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GET STUCK IN THE JAM

Ruby Meades

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GET STUCK IN THE JAM

Ruby Meades

It is possible for games to be made in a weekend. If you are new to game development, a student, want to practise or trial an idea or mechanic, have a new team and want to test the dynamics or a pipeline, or want to join a creative community—the answer to all of this is to participate in a game jam. Online or in person, locally or internationally, there are game jams running all the time with themes and due dates to stimulate a plan to get something done. A game jam with low stakes can simply be fun; a weekend is a quick enough turnaround to not distract from any main jobs; it is potentially a good break from a current project; and it can help you to fall back in love with making games. More tertiary institutions across the motu could be organising and encouraging game jam participation for their creative students and staff, reaping the benefits to learning and adding to a body of work.



Figure 1. Collection of game jam advertisements designed by various people.

WHAT IS A GAME JAM?

Game jams involve making games digitally or physically usually under a time restriction and theme. One weekend is a great length of time to dedicate to a jam, though anecdotally there has been a rise of week-long jams to better suit the schedules of people in the industry, and even studios organising their own in-house jams over two or more weeks to fuel creativity and boost morale. Examples of now popular game titles that started out as game jam games include *Hollow Knight*

(Team Cherry, 2017).[1] One of the biggest game jams in the world is the Global Game Jam®, which has been running for nearly two decades.[2] This organisation likens the game jam to the "jam sessions" of multiple musicians, who each "feel and feed off of the others."[3] In 2026 there were 94 countries hosting sites across the world with 9,874 games created.[4]



Figure 2. Ruby Meades and Christopher Popham presenting at NZGDC 2025.

At the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT), there has been at least one facilitated game jam each year since 2019, where teams of students collaborate and make a game over a weekend. Screen Arts tutors Ruby Meades and Christopher Popham have helped organise and have participated in game jams at SIT each year since 2021, and the game jam tips covered in this article reflect those presented by the SIT tutors at the New Zealand Game Developers Conference in 2025 based on their prior years of game jam experiences.[5] Making games each year has helped work out the muscle of game development, test software and inform class content. Nine games can be downloaded and played for free on itch.io with teams varying from two to 14 people.[6]

GETTING THE TEAM TOGETHER

Making a game can be a solo endeavour or involve a studio of departments. Around six to eight core people is a decent team size depending on the roles they are willing to do. A discussion with the team is recommended to outline availability across the event timeline and ascertain which roles team members are interested in. Roles in game development can span a wide range from art to code to animation and audio. Ideally, you should be ready to try new things, put on

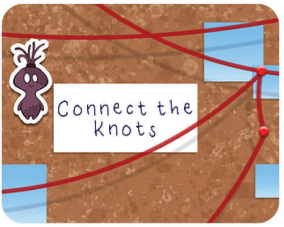
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Check out these games that were made in 48 hours or less over odd weekends for game jams over the years.



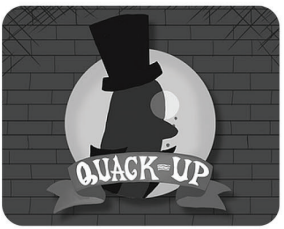
Careful What You Fish For
In a small rural NZ town, a cult triggers a unique event one evening...
Adventure



Connect The Knots
Restore a memory by collecting your friends
Platformer



Save The Date!
Manually override the old computer system before Y2K catastrophe!
Adventure



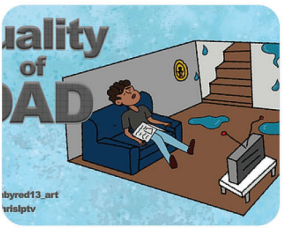
Quack Up
Quack needs to find punchlines so his Dentist turned comedian can make people laugh!
Adventure



La Chia
Play as a super soldier doing the bidding of mysterious leaders.
Adventure



Grub 2 Bug
Tavo finds himself transitioning into a bug & wants to find out why
Role Playing



Duality of DAD
Dad's gotta fix the bathroom... if only he knew where his wrench was...
Platformer



Tropical Escape
Explore around to find a way to free your stuck vehicle!
Adventure



Curse of Sobek
Explore a crypt to try and discover a lost civilization
Platformer

Figure 3. Collection of collaborative game jam games at SIT.

a few different hats and not be afraid to give suggestions and feedback throughout. Joining a jam will expand networks and possible future collaborations. There is usually something to do the entire time, and, to keep on track, it is helpful to have someone be a project manager of sorts to delegate tasks plus motivate the team. Communication is important during the jam to update all who are participating. It is also not silly to survey any relevant legal considerations of ownership and use of the idea and content that will be made. Establish a team goal to establish unity and the motivations behind why everyone is participating; a personal goal adds another incentive. In a game jam with low stakes, any game goal is valid: balancing art and code, or favouring one, or just getting part of a concept that did not exist before. The point is not to produce a game ready for release, but getting something new to function and inform a future project makes it worthwhile to add to a portfolio or library of work.

Technical things to consider for a game jam include hardware, software, internet, power—all are integral and need to be in good working order. Key to smooth production is a file and folder management system that the team knows and a place to post and share. There is no set software to use; it could be an opportunity to learn a new one or be comfortable in the familiar. Game jams are a good way to refresh 21st-Century skills (Contreras-Espinosa and Eguia-Gomez 2022).[7] Do not forget to schedule in time to eat and sleep. Providing accessible snacks and water is important for the team. It can be tempting to go all night with these weekend jams, but a solid nap refreshes everyone, especially if is there is any conflict and tension. If the team is burning like a candle the entire time, there may be nothing left at the end and the mental tax is not as rewarding compared to having a break and compromising on the end product. Recovery time from a weekend game jam is also something to take into consideration. It is fine if commitments change, just keep communication clear with the team and even yourself. Be aware of the surroundings and ask for help if needed; know who to ask and how to best contact them.

GAME JAMMING

Game jams usually have a theme for teams to work towards, chosen by the host and revealed at the start of the jam time. Once the theme is revealed, the first step for any team is a brainstorming session, with each team member contributing ideas and doodling on paper or a digital whiteboard; it can be interesting to see what eventually sticks. There is a knack to feeling when it is time to pause coming up with new ideas and to pick a couple of core directions and expand on them. Focusing on a core idea or mechanic is key; an existing world or character could be brought into the brainstorming time to help narrow down the scope and find the plan sooner. Being conscious of the time is important given the limited time span, with the aim of the game plan being reasonably clear by the end of the first night. It is recommended to go on a break after the brainstorming session and come back with fresh eyes, to check that all agree. A more casual setting away from devices may even spark some different ideas.

There are particular areas of the game development pipeline where there is some wiggle room to make minor changes to the idea, but there must be some negotiation if suggesting any sudden big changes. Clear bullet points are great to keep the team on the same page. A moodboard of existing images then provides a visual path towards a cohesive vision and can help inform the concepting. There is not a lot of time to iterate or try many different variations, so a game jam is about finding confidence in an initial design and avoiding too much second guessing, especially if the team is encouraging. Fostering a positive environment is a big part of a 48-hour time crunch; coming away having had fun is more beneficial than being stuck on trying to make the perfect

product or being too stubborn to collaborate. Game jams help grow soft skills to work in a group and see a project through from beginning to end.[8]

Play-testing games throughout the jam can be tricky to coordinate, but beneficial particularly near the end. Make it part of the schedule to bring in someone fresh; have enough there to play and test but also some time to adjust if needed. No matter the end game result, put the outcome somewhere for people to see, such as on social media or itch.io. It is valid and allows reflection on how to adapt better for next time. Each jam will never be the exact same experience, for better or worse, but that is all part of the learning and a way to prepare for future projects. Gaining the 'experience points' (XP) is what it is all about—trying something new and then seeing how it can inform other things in your life and career.



Figure 4. Collection of game jam concepts by various graduates of SIT.

ORGANISING A GAME JAM

If there is no jam being organised in your local area, then hosting a jam may be the solution and do not be afraid to host and participate. Confirm the venue and facilities as well as security over the intended time period and know the capacity limits. An online jam is an alternative to a physical location, if needed, as proven during 2021.[9] Make sure to provide a contact and establish key health and safety elements. Collectively agree to have a respectful time and be the exemplar to the participants, especially newbies. Occasional monitoring of the other teams is important throughout; providing some sustenance like snacks and water and encouraging breaks goes a long way to boost morale and keep teams engaged. So too does following up with everyone to see how it went and any feedback for improvement. An overall positive experience is the main thing to gain the confidence to do it all again in the future. There are now many resources out there to help and a community across the globe to support more game jam sites.[10] Eventually, they basically run themselves with low effort but high reward.

It has been proven that games can be made in a weekend even at the bottom of the world. Who knows, maybe one day the game you make is featured as a success story from a game jam.[11] Get stuck in the jam and get inspired.

Ruby Meades is a Screen Arts tutor alongside Christopher Popham at Southern Institute of Technology in Invercargill. Ruby specialises in 2D animation and games while Christopher teaches graphic novel illustration and 3D animation. Game jams are a key creative output each year to collaborate and keep up to date with technology and skills.

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