

Game Jams for Academic Libraries

Lessons Learned from a Collaboration with the Makerspace

International Games Month¹ is an initiative run by the Games & Gaming Round Table of ALA. Held each November, libraries of all types across the globe host a variety of gaming-related programming. One popular event is a game jam, where participants gather for a set time to either create a game from scratch around a common theme (a 2022 theme was “the connections we make through reading”) or create new iterations of an existing game. These can take place either in person, online, or both, and can be used to create any type of game.² While these are held frequently in school and public libraries,^{3, 4} they are less often held in academic libraries. Those that are held in academic libraries are often focused on digital games^{5, 6} rather than physical games. In November 2022, I held a game jam at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas Lied Library in collaboration with our Makerspace, with specific interest in how my experience might differ from other game jams held during International Games Month.

My Experience

To begin, I pitched the idea of a game jam to my supervisor in a slate of other game programming for November. Lied Library had, to my knowledge, never participated in International Games Month, so I wanted to hold a variety of programs in a low-stakes environment to test what resonated with students. I was given the go-ahead and collaborated on initial plans with the student engagement coordinator, who was responsible for departmental outreach and supervision of peer-coach mentors, among other responsibilities. With myself as lead, we decided on the timeline for the competition, the number of participants, rules, marketing, and the strategy for determining winners. With those decisions loosely made, we met with the Makerspace team, including the department supervisor and making and innovation specialist, who oversees the daily operations of the Makerspace, to pitch the idea of hosting this competition in collaboration with the Makerspace. In this meeting I emphasized that most of the work would be done by myself; while this event was designed to highlight Makerspace resources and tools, I was intentional about not wanting to overwhelm the space or place undue burden on Makerspace staff during a time when many students are working on final projects or holiday gifts.

Together, we finalized details like the number of participants, a reasonable budget to give each team for use of Makerspace materials (\$25), and how to strategically use the Makerspace and its resources without negatively affecting other users or Makerspace staff.

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This competition could be considered not a game jam because we did not use a unifying theme for participants. The 2022 theme felt geared more toward a public or school library audience, and I wanted to remove as many barriers to participation as possible. For this event, students could make any type of physical game, so long as they used at least one of the Makerspace tools (3D printer, laser cutter, vinyl cutter, or sewing machine). Other guidelines included the following:

- Five teams of two to three students could compete.
- Teams could not use their own money to supplement the \$25 provided for Makerspace resources.
- Games should take no more than 15–20 minutes to play, should be constructed primarily in the Makerspace, and should come with clear written instructions for players.

The goal was to hold a kick-off event on November 1. Students would then have three weeks to build their games, with the final week reserved for voting by the university community. Marketing of the event was delayed due to other events, including homecoming; at the time of the November 1 kick-off event, only one team had signed up, and they were unable to make it to the kick-off due to car problems. Two individuals showed up to learn more about the competition, so I ended up delaying the kick-off event a week to accommodate both the original team and to allow any new sign-ups. At the kick-off event on November 8, the original team, plus one individual who had attended the November 1 event, joined.

The kick-off event was planned by myself and the making and innovation specialist. I provided an overview of the competition, including guidelines, suggestions, and the timeline. The making and innovation specialist explained what Makerspace resources were available to the teams, as well as how working with any of the Makerspace staff might help them with their designs. We had decided to provide the team with designated time to access the Makerspace for the competition to avoid overburdening the space when it was open for everyone. On Mondays, the Makerspace does not open until noon; for November, we opened the Makerspace from 9 a.m. to noon to only the teams so they could work on their projects. The making and innovation specialist and I, and sometimes a Makerspace student worker, were available during these times. The teams largely did not take advantage of this option; they only came the last Monday of the design phase, as games were due to be turned in at noon that day so we could begin the voting process.

While students were working on their games, the Makerspace team and I did not engage with the teams much, leaving plenty of time to assist regular users and for myself to focus on other game programming throughout the month. Teams turned in their games November 21, and I worked with the student engagement coordinator and our peer-coach mentors to establish a schedule for tabling at the entrance of the library, where we aimed to engage students, faculty, staff, and even community members visiting the library. We set out the two games, including their instructions, and I designed a short voting form that players could easily fill out after playing the games. The form asked voters to rate the game one to five stars in areas of appearance, clarity of instructions, and amount of fun playing the game. We tabled November 21–29, and on November 30 I tallied the votes before the winner announcement on December 1.

One hundred people played the games during the voting period, which was marketed via social media, as shown in figure 1. This was a really fun and informative part of the

competition; it allowed me to see where I could have provided more guidance for the teams, especially in terms of creating instructions, in addition to seeing how players interpreted the instructions that were provided. I did not offer any suggestions as to how the games were played, though I or the peer coaches did offer to serve as a second player for any single individuals who approached the table to play the games. Fourteen votes were thrown out for not specifying which game they were evaluating on the voting form, for a total of 86 votes cast. The teams assembled, as well as those who had been involved in the competition, for a celebration and debrief on December 1, where the winner was announced and awarded a 3D printed trophy (shown in figure 2). Though the competition was small and experienced several setbacks, the students all expressed satisfaction with the competition and were eager to compete again. Members of the winning team received \$25 for their student account.

Feedback

Feedback on the competition was very positive. Those involved in making the competition happen were happy to host it again, and the three student competitors provided extremely valuable suggestions and reflections for future events. The major takeaway, both provided by students and observed by me, was that November is a terrible time to host a game jam in an academic library. It impacted everything from marketing the event to students to the amount of time students had to work on the project; November has several days off for holidays, it is cold and flu season (which impacted one team fairly significantly), and students are focusing on their final projects and exams of the semester. While none of the student participants were upset about the timing, they did strongly suggest choosing a different time in the semester to hold the event.

Another piece of feedback that arose out of student reflections and input from library staff was making sign-ups available much earlier and providing an information session or two before sign-ups close. For this iteration, October events significantly impacted our ability to get the competition information to students early, and the fact that some people showed up to the kick-off event to learn more suggests that students may be curious, but not sign up without more information. An information session beforehand may also set teams up for success better than our kick-off session did; student participants shared that they wished they had a more holistic picture of what game design entails before they started. The prototyping phase, in particular, was confusing for students; though we talked about prototyping resources available in the Makerspace at the kick-off event, a more in-depth explanation of what prototyping is and how it can help students visualize their design before spending money on more expensive materials would have been beneficial.

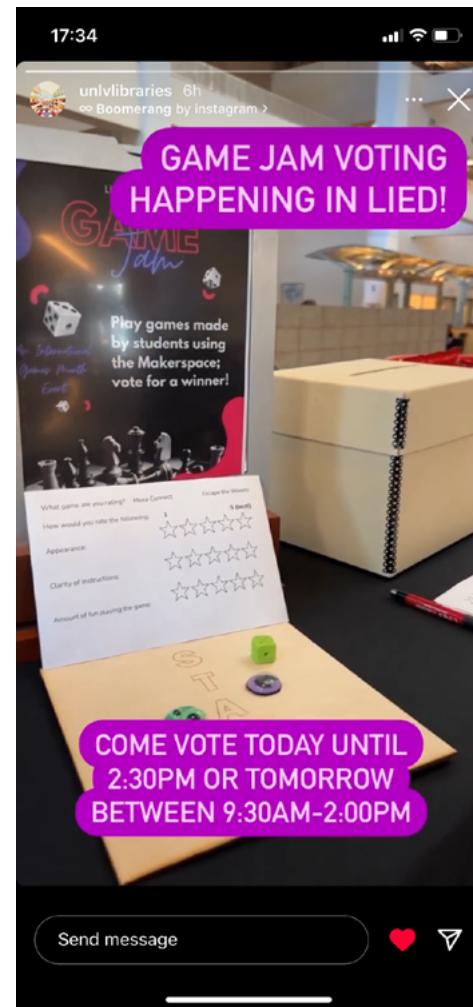


Figure 1. An Instagram story post promoting voting.

While watching players test the games, I realized I needed to provide more game design guidance to teams before they began working. Due to my longer history with game design, I forgot to communicate the basics, which was evident when it came to instructions and a win-state. Many players did not understand how to play the games, and when they did interpret the rules, they were unclear how to know when the games were finished. While the student participants did not comment on this during the debrief, I plan to create a game design checklist at the beginning of the competition.

The most surprising feedback for me was that students wanted this competition to evolve into something much bigger. Students at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas have a very entrepreneurial spirit, which I did not consider when designing this competition—I just thought it would be a fun opportunity to play around and raise awareness of the Makerspace. The students, however, made many suggestions as to how they would scale up the competition. These included involving the Patent and Trademark Resource Center housed in the library, inviting local game publishers to sponsor the competition, and assembling a judging panel from local game publishers and game store owners, allowing students to network and potentially establish working relationships with these community members. There were suggestions about expanding the competition beyond a month, integrating it with relevant courses, and more.



Figure 2. The winning game and the 3D printed trophy.

Next Steps

Working with our outreach librarian and making and innovation specialist, we've chosen the second week of classes—January 22 for us—as the start of our next iteration of the game jam. It will run for four weeks, ending right before our general education instruction picks up, enabling us to test changes before hosting another game jam in September 2024. Moving the game jam to September should allow us to promote the competition as part of welcome-week events, encourage first-year students who need campus participation activities to fulfill course requirements, and fall nicely before instruction and mid-semester events pick up.

I will implement changes based on the feedback received from everyone at the debrief, including releasing sign-ups earlier, hosting a few information sessions, and redesigning the kick-off event—or hosting workshops during the competition—to provide more game design support. While I am excited about the suggestions made for ways to scale up the event, I would like at least one fully attended competition under my belt before exploring any of these options. ²²

Notes

1. “International Games Month,” Games & Gaming Round Table, <https://games.ala.org/international-games-month/>.
2. Indiana State Library, “Game Jams for Libraries. What Are They? Why Should I Host One?,” Darren Edwards, Ash Green, and Stella Wisdom, August 24, 2022, video, 58:24, <https://youtu.be/xWbEfLDWOkI>.
3. Matthew Farber, “Students as Designers: Game Jams!,” Edutopia, July 15, 2015, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/students-as-designers-game-jams-matthew-farber>.
4. Allan Fowler, Johanna Pirker, Ian Pollock, Bruno Campagnola de Paula, Maria Emilia Echeveste, and Marcos J. Gómez, “Understanding the Benefits of Game Jams: Exploring the Potential for Engaging Young Learners in STEM,” *ITiCSE '16: Proceedings of the 2016 ITiCSE Working Group Reports*, July 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3024906.3024913>.
5. Jeff Murphy, “UCM Student Team Captures First Place at Chillennium, World’s Largest Collegiate Student-run Game Jam,” University of Central Missouri, March 8, 2023, <https://www.ucmo.edu/news/university-news/2023-03-08-ucm-student-team-captures-first-place-at-chillennium-game-jam.php>.
6. “Game Jam 2022 Provides Hands-On Experience,” ArtCenter, February 25, 2022, <https://cms.artcenter.edu/connect/college-news/game-jam-2022-provides-hands-on-experience.html>.