

An Autopsy of the Global Game Jam 2012

Theme Committee Discussion: Deciding on Ouroboros

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the tentative results of an online ethnography on the Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee are presented. The role of the committee was to come up with a globally distributed theme and a list of optional design constraints for the participants of Global Game Jam 2012. Within the brainstorming and discussions, several different ideas were proposed. A picture of an Ouroboros and a list of 15 “diversifiers” were eventually selected. The ideation process of the theme was not straightforward: within the discussions, different arguments were presented in support or refutation of the candidate themes. The opinions explicated within the discussion echo different views on *game design paradigms*.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General – Games.

General Terms

Management, Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Games, Global Game Jam, game jam, game development, game design, theme, ideas, brainstorming, creativity, innovation, experimentation, design paradigm

1. INTRODUCTION

Global Game Jam (GGJ) has been considered the world’s largest game jam. In one weekend thousands of participants all around the globe take part in a weekend-long game development event. Typically for the GGJ sites, the participants are expected to come without an idea or a team and build a playable game from scratch in less than 48 hours. [9]

The rise of the game jam scene has been remarkable for the past ten years. From the early game jams such as Indie Game Jam to the wide variety of smaller and bigger jams [14], the culture of the time-constrained design experiments has laid its mark to the future histories of game development. Game jams are important subject to study for several reasons. They affect the learning process of aspiring game developers [21] shaping the future development cultures, they provide an interesting window to

compressed development processes [29], they are in a big role in the social aspect of game industry [22, 27], and they also provide an interesting tool for various research interests [5, 8], such as ideation and design inspiration [11, 13, 29], cultural differences in game development [28], prototyping [19], and accessibility [23].

Global Game Jam is one of the best-known instances of the jam format. It is a widely spread event and it has an emerging impact on game development cultures around the world. The growth of the event has been rapid. The first GGJ was arranged in 2009 with around 1600 participants in 23 countries. Already in January 2012, GGJ had grown into the biggest game development event in the world and consequently earned a Guinness World Record with 242 locations in 47 countries and a total of 2000 games made by over 10 000 participants [9]. This record was already broken in 2013 with over 16 000 participants and the growth has been continuing at a similar pace: in 2015 GGJ had over 28 000 participants, 518 jam sites, 78 countries and 5438 games [12]. At first, the event was heavily dominated by the US and European participants, but in recent years the West European sites and Asian sites have been growing in number [8]. For some countries, the reach is significant compared to the size of the local game industry. For instance in Finland almost 700 people took part in GGJ 2015 [1]. If the participants would all be employed by the industry¹, this would add up to 28% of the 2500 employee industry [20].

According to the Global Game Jam website [10], GGJ is not a competition. The event is built around individual challenges on game experimentation and creativity. However, locations of GGJ are organized independently: differences in the way that the event is actually run are expected to be found. Some sites are open throughout the weekend; some are closed during nighttime. Some locations are organized by schools and universities; some are organized by game studios or local business incubation centers. For some of the sites, the brainstorming and the whole process are more or less structured, some sites are more organic. The number of participants per site also varies greatly from a total of three jammers² to over 200 participants. The fluidity of the event has been counted as one of its virtues [23]. Practically the only thing common to all of the sites is the globally shared theme and the list of additional design constraints. The theme is kept secret all the way until the beginning of the event while the list of “diversifiers” – the additional constraints – has typically been revealed a couple of days beforehand.

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¹ Finnish GGJ participants comprise professional game developers, students, and hobbyists.

² A participant of a game jam.

The Global Game Jam themes have been of different formats: a sentence in 2009 *As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems*, a word in 2010 and 2011 *Deception* and *Extinction*, a picture in 2012 an image of Ouroboros; (see Figure 1.), a sound clip of heartbeat in 2013, a sentence *We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are* in 2014, and a question *What do we do now?* in 2015.



Figure 1. The image of Ouroboros used at GGJ 2012.

This paper describes the Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee work and the course of discussion that led to Ouroboros and using a picture as a theme. Furthermore, this paper examines the different mindsets that the committee members had for the role of the theme, revealing opinions on the nature of Global Game Jam and indicating potential differences in underlying game design paradigms.

2. METHOD & DATA

The theme committee for Global Game Jam 2012 worked using a web-based project management tool Basecamp³. Basecamp allows people to post messages via email, but the discussion can be viewed as a traditional forum thread by signing into Basecamp. The 2012 theme discussion lasted for four months: from 30th of September 2011 to 2nd of February 2012.

As a member of the committee, the author of this paper was taking part in the discussions and the messages were utilized later as data for the online ethnography⁴. A qualitative analysis of the messages was conducted using Atlas.ti software⁵. The analysis was data-driven instead of theory-driven in the spirit of grounded theory [4]. The messages within the theme thread were coded by identifying authors, ideas suggested, arguments for and against the theme ideas, and mixed topics within the discussion. The codes were organized together in multiple ways to reveal reoccurring topics, interrelations, and categories. A theoretical framework was sought after the analysis.

Participating in the GGJ 2012 Theme Committee was especially fruitful due to the comprehensive discussion on the role of the theme during the selection process of the 2012 theme. These discussions provided rich material for examining the design thinking behind the theme and the perceptions on game jams as game development events.

The Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee consisted of eleven members. Two of the members were Global Game Jam

Executive Committee⁶ members, others were invited by the theme committee chair. One executive committee member outside the theme committee also participated in the discussion. The members of the theme committee represented different nationalities, and the backgrounds of the members varied from AAA developers to indie game developers and academics. There were three female and nine male participants present in the discussion. Within the conversation, there were four threads with 271 posts altogether. The theme thread, the main interest of this analysis, consisted of 179 messages. The length of the posts in the theme thread varied from one sentence (e.g. "Totally agreed.") to 800-word in-depth-postings. An average posting was around 150 words. The peak months for the theme thread were November 2011 and January 2012.

The participation level of the committee members (CM) varied: the most active members posted approximately 40 messages on the board during the four-month discussion; most of the members posted 10–30 messages. One participant was completely absent and one member posted only one message. One outsider (CM) also participated in the discussion even though she/he was not officially part of the theme committee itself.

3. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

The discussion in the theme thread revolved around three topics: ideas for the GGJ 2012 theme, the nature and role of the theme for game jamming, and the essence of Global Game Jam.

There were 95 distinguishable ideas for the GGJ 2012 theme in total. Some ideas were built on top of already proposed ideas being variations to previous suggestions. Some ideas stimulated more discussion, whereas other ideas got no feedback at all.

As a proven format for a game jam theme, 30 concepts or single words were proposed and 24 theme ideas were sentences. There was some discussion on preferring the sentences as the GGJ 2009 theme was among the favorites of the committee members. Since previous Global Game Jams had already featured a single word or a sentence as a theme, ideas concerning different formats were also proposed. The final selected theme was a picture of a snake eating its tail, an Ouroboros, which was suggested along with 18 other pictorial theme proposals. The format was seen as an important part of the selected theme.

Out of all the suggested ideas, approximately half were discussed further by someone else than its originator. Within these comments, arguments against or for were usually provided.

3.1 Arguments For and Against

Out of 95 suggested ideas, 44 were commented on by others. 17 ideas received support from another committee member and 27 ideas were questioned or refuted by someone. The reasons for refuting ideas were more explicit and elaborate, while reasons for supporting certain ideas were not always explained. In some cases, the support was expressed in the form of simple sentences such as "I like it!" or "I love this idea." Sometimes supportive arguments were presented within the very same argument as refutation or doubt.

The main concerns of the committee members towards suggestions were that the selected theme would be too superficial,

³ <http://basecamp.com/>

⁴ The permission to analyze the discussion has been asked from the committee members individually by email as well as from the GGJ 2012 Executive Committee.

⁵ <http://www.atlasti.com/>

⁶ Executive Committee of Global Game Jam is responsible for the operational lead of the event.

too hard for the beginners or that it would spur one dominant interpretation or set a wrong tone for the event. Many committee members expressed a concern that if the given theme would be too open to interpretation, it would be later attributed as the origin of the game, even though the actual game was inspired by something else.

Another concern was that the theme would be too hard for the participants, especially for the beginner jammers. There were also doubts whether participants would be accustomed to certain forms or knew how to deal with an open theme. Some of the suggested themes were found challenging in terms of the practical arrangement of the jam itself. If, for instance, participants would have to use external sources to understand the given concept, it might cause distraction to the social schedule. Also, some members preferred textual themes because of the preferred way of revealing the theme to the local participants. Some suggestions were deemed difficult to translate.

As vagueness and abstract form were seen as a challenge on one front, ambiguity was seen as a virtue by some committee members. A popular concern was that some suggested themes would be too concrete or literal or that they would direct the brainstorming towards certain kind of games. Some members preferred abstract themes over the concrete arguing that concrete themes would create dominant interpretations:

"I don't like these images. They are in some sense too concrete - yes there are multiple readings, but I'm pretty sure I see a hand, a mask and a rabbit. I prefer the abstract symbol-like images." [CM03]

"I feel that most game jammers would go toward one specific direction [...] and we'd end with a very boring collection of games." [CM08]

Some themes received support since they were seen as provoking several interpretations and associations. The themes which were seen as potentially promoting diverse topics in GGJ projects were seen as valuable. Some themes were seen as a sweet spot for both: accessibility and depth. Ideas which were seen as easy enough for the beginners, yet holding enough depth were favored by some members.

Some of the arguments for refuting or doubting the suggestions were concentrated on personal preferences or the way that the event would be staged by the theme. For instance it was important for some committee members that the theme was not forcing the participants, but instead inviting people to go outside their comfort zones. It was also important to think about what kind of general tone the theme would give for the event.

Theme committee members were game makers and jam participants themselves and thus also advocates of certain design topics. Some themes received support according to the members' personal preferences:

"[...] I love it because of the possibility of emotional games [...]" [CM01]

"[...] I like making a political theme [...]" [CM09]

"[...] also reminds us to keep ideas simple and the game accessible" [CM02]

One important aspect for some members of the theme committee was the experimentation in the form of the theme itself reflecting the values of GGJ in general. Themes that were perceived as new within the game jam scene were seen valuable. Some themes were

also sparking the curiosity of the committee members to see what participants would come up with.

Reasons to doubt and reasons to support were intertwined and overlapping. Some members expressed concerns about only certain theme suggestions, some saw similar problems in several theme ideas while others were seeking a balance between different, to some extent even conflicting, values for the theme. The two most common topics of concern were about the theme being too literal or too vague, both of which were also sometimes seen as a value. The search for an ideal theme made committee members face an interesting dilemma, pushing the discussion back to the nature of GGJ and the role of the theme.

3.2 Role of the Theme at GGJ

To provide grounding for the theme negotiations, the role of the theme was further detailed. In eight posts, somewhat overlapping with the discussion on the nature of GGJ, the opinions on the role of the theme for GGJ were explicated. The varying views were also present in the discussions on particular theme suggestions when someone supported or refuted an idea.

Most of the members had prior experience of game jams as a participant or as an active organizer. In the beginning of the discussion, the head of the committee stated the mission of the GGJ 2012 Theme Committee in a following manner:

"Since the main tenets of the Global Game Jam are Innovation, Experimentation and Collaboration, it should be a theme that:

- Encourages a sense of global community,

- Encourages experimentation,

- Encourages personal interpretation"

In eight posts throughout the discussion, the nature of GGJ was further discussed by six members of the committee. The expressed views on GGJ provided the frame for the suggestions and eventually guided the selection process.

Even though the committee seemed to be overall unanimous over the different features of GGJ, there were some disagreements on the priorities when it came to deciding on the theme. The issue of prioritizing novices over veterans was one topic of such negotiations:

"I agree [...] that those more abstract themes might be totally valid for a more "veteran oriented" event. But, since GGJ aims to include veterans and newbies alike, I would rather see lots of snake clones [...] than lots of stuff related to nothing specifically." [CM08]

However, exploring the format was generally seen as important, sometimes even superior over other potential features of the jam:

"Game jams are all about experimentation - to embrace the new and unexplored rather than tried and safe. This year's theme is an experiment, it might not be the objectively 'best' theme, but we hope it will inspire you to step outside the box and try to do something completely new. [...]" [CM03]

The discussion on the nature of GGJ was intertwined with the notions of what a theme stands for in regard to the event in general.

3.2.1 Theme as an Event Design Element

The key design elements of Global Game Jam as an event include the guidance of the local organizers, the keynote videos, and the theme as well as the list of diversifiers. Additionally there are

several features adding to the feel of the event, such as webcam feeds and social media streams depending on the organizing sites.

Within the committee discussion, it was expressed that the theme has an important role in creating a feel of togetherness for the global event of this scale:

“I believe a simple, unified, global theme [...]. There's something special about the idea of jammers around the world waiting to hear an essentially global announcement, something singular and unifying across all sites [...].” [CM09]

The theme was also believed to have a role in setting the tone for the experience. For instance, prioritizing upbeat themes over darker concepts was part of creating a positive experience for the participants of the GGJ.

3.2.2 Theme as Creative Stimulus

For a time-constrained game development event such as Global Game Jam, there is limited space within the schedule for coming up with an initial game idea. A successful game jam project moves quickly from an idea to a playable prototype. To save time, an ideal theme would serve also as a tool for brainstorming.

Within the discussions of the Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee, some members expressed that a good theme would serve as a lubricant for the brainstorming; a theme to inspire. It was also argued that this would be more important than to have a clear, easy to translate and unifying theme. However, it was also argued that if the theme would be too abstract, it would not set the process on the move fast enough. One committee member also noted that the creative freedom of the jammers was important:

“If the theme doesn't move me in a direction I want to go I abandon the theme (and only slap it on afterwards if I care). I don't think themes are holy, only people and their creative processes are sacred [...].” [CM03]

The discussion on whether the theme would launch the brainstorming into diverse directions and inspire the participants was giving the theme the role of a *creative stimulus*.

3.2.3 Theme as a Design Constraint

In addition to the theme, Global Game Jam provides a list of “diversifiers” as an extra challenge and additional design constraints for the more experienced participants [9]. Some of the specific theme suggestions were seen as more fitting to be on the list of the diversifiers:

“Could you make this into an interesting diversifier?” [CM10]

Within the discussion, the theme was also framed by the committee members as a problem to solve, a challenge or explicitly framed idea for the participants to engage with. Yet again the abstract themes were seen as problematic, especially when framed as a design problem:

“Agreed that the point of the theme should be to get people talking and moving in a direction, and I think that's what bothers me about anything too abstract.” [CM05]

Furthermore this also amplified the problems of translation since themes lost in translation would create different design problems and thus not unify the event for the participants.

Some committee members were viewing the theme as a more predefined design premise, which Ouroboros was also deemed to be:

“So far I've been drawn to what seem to me to be explicitly framed ideas with a lot of potential depth, rather than anything purely suggestive or symbolic, and so I guess that the Ouroboros fits with my priorities better than the others” [CM09]

Framing the theme as a challenge or a design problem is framing the theme as a *design constraint*.

3.2.4 Theme as an Experiment and Example

As Global Game Jam is about experimentation, it was seen important that the theme would reflect this philosophy. As the discussion was focusing on finding an optimal theme, there were also comments on how GGJ should practice what it preaches; for example, the art of failure. An experimental theme was seen as an example that could encourage participants to be more daring:

“We like to believe that we encourage experimentation in game development by being an example.” [CM06]

Altogether it seems that the role of a game jam theme was, and perhaps still is, loaded with a pressure for the committee members to come up with an optimal, if not perfect theme for the event, and varying views on game design were surfacing. Eventually, even though the committee ended up supporting one idea, the picture of Ouroboros, the discussion on different values for the theme seemed prevalent:

“It seems to me that all this discussion [...] is backtracking on the theme discussion we just had. [...] We have decided it would be an ouroboros, exactly because the majority thought the other two options were too open to interpretation or too abstract. Now we're going back to discussing if our Ouroboros will be abstract or not? [...] It appears we are trapped on our own ouroboros, eternally eating our own tails looking for a theme we already decided on...” [CM08]

Even though it can be debated as to what extent game jams can be treated as a “compressed development process” such as Zook and Riedl propose [27], the theme committee members' task at hand was to come up with a theme that would be suitable as a starting point for a *game development event*. While the theme was brainstormed, negotiated and finally decided, the varying opinions on the nature of game development were present. In the next section the surfacing differences in priorities and opinions as views on game development as *design activity* are explored.

4. (GAME) DESIGN PARADIGMS

The most interesting differences in committee members' opinions revolved around treating the theme as a creative stimulus or as a design constraint. This was reflected in the several layers of the whole discussion as reported above.

Theme as a stimulus and theme as a constraint can be considered to have a foundational difference: Whereas a *stimulus* can be defined as something that evokes, a constraint can be considered as something that creates boundary conditions [7] and thereby limits. Both contribute to the creative process. As in any design activity [16], including game design, the design process is guided by design constraints [2]. Design constraints are not only something received or forced-upon from outside but also imposed, selected and defined by the designers themselves [2, 17]. Depending on the Global Game Jam location, the participants can engage in self-imposed challenges or location-wide competitions, even though the event itself is not framed as a competition on a global scale.

For many, if not all, participants the theme is in a central role for the creative process of a game jam. In their study of GGJ 2013, Zook and Riedl [29] found out that the theme of GGJ 2013 proved to be the most common inspiration for the participants. However, the theme was not the only source of stimulation. Along with the theme, inspiration was also sought from other games, life experiences, stories, movies etc. [29]

Zook and Riedl [29] also found out that in 2013 the main goal for the GGJ participants seemed to be “just getting something done”: 97 out of the 419 respondents reported that their personal goal for the participation was to finish a game. Originality scored as low as 8th place by 13 respondents reporting it as their design goal. However, 48 respondents reported that the main goal was to test a game mechanic. To what extent GGJ is actually about experimentation and especially experimentation *through the theme* is left unclear.

While it is difficult to know whether there have been differences in the role of the GGJ themes throughout the years, it seems that the views on the role can vary amongst the participants and organizers alike. Investigating these differences can shed a valuable light on the practice of game making as *design activity*.

Dorst and Dijkhuis [6] have compared two fundamentally different paradigms for explaining design activity. They looked at the descriptive powers of the views proposed by design theorists Herbert Simon [25] and Donald Schön [24]. Even though Simon’s view on design as rational problem solving and Schön’s “reflection-in-action” models somewhat oppose each other (see Table 1.), the conclusion of Dorst and Dijkhuis [6] is that these models function in explaining different situations in design. Describing design as a rational problem-solving process is more natural in design situations with clear-cut problems and design strategies to solve them. Describing design as a process of reflection-in-action works better in describing the conceptual stage of the design process, where there are no standard strategies to follow and there is more experimentation in finding the solutions.

Table 1. Two design paradigms by Dorst and Dijkhuis [5]

	RATIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING	REFLECTION IN ACTION
DESIGNER:	information processor (in an objective reality)	person constructing his/her reality
DESIGN PROBLEM:	ill defined, unstructured	essentially unique
DESIGN PROCESS:	a rational search process	a reflective conversation
DESIGN KNOWLEDGE:	knowledge of design procedures and ‘scientific’ laws	artistry of design: when to apply which procedure/ piece of knowledge
EXAMPLE/MODEL:	optimization theory, the natural sciences	art/ the social sciences

Within the frame of rational problem solving, the designer is an information processor, whereas the view of reflection in action depicts her/him as a person constructing her/his own reality. The design problem is correspondingly ill-defined and unstructured or just essentially unique. The process of proceeding with the design challenge is either through a rational search process or reflective conversation, and the model for the knowledge processes is closer to science or art. (See Table 1.)

The underlying differences in the Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee discussions echo the differences between design paradigms similar to Simon and Schön. Opinions on whether the event was primarily about game design as problem-solving or game design as designer explorations seemed to affect the way the members of the committee responded to the theme suggestions.

The discussion on Global Game Jam as an event for beginners and experienced jammers alike reflects similar issues. A design theorist Bryan Lawson [16] has been discussing the differences between inexperienced and seasoned designers in the domains of architecture and industrial design. Whereas *the novice’s* design activity consists of following strict rules and “objective features”, *the competent* designers are seeking opportunities and use the method of trial and error. The exceptional designers, *the experts* for Lawson, “recognize the nature of the situation intuitively and perform the appropriate actions without conscious mental effort”. [16]

Whether the design situation of a game jam is framed as a design problem or as reflection-in-action, there are also differences in the way that a game jam can be devised and utilized by the participants based on their experience level. The premise of Global Game Jam as a proponent for experimentation, innovation and collaboration can mean different things for different participants. For the novices, jams might end up being more like events for personal challenge, and for the experts⁷, they also present opportunities for advancing the medium.

Global Game Jam is not a centrally located event. The combinations of guidance, free-form activity, the way that the event is framed by the local organizers and further interpreted and devised by the jammers vary. Allegedly, the differences in the views of game design as activity and the expertise level affect the reception and the use of the shared theme. In the spirit of Dorst and Dijkhuis [6], a rough model on the differences in interpreting game jams and the theme according to the two design paradigms is presented below (Table 2.).

Table 2. Design paradigms and game jams

	RATIONAL PROBLEMSOLVING	REFLECTION IN ACTION
GAME JAM:	interesting challenge	opportunity for exploration
THEME:	unifying topic	a starting point to explore
BRAINSTORMING PROCESS:	the theme ‘means’ something	the theme invites to interpret
POINT OF VIEW:	objective: the theme must be self-evident from the final game	subjective: different interpretations of the theme are interesting
REASONS FOR NOT USING THE THEME:	the theme was too hard, or it was too vague and open	the theme was too concrete, or it was not interesting and inspiring

Roughly put, game jamming as a design situation can be interpreted in different ways, making the search for an optimal theme a difficult challenge. However, the role of a theme and the way that it is treated by different participants is not a zero-sum

⁷ Whether the expertise in a game jam context is transferable with the expertise in game development is yet to be explored.

game: most of the themes proposed by the committee as well as the themes of GGJ so far could be treated as both design constraints and creative stimuli.

Game development as a part of the creative industries and creative sector is a complex field combining technology, design, and content, which causes complexity and uncertainty in the development process [26]. The complexity and volatile nature of the field of games invite the use of any tool providing a “compressed” [29] perspective to the phenomenon. Together with utilization of general design theory [6, 17, 24, 25] and understanding of preceding similar phenomena⁸, versatile investigation of game jams can provide an invaluable insight into the cultures and practices of game jams, game development, and moreover, the diverse field of design.

As the views examined within the Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee discussions did not reveal exact divisions of the members into different camps of design paradigms, a clear division in the larger view is also not probable. This discussion, however, has been a valuable insight into the potential differences in views guiding game development and the possibility of the emergence of different schools of thought.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the discussion of the Global Game Jam 2012 Theme Committee and the selection of the picture of Ouroboros as the theme for Global Game Jam 2012 has been explored.

Within the discussions of the GGJ Theme Committee, the topics of the role of GGJ and GGJ theme and the ideas themselves were discussed. Altogether 95 ideas were proposed and 44 of them discussed further by someone else in the group. There were several reasons for refuting or supporting certain ideas. Reasons for not selecting certain ideas as a theme for the upcoming GGJ event included: the theme being too open, too hard, spurring one dominant interpretation or setting a wrong tone for the event. Reasons for the support were: the theme itself being experimental, promoting diversity, and representing personally interesting and important domains of game design. The views on the role of theme and the nature of GGJ were affecting the decision process and discussions. The central discussion pieces were revolving around the role of the theme being a creative stimulus or a design constraint and how to cater to both experienced and novice game jam participants. Furthermore, the discussion echoed differences in design paradigms: whether design activity is framed as problem-solving or reflection-in-action.

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⁸ For instance a deeper analysis on the similarities of “jam sessions” [3], the emergence of jazz art culture [18] and the modern phenomenon of game jam scene could provide interesting insights on the dynamics of creative communities and the role of improvisation.

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