

Pizza and Coffee Make a Game Jam - Learnings From Organizing an Online Game Development Event

Elina Koskinen

elina.m.koskinen@tuni.fi

Tampere University

Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT

Global Game Jam was organized fully online for the first time in 2021. This event report presents a walkthrough of the Global Game Jam weekend for the FGJ Tampere Online site, and proposes guidelines for online game jams based on what was learned from organizing the event.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Applied computing → Computer games.

KEYWORDS

Global Game Jam, game jams, game development, games, online events

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1 INTRODUCTION

Global Game Jam (GGJ), the biggest game creation event in the world [4], was organized for the first time fully online in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In GGJ, participants gather to develop games together during a weekend. As commonly in game jams, the goal is to develop a game from scratch to a prototype that is playable, or sometimes even a finished game [7]. Whereas online jams such as Ludum Dare have already been running for years [1] even before the pandemic, Global Game Jam has previously been an event set on physical sites around the world. The change required learning new skills and finding ways to keep up the spirit and atmosphere of recurring sites that have already formed traditions within the physical spaces and communities they have been organized in. Especially finding new ways for sociability was a challenge.

In Finland, the Global Game Jam is organized under the umbrella of the Finnish Game Jam (FGJ) association, an organization that nationally coordinates this annual jam, and in addition organizes other jams around the year [3]. The FGJ Tampere site, located in

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Tampere, Finland, has been organized every year since 2010, the year Finland was participating in GGJ for the first time[7]. The only exception has been 2017 when a site organizer was not found (although there were smaller, non-public sites in Tampere that year as well). The tickets for the site are free, and it has been sold out several years in a row due to the max capacity of the space being 60–80 people. The participants range from students to professional game developers, and the jams always have recurring faces but also new people, whom we wish to welcome warmly to the community.

In this report, a walkthrough of the FGJ Tampere Online site's preparations and event weekend from Friday to Sunday will be presented. The report will end with a set of guidelines for online game jams derived from the experience of organizing this event.

2 WALKTHROUGH OF FGJ TAMPERE ONLINE 2021

The preparations for organizing the jam site started around 1,5 months before the jam weekend. In addition to the site organizer, eight volunteers were recruited. Event was advertised in different channels (mainly in Facebook, Discord and Slack). It has been a tradition that the FGJ Tampere site has some local sponsors each year. Tampere based game company contacted the organizers, and offered to be a sponsor, so no additional sponsor seeking needed to be done. **An info letter** was written for the participants, including information on the event starting from what is a game jam, how to prepare for the event, assets and resources available, information about the Discord platform, tentative schedule, introducing the sponsor, and sharing some information on streaming channels with program during the jam weekend at the national and local level. The letter was sent to participants on Monday before the jam weekend.

The Finnish jam sites were invited to use the FGJ Discord server for the GGJ event in Finland, and FGJ Tampere Online joined this platform as well. The Discord category for FGJ Tampere was created 2,5 weeks before the jam, although most of the jammers found their way there right before the event. **Introductions text channel** was created for the participants to get to know each other already before the jam (and during). It was difficult to speculate how the jam shifting from a physical space to a virtual one would affect the participation, but in the end the FGJ Tampere Online had around 80 jammers, which was similar to previous years. The difference was that now there were people participating from different cities in Finland (e.g. Helsinki, Turku, Padasjoki), as well as from other countries (e.g. Brazil, France, Germany, Italy).

We organized **Pre-jam game nights** online on Discord on Wednesday and Thursday before the jam weekend to play some casual games (e.g. Among Us, Jackbox Party Pack games, Skribbl.io) together with the jammers. This was to break the ice already before

the event, and also for the jammers to get to know the Discord platform beforehand. Around 15 people participated each night despite the quite a short notice on informing about the pre-events.

2.1 Friday – The Jam Starts

The jammers had registered through Eventbrite before the jam, and the organizers did a **check-in** in the beginning of the event on Friday, like it would have been done in a physical jam at the FGJ Tampere site. Three options were prepared for this online jam: **voice channel**, **text channel**, and an assigned person who one could send a **direct message** to if the participant did not prefer to use either of the first two options. The voice channel got crowded the minute the registration started, so most jammers settled for checking in through the text channel. In addition to checking that the participant's name was found from the registration list, the nickname the jammers use at GGJ page was asked if they happened to already have a profile there. In hindsight, we should have added their Discord nicknames to this list as well, since that was the name by which we organizers learned to know them during the weekend. This check-in process was useful for the online jam as well for three reasons: it allowed the organizers to figure out who were actually joining the event, we were able to acquire useful information that was not asked in the original registration form (GGJ username, and if the jammer already had a team and might not participate in the group forming exercises), and the process allowed the organizers to have a contact to the arriving jammers.

After the check-in we had some **facilitated mingling** through Discord voice channels with light or funny topics that we hoped would stir up some ice-breaking conversations. Especially "Weird Facts" topic gathered a lot of participants. After the warm-up, we had local opening words on a "Main Stage" voice channel with some slides introducing the event, organizers, sponsors, code of conduct, schedule and other relevant information. This was the first time we ran into a platform related problem: Discord allowed only the 25 fastest participants to see the shared screen. The slides were shared later, but in this kind of situation it would be better to **share the slides beforehand** so that the participants can follow them on their own during the presentation. In addition to the local opening ceremony, we had a national opening ceremony stream by the FGJ, in which the official GGJ videos were shown, including the revealing of the theme of the jam.

After the ceremonies, we moved on to **brainstorming**. Organizers had prepared five different prompts with four options each (see Figure 1) based on a method created by Lassheikki [8]), and had created four voice channels according to the option numbers. The jammers were asked to choose one of the options and go to that voice channel, introduce themselves and discuss why they chose that option. The purpose of this exercise was to get the jammers talking to each other in smaller groups and getting to know each other a bit, and also discuss through the prompts what kind of game they might want to make.

After brainstorming, the jammers had some time to prepare a **game pitch**, in which they could either pitch a game idea (see Figure 2) or themselves as a potential team member in 30 seconds. In physical events, we have not restricted the number of pitches by person, but now for time management reasons we accepted a

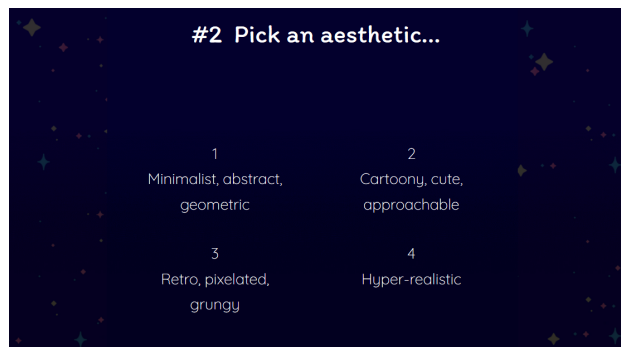


Figure 1: Example of the brainstorming prompts with options. ©Christina Lassheikki

maximum of one pitch per person. Organizers gathered the pitches onto a one slideset to have a proper structure for the pitching event. It took more time for the jammers to make the pitches and then for the organizers to integrate them to the slideset than we anticipated. We had originally assigned only one person for this process, but more were needed.

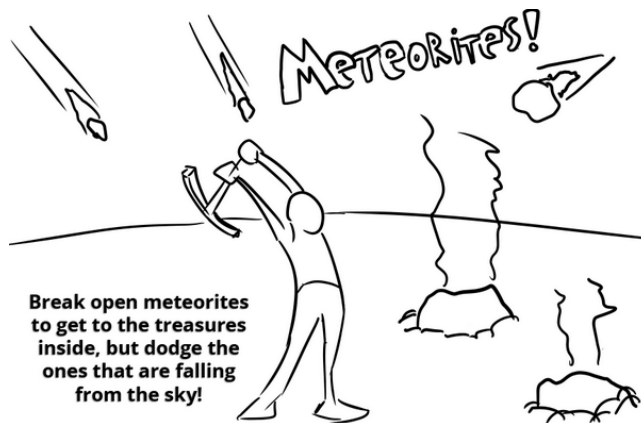


Figure 2: Example of the game idea pitches: "Meteorites". ©Juho Korhonen

After hearing almost 30 pitches we ran into a second limitation of Discord. Each of the sites under the FGJ server had their jam site as a 'category' in Discord, and it turned out that this category can only have a maximum of 50 channels including both voice and text channels. We had planned creating a voice and a text channel for each of the pitched game ideas at the FGJ Tampere site, which equals almost 60 channels in total, in addition to all the other channels we had already created (for example check-in, introductions, announcements, helpdesk, and organizers' channels). Luckily we got help from the FGJ level right away, and were able to have a second Discord category for FGJ Tampere, after which we were able to create enough channels. Group forming was done so that the jammers were encouraged to go to these channels and

discuss the ideas and form teams, so it was important to have both **voice and text options for communicating**.

The **team formation** process was the toughest part for the organizers. We had a **pitch sheet**, which we updated according to the teams formed. The pitch sheet included the game title, game description, and slots for different roles (designer, programmer, graphic artist, sound designer, musician, writer, other), whether the team is full or still looking for new members, which diversifiers (see [5]) the team is planning to use, and a space for other information the team wished to communicate, such as what type of roles they would still like to fill in their team. Facilitating group formation in a virtual space was more difficult than in the physical one, because you cannot see who is missing a team. We were also mentally prepared that more people might want to jam alone in this online situation than normally in the physical jam (see [2]) because the social facilitation is more difficult. At the end of the evening we were not sure if everyone had a team (if they wanted one) even if most participants had already announced their teams to the organizers. In hindsight, we could have tried contacting all the jammers who had not come forward with their teams and ask whether they already are in a team or decided to jam solo but haven't shared this information with the organizers yet, or if they are still looking for a team.

2.2 Saturday – Jamming and Pizza

In weekend-long jams Saturday is often the day that is mostly spent on developing the games. Hence, the only “obligatory” program we had was a **midway status update**. We wanted to use only one hour for this, so each team had two minutes to show what they had done so far. This status update has been a tradition at FGJ Tampere site, but it should have been explained more properly, because now some jammers had felt like it was some sort of a pitching event, when the reason for having this is to share to others how the jam has been going and showing what the teams have been working on. At this point, the organizers created a **work-in-progress channel** for the jammers to share pieces of their work. This was initially set up due to some difficulties in screen sharing during midway status update, but worked well also afterwards for the jammers to give encouraging feedback to each other's work.

As a more casual program, we had breakfast, lunch and dinner meetups in the “**Coffee Lounge**” voice channel. This channel was open for anyone at any time, but with these meetups we tried to facilitate jammers taking a break from jamming and hanging out with people outside their team. This worked very well, and was also mentioned as one of our site's highlights in the feedback.

One of the other highlights of the event was a **pizza delivery stream** organized by our local sponsor. Before the jam, we pondered a lot about what the sponsor could offer for the jammers this time, when most years it has been a tradition to have pizza delivered to the FGJ Tampere site. Ordering pizza to each person's house would have implied a lot of work and would have included delivery fees in addition to the pizza price. We discussed sending gift cards to a grocery store and even delivering pizza kits. Our sponsor wanted to have as authentic as possible FGJ Tampere experience, and they got excited at our idea of them delivering the pizzas to the jammers and streaming it. We followed the stream together on our Coffee Lounge channel. The live stream was a lot of

fun for everyone, especially for the jammers who waited for their turn to go outside to receive the pizza, and have a small chat about how the jam is going. We also got a good laugh when the sponsors took a wrong turn or mixed up an order. The livestream received positive feedback, and also the sponsors said they had a blast. The jammers were able to see each other in the stream, have a shared experience and something tangible (and edible) with it. Also for participants jamming alone at home it might have been nice to have some face-to-face contact when having a short chat with the sponsors, even if it was with appropriate physical distance.

Another peculiarity was that this was the first year FGJ Tampere had some **cooperation with other sites outside of Finland**. It ended up simply being a Zoom meeting with two other sites (Belgrade, Serbia and Schleswig-Holstein, Germany) where jammers were presenting their games. This sort of an activity is a good base to build on in forthcoming years if we would like to give more emphasis on the cooperation aspect. We had also offered a possibility to join forces with the other sites and have combined teams, but no one from our site grabbed this opportunity this time. In the future, this sort of option should be advertised well beforehand.

2.3 Sunday – Wrapping up the Jam

On Sunday, the jammers had some time to finalize their games before the uploading process started in the afternoon. We organizers could have paid more attention to the uploading phase by **checking if all the teams have managed to upload their game by the deadline, and offer help to those who had not**. Also, we had not really prepared for questions related to the uploading process and licensing, and we needed to rely on the knowledge of more experienced GGJ jammers when these issues came up. What we also could have emphasised related to updating the games' GGJ pages, was that it would be good if the jammers **list all the tools and libraries** they have used when making the games because of transparency.

The final “official” agenda item of the day was **team presentations**, and almost all of the 27 teams that had a GGJ page for their game joined. One hour was reserved for this, so each team had again two minutes to introduce their game. Finally, we had an ending presentation to go through some statistics of the event, and to thank everyone. This was to have some closure for the event, since we figured that many of the jammers might be too tired to watch the organizers play their games.

Later in the evening we had a **play stream** [6] on Twitch, where four organizers gathered to play all the games made during the jam. We had a great number of viewers, and this activity was also appreciated in the feedback. People love to see their games played, and it was worth it to organize the stream even if it took 3.5 hours to go through all the 25 uploaded games without proper scheduling. We could have also encouraged **play-testing** during the event more. Jammers appreciate feedback from their games [2].

All in all, it seems we were able to create a **positive atmosphere** during this online jam. According to the feedback, for some just the possibility of speaking with other people during the pandemic time was greatly appreciated. Being able to see people jumping from one voice channel to another in Discord increased the feeling of

presence of the participants since you could see where others were, at least virtually.

3 GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE GAME JAMS

Based on the learnings from organizing the FGJ Tampere Online site, there are some good practices which we endorse when it comes to organizing online game jams.

Learn about the platform you are going to use, especially about its limits. For example, Discord voice channels can fit any number of people if not limited by the admins, and no one uses video, but only a limited number can access the screen being shared.

Breaking the ice already before the jam starts can be done by organizing some **pre-jam socializing**, for example game nights with casual games. This gives a possibility for the jammers to get to know the jamming platform (e.g. Discord) better as well, which lowers the bar to participate and possibly reduces some anxiety when it comes to joining new kinds of events.

When it comes to **registration**, if the jammers register to the jam with their real names, it might be good to also ask the nickname the participant uses in the chosen platform. Some participants might make an account to the platform after the registration, so this information could be filled in at the check-in phase. Knowing who is who can be useful in the team building phase when trying to figure out who is missing a team from all the participants who checked-in. In Global Game Jam, GGJ nicknames can also be useful information for the organizers.

When the event starts, the **check-in** is the first thing the organizers will need to handle, if done manually. Offering several options for the jammers makes the process smoother if there are enough volunteers to follow different channels: voice channel, text channel, and direct messaging for those who do not want to use either of the first two. This might also be the first contact to organizers for some of the jammers, so make it a pleasant one.

Team formation is possibly the heaviest task for the organizers if they are facilitating it, and want to make sure everyone (who wants one) will have a team. Instead of doing the team formation after the event has started, it could be done (at least partially) earlier by setting up a team formation Google Sheet in which people could add their teams if they have one, and needs if they are looking for additional members. The jam platform could also be advertised in more advance so that the jammers would arrive there before the event to chat, mingle and discuss team formation. This could lighten the burden of the organizers since people would already know each other a bit, and some of the teams would already be assembled before the event (see also [2]).

Having a “coffee lounge” type of voice channel can be a nice place for the jammers to **hang out** and chat with people outside of their team. The use of this type of channel can be encouraged for example by having casual meal meetups there, or watching scheduled streams together. These **streams** could include things involving the jammers themselves, like interviews or the jammers getting pizza delivered to them. In general, getting something **tangible** like food or jam-related swag such as stickers in a virtual game jam connects the jammers more to the event.

It might be more difficult for the teams to get **game testers** at an online jam. In the online environment it is not possible to

just walk by other teams’ tables and be invited for game testing. Further, while many co-jammers might be more than willing to test other people’s games, they may not have the time because they are busy developing their own game. Hence, some volunteers could be recruited for the task. Volunteering as a tester can be a good way to get to know game jams for those who yet feel too intimidated to take part as a jammer. The more people of different skill levels and with different perspectives are testing the games, the better. In addition, a **work-in-progress channel** can be useful. This allows for jammers to post their work and others to react and comment, even briefly, when they happen to have a break from jamming.

When it is time to finish up the game, **make sure all teams manage to upload** it, and contact the teams that have not done this by the deadline and offer help if needed. Also make sure the teams have enough information on what sort of things should be mentioned on the game page, for instance tools used in the process.

Jammers like to see their games being played, so organizing a **play stream** after the jam to go through all the games can be very appreciated. It can take some time depending on the amount of games, but it will probably be one of the highlights of the event, especially for new the jammers.

All in all, same as with the physical jams, aim for a **warm and welcoming atmosphere**. Acknowledge when participants arrive at the jam platform (for example reacting with an emoji in Discord if there is not a possibility to say hi to each and every one), and have an **introductions channel** to get to know each other. Have a **code of conduct**. Even if you have a recurring jam site with familiar faces every year, there are often new people as well for whom this might be their very first jam. This is why it is important to **be informative**, and make people feel welcomed to the jam community.

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