Contextualising nonattendance of eligible students to Global Game Jam locations

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the attitudes to the Global Games Jam, not from the students that do take part – but the ones that don't. With a successful track record of hosting Global Game Jam locations, at Staffordshire University it has become apparent that the same students attend year on year. This proposed research sets out the setting for Staffordshire University's game related courses, and the areas that will be addressed by questioning the students that's don't attend the 2014 Global Game Jam event.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8 [Personal Computing]: Games

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Engagement, Motivation, Game Jam, Community, Attendance,

1. INTRODUCTION

Staffordshire University's Games Design group is one of the largest in the university, with near to 500 students studying one of the 4 distinct Games Design programs of study. This is augmented by popular Computer Games Programming & Games Concept Art degree programs. While there are few other points of cross in the everyday running of the games courses, the annual Global Game Jam event provides an opportunity for students from all aspects of the university to take part in the event. The event is also open to prospective students, alumni and anyone else interested in making games.

Having had such a long connection to the Global Game Jam event, it's clear that there are interesting elements of research and questions to be answered within our student body.

Within the small, but growing field of game jams related research the majority of research currently on game jams appears to focus on the processes undertaken by the participants as they jam. Arya et al's work looks at Process Choices [1] and Guevara-Villalobos has looked at the relationships between community and labour [2] but there has been little on the reasons that motivate students to attend a Global Game Jam – or any other short game creation event.

The closest work in this field looks at engagement, primarily within the Nordic Gam Jam [3], and adaptability of jams in other cultures. [4] This study will look at the motivations of those that do take part in a game jam, but holding up a mirror to those that don't.

2. GAMES STUDENTS AT STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY

Since 2004 Staffordshire University has had a Games Design programme, original built on an Interactive Entertainment Technology undergraduate degree programme, and bolstered by successful Computing & Entertainment technology areas within the university. Original part of the school of Engineering and Advanced technology in the intervening decade the department has moved to be part of the Faculty of Computing, Engineering & Technology and now resides in the School of Art & Design, part of the Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies.

There are three distinct areas of Games within the University, all of which are family autonomous with little overlapping. They are:

- Computer Games Design / Technology
- Computer Games Programming, part of the School of Computing.
- Games Concepts Design, part of the Film & FX team.

While topics overlap, and in some cases technology, there are currently only limited opportunities where the students from these three groups are encouraged to work together.

All of these students are currently located on the same physical campus, and are the healthiest courses in numbers of cohort. The portfolio of courses covers both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, all of which are in science or engineering (BSc, BEng, MSc or MEng).

2.1 Who are our students

In looking at the smaller demographic of students that study games, and take part in the Global Game Jam, it will be necessary to do a more detailed analysis of our student body as a whole. Specifically the gender divide, a common issue raised with the

students and an area of concern for the university, anecdotally the Stafford campus, where the students are all based, has a ratio of 8 or 9 males to every 1 female in the computing and technology areas. Other areas that will be assessed are race and possibly academic attainment before entering university.

Academically the students range across 3 separate strata of education, within the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland [5].

- Level 3 – a foundation Year, at the same level of study as further education colleges.
- Levels 4-6 – the three years of the undergraduate study
- Level 7 – Master level study

Within the largest area, Computer Games Design / Technology the students are studying one of four distinct programmes of study – each focussing on a different aspect of creating games.

- Computer Games Design – our broadest and longest running award
- Computer Games Design & Programming (overlapping with the Computer Games Programming award)
- Computer Gameplay Design & Production – focussing on core gameplay design.
- Games Technical Art (which overlaps with Games Concepts Design)

To give and idea of the numbers of students the following table shows the break down to students across the programme area:

Table 1 – The 2013/14 Computer Games Design / Technology student cohort in numbers, by award programme and academic level.

Level 3	
Games Design Extended	44
Level 4	
Computer Games Design	89
Gameplay Design & Production	35
Games Technical Art	14
Games Design & Programming	42
Level 5	
Computer Games Design	78
Gameplay Design & Production	25
Games Technical Art	5
Games Design & Programming	10
Level 6	
Computer Games Design	54
Gameplay Design & Production	21
Games Technical Art	4
Games Design & Programming	8
Games Audio Design	2
Level 7 & Masters	17

To complete the picture Computer Games Programming has approximately 120 students spread over tress years (levels 4-6) and Games Concepts Design have a further 60 students.

2.2 What do they study

Since they are science related courses, developed under engineering or computing based regimes, they are focussed on producing portfolio pieces using industry software. They all involve group work, as well as individual assignment across all the academic levels. The study of theory and the fundamentals of aspects such as 3D modelling or Game Engine physics is interwoven throughout the relevant modules.

There is limited scope for them to 'make games' – although some modules and elements of assignments have taken nods from the Global Game Jam and worked rapid prototyping or experimental game creation into the fabric of assignments.

3. INVOLVEMENT WITH GLOBAL GAMES JAM

With such a large cohort of students and the backing of the university Staffordshire University has been taking part in the Global Game Jam since 2010. The event is initially organised by the Games Design / Technology team but is open to all. In the intervening years the participation of students has grown sharply. The following chart, taken from the data collected by the GGJ's own registration website shows this upturn.

Final Number of Participents in Global Game Jams at Staffordshire University
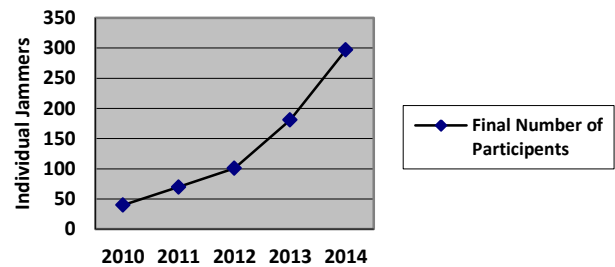
This trend in growth sees no sign of stopping, with 297 registered students at the 2014 Jam. [6] While this is positive, it's clear from a glance at the spreadsheets that the same students are attending year on year. While this retention is encouraging, it asks a larger question – if we have on campus approximately 700 students that are studying some part of games development, why do only a quarter of them take part?

4. WHO ARE OUR JAMMERS?

The bulk of the information about our jammers is limited by the registration process on the Global Game Jam website. We do not employ any other sign up page, believing that they key is to have as few barriers to entry and participation as possible. Similarly there is no charge for the jam and no real limit on who can join.

The jam is an open and informal event, publicised on social media, and closer to the time in classes, bulk e-mails and lectures. Since the jam site has grown overtime, and each year has been a positive experience with a strong word of mouth following then it's safe to assume that the publicising of the jam site within the university is fairly wide ranging.

In a broader sense the jam participants can be categorised into three distinct groups;

- Staffordshire University Games Design Students

- Other Staffordshire University Students
- Non Staffordshire University Students

4.1 Why do they jam?

The students seem aware of the benefits of games jams. Industry talks and articles about the benefits of games jamming, e,g 'Jamming your way into the industry' [7] are frequently shared with students. Anecdotally they see the games jams as positive experiences, helping them to hone skills, develop new ones and boost cv's. Those looking to go into the more formalised games industry see it as a way to bolster their cv, those looking to be indie developers see it as a way to develop working practices.

Participants also note the social and fun aspects of the Game Jam, since it falls at the start of the second semester, when the work load is less and it's optional and out of the academic structure there is a sense of community. Returning Jammers, especially alumni that have entered industry and are returning for the weekend are referred to as 'veterans' and new jammers as 'fresh meat' or 'noobs' in common with popular gamer parlance and terminology. The sense of community is fostered online, through a Facebook event that acts as a communication hub. Although preformed groups can be arranged, most participants enter a lucky dip draw to join groups – again fostering the social side.

The anecdotal evidence gathered, through informal conversations with the students that have taken part are backed up by the research presented on engagement in Nordic Game Jam [3]. and by local press from other game jams [8]. It's clear the message and purpose of the Global Game Jam is being heard loud and clear by some.

5. METHADOLOGY AND PROCESS

5.1 Identifying Non Jammers

Within the on campus community of the games design students especially the benefits of attending and taking part in a games jam seem evident. This still leaves the question of why such a small proportion of our total games students on campus take part – assuming that they too have the goal of entering the games industry. Since the bulk of them are traditional, on campus students, there should not be any logistical or financial barriers to them taking part. Similarly they have attended the same classes and should have the same or comparable skill set as their jam participating students.

Since there are no evident outlying external factors it must be assumed that there are internalised reasons for these students not wanting to take part in a key event in the annual calendar, especially one with such widely publicised added benefits.

This group will be identified once the surveys data has been collected and a number of choices have been actioned. The core group will be those that are current students at Staffordshire University, studying a Games Related course, who did not sign up to a 2014 Global Game Jam Site.

5.2 Survey Design & Questions

In order to capture the relevant data an online survey was constructed. Key information points within the survey were as follows

- Are you / have you been a student at a university or college?
  - o This would then capture details of location of study, final level of study, and year of graduation

- Did you attended a global game jam site in 2014
  - o A yes answer captured details of the Jam Site they attended, what attracted them to it, had they attended jam sites in previous years, what they knew about the Global Game Jam and how they heard about the first Jam they attended

  - o A no answer asked them why they didn't sign up to a 2014 Global Game Jam location, if they signed up but didn't attend, or didn't sign up. This led to similar questions as the previous option, asking what they knew about Global Game Jam etc but also including why they signed up initially but didn't attend, or why they didn't sign up
- Finally the survey asked them to list their strongest skill in the field of games development.

Since the focus of the survey was not to include any identifiable data about the jammers that questions of the sort were not included. The survey was set up in such a way that the data would be recorded in blocks for ease of analysis and clarity.

5.3 Contacting Students and previous Jammers

In order not to single out students, and to get as wide a selection of responses as possible, the survey was sent out to all students who had attended a Global Game Jam event since 2010 at Staffordshire University.

The survey was also sent out generally to all students currently studying at Staffordshire University on a Games related course. Since specific data about the identity of the respondents was not collected it does raise the issue of duplication of data, but it's a small possibility with limited consequences for the integrity of the survey.

The final data set had 98 responses, 87 of which had studied at Staffordshire University and only 4 of those not studying a course related to Games. These 83 responses covered all available levels of studies on offer, from level 4, the foundation year, through to Level 7 Masters students. The Majority of responses – 46% were from students in, or had reached their final and in most cases 3rd years of study – Level 6. This reflects the number of alumni we have attending the annual event.

Of those 83 Students in the area of study, 26 of them stated that they did not attend in 2014. Of those 15 were current students, with expected graduation dates in 2014 or beyond. A further 2 of these did sign up the 2014 Global Game Jam event, but did not attend. Both if these stated reasons were for social or religious reasons.

6. Results of the Non Jammers

Two questions are important to understanding the students that could attend, were on site, had the relevant skills but chose not to. The survey asked all respondents what they knew about 'Global Game Jams' (question 4a) and 'Why did you not sign up to a 2014 Global Game Jam Location' (question 4b).

6.1 Textual Responses to 'question 4a'

3 of the Non-Jammers had attended a Global Game Jam before. Unsurprisingly they had the clearest idea of what an event constituted: For example

> "Teams club together over a long weekend to make games based in a preset the / buzz word / coined phrase. Having a successful game coming out of GGJ is a very useful opportunity. Staffs uni is a major force in the world of GGJ."

Even those that had not attended had a good grasp of what a Global Game Jam constituted of. Most knew it ran for a 48hr period, and contained making a game about a specific theme. Some were also aware of haw it differed from other competitions, as this response states:

> "It is a world-wide (obviously) event which encourages the development of games. Making games can be tough, and GGJ enables people to participate in the development process and realise what they can accomplish. Unlike Ludum Dare there is less of a competitive element, and the spirit of the event is learn, create and play. Successful GGJ games sometime flourish into full-fledged games."

One final response was of interest

> "... Nothing about the standard of game which we would be making, if there were any guidelines etc."

6.2 Textual Responses to 'question 4b'

The majority of the responses of why they did not sign up mentioned financial hardship of some kind, either working nights which would stop them enjoying the experience fully or they had other, usually family commitments which stopped them from attending. Two responses were of interest:

> "Monumental waste of time. Time attending these jams would be better spent working on actual projects worthy of attention and/or capable of proper planning.

> "My previous experience of the jam was that it disrupted my sleep and buzz for the coming semester. At this crucial stage of my degree, I would rather have the most time possible working towards my modules."

One final answer, to the same question to a non Staffordshire University student was also interesting – "Have done several game jams now and am more interested in a longer term project outside the scope of a game jam."

7. Conclusions

With such a small eventual pool of non-jammers to which to draw conclusions it's good to see that external, as opposed to more internalised factors kept the eligible students away. Only one response mentioned not feeling they didn't have the skills to participate. Many of the non-attendees cited a lack of awareness of the event which can be changed in future.

Encouragingly 74% of all of the responses attended a Global Game Jam event in 2014, if not at Staffordshire University. Half of those having that did attend had never attended a previous event. The answer to question 5 about skills also showed that there was no one area of game development skills that en-mass didn't attend, so the event as it is inclusive, including one response where the event hasd encouraged them to learn more game development skills "...so I can do more in next years event."

Awareness of the core principals of The Global Game Jam [9] are also strong, with only a few students thinking the event had a competitive element. Unsurprisingly convenience and familiarity with the main reasons why students attended their choosing jam site in 2014, weather it was Staffordshire University or not.

It is clear however that this research methodology only really engaged the students who were already engaged with the university, either via e-mail or social media. Further work is needed to discuss with the students who didn't attend a Global Game Jam event, to find out why they did not attend. It's possible focus group and informal conversations might elicit responses that they survey did not, and shed some further light onto the continued nonattendance of eligible students to future Global Game Jam events.

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