. To Magy Seif El-Nasr and her coordinators, for volunteering your time to take responsibility for Vancouver's Game Jam I salute you. To the sponsors, you have contributed to an important step in the growth of your industry.

And to the participants: your dedication, passion and sacrifice are what made this event such a success. You have been a part of a creative union unlike any other within the games industry, and helped give birth to what will hopefully become a significant and lasting part of the future of amateur game development.

My name is Cody Church, a 5th year game design student in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology of Simon Fraser University, and in my opinion the 2009 Global Game Jam was a historic event that took a bit too soft an approach to during its first year yet shows great room for development and expansion . . .

. . . and I can't wait to be involved again next year.

Contact me at cchurch@sfu.ca

Read my Global Game Jam at: www.ggjvancouver09.blogspot.com