

Global Gam Jam: How Can Game Jams Benefit the Educational Process

Interview with Tarja PORKKA-KONTTURI

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Tarja Porkka-Kontturi is a games industry professional from northern Finland. She is the Director of Communications at Global Game Jam, Business Development Manager at The International Games Summit on Mental Health, Event Organizer at Nordic Game, and toys, games & tech PR and marketing specialist at PR Nordic. Porkka-Kontturi is a board member of We in Games Finland, and Diverse game developer mentor at IGDA. Her specialties are issues around and about diversity, inclusion and accessibility.

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Martina Kobetičová is a student at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication and her field of study is the Theory of Digital Games. She specialises in organising various events such as Game Jams, Game Conferences or festivals, mainly TEDI Game Jams organised by the Faculty of Mass Media Communication, but also Global Game Jam, Bratislava Game Jam and Game Days. Martina is part of the organisation team for the festivals UniCon and Game Days. Topics of interest in the Theory of Digital Games include marketing, communities around games and genres studies.

Martina Kobetičová (M. K.): Global Game Jam (GGJ) is a worldwide event. It all started in 2009 with 53 sites. How did this idea of a global game jam occur?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: The following answer has been provided to me by Susan Gold, the principal founder of the Global Game Jam: I got the idea of jamming and how GGJ came together while I was at a conference in Gotland. I saw three games that were made at the Nordic Game Jam. I had never really heard of a game jam and I thought this would be a really good way to get my students (I am a professor) to make a game from start to finish. As in classes at the time, the most you would do was a level. (Remember we didn't have tools – students had to make their own engines...Unity really got a huge push from GGJ because David was a friend of Gorm's and GGJ distributed licenses for them.) But beyond just students making games, I had this idea, what if I could do a game jam that connected people? This was inspired by what at the time seemed new and novel, synchronous experiences, the example I was using was DJ's mixing music in Paris at a club while another DJ who was mixing in Montreal mixing with Paris – and I was listening and dancing in Chicago with my friends in London, Rio and LA. What I wanted to see happen was a global buzz of creativity. The idea comes all together in my head and I approached the Nordic Game people, I introduced myself (they were all outside smoking) and said I loved what they were doing. What if we did this globally? They kind of hemmed and hawed and dismissed me. Then about an hour later I saw Gorm and he said, he kind of liked the idea and let's talk. So, I came back to Chicago and called my friend Ian. I said, what if we did this huge jam, could he help me? He said, yes and then we talked with Gorm via Skype and we came up with the name, Global Game Jam. At the time I was the chair of the IGDA Education SIG. I asked if they could help me start this, I applied for a grant and got 500 USD. That was July 2008. I then approached Chris Hecker, Doug Church and Jonathan Blow to ask for advice on how to do a good jam. I then went to my own personal advisory board (yeah, I had amazing people... Eric Zimmerman, Katie Salen, Robin Hunicke, Mark DeLaura, Warren Spector, Kathrine Isbister) and talked about what outcomes we should aim for – they essentially were my support system in the beginning. In August of that year, I put together some postcards and went to SIGGRAPH in LA. I sat as the chair of game education there too and had access to educators around the world. I passed out the cards, I talked to everyone I could, desperately trying to get all of the continents covered. (Never have btw, we never got Antarctica, we get as far south as Tierra del Fuego). I also pushed for the ISS – never been able to do that either, but I have spoken to NASA several times trying to jam at the ISS.

M. K.: What is your opinion on the integration of game jams in the educational process (e.g., at high schools, universities)? Do you have personal experience with this?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: Game jams are definitely something that can be integrated into the educational process, and I strongly believe it would benefit the students in various ways. Skills we need, use and build when developing a game are not only very important STEM skills, but also teamwork, creativity and social skills. *Global Game Jam NEXT* (<https://ggjnext.org>) is a game jam focusing on youth (12-17yos) and it's easily adaptable into schools' curricula. I teach game development for 10-15 years olds as part of their school club activities and I work with them very much in a game jam style, despite the fact that we have a longer time period to use. For university students, game jams are absolutely a great addition in the educational process, I studied game development in the jamming system in Centria GameLab: We had changing teams and roles, and we created 4 different games from scratch during one academic year. It was such a great and extremely valuable experience.

M. K.: Game jams are great way of learning new skills and also improving those one already has. How would you encourage someone that never tried jamming and is afraid because they may feel unskilled?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: There's nothing to be afraid of! For example, Global Game Jam is not a competition, it's for pushing your creativity, enjoying the process and developing new skills on top of the ones you already might have. It's for uniting in the game development process and having fun! There are no such things as unskilled in game jams; everyone can find a suitable role and test their boundaries while having fun.

M. K.: You've said that you work with 10-15 years olds and you work with them in a very much game jam like style, could you maybe describe this process a bit more?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: With children I let them figure out their team roles or teams, depending on how many they are, by themselves but of course I offer some guidance. Sometimes there are children who are very shy or insecure and others that are more extrovert and vocal – like in any group or community. Therefore, I try to gently guide the team forming process in a way that it truly leaves room for their independent decisions. I think it's extremely important to listen to the children and their wishes and feelings. The process is firmly based on game jam structure, but I give it checkpoints as I was working as senior producer. First comes the idea and genre of the game, which is naturally a bit limited by the possible engines and work flows we're able to use with the children. For example, creating a complicated RPG would be impossible, like it would be in a game jam also. After having a basic idea for the game that everyone (we cannot always reach the consensus of course) agrees on, I explain the process steps which roughly are a) creating art b) coding c) narrative design d) UX/UI e) sound design f) possible marketing side exercises. Not in that order, but overlapping, happening at the same time. It's important to keep things simple and achievable, every step has to have enough time spent on it. All the tasks and schedule have to be adjustable also, with children especially it has no positive outcome if we keep pushing too much and do not leave room for the wonderful creative process and blooming.

M. K.: Would you say that children respond better to this method? If so, in which way?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: I do believe and have seen it from my own experience that children do respond better to this method. There are so many things you can teach through game jam structure! While developing extremely important STEM skills, you also develop team working skills, empathy, patience, problem solving, and you can choose a theme that supports the topic of your wish! For example, today we kicked off the Cultural Heritage Game Jam at Global Game Jam, in collaboration with the State Department, and it encourages people to look into their cultural heritage, do research and teach others through their game! Isn't that amazing? Same thing works with children. You can make learning chemistry or biology or history so much more interesting by gamifying the learning experience – I just take it even step further by helping them to make the whole game and use that in educating themselves and others.

M. K.: Is it common to use game jams in the educational process in Finland?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: It's not common in Finland, but I wish it to be in the future! Coding is already used when teaching maths so why wouldn't we take it further? Today's children are very tech savvy, and many are interested in gaming. We could use this for every-

one's benefit and joy. Children have to do many group projects in school and the game jam structure would offer a different approach, and possibly a more motivating one.

M. K.: Would you say that game jams are great even for people, that have never tried game making, could it help them even if they don't plan to make games professionally?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: Absolutely. Game jam can be a fruitful experience for anyone and teach you new skills – or help you to discover skills. It's like a small intimate festival where you engage in co-creation and support each other.

M. K.: What would you advise newbies in jamming so they could take the most experiences from game jam?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: Be bold and open! Introduce yourself to other jammers and say what you are interested in and what possible skills you possess. Keep your mind and heart open to new areas and experiences, there's nothing to fear or be ashamed of. Keep some kind of diary of your experience so you can easily turn it into valuable portfolio material. Try to put yourself out there, I understand not all are extroverts, but try to communicate with other jammers as much as possible. Game jams are great places to find new friends and even colleagues.

M. K.: Do you think that the global pandemic has changed the way game jams are and will be organized in the future, or will jamming get back to full in-person events again?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: I believe we will go back to physical events soon, but I also believe and hope that the hybrid nature of events would become a norm. I see it as an accessibility issue and providing opportunities for jamming online offers so many jammers a way to participate. We have many game developers and other creative folks who can't participate in person, whether it's due to their financial situation, a disability or any other thing causing restrictions. My personal experience as a chronically ill and disabled person has been super positive due to online jams! And I've heard so many other positive and inspiring stories as well.

M. K.: Do you personally think that online (not in person) game jams can be as effective as those happening in person?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: I do personally think they can be as effective. I do not see a problem or less value in online jams. This is based on my own experiences as a disabled developer and digital event organizer.

M. K.: What do you see as the future of the game jams? And GGJ?

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: I believe game jams will be even greater in volume, and slowly become part of many educational processes and curriculums. GGJ is focusing on underrepresented people and areas that are often left in the shadows. We want to actively engage the folks that don't have access to game jams and such in general. I personally want to see game jams reaching all the regions and be truly something that brings people together, regardless of ethnicity, gender, disability, race, or any other factor.

M. K.: Some games that had their first ideas or prototypes at game jams became successful. Would you say it's coincidence or it's kind of expected that this may happen? Games like *Surgeon Simulator*, *Home Improvisation* or *AVGM (Abusive Video Game Manipulation)* were born at GGJ.

Tarja Porkka-Kontturi: I'd say it's expected! Game jams are like a cosy oven full of sweet buns of creativity, and the ideas are shared generously. People come from such a vast variety of backgrounds that it's inevitable to create something magnificent and spectacular at some point. The diversity of jams is their true richness, and the inclusive, supporting atmosphere boosts the creation of successful games.

