Critical Gambling Studies Blog

The GameBling Game Jam: Game Jams as a Method for Studying Gambling Games

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Abstract: Gambling scholars may be unfamiliar with the research methods used by their colleagues in game studies. Yet, as gambling becomes gamified, and gaming becomes gamblified, the intersection between our two fields continues to grow. The *GameBling* game jam, which took place in 2022 at Concordia University, proposed to explore this growing intersection by applying a game making and game studies method—the game jam (see, for instance, Kultima 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2020; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017)—to a gambling object—the slot machine. This post argues that game jams can be used in gambling studies to learn more about public perceptions of slot machines, to reverse-engineer black-boxed gambling algorithms, or even to help new research interests emerge through the process of game creation. We ultimately propose that the practice of creating games from scratch in a limited time frame, or "game jamming," is an innovative research method that can help uncover new ways to think about and question social science concepts.

Introduction

Gambling scholars may be unfamiliar with the research methods used by their colleagues in game studies. Yet, as gambling becomes gamified, and gaming becomes gamblified, the intersection between our two fields continues to grow. The *GameBling* game jam, which took place in 2022 at Concordia University, proposed to explore this growing intersection by applying a game making and game studies method—the game jam (see, for instance, Kultima 2015; Meriläinen et al., 2020; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017)—to a gambling object—the slot machine.

Slot machine games developed at the same time as industrial modernity in the 19th century and have been long emblematic of the complex relation between humans and machines (Huhtamo, 2005). They have historically been thought of as games of pure chance, where skill plays no role in the outcome while at the same time providing a modality for a newly alienated workforce to rage against factory automation on their own terms (Huhtamo, 2005). Modern gambling slot machines were relegated to casino sidelines when they were first introduced but are now one of the leading sources of revenue of the contemporary gambling industry (Schüll, 2012). This market success, which has only been

multiplied by the development of slot machine games on digital and mobile platforms, calls for a fundamental re-thinking of what slot machine games are and might be.

This post argues that game jams can be used in gambling studies to learn more about public perceptions of slot machines, to reverse-engineer black-boxed gambling algorithms, or even to help new research interests emerge through the process of game creation. We ultimately propose that the practice of creating games from scratch in a limited time frame, or "game jamming," is an innovative research method that can help uncover new ways to think about and question social science concepts. Jamming gives direct access to the ways in which social relations are materially enacted and mediated and allows researchers to explore this in ways that normal social science methods cannot. In this review of the event, we first provide a brief overview of gaming and gambling studies, before presenting the games created during the game jam, and concluding with a discussion of its implications for gambling research.

Game Jams in a Nutshell

While there are different ways of defining the field of game studies, scholars who adopt this moniker often study games and play in all their diversity, their cultures, political economies, and the social fabrics, geographies and temporalities in which they are embedded (Mäyrä, 2008; Nieborg & Hermes, 2008; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). The discipline includes all types of games, such as board games, sports, and video games. Game studies, which draw on anthropology, sociology, and communication studies, use a variety of approaches to investigate issues such as game design, player psychology, and the social significance of games (Hunsinger, 2017).

Game studies scholars—particularly in video game studies—are increasingly advocating for the use of game jams as a collaborative and interdisciplinary research method (Balli, 2018; Cook et al., 2015; Ramzan & Reid, 2016). Game jams are events in which individuals or teams attempt to create a game from scratch in a limited amount of time—this can range from an hour, such as in the 0h game jam (0h Game Jam, n.d.; Kultima, 2015) to two weeks, like the Summer Slow Jams organized by the Portland Indie Game Squad (Kultima, 2015; Portland Indie Game Squad, n.d.). Game jams can be held for research purposes, but also for entertainment, commercial, or even educational purposes (Lai et al., 2021).

Gambling studies is the study of games of chance. Games of chance usually involve a wager or a bet, and their outcome (winning or losing) usually cannot be determined by skill alone (Barmaki, 2019). Most gambling research stems from psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience, and this research largely focuses on problem gambling and addiction, though there is a growing number of social science studies on the topic (Nicoll & Akcayir, 2020) and calls for more interdisciplinary research (Reynolds et al, 2020). Ethnographic approaches, for example, though still marginal, provide new insights into gambling subcultures (e.g., Cassidy, 2020; Lynch et al, 2020; Schüll, 2012).

The GameBling Game Jam

On the 12th and 13th of February 2022, Concordia University in Montreal hosted the *GameBling Game Jam*, on the theme of slot machine design. The game jam was organized by the Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre (TAG, n.d.), and two research groups from Concordia's research chair on gambling studies: HERMES (Hermes, n.d.) and Jeu Responsable à l'Ère Numérique (JREN, n.d.).

The *GameBling Game Jam* aimed to provide a space for creation to tap into the participants' representations of slot machines by developing games that enchanted and enticed users to think critically about the visual pleasures, haptic feedback, soundscapes, temporalities, and other affordances that have been (and continue to be) associated with this genre of gameplay.

Sixteen participants met over two days for a game jam designed to deconstruct and prototype slot machine games. They formed six teams. The call for participants stated that anyone could join, regardless of coding experience, because three programmers were hired to provide teams with coding assistance. The students and programmers who participated received a $300 bursary. The organizers of the jam emphasized that it was a no crunch event. Participants were not required to submit a finished game, and in-progress ideas were welcome. The theme was presented in an introductory game created by Idun Isdrake, one of the jam organizers (Isdrake, 2022b).

The teams presented six games during a public showcase on the final day of the game jam, held in *Gather Town*. Each game was a playable prototype with a unique take on slot machines. We will go over each of these games in the following section.

The Games

Time Out: A Soothing Machine Reflection

"Taking time to relax, reflect, and affirm yourself" (game description; Cardinal, Maïer-Zucchino, Ventura Sanchez, Abukasm, & Roberts, 2022)

The creators of this game challenged themselves to use slot machine mechanics to create a non-gambling game. *Time Out* was designed as a wellness app that transports its users away from their daily lives for a few moments. Players can listen to soothing sounds—a crackling fire, a flowing river —while tapping the pastel-colored screen to produce musical notes and meditative questions like "What would you do if there was no tomorrow?" or "What makes you feel powerful?" At first glance, the game appears to have no relation to slot machines. However, the app displays three dots that randomly change colors, reminiscent of slot machine reels, which are always spinning and sometimes land on winning combinations, but are difficult to control.

Casino After Dark

"In this interactive fiction game, you play and make choices as a casino worker cleaning up after hours." (game description; Dwyer, Isdrake, French, & El Mir, 2022)

In this choose-your-own-adventure game, the player takes on the role of a casino employee cleaning up after hours. The game is mostly text-based, with some brightly-colored illustrations of slot machines to accompany it. The player progresses through the game by selecting options like "grab a cloth and start cleaning" or "use your screwdriver to repair the [damaged slot machine]" (Dwyer et al., 2022). When attempting to repair the damaged slot machine, the casino employee is transported into the machine's interior. The player is then trapped, only able to look out at the patrons playing the slot machine. The options presented to the player can send them into an endless loop, similar to the control loops exerted by slot machines on their players.

Hot Hot Cold

"Try to get three hot cards in a row to get a hot streak!" (game description; Hoebanx, 2022)

This game was inspired by the language used by some slot machine players—slot machines that pay out are referred to as "hot," and those that do not are referred to as "cold." The player begins the game with $0 and has the option of selecting a card. The cards are either "hot," which means that they win a random amount of money, or "cold," which means that they lose a random amount. At each turn, the player is told how much money they have, and is given the option of picking another card or cashing out their winnings. If the player's earnings fall below zero, the screen displays the message: "Please leave." In this game, it is easy to keep clicking on "Draw another card" until all earnings are lost.

Cashino and Cashing

These two games were designed to complement each other.

Cashino

In this 2-bit game, the player controls a character seemingly stuck in a square room filled with slot machines, a key, and a rat. The player can pick up the key, but there are no doors to use it on. When the player tries to interact with the rat, the dialogue "Why?" appears. The player has to search for options to exit, which is a challenging task as they are given no indications on where to go or what to do. They are stuck. This was a prototype for the second game, *Cashing* (Isdrake, 2022a)

Cashing – stay a while and listen

"The idea was to zoom in on the Bitsy game *Cashino* and continue the critical play on casino games and their labyrinth, deceiving design to keep people spending/spinning. We wanted a minimalist take with as few loud, colorful, stereotyped visuals as possible, opposite of casino games.

We also wanted to create an empty, disturbing feeling of being trapped and alone, wandering around a glitchy soundscape including noise from ventilation, players breathing, underwater atmos, and in the final level, a few clips from a Sex Pistols concert in London as a call to rebel against the system."(game description; Isdrake & Cheema, 2022).

When the game starts, all the player can see is a door in front of them, and they can hear creepy noises: machinery, distorted music, and electronic grizzling. The door remains closed. Looking around, the player can see a glowing blue box, a staircase leading to the ceiling, and a green slot machine. It seems impossible to interact with these objects, and all the player can do is wander around this desolate casino, listening to the layered soundscape, and fall from the stairs, only to return to the empty casino room. If the player persists on climbing and falling from the stairs, their fourth attempt is rewarded with the door opening, and Sex Pistol music can be heard.

The Pursuit of 😅

"The game that'll make you feel all sorts of 😁 🤑 👺 😭 !" (game description; Jobin, Lynch, Parmentier, & Luna Barahona, 2022)

At first glance, this virtual reality game is simply a slot machine simulator. The player can pull a lever on the side of an old-school slot machine and see reels of emojis start to spin. However, if the player peeks behind the slot machine, they will find a dusty room with three rusted knobs labeled 'jackpot', 'losses', and 'bet'. The player can manipulate the odds of winning on the machine by turning the knobs. If the player returns to the front of the slot machine, they will find a sunny glade full of trees and flowers.

Discussion

It is interesting in the context of game studies to wonder why the form and mechanics of modern casino slot machine games have remained more or less static over time given the rich historical variation of coin-op arcade machines on the one hand and video games on the other. The tendency would be to perceive slot machine gaming as being institutionalized by the cultural logics and economics of casino gambling, but this would be to neglect the importance of the symbolic and material interaction between human and machine with slots.

The games created during the GameBling Game Jam bring up interesting questions about slot machines, our interaction with them, and their perception in the collective imagination. The games focused on various aspects of slot machine gambling, such as losing control of the game (*Time Out*), manipulating the odds of winning (*Casino after Dark* and *the Pursuit of* 😁), casino design (*Cashing* and *Cashino*), and player superstitions (*Hot Hot Cold*). Apart from *Time Out*, where the slot machine is reduced to its randomly blinking lights, and *Hot Hot Cold*, where only winning or losing money remains, slot machines appear as physical objects in each game. It's worth noting that in the majority of these games, the game designers chose to keep the setting of slot machine gambling, with players interacting with the slot machine-as-object.

Players are encouraged to look around the slot machines in games where slot machines figure as objects (and even peek inside in *The Pursuit of* 😁 and *Casino after Dark*). This exemplifies a literal interpretation of critical thinking, in which the design of a slot machine is achieved by viewing slot machines from a different angle. This implies that gamblers must be removed from the slot machine game in order to critically reflect on it.

While the jam theme was not explicitly negative, all of the games portrayed slot machines negatively. This was even true for *Time Out*, the meditation app that disguises itself as a reversal of slot machines, or a 'good' slot machine. According to the narrative chosen by the *GameBling* teams, slot machines are generally portrayed negatively in the collective imagination. Each game depicts the loss of control over the outcomes of slot machine gambling in a different way. *Cashino* and *Cashing* are the best examples of this portrayal: the character is trapped in a box with no way out. Other games, such as *Casino after Dark* and *The Pursuit of* 😁, demonstrate that the house always wins at the expense of the player.

The theme of the GameBling game jam focused on a type of gambling game, but not on how the participants should interpret it. The paths chosen by each team reveal interesting ways to think about slot machines, such as the idea that stepping away from the game is necessary if a player wishes to understand how little control they have over the outcome of the game.

Conclusion

The GameBling game jam was an experimental event, that proposed testing a new methodology for gambling studies. We found that despite very different games, common themes emerged, such as the themes of manipulation and control of the player by the machine. Such themes demonstrate a negative association with slot machines by our participants.

Participants and organizers were pleased with the game jam's results. They discovered that creating a game encouraged innovative and creative thinking and allowed them to collaborate across disciplines. The objective of this game jam was exploratory and experimental, but there is no doubt that a more

targeted approach could also produce interesting outcomes, such as encouraging participants to create awareness-raising games.

In order to learn more about game jams as possible gambling research methods, we will host a second edition of the *GameBling Game Jam* in February 2023. We also propose to conduct interviews with past participants about their thought processes and experiences during the creation of their games to gain further understanding of the ways that game jams open up new research avenues.

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Bart Simon is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University. His research is focused on the areas of science and technology studies, critical post-humanism and everyday technocultures with specific interests in digital culture, games and virtual worlds, and simulation, surveillance and social control. In 2004, Simon launched the Montreal GameCODE project, a Concordia-based research initiative to examine the cultural impact of digital games. In 2009 he became the director of a new broader cross-faculty research initiative in Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG).

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