

Evoking Inspiration for Game Jam Ideas

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ABSTRACT

Game jam participants, or “jammers” for short, are under time and pressure to make a playable prototype. With limited resource, they cannot rely on serendipity to encounter new ideas. As game jam themes can be a major inspiration in evoking design in jams, the role of idea generation toolkits seem diminished. Few game jams provide prizes, because game jams are not competitions, but a compressed, cooperative development environment to learn, experiment, and share results. This makes it an ideal situation to employ idea generation toolkits. We investigated how jammers use these idea generation toolkits, and how might they aid in inspiring evocative ideas. Our survey of idea generation toolkits show that experienced jammers tend to experiment with new ideas, and largely possess intrinsic motivations to participate.

CCS Concepts

•**Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design** → **Systems and tools for interaction design; Human computer interaction (HCI)** → **User studies**; •**Applied computing** → Computers in other domains → Personal computers and PC applications → Computer games

Keywords

idea generation; design toolkit; game jam; brainstorming; connected ideas; collaborative learning

1. INTRODUCTION

New ideas are often inspired by serendipity, the joy of encountering something by pure chance. Most game jam participants, which we call *jammers*, form teams to make games in 24 or 48 hours. Time is precious under this environment, and jammers cannot afford to spend too much time waiting for a grand new idea to surface. Adding to their challenge, larger game jams often attract tens of thousands of jammers in one event with a central theme. In order to make a game that stands out from the crowd, jammers must innovate new game ideas and execute their implementations under pressure.

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Not all game jams offer monetary rewards and prizes, as some explicitly state that “game jams are not competitions” [6, 25]. The format is more akin to “music jamming sessions, not necessary a contest” [23], and can be traced back to 2006 at Nordic Game Jam, one of the first major events. To wit, game jams provide a collaborative space where “people [are] willing to help other teams as needed ... to solve problems. It’s often a learning experience ... with people specifically experimenting with new technologies or ideas.” [17] In this way, we see game jams as friendly, cooperative competitions, an oxymoronic yet healthy tension that fosters collective creativity.

Exploring game jams as a research environment [2], our research aim is to investigate how ideas come to be and manifest; specifically, how toolkits can be designed to aid jammers for idea generation. We are interested to generate ideas that are connected by meaningful relationships, where key topics can be laid out quick and cheap for prototyping. Just as game jam themes can create a constraint around jammers for design [25], idea generation tools can set the tone and voice for their games.

We pose the question, “how might ideas inspire jammers and evoke new game ideas?” To define ‘inspire’, we look for positive stimulation and actions that follow visions of new ideas [21]. For evocation, we look for traces that connect original and however unlikely ideas which made it into the final game, as well as the design constraints that jammers overcame to get there [14].

In this study, we propose three phases to achieve our research aim: a survey of idea generation toolkits, an ethnographic approach to study game jam participants, and a survey incorporating tools and idea generation following a game jam. This paper comprises the first phase: a survey of available toolkits and online generators.

2. IDEA GENERATION TOOLKITS

There are many toolkits and frameworks available to inspire design. We examined tools with focus on creative thinking that can be applied to games. This criteria was not only to provide a broader frame of thinking—more than brainstorming—but also to aid idea growth in the process. General-purpose idea generation toolkits, not designed for game making, include Eno and Schmidt’s *Oblique Strategies* [4]; Eberle’s *SCAMPER* [3], and *IDEO Method Cards* [10]. These toolkits contain design processes aimed to switch on the “what if?” mindset.

Other toolkits were made for game design, for instance from Flanagan et al., *Grow a Game*, and the *Value at Play Framework* [5, 9]; Michalko’s *Thinkpak* [19]; Sampanthar’s *ThinkCube* [22]; from Kultima and et al., *Verbs, Nouns, and Adjectives (VNA)*, *GameSeekers*, and *GameBoard* [13, 15]; and Lucero’s *PLEX Cards* [18]. All of the toolkits are listed in Table 1.

To use any of the toolkits, participants would play a card and then decide what it means to some extent in the context of the design process. Using toolkits this way is like a game in which there are

no winners, and participants are “trying to reach the status of ‘idea dictators’” [15]. Most toolkits provide names, descriptions, or actions to participants, although there are no set ways to play. Toolkits are designed for group play to encourage sharing ideas, but they can also be used with a single player.

Table 1: List of idea generation toolkits

Name	Content	Examples
Oblique Strategies	A deck of 22 strategies to be drawn at will to provoke novel ways of thinking by process. The latest edition is the 5th, published in 2001.	List the qualities it has. List those you'd like. Back up a few steps. What else could you have done?
SCAMPER	Seven general strategies designed to promote out-of-the-box thinking.	Substitute, Create, Amplify, Modify, Put to other use, Eliminate, Rearrange or Reverse
IDEO Method Cards	Empathy tool cards divided into four categories, Learn, Look, Ask, and Try. Each card has a title, “how”, and “why” to facilitate usage.	Guided Tours: Accompany participants in spaces relevant to the project. This helps people recall their values.
Value at Play Framework	A design process with three iterative phases: Discovery, Translation, and Verification.	Do system features afford activities that support identified values? Does the overall system design adequately represent the values in question?
Thinkpak	56 cards using the SCAMPER principle and nine design strategies for creative thinking.	Can you make it do more things? Can you find more uses? Increase functions? Get a higher performance level?
ThinkCube	88 idea cards, 88 keyword cards with a definition a visual thesaurus, and 24 verb cards to mutate them.	Story: Legend, Adventure, History, Tale. Exaggerate: Embellish, Enlarge, Amplify, Inflate.
Verbs, Nouns, Adjectives (VNA)	3 decks of cards with high-level, distinct categories to stimulate shared ideas. Different versions can be tailored for a theme.	Rotate, Bogeey, Glimmering Death, Only a handful of individuals survive, Extermination
GameSeekers	4 decks: red cards with subjects or abstract themes; purple cards with black and white patterns; green cards with game genres or social aspects; and blue cards with game mechanics.	A row of black lines, a photograph of a woman in snow, time management, simplify.

Name	Content	Examples
GameBoard	A board of 11 card slots, and two decks. Core cards with mechanics and themes, and Gameplay cards with structure, feature, and special cards.	Players take turn to play cards and ask each other to explain how it fits the game they are creating.
PLEX Cards	22 categorial cards with keywords, a brief description, and 2 photographs. 2 instructional cards.	Exploration: investigating an object or a location

Most ideation toolkits are card based, because this format makes them easy to randomise and distribute for many unique combinations. Cards also make progressions simple to design; Oblique Strategies is meant to be played sequentially, whereas VNA is designed to be used in sync with all three categories to inspire new ideas. The content is not necessary unique topics and random words, but they can also be instructional, such as the IDEO Method Cards. Combining different strategies, objects, and thoughts consistently becomes a major theme throughout the toolkits. Some toolkits are available online in its entire set of cards, making it possible to “print and play” [1].

3. ONLINE IDEA GENERATORS

Another popular way of generating game ideas, especially in online-only game jams like *Ludum Dare*, is to use pseudo-random systems to puzzle together distinct topics. It is worth noting that using a random idea generator does not mean committing to the first results, because jammers can keep hitting the *generate* button until they get something they like. As Lehrer [16] wrote about remixing ideas to get a new one, “the metropolis is like a sonic blender; every street is a mix tape,” jammers are free to visit every corner of the knowledge bank until something clicks with their minds.

British Library Labs provided 1 million digital images from the British Library. They hosted a game jam between 4-12 September 2015, and invited game submissions that used those pictures [11]. In this way, the source of inspiration was those 1 million pictures. Reframing the crowdsourcing constraint for content, jammers were free to browse at their own pace, or use their sample browser to get an overview of the collection.

There are many online game jams that crowdsourced ideas from participants, scraped from popular titles, and put together random idea generators for use. To name a few, *Ludum Dare*, *Berlin Mini Game Jam*, and *Insanity Jam*. A list of online random idea generators and their descriptions are available in Table 2.

Table 2: List of online random idea generators

Name	Description	Generated Examples
Insanity Jam Official Game Idea Generator v2.0	Randomly fills out a sentence by genre, player action, and a possible secondary factor. Genre can be fixed by the user.	A trivia game where you can never escape indecision.
The Video Game Name Generator	One button to generate a video game title. Templates change between adjectival nouns and “nouns of nouns.”	Monty Python's Banana Gladiator Combat Sniper

Name	Description	Generated Examples
Boardgamizer	Provides mechanics, two themes, a victory condition, and a hidden constraint which can be revealed with an additional button.	Mechanics: Dice Rolling. Theme: Encounter, Extreme Sport. Victory: Solve a puzzle/mystery. Constraint: Must use paper money
Random Game Jam Theme Generator	Randomly picks one of over 2,000 suggested ideas to the Berlin Mini Game Jam	decision dilemma Electricity Short Complete Story
Orteil's Game Idea Generator	Single click to generate a mashup of game mechanics. There is a toggle "sanity" for darker results.	A student project where you paint portals through social engineering. A horror game where you motivate wyrms and collect loot.
Ludam Dare Theme Generator	Randomly picks a suggested theme from Ludam Dare, shortlisted by the community. Results are presented as a Google link per Ludam Dare tradition.	Time Limit Simulism Descent
Cowface Game Idea Generator	Populates a list of game titles from "Notable Games" in Ludam Dare entries, genres, Ludam Dare themes, and nouns. User can choose a number of results from each category. Results are presented as a Google link.	Command Persistence Gratuitous Space Battles Spore
Fancy Words Generator	Juxtapositions three words together in this order: adjective, noun, verb-er.	Happy Bacon Shooter Burnt Bag Dunker
Streaming Colour Game Idea Generator	Mashes a description, two game genres, and a location.	fast-paced, word game combined with rhythm game, set on a farm.
Gigster	Generates five categories with accompanying art: theme, genre, core aesthetic, objective, and design challenge. Offers one button to generate all five, one at a time, and options to swap out single categories.	Theme: suspense. Genre: dance. Core Aesthetic: dance. Objective: heal/save. Design Challenge: emotional rollercoaster.

4. GAME JAMS AS ENVIRONMENT FOR RESEARCH

Game jams provide an opportune avenue for design researchers onto evocative inspirations, in which jammers are initiated to do something and accomplish goals, "beyond the self" [21].

Grace [8] proposed that game jams are effective research environments with three reasons: focus, low risk, and support of skill mastery. Drawing further from that discussion, let us outline what makes game jam *positive* research environments.

Openness. Game jam themes are designed to be open-ended and ambiguous [7], allowing room for much creative freedom. To that effect, Kultima [12] conjectured that "framing game jams as 'compressed development processes' ..., being able to go through different steps of game development in a short period of time" is one of the key reasons game jams are attractive to researchers.

Playfulness. For VNA, Kultima and Alha [13] found that more ideas "flowed immediately, making the process faster ..., and a bigger portion of the ideas are suitable for the purpose." For PLEX Cards, Lucero and Arrasvuori [18] tested two design approaches for playfulness: PLEX Brainstorming, which "helps generate a lot of ideas in a short amount of time"; and PLEX Scenario, which "facilitates creating more elaborate ideas." This breadth and depth approach resulted in favourable ideas.

Stimulative. Kultima et al. [15] noted that random ideas were "surprising stimuli which force the player to think outside the box thus resulting in ideas that would not necessarily otherwise emerge." Players draw random words from different categories, if available, and attempt to describe a game based on what they turned up [Hansson 2014].

Collaborative. Lucero and Arrasvuori [18] found that idea generation by rules forced players to think about relations between subjects in hand, instead of the most obvious solution. The tension of random ideas and game rules create an equal contribution opportunity for everyone to participate, a factor for success in collaborative learning.

Many idea generation toolkits combine two unlikely ideas and create improbable combinations to stimulate creative thinking. Others have instructional or process-driven activities which evoke different ways of thinking. This unique combination is a key element to inspiring new game designs.

Idea generations are successful because of their resilience to repetition, and their nearly infinite combinations of possibilities. When deployed in an stimulating environment like game jams, they become a catalyst to iterate designs. When new ideas are exposed to low risk design teams, fumed by the playfulness of idea generation toolkits, well-executed games will stand the test of time.

5. CONCLUSION

We have conducted an ethnographic study to observe how jammers brainstorm with and without ideation toolkits, as well as examine the social dynamics of idea contribution. This was employed at Swinburne Summer Game Jam on 2-4 December, 2016. Data gathered from this jam will shape how we run our third phase at Global Game Jam on 20-22 January, 2017, and will be disseminated in a future publication. We will test ideation toolkits that have a focus on meaningful relationships between subjects with jammers.

We surveyed idea generators in two main categories: ideation toolkits and online random idea generators. Most of these tools have been used in research environments, and have been found effective to stimulate novel ideas in a limited time frame. We also

presented why game jams make an ideal and positive research environment to study idea generations, drawing four attributes: openness, playfulness, stimulative, and collaborative.

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