

# Extra Lives: Game Jam as Extra-curricular learning for University students

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## INTRODUCTION

Within both Academic and popular discourses, there are questions around how “industry-focused” game development degrees<sup>1</sup> should be, especially given the nature of the industry (Keogh 2019; Primak 2019). These questions are hardly unique to game development, with the divide between higher education’s focus on theoretical pursuits and the more “practical” approach of vocational education and training coming under scrutiny, especially within Australia (Kift 2024).

Finding avenues within degrees to explore these questions of industry-preparedness versus abstract critical thinking provides its own challenges. Many approaches to creating “work ready” students foster and reinforce established inequities (Harvey 2019), marginalising the already marginalised and in turn reducing student outcomes. Moreover, an over-emphasis on project-based learning – a necessity for creating “complete” video games in the classroom – may decrease student outcomes by privileging “doing” rather than “understanding” and problem-solving (Beringer, 2007). A gravitation away from the creation of thoughtful, well-rounded problem-solvers seems perpendicular to the mission statement of Universities.

To approach this quagmire of questions, I turned to the idea of scaffolded game jams for the game development students in my institute. As with any game jam, students were invited to create games under both conceptual and temporal constraints, but with the addition of learning materials to guide their journey. Separate from both grades and class-time, this activity capitalises on the concept of extra-curricular activities for student learning, experimented with in general programming and STEM pedagogies (Dalal et al. 2022). The game jams began as small affairs, but have since grown to a prominent event within the University, welcoming students from across different degrees and Faculties.

Over the last three years, these game jams have grown with the inclusion of industry guests and speakers, inter-school collaborations to create more opportunities for games to be showcased, as well as providing a platform for smaller, student-led game jams to also happen across campus. The community-building and knowledge-sharing elements of the game jams aligns them with the practice of community-focused development in programming pedagogies (Dziallas et al. 2022).

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Most notably, however, the game jams have given students opportunities to fail. Rather than creating their first “complete” game in their final year of study and experiencing the woes that come with it while their GPAs are on the line, they instead do so surrounded by friends, pizza, and encouraging industry guests. The game jam activity becomes a valuable – but risk-free – milestone on their journey from student to developer, and helps dismantle the idea students must first complete their degrees before being game makers.

This position paper will present an auto-ethnographic exploration of my role as educator and facilitator of my institute’s game jams over the last three years. The paper reflects on the opportunities and challenges afforded by the inclusion of industry guests, the balancing of development time and more “classroom activities”, as well as the formulation of constraints that are both typical of game jams and also suitable within the context of higher education. Through this discussion, this paper seeks to provide other educators and community-builders with resources for the creation of their own game jams.

## **ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **BIO**

Dr Cameron Edmond is a lecturer in Game Development at Macquarie University, with a focus on Teaching Leadership. As a researcher, he is interested in the intersections between creative writing and coding, and how the two may inform each other in classroom settings. He is passionate about inclusive teaching practices that empower students to forge their own interdisciplinary links. His research encompasses videogame narrative design, algorithmic literature, as well as data storytelling. He maintains a creative practice as a game developer and experimental poet under the name Uncanny Machines.

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### **ENDNOTES**

1 I have adopted the term “game development” as an all-inclusive term to describe the creation of games, be this programming, design or community management.

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