Critical Gambling Studies Blog

GameBling Game Jam 2.0: The Writing Workshop

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This is a short introduction to a series of blog posts, below, written by participants in the second edition of the *GameBling Game Jam*.

GameBling 2.0

On the 11th and 12th of February 2023, Concordia University hosted the second edition of the *GameBling Game Jam*, one year after the successful first edition (Hoebanx et al., 2023). A game jam is an event during which individuals or teams attempt to create a game from scratch in a limited amount of time. A detailed explanation of game jams and a summary of the first edition can be found in Hoebanx et al. (2023).

In Hoebanx et al. (2023), we argued that game jams can be used as an innovative research method "that can help uncover new ways to think about and question social science concepts." We put that idea to the test again in the second edition, with an added twist: we held a writing workshop after the event to which all jam participants were invited. Of the 16 original participants, 9 participated in the writing workshop. The primary goal was to encourage jam participants to reflect on and write about their experiences as game designers, aiming to gain insights into their thinking and design processes—something that last year's blog post was not able to achieve (Hoebanx et al., 2023). The blog posts in this series are the result of this writing workshop.

While the theme of the first edition was slot machines, the second edition's theme was more abstract: (Un)Lucky. Supported by TAG—the Technoculture, Art and Games Research Centre, housed in the Milieux Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology at Concordia University—along with the research teams at Concordia's Research Chair on Gambling—

HERMES and Jeu Responsable à l'Ère Numérique (JREN)—the jam hosted sixteen participants, the same number as the previous edition. The event was virtual and took place over Discord and the Gathertown platform. Participants received a $300 bursary for their participation. Accompanied by four organizers and a floating mentor, six teams generated eight unique games, which were uploaded to the itch.io page (*GameBling Game Jam 2.0*, 2023). Participants had the option to present game ideas or working game design documents without the requirement of a finished game on the itch.io page. The organizers emphasized the low-stakes, exploratory nature of the event and highlighted its experimental space, which encouraged collaboration, diverse roles, and various interpretations of the theme.


GameBling 2.0 Event Banner

The organizers were interested in the outcome of a theme that did not dictate a specific game mechanic; unlike the previous year, which had called for a focus on slot machine retention mechanics. As a result, the games that were created included three card games, an adventure game, a coin-flipping game, and a horse race betting game. All the games are available to play here.
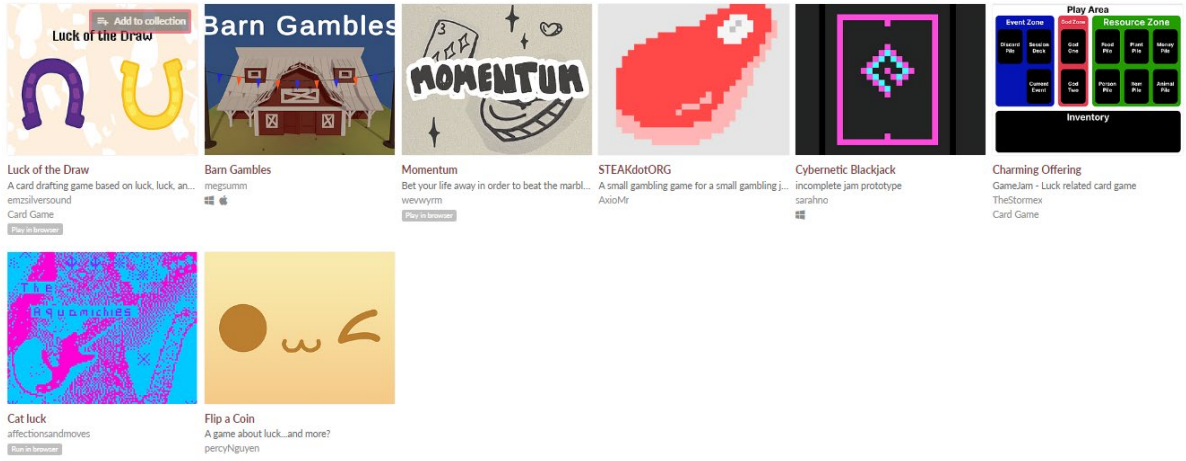
Screenshot of the game submission page.

(Note: STEAKdotORG was not submitted by a participant in the Game Jam.)

Four blog posts came out of the writing workshop and focused on the following games: *Luck of the Draw*, *Charming Offering*, *Cat Luck*, and *Flip a Coin*. These blog posts illustrate some of the ways that jam participants interpreted the theme and later made connections between the theme and scholarly work about luck, gambling studies, and even drama studies. Unlike the initial game jam, where all six games portrayed slot machines negatively, our recent edition presented a more varied perspective. Among the featured games, only *Flip a Coin* depicted the hazards of gambling, while the others did not associate gambling with negative undertones. This shift can be attributed to the more abstract prompt, (Un)Lucky, which encouraged participants to focus on the concept of luck rather than on a specific game, since that might carry pre-existing negative connotations in the collective imaginary.

Through the facilitation of game jams that prompt participants to contemplate gambling, our aim is to uncover innovative research methods as valuable tools for thinking about gambling. As advocated by several critical gambling studies scholars (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2020), there is a need for more interdisciplinary research in gambling studies, extending beyond the conventional clinical and quantitative research. Broadening our comprehension of gambling experiences and exploring the ways gambling is depicted in our collective imagination is crucial. This approach reveals nuanced facets of how gambling is experienced and imagined, and it can guide us toward potential interventions if necessary.

In light of this, we invite you to read the posts in this special section of the *Critical Gambling Studies Blog* by reflecting on how we can use innovative research methods to expand the ways we think about and study gambling.

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Luck of the Draw: Card Games, Superstitions, and Cats

Leonardo Abate

I participated in the *GameBling Game Jam 2.0* alongside Justin Roberts and E. Jules Maier-Zucchino, taking the name Team Pasta Casa after an inside joke too long to recount here. Our entry for the jam, *Luck of the Draw* (Team Pasta Casa, 2023), is a simple game of chance inspired by the trappings of the draft tournament format in trading card games (TCGs). The player is presented with a random selection of three cards from which they must pick one; this process is repeated over five rounds, resulting in a hand of five cards. Cards can be lucky or unlucky, and are worth an equal amount of good or bad luck, with the exception of rarer cards (lucky number 7 and unlucky number 13), which are worth more points. After the five-card hand is completed, players are then presented with a random test that can benefit from either good luck or bad luck. A 20-sided die is rolled, and the result is added to the amount of good or bad luck accumulated. If the total result is 15 or more, the game is won. Otherwise, it is lost.

Figure 1. *The card selection process.*

There are also two secret ending scenarios, which can be accessed by constructing specific hands: one is unlocked if good and bad luck are balanced (i.e., there is at most one point of difference between the good and bad luck scores), the other if the player picked at

least three cat-based cards (the tortoiseshell cat, maneki-neko, and / or the black cat). In both cases, there is no test, and the player is considered to have won automatically.
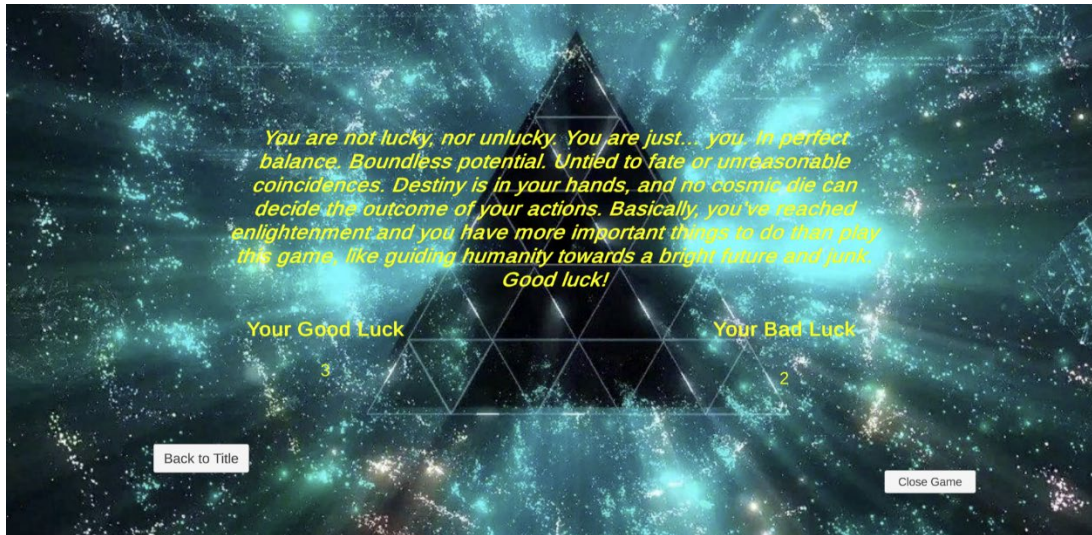

Figure 2. *The special equilibrium ending.*

Thought Process and Expectations during Development

Coming into the brainstorming portion of the jam, our lead programmer, Jules, immediately had the idea of using a draft (a popular tournament format of the TCG *Magic: The Gathering*) as the basis for our game design, as it is something that we all had experience with and it fit the theme of "luck" very well. A *Magic* draft tournament requires players to open a set amount of booster packs provided by the venue, select a card from each, and pass the rest to a player seated next to them; repeating the process until enough packs have been opened and cards collected for a full deck to be formed. It is a format that rewards knowledge of the game's strategy to construct a functional deck out of the available pool of cards, but it is also eminently based on luck, which determines what opportunities are being presented to each player.

With that baseline in mind, we decided to move away from the multiplayer aspects of *Magic* (as they felt too complex to tackle within the scope of the jam) and tried to recapture the feeling of building a viable strategy out of the limited possibilities available. We decided to style the cards after good luck charms and bad luck omens from popular folklore in order to stay within the game theme, to give players familiar with the symbols an intuitive understanding of the cards' relative value, and to introduce those unfamiliar to superstitions from different cultures. Our hope was to use the trappings of a draft game and the intuitive understanding of good and bad luck to trick the player into value

judgments about the cards (leading them, for example, to avoid bad luck cards and aim for good luck cards on a first run), while simultaneously using the ending scenarios to showcase an equivalence of the two types of luck, rewarding balance rather than obsession of one over the other.

We initially toyed with more complex design ideas—such as having poker suits represent different "types" of luck that could be collected (instead of the simplistic good and bad luck that we went with in the end), cards having more unique properties, and the final event be some kind of battle scenario that would require the playing of collected cards to win—but we scrapped these due to the jam's time constraints. This ended up being a good call, as it allowed us to complete the game in time without too much stress, and the thematic intentions were not undercut by the simplicity of the final game.
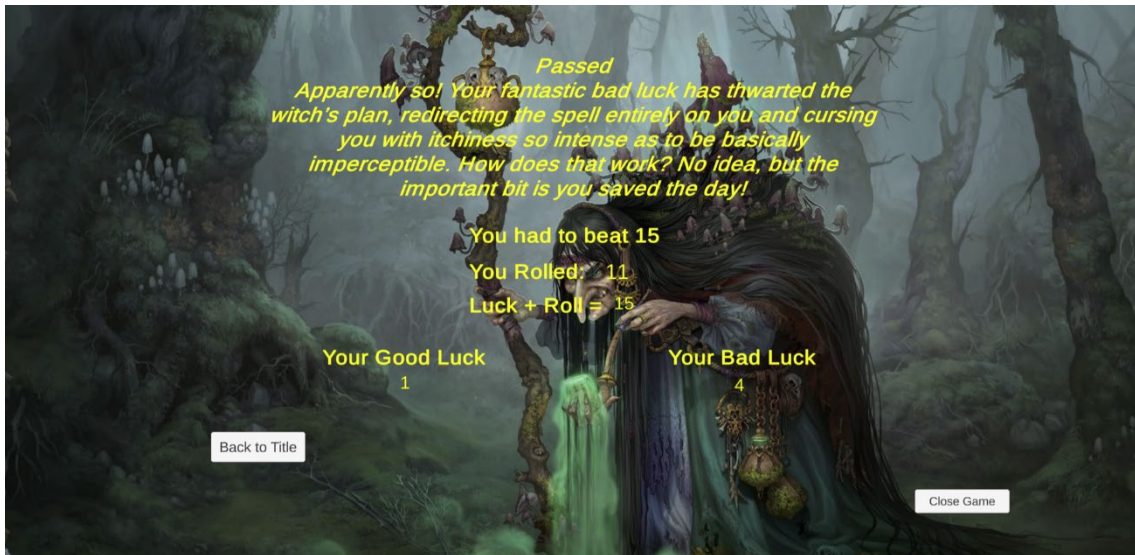

Figure 3. A successful bad luck ending.

Reflections on the Theme of Luck

We toyed extensively with the theme of luck, as it appears in the game on four different layers of experience. Firstly, luck is presented in the game's aesthetics: all the cards are styled after charms and ill omens from folklore of different cultures, which we researched during production. We would have liked to have more in-depth descriptions of the symbols used to potentially give players some insight into the origin of these folkloristic traditions, but this feature too was scrapped for time, and we settled instead on witty flavour text for each card that hints at the origins of each symbol. The use of pre-existing symbology for luck also helped our intent of priming the player to expect certain cards to be "better" than others while subverting that belief in the rules themselves. We even

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decided to never state the rules explicitly in the interest of leaving the player's intuitive assumptions as the only guidelines when they first play the game.

Figure 4. *An example of some lucky cards.*

The other three layers are found in the succession of mechanics: the draft portion of the game, which determines the pool of cards that the player has access to when building their hand; then the final scenario, which is normally random and will establish whether the player's hand is "good" or not (i.e., which of the accumulated points matter); and finally the die roll, upon which depends success or failure of the game session. Crucially, the die roll is constructed in such a way that it is possible for it to make redundant everything that came before: at the end of the day, pure luck can grant success in the most unlikely circumstance or break down the most well-constructed countermeasure, similarly to what can be seen even in more "strategic" games like *Magic: The Gathering*.

The hidden layer of this reflection is that, due to the secret scenarios, the ways to reliably "win" the game have very little to do with luck as presented. This was not planned from the start as an explicit goal: we included the secret endings mainly because they sounded fun. But, in an appropriately serendipitous twist, we realized after testing the game that their implied rhetoric worked nicely within the larger context of the game. One secret scenario rewards balancing good luck with ill omens and accepting the ups and downs in fortune as the wisest course of action, while the other secret scenario rewards a player that ignores the symbolic lucky or unlucky judgment placed on the cards in favour of pursuing that which makes one happy (i.e., cats).

We had hoped to make the secret scenarios achievable in every session. We wanted them to be a method to bypass the quantified abstraction of luck present in the internal mechanics of the game. However, we were unfortunately unable to completely remove the element of randomness, as the secret scenarios still rely on the pool of cards presented to the player to be achieved. In other words, while the secret scenarios might be easier and more reliable outcomes to achieve for the player (balance good and bad luck, or pick three cat cards), they still might be impossible to reach if presented with a bad draft of cards. As it turns out, it's hard to build an engaging game based on luck while also including solutions that do not rely on chance at all.
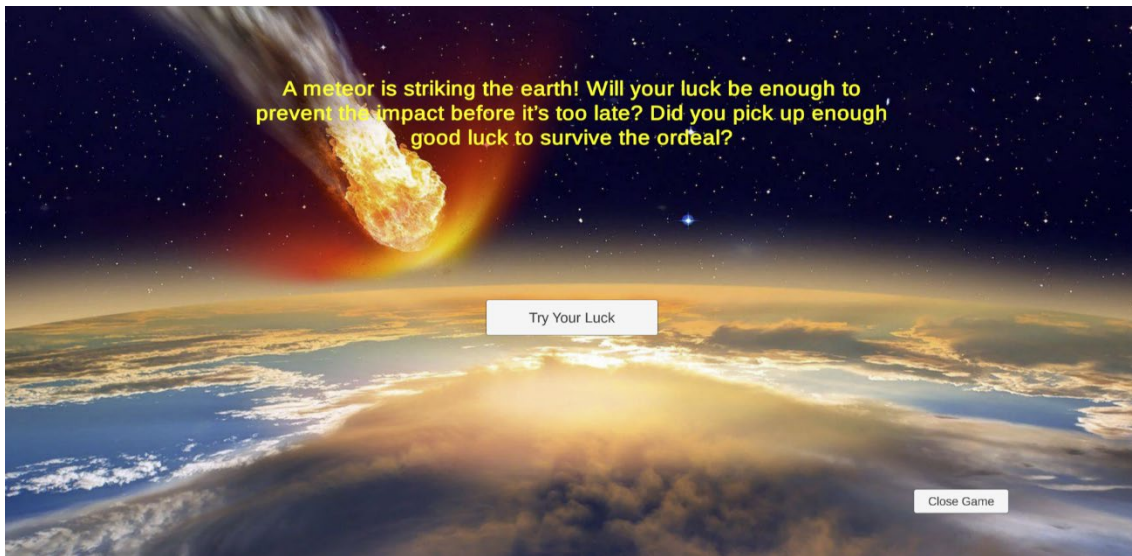

Figure 5. The good luck standard ending.

Critical Theorization

Beside what has already been said about the expectations created by symbols of good and bad luck, there are two ways in which this game can be put into conversation with larger critical analyses of gambling and luck. The first is within the confines of TCGs and their competitive scene. Draft tournaments are a popular format for TCG competitions, pulling together the various characteristics that makes the medium successful: their nature as collectibles (where participants at draft tournaments can keep the cards they drafted and / or win more cards through the event), as a strategy game (knowledge of the system is rewarded when constructing a drafted deck), and finally, in the innate gambling aspect of booster packs. Luck in TCGs is used as a tool for fairness both within a game (what cards one ends up drawing) and at a referee level (drafting allows for an impartial, if rarely equal, distribution of resources); but it is also a commercial snare, as

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the chance of getting a good card is used as incentive for buying multiple booster packs (Martin, 2019). Our game disrupts this framework (albeit somewhat inadvertently) by making the card-collecting aspect deceptively useless: most cards are equivalent in value and strategic worth, including the bad luck ones (which a first-time player might avoid because of their negative connotations), and even if there are ones that are rarer than others, their collection doesn't necessarily equate to a better final result (as the winning strategies remain pursuing balance and cats, rather than leaving the outcome of the game entirely up to chance).

The second framework of analysis that could be applied to the game is that of rituals. As mentioned, all the cards in the game are styled after charms and ill omens, whose collection grants a quantified representation of luck. In gambling culture, there is a tendency to maximize one's luck through rituals and by avoiding unlucky gestures, circumstances, or symbols (Grunfeld et al., 2008), which showcases a practical understanding of luck as something that can be accumulated, or at the very least attracted. This value judgment on certain things and actions as "lucky" or "unlucky" can be harmless, but it can also combine with misunderstandings of probability to produce a worse relationship with gambling. In our game, lucky and unlucky symbols are presented as qualitatively distinct but morally neutral, without one being innately "better" than the other in all circumstances, and both being required for the best endings. This follows a similar logic to the Taoist parable of "The Farmer's Luck," which we were reminded of during development:

> There was once an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years.
>
> One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit.
>
> "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.
>
> "Maybe," the farmer replied.
>
> The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it two other wild horses.
>
> "Such good luck!" the neighbors exclaimed.
>
> "Maybe," replied the old man.
>
> The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg.

Again, the neighbors came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune.

"Such bad luck," they said.

"Maybe," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by.

"Such good luck!" cried the neighbors.

"Maybe," said the farmer."

(Ying, 2018)

Ultimately, it's hard to know what exactly "good luck" or "bad luck" are. Life's events are unpredictable, and both good and bad fortune can lead to positive or negative consequences depending on your perspective. It is perhaps better, then, not to consider luck in decision-making at all, and instead simply try to collect cats.

Figure 6. *The secret cat ending.*

[*Luck of the Draw* can be played here](#)

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On Making *Charming Offering*: *GameBling Game Jam* 2023

Isabella Byrne & Calvin Lachance

Over the course of a February weekend, Calvin Lachance, Isabella Byrne, and Che Tan formed one of the teams in the second edition of the virtual *GameBling Game Jam* presented by JREN, TAG, HERMES, Research Chair on Gambling, and Concordia University to build a game that would touch on the relationships between luck, play, and gambling.

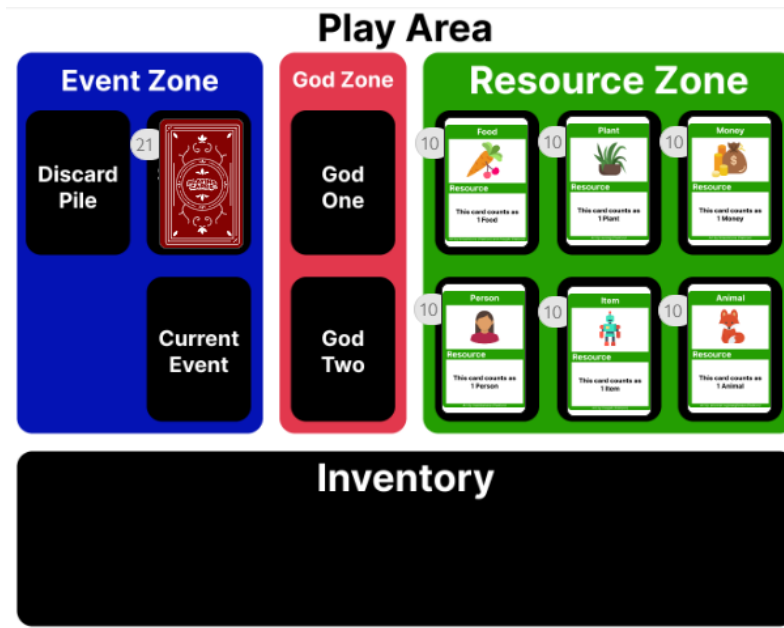***Figure 1.*** *The play area.*

Our entry, *Charming Offering*, is an analog single-player card game focused on collecting luck-infused offerings for a pantheon of gods. At the start of the game, you randomly pick two gods, each of whom demands specific resources in exchange for bestowing their good luck upon you. You win the game and gain the favour of your chosen gods when you collect all of the requested resources. Resources are gathered by strategizing through a limited number of story events, which either grant or require resources to proceed.

Thoughts on the Process

Calvin: With tight timelines being constitutive of this game jam, our fixed working period informed the parameters through which we prioritized tasks, built our scope, and

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moulded the final product. Our weekend time-limit was more circumstantial than constrictive. Despite possessing fewer game-design skills, I was comfortable with my first game jam project taking the form of an analog card game; it was well-suited to our collective ideas, experiences, and vision. The game that I initially imagined had too large a scope for a weekend project. In the drafting stages, I had hoped for us to create a heavily narrativized game that would incite the player to reflect on their own relationship to and beliefs about luck. With more time, I would have enjoyed seeing our team craft a more detailed narrative that was thematically framed by luck and fortune and would pertain to in-game items and characters. Within this thematic framework, players' gaming experiences would be enriched.

Isabella: We spent most of the weekend trying to translate our concept into a playable game. Over the two days, we felt tensions between sticking to our desired themes and the functional mechanics of the game. At times, we stuck too closely to our theme, which resulted in a game that wasn't really fun to play; it did not seem to have any end goals. We reconfigured the game by adhering to playing card game mechanics. However, this contributed to feeling like we had distanced ourselves from our initial idea that inspired us to create the game. Additionally, in both cases, the games we planned had too broad of a scope to accomplish over one weekend.

We had to learn (quickly!) how to balance critical theory with designing a workable game by integrating both features' essential elements. We would spend some time discussing the desired theme, then we would move away from it to focus on the game's mechanics, and then assess whether we had successfully woven the two together. What took us the longest was the process of achieving a concrete idea; during this time, we went through many different iterations of the game. Finally, once we made the initial prototype, it was tweaked after playtesting.

Addressing the Theme

Isabella: My greatest challenge was coming at this process from a writing background rather than game design. In game design, your point is communicated through inference in the active play the player undertakes. I felt pressure to "make this game academic," as the game jam was taking place within a university context and was meant to address certain areas of scholarship. I struggled to reconcile the tension of making a game that was fun while having it "say something,"

especially when adding important context for our themes was not workable through our medium.

Calvin: As I discussed previously, I was far more comfortable working with themes and stories than with logistics. The theme of luck is exceptionally interesting to me, imbued with a plethora of spiritual, cosmic, and religious aspects that I hoped to explore. In light of humanity's long history of attributing the unknowable or uncertain to the actions of gods, I was intrigued by our historical relationship between luck and the divine or spiritual. I was also interested in how mundane items or practices can shape the criteria by which we measure what is human and what is beyond human. Early on, my teammates introduced the idea of sitting next to a "lucky person," introducing the notion of luck transference through proximity. I thought this was brilliant, and quickly became attached to incorporating these themes in the final game. And so began the process of accumulating a series of items and practices that could be perceived as having an ability to hold, transfer, or negate luck. We crowdsourced some ideas from other game jam members for our event cards, prompting them to share some items or rituals which they engaged in. Incorporating personal accounts into our resource and event cards was another way, I believe, to integrate humans' relationships to luck, marked by unique perception and understanding.

Figure 2. *Examples of event cards.*

Turning the Theme into a Game

Calvin: Following research on gods of luck, my personal relationship to the theme was enhanced by the game-making process. Since I had no experience in game creation, my team provided some amazing suggestions of card-based games to help guide us to the final product: games such as FLUXX and Underhand. Additionally, my research on luck gods provided me with tremendous insight into the cultural and historical contexts that shaped the relationships between individuals and luck, and into how we render intelligible these intangible, elusive, and ephemeral phenomena. Working in a team of brilliant individuals with their own ideas of luck inevitably shaped how I engaged with and metabolized the theme by the end of our project.

Figure 3. Examples of God cards.

Conducting research into specific gods of luck allowed me to explore how the concept of luck can be gamified in a myriad of ways and what threads connect these possibilities. I realized that, in working through this theme, luck extends beyond the scope of human capacity and action; that it is so often understood to be external to us, and out of our control. Simply put, the game's goal is to meet a god of luck by engaging in events and gathering resources. In our game, of course, the randomization of cards (some representative of bad luck, some of good) working in tune with player strategizing to meet their goal was one way to exercise

the flux of situational or circumstantial control; by this, I mean where an individual's actions can shift outcomes and where it can't. Many games, even the simplest, take this shape: you are never wholly lucky or wholly strategic—you are always engaging in calculated chance. Personally, I wanted our game to feel like a small but enjoyable exercise in the humanization of luck.

Isabella: When I heard that we were supposed to make games around luck for this year's *GameBling Jam*, I was excited to think about the relationship between luck, materiality, and other forms of ritual actions or objects involved in play that give the player an impression of control over the game. While the game we finally created involved these themes, we found the process of designing it with them in mind to be challenging. In this way, this game jam was a good primer in learning how to turn a concept into a product. I was challenged by the process of exploring these themes versus creating a finished product. I felt more intrigued by simply seeing how games were made and playing with this scholarly area than creating a completed game. Ultimately, I think we struck a good balance.

What We Learned about Game Design

Isabella: This process taught me a lot about the importance of iteration in game design. The game iteratively improved following testing some aspect and then critically analyzing it. I have no doubt that we could go back to our completed game and take it apart to make something even better. Iteration appears to be one of the foundational cornerstones of game design. Each new version was unique and could have been its own successful version of a game that addressed the theme, but as we reformed the game with each encounter, we improved it until it became the best workable product of itself. This process gave me an immense amount of respect for game designers, especially ones who work on projects much larger than the one we created. That a game gets finished at all is a feat in itself, but another when it is effective, clear, and impactful. We got a small taste of what it would be like working collaboratively on a team where the theme has unique meaning to us, let alone our three different conceptions of how to make it come alive.

Calvin: As Isabella stated above, this process thoroughly enhanced my appreciation and deepened my respect for the work of game designers. Accounting for the choices and emotions of the player can seem like an endless assessment of variables.

Doing this in collaboration with other individuals who hold their own ideas, visions, and methods of working can be daunting. As someone who struggles to let go of his ideas, I was immensely grateful to be pushed by my teammates to test, adapt, test again, and tweak our game into something we could all play and enjoy.

Charming Offering can be played here

Participating in the *GameBling Jam 2.0*: An Introduction to Game Writing and Interdisciplinary Thinking

Alejandra Jimenez

On February 11–12, 2023, Concordia University's Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG) and the Jeu Responsable à l'Ère Numérique (JREN) hosted the *GameBling Jam 2.0*. The goal of this 48-hour game jam was to design and prototype a video game around the theme (Un)Lucky! This article will dive into the experience of participating in it and the framework to develop the game *Cat Luck*, followed by a reflection on creative writing and interdisciplinary thinking around the question: How does this experience produce new knowledge for non-experienced participants in the field?

The process of the game jam was captivating from the beginning, with tools to help participants connect with each other, like the Discord channels where everyone would introduce themselves, gather resources, get updates and announcements, and easily reach out to mentors. This was an effective manner of enticing contributors. On the first day of the jam, the opening ceremony took place in a virtual room in the Gather app. Participants chose an avatar and a place to sit around to set up teams and brainstorm ideas. Many of them were experienced gamers, programmers, designers, and creators. This was a scary scenario for a firstcomer. However, the feeling was quickly dissipated by the collaborative environment in which the groups were well-balanced to develop ideas efficiently.

For someone who has spent a long time without frequenting video games other than those easy, non-thinking, addictive cooking Android video games or those memories in the back of their head such as Atari or 8-bit games, the idea of the *GameBling Jam* brought some questions regarding the skills needed to participate. Having a background in acting and theatre, I reflected on the contributions of interdisciplinary thinking regarding creative writing for video games, storytelling, and visual representation. Does drama theory have anything to do with video games? How are the connections built between the story, the goals, the obstacles, and the player? How would the story information be displayed without generating a dialogue-based game?
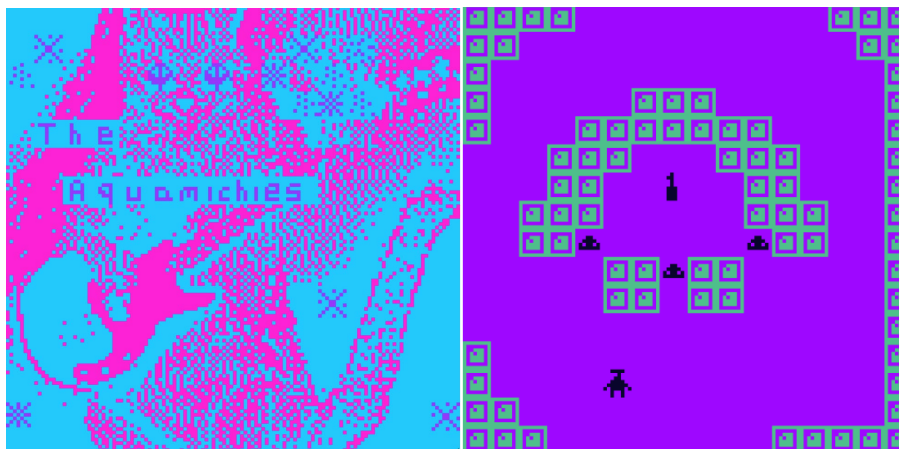
Cat Luck

Cat Luck (Jimenez & Isdrake, 2023) was a collaborative game developed for the *GameBling Jam 2.0* using Bitsy by Alejandra Jimenez and Idun Isdrake. It aims to achieve a basic idea:

a fiction about success and fortuity. It was a compelling process that explored universal, shared beliefs and codes related to luck. The main character is a cat who plays in a punk band and is trying to get to play on stage while surviving in the brutal world of artists. Greta, the cat, is helped by a witch, the player. The witch's luck will be challenged by a series of jobs, problems to solve, and fortuitous events to get the cat to the concert.
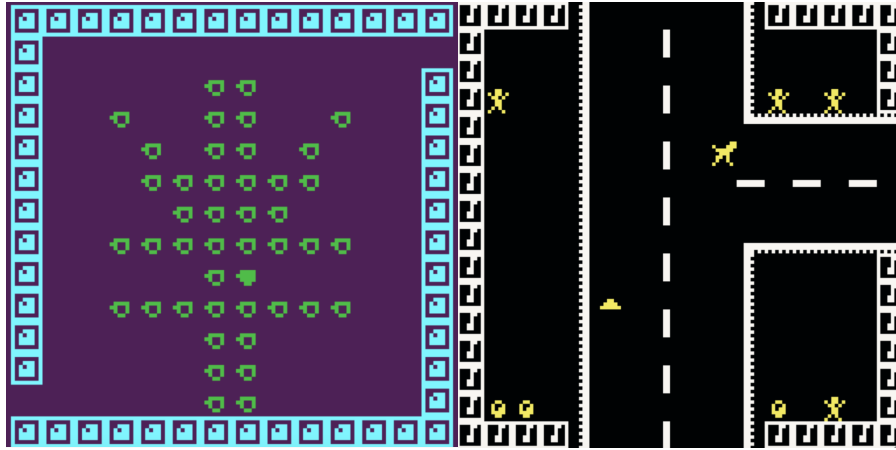
The diegetic world created for this game was based on events that happened to close friends or to ourselves, or in fictional situations where a punk cat could get involved. During the brainstorming for the game design, one of the team's insights was that luck is related to success. *Cat Luck* is a parody of the challenges behind the art world. Also, the group discussed the dichotomy of good / bad luck, superstition, and the imaginary that might vary culturally. The game would bring the player into scenarios meant to struggle with misfortune.

This helped define some obstacles, characters, and rooms following the premise of keeping the game simple with a clear set of tasks to solve. There are ten rooms in total. In each one, the cat shapeshifts, and there are obstacles for the player to access more rooms.

The video game aesthetics are based on the 1980s–1990s. The experience of using Bitsy to create *Cat Luck* brought the spirit of that time. Although it is a user-friendly engine, one of the challenges was the time constraints. Composing with blocks, a two-dimensional image became difficult due to the number of rooms. Nevertheless, it was clear that a visual reference with minimal elements would display a sense of space concerning the script. *Cat Luck* has a fair result despite the difficulties of getting more elaborate scenarios. More questions related to writing and game design emerged by developing this game. Is there a level of detailed descriptions of time and space present when writing the story that can be suppressed when drawing? If so, what other ways are possible to integrate them?

Writing the (Un)lucky

The *GameBling Jam 1.0* studied the relationship between gambling and slot machines. In the article titled "The GameBling Game Jam: Game Jams as a Method for Studying Gambling Games," posted in the *Critical Gambling Studies Blog*, Hoebanx et al. (2023) refer to game jamming as an innovative procedure of exploration to inquire and build on concepts related to social science. The theme "(Un)lucky" in the 2.0 edition was fundamental because of its relation to gambling. Thus, by understanding luck as a mere chance or a ritualistic behaviour independent of the set of skills that a player or a game might have, there is an occasion to inquire about the perception and control of the cognitive outlook that game designers apply to gamble.

The theme "(Un)lucky" is recurrent with several references. The following two, a video game and an animated film, show a contrast in how it is presented. Although these weren't considered for the game development during the jamming, they will help to analyze and open up some elements of creative writing. When communicating a topic, emotions are

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also evoked. In any form of storytelling (including theatre, literature, graphic novels, movies, and video games), the story is organized around a narrative structure so that the theme communicates a meaning and a message. It attempts to engage audiences and readers emotionally.

In 2017, the video game *Night in the Woods* was launched by Infinite Fall. This is the story of Mae Borowski, a cat returning home to reconnect with the life she left behind. However, things are different, and the woods seem strange when the night arrives. The character-driven adventure game creates a world of exploration with a successful story. Moreover, it discusses complex themes with a good sense of humour and eerie places. The player has the chance to choose the dialogues affecting some interactions. Mae is a character constantly taking risks and getting involved in dangerous situations, some of them near-death experiences.

Nevertheless, the cat is lucky and smart enough to unexpectedly discover a mystery and accept the changes in her life. In a review posted on the IGN YouTube channel, Chloi Rad (2018) finds that "mystery adds some dramatic impetus" due to the interactions between each character's journey becoming vital for the story. *Night in the Woods* is a single-player game in which they are engaged with the characters and the narrative because their decisions affect the story.

The 2022 computer-animated movie *Luck*, directed by Peggy Holmes and Javier Abad, portrays an optimistic moral tale around the human concept of luck. The plot is set in the Land of Luck, where Sam Greenfield, an unlucky person, finds a black cat named Bob. They join together in a journey to turn Sam's luck back. Elements like the penny, portals, clovers, leprechauns, and stones are present during the film. Good chance is the main character's goal. However, they get involved in clumsy, unlucky situations and life events while traveling across the Earth, the Bad Luck Land, and the In-Between. Characters like a dragon and a unicorn manage those places. During the journey, Sam understands that things aren't fixed, that humans need to try hard in life, and that it is possible to see some good luck in bad situations. According to a review posted on YouTube by CinemaSins (2023), excessive deployment of symbols about good chance makes the film predictable and naive.

In the videogame version, elements of superstition are displayed within well-structured and plausible situations. This creates an environment for the player's engagement by building out their own backstories and shaping the main character's life. In contrast, the animated film aims to catch the viewer's morals optimistically. The story's situations are evidently life's clumsiness instead of unlucky ones. Everything is set up, so the emotional

arc ends with an optimistic and ingenuous message. Luck is a goal; it's an ending point. A single space for the viewer to engage differently with the topic is unlikely to happen. It might seem unfair to compare two unique languages. Regardless, this comparison informs how these stories related to luck are presented in different media with dissimilar goals.

On the one hand, the opportunity to intervene in the story with the player's choices; on the other, the message that human incompetence is a product of bad luck. Looking deeper into those narratives, is the perception of luck / chance fixed in our belief system, or is it induced and controlled?

To develop that inquiry, first, it is relevant to provide some information on what writing for video games means and if there is a relationship with traditional writing. Later, it will be necessary to include an analysis through the lens of interdisciplinary thinking.

In the article "Explainer: The Art of Video Game Writing," posted in *The Conversation*, Maggs (2016) mentions that the narrative is all that is built, it is the wholeness of the game and "it can be informed by art, gameplay design and technical capability that already exist." Adjustable storytelling would be central to developing those other clue elements: the game world or the tactics. It will help to plan the narrative and the game's progression. Although game writing can be supported by traditional narrative, it is different due to the many aspects involved in the design and development of digital games.

To continue building on some comparisons between these two writing styles, in the video blog *Game Writer's Corner*, Kae (2020) highlights some of the differences and challenges of moving from writing more conventional works, novels for instance, to writing for digital games. She explains that the narrative is only one part of a more complex production: "Most people will not care about the dialogue, most people will not remember the characters, most people will not bother to read the lore" (1:15–1:23). This is related to the types of players that are involved in the game industry: The Narrative Kindred Spirit, who is going to be wholly engaged with the story; and The Ludologist, whose only interest is to play the game. In this regard, no story, dialogues, or characters are needed; the gameplay would have a clear standpoint; and the information (quest cues and objectives) would be short, clear, and concise so that the player's time is respected. Also, she suggests that dialogues are not the only way to display information. However, the writer would cherish both types of players. Hence, this informs how writing for video games is part of a whole environment where designers tell stories visually, and not everything relies only on the written word.

Interdisciplinary Thinking

The experience of participating in the *GameBling Jam 2.0* was nourishing and provided a creative outcome and research possibilities as well. Some insights are related to the levels of development of each of the video games, how teams are constituted, the level of expertise using the engines, and the time provided for the game jam. In prototypes like *Cat Luck*, interdisciplinary and collaborative perspectives led to exploring and integrating interests in both digital games and theatre.

According to Hoebanx et al. (2023), a game jam is a way to "help new research interests emerge through the process of game creation." This statement raised questions related to my discipline and the game development to expand on in writing. What tools are required to tell a story in video games? What are the links between metauniverses, for instance, between a play and a video game, that expand the audience's / players' experience? What makes a video game engaging for players? Is it the story or challenges, the characters and their goals, the difficulty levels, or the narratives?

Theatre and Video Games: A Revision of Paradigms

The relationship between theatre and video games can be traced by comparative drama. I will use the "soft game" theory to do so. Drama Theory is a plurimedial form of structuring situations, conflicts, and actions in social and theatre studies. Moreover, looking into this theory and the theme of luck, the inquiry would be about the spaces that video game writing opens to chance. Does interactivity depend on the narrative? How does *choice* work in video games?

To answer these questions, explaining the links and differences between video games and theatre is necessary. Before that, it must be considered that digital games are often understood as narrative media, which, like traditional media, are based on representation. However, some argue that video games are based on a different paradigm: simulation.

First, Drama Theory is close to *Dramatic Theory*, which is specific to theatre and drama studies. In the classic Western tradition, representation works to explain and understand reality. Narrative and Drama are concrete manners of representation. Drama creates a sensory impression for the viewers during a performance. It is representational and based on a written text. It is a form of literature in which conflict is the structure; it is the vertebrae. Conflict produces tension, urgency, and motivation, usually due to the uncertainty of its results. However, Drama is a plurimedial form of art that cannot be fully understood with reference to the text itself.

Second, Drama Theory is a problem-solving, analytical theory; an operational research method based on Game Theory and building on metagame analysis. Howard (1994) uses the concept of "soft game" theory to explore the transformations of a game and how it may vary as a result of pre-play negotiations between players. These negotiations involve "emotional persuasion and rational argument" (p. 187). Thus, soft game theory contributes to identifying the transformations affected by the inner dynamics of pre-play negotiations. In real-life situations, these transformations come from people's (or the player's) perception of reality by describing "rational and irrational processes of human development" (p. 187). Howard (1994) based his studies on real-life games as much as on drama because of its role-playing principle. He states: "Drama, like game playing, is, in part, a rehearsal for real life and throws light on it in crucial ways" (p. 188). Drama Theory concentrates on rationality, which conducts goal-directed behaviour, creative transformations, choices, and decision-making based on emotions and interactions.

Conversely, there is an alternative to narrative and representation: simulation. Video games are particular ways of structuring a simulation. According to Frasca (2004), simulation models a new system based on a source, keeping some elements and behaviours of the original in it. Thus, video games can express messages that representation cannot, and vice-versa. Frasca explains that the narrative paradigm and the storytelling model are "not only inaccurate but also they limit our understanding of the medium and our ability to create more compelling games" (p. 221). Although these paradigms have many elements in common, their mechanics are different, and they have "diverse rhetoric possibilities" (p. 222), where simulation operates as an "alternative semiotical structure."

Those elements are core: characters, settings, and events. As per representation, the narrative is a mechanism of structuring cognitive structures in rational thought: it produces a description of circumstances and a sequence of incidents that might be surpassed to generate a "solution concept": a dramatic resolution and a rational solution (Howard, 1994, p. 189). In simulation, more compounded systems work as cogwheels where there is a "sequence of signs that behave like machines or sign-generators" (Frasca, 2004, p. 223). It helps to predict complex situations and behaviours by retaining their characteristics and modelling them according to a set of conditions, which means that there is a configuration of loaded particulars that generate reactions to certain stimuli. According to Frasca, simulations are restrained, and diverse approaches and rules exist to accomplish goals. He states: "In the realm of simulation, things are more complex: it is about which rules are included in the model and how they are implemented" (p. 231).

Evidently, the contrast between these two paradigms is controversial. It has several detractors and advocates divided into two positions: the *narratologists* (or narrativists as named by Frasca) and the *ludologists*. The former stand for video games as a new narrative, whereas the latter consider them in their own nature: simulation. The narrative is binary in essence; it works in a relation of cause and effect, while simulation does not require coherent sequence, and yet, it can work with new starting points any time one plays it. While in video games, the user can make choices, in a film or a book, an observer can interpret the events rather than influence or manipulate them as they are pre-established.

According to Frasca (2004), "To an external observer, the sequence of signs produced by a film or a simulation can look exactly the same" (p. 224) due to the "well-lubricated tool" (p. 226) that narrative rhetoric establishes. Although he addresses that it might take several generations to shift the paradigm, interesting "cognitive consequences" might arise by changing the "literary mind" to the "simulational way of thinking" (p. 224), which means that an environment of experimentation and repetition is expected rather than simply telling a story. However, such ideas sound very similar to Howard's drama theory. This approach to role-playing activities analyzes how human processes such as values systems and perception of reality can change and develop during a game that, to solve a problem, can exceed the rational (reaching irrational emotional states), exhaustion of emotions, and creative impulses to get a dramatic resolution, yet, rationally accepted. That is to say that role-play approaches incorporate "complexity and emotion into a simulation" (Bolton, 2002, p. 353).

Are there Convergences between Theatre and Video Games?

Games have a system of participation rules with a clear goal, whereas spectators in theatre are conceived as passive. However, theatre has transformed so much over time. Over centuries, the misconception that theatre is "available only to the eyes and ears" (Laurel, 2014, p. 60) implies that it cannot exist without spectators.

Due to the relationship between the stage (space), actors (players), and audiences, the *ritual* (considering its antiquity and inherent development of humanity) called theatre is created. Although there is a stimulation of the predominant senses, there is a kinesthetic experience in the observer due to the response of the mirror neurons. Thus, this idea about passiveness needs to be more accurate. Conventional theatre is based on *verisimilitude*, which is related to *reality*. As mentioned above, drama is the basis of

theatre, stimulating the spectators' senses to impact them emotionally. In this paradigm, theatre creates the illusion that everything happening on stage is a reproduction of reality.

In contrast to the Aristotelian principle of theatre as an illusion, *theatre as theatre* was developed by, among others, by Bertolt Brecht, Vsévolod Meyerhold, and more contemporary theatre directors like Augusto Boal. The illusion of theatre neutralized the spectators' present reality, impeding social changes. It is relevant to say that theatre was an essential way of entertainment, and because of that, reality was presented as an "inexorable progression of incidents without room for alterations" (Frasca, 2004, p. 228). Theatre as theatre is a principle in which the spectator is aware of the use of effects to create theatricality and, instead, has a rational response to the facts presented on stage. The tension of principles between the paradigm shift from dramatic to post-dramatic theatre involved relational, participative, and interactive forms. Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s had experimental perspectives that focused even more on impacting other senses, engaging audiences with no conventional dramatic conflicts, non-linear stories, and breaking the barriers of representation. This also gave birth to performance art.

It is often thought that theatre has nothing to do with digital games, and they might seem contradictory. However, this comparison has also had several advocates and detractors, as described before. Nevertheless, those statements, nowadays, are problematic due to the borders vanishing between both paradigms when referring to interactivity. In the book *Computers as Theatre*, Brenda Laurel (2014) established the vast similarities between video games and theatre, contributing to the idea of interactive narrative.

Theatre, like cinema and TV, has been used as a reference to create video games due to how tension and uncertainty are presented. The traditional narrative (Aristotelian) follows a three-act structure: presentation–conflict–solution. This creates a *dramatic arc* in which the events are processed in tension, climax, and resolution. For instance, adventure games (role-play and strategy games as well) follow the conventional structure of the "hero (or anti-hero) journey." This system presents a character (created with several characteristics and features to generate *engagement*) who, in general, faces a moral dilemma that must be solved according to established and normative morals. Howard (1994) indicated the term "paradoxes of rationality" to explain six dilemmas generated by a rational approach to conflict (p. 189). As described before, in theatre, players are actors, and spectators only observe actions; whereas, in video games, players are both characters and spectators.

Frasca (2004) references Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to give an example of how the simulation rhetoric creates an environment for education and reenactment. In this theatre technique, called Forum Theatre, Frasca sees a theatre of simulation: an oppressive system

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(reality) is modelled by a representation system (the play). While issues are presented, the play can be interrupted to integrate a person from the audience to improvise, take the leading role, and change the story, giving a possible solution. The plot was created collectively, and the spectators were also meant to be actors. Boal called them *espectactor*. This is a virtuous manner of participatory theatre close to the video game simulation rhetorics with a different approach from the conventional narratives. This idea joins both roles of a video game player: an actor who jumps into the story and a spectator of their actions. In Boalian drama, what's interesting is the fact that the simulation is set by a non-digital, virtual, or computer-based domain that generates a captivating involvement in the play and a level of autonomy to be part of it. The feature of interruption and modification of the story is closer to gaming. In the idea of modification, an espectactor reaches their goal: go along with the imagination and adapt the game to diverse changes.

Essentially, what Frasca is conveying is the need to get rid of the "narrative coherence," which is well defended by Laurel in the interactive narrative, arguing the "Aristotelian closure as the source of the user's pleasure" (2014, p. 229). On the other hand, Frasca (2004) remarked that the potential of games is the player's capacity to start over and enhance their knowledge through the interpretation of simulated experiences and their repetition. Hence, for a digital game player (or an espectactor), what is compelling is the make-believe rather than the closure.

Insights on the "Make-Believe"

The categorization proposed by Roger Caillois (2001) in game studies can frame the essence of theatre as *mimicry* or *mimesis*, which is role playing. Caillois establishes three more categories: *Agon* or competition games; *Alea* or chance games; and *Ilinx* or vertigo games, in which perception is altered. This classification defines four play forms that continuously intersect. Two types are structured in a broader spectrum of these categories and are framed by the play continuum: *ludus* and *paidia*, play and game. One follows a well-defined structure and a set of rules, with winners and losers. The other is spontaneous, and the rules, although structured, can be more abstract. Ludus games are more linear and binary, while paidia are more "open-ended" (Frasca, 2004, p. 230).

From the acting point of view, as a performer and an actor, I learned that *acting is playing*. That rule is applied almost everywhere and taught in every corner of drama and theatre schools. In English, "play" has diverse meanings, being a noun and a verb. So, theatre across time has been defined by various philosophical concepts, and the first is the Aristotelian one of *mimesis*: imitation. It is how the actions and events of the characters

are shown instead of being told by a narrator (*diegesis*). Mimesis is an essential human feature that involves observation and repetition; in this way, children learn to behave. Hence, as an actress, my relationship with theatre begins with that primarily human behaviour. Also, it is undeniable that theatre has taken centuries to analyze and develop accurate techniques (for playwrights and actors) to create characters that engage the audiences.

Moreover, every theatre style has a basis in the make-believe principle. I have also been an espectactor, a practitioner of the Boalian theatre, Stanislavksi's method, Brechtian distancing effect, and Meyerhold and Grotowski's technique, where the body and objects (kinesthetics) are the first links between reality and the simulation of it in worlds modelled by playwrights, dramaturgs, and stage designers. I have practiced performance art where no acting is needed except the mere presence in a real-time space doing an action. Here, the relational sphere with others nourishes the work. As an espectator, I have also participated in participatory and interactive theatre. Thus, whether inside or outside the theatre or video games, a player's experience is kinesthetic, cognitive, and emotional; if winning or losing is involved, the engagement would change accordingly.

Theatre and technology have blurred their borders, serving one another as models. During the 1980s and 1990s, conventional narratives influenced the design of video games, and now, digital games and interactive technologies are more incorporated in theatre pieces worldwide. Nowadays, audiences take up more space, becoming players, who are, at the same time, playwrights, actors, and directors. In regard to digital games, simulation appears as an "alternative" rather than a "replacement" of representation (Frasca, 2004, p. 233) because their difference goes only to a certain point. On the other hand, Homan and Homan (2014) stated: "It may be that the video game … will, we think, become a (rather than the) theatre of the future, or at least the most popular new expression of theatre's evolution" (p. 184).

Conclusion

Participating in TAG and events like the game jam can contribute to producing research questions and interdisciplinary methods for creators, gamers, and non-gamers. It made me rethink my practice because it expanded my information and skills. This is also a way to understand the game design's collaborative, technical, and iterative aspects. It was also an encouraging laboratory of creative writing and its expansions to interactive theatre. Thus, new knowledge is acquired.

Earlier in this essay, I referred to the *GameBling 2.0* regarding the topic (Un)Lucky and the insights about game writing and its relationship to chance. After examining multiple perspectives, I considered the question of whether chance / luck can be modelled by changing the paradigms in which it is framed. Considering perspectives such as Frasca's ideas about the rhetorics of simulation being a fundamental characteristic of digital games in contrast to the narrative paradigm's construction of a black-and-white experience, will games written under the simulation rules shift the perception of luck on players?

The concept of paidia contributes to simulation rhetorics because it helps establish diverse levels for the players to develop their own goals. Likewise, simulations can be controlled to transmit ideology. Hence, luck and chance could be manipulated in the writing and design process. Often, digital games are perceived as spaces where skills are essential and can be enhanced by practice and repetition. Also, they can develop tactical thought and, therefore, success. However, further research is needed to address the intersections of gambling and video games, supported by both game and gambling studies, and applying methods such as game jams.

Cat Luck can be played here

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GameBling Jam Writing Workshop: *Flip a Coin* Reflection

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Introduction

For the *GameBling 2.0 Game Jam*, I made *Flip a Coin*: a simple browser game where players bet money on one side of a flipping coin. The goal is simple: gamble to your heart's content and cash in the goods! The odds seem reasonable to the untrained eye, as a 50% chance of winning is high in gambling.
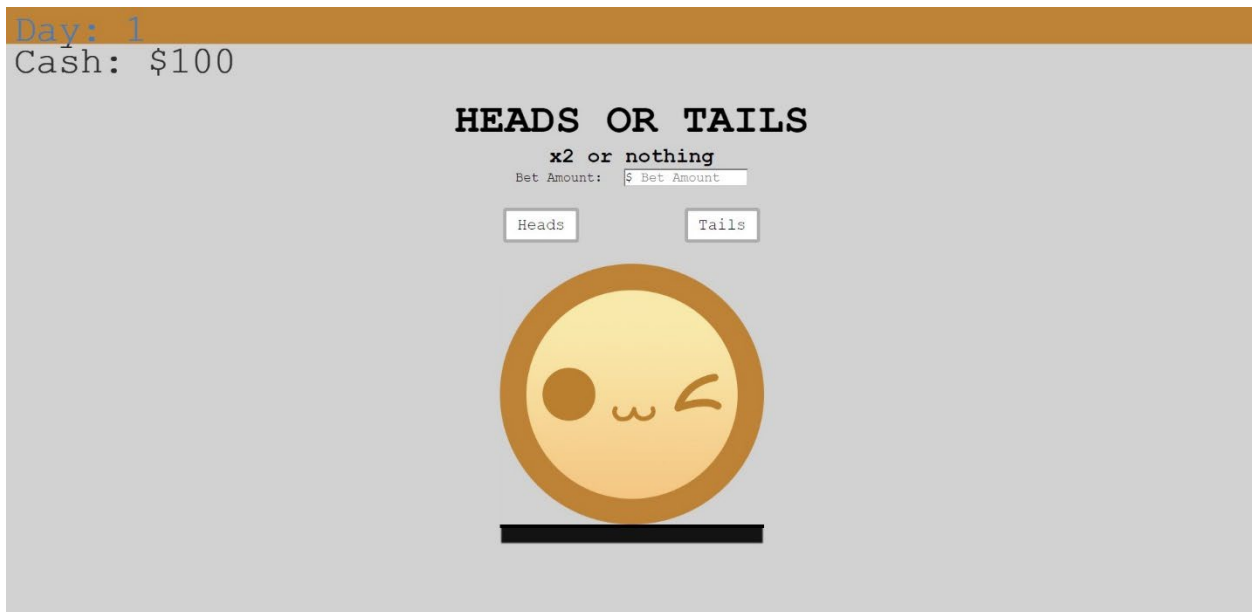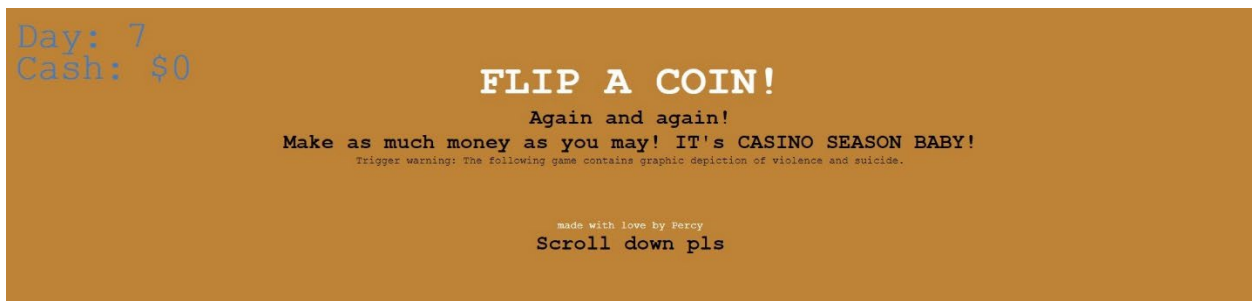
In the (eventual) case of bankruptcy, players will be introduced to Russian Roulette, a dangerous way to earn free coins. Whenever out of cash, players may then risk their life to continue feeding their crippling gambling obsession.

Thought Process

I was the sole creator on this project. In the initial stages of planning the game, I envisioned a story-branching narrative game. I decided against this because the random nature of luck removes the meaning of choices. In an action–adventure game, players should be rewarded for making the right choices. If player decisions are constantly influenced by random number generators (RNG), winning is no longer gratifying, while losing feels empty and unfair. Yet, this randomness is often the reality in commercial gambling where luck, or rather bad luck, is a significant determinant that dictates gambling outcomes.

The only choice that players can take in *Flip a Coin* is the simple action of gambling. Players must comply with this act as it is their only option to advance the narrative. The lack of player agency, bound to the repetitive act of gambling, paints my vision of compulsive gambling and its momentous repercussions for the gambler. This art of persuasion is called procedural rhetoric in which the message of the game is conveyed through processes and rules-based systems. By limiting players' choices to one single path, or one recurring process, the game mirrors the unyielding urge to gamble that addicted gamblers experience.

I am quite content with the final game output. If given more time and skills to develop this prototype, I would stray away from the theme of gambling and delve into how people perceive luckiness upon birth. What factors decide a fortunate upbringing? A solid country

of birth or good wealth? A lack of birth defects or happy, married parents? Luck is subjective and respective to each individual and their worldview.

Reflections

As a skeptical individual, I believe in cause and consequence rather than the unpredictability of luck. I tend to lessen the importance of luck, being the unexpected and the unaccounted factor, in favour of a predictable outcome. This could be something like simply refusing to buy lottery scratchers to avoiding driving late at night when the probability of accidents caused by driving under the influence is the highest. While I understand that some factors are beyond my control, I do have the choice to engage or disengage from dubious behaviours. I dislike luck for how its unpredictability interferes with our daily lives.

The theme of luck and chance is implicitly communicated through the gambling activities that players engage with. Betting with one's money in a game of heads or tails or wagering one's life in Russian Roulette demonstrates the many ways players try to beat the odds, regardless of potential consequence.

Flip a Coin also explores the theme of "beginner's luck": a superstitious phenomenon where novice players are believed to experience early successes in gambling activities. New players are given a ratio of 70% against 30% in Heads or Tails for their first five days. This secret algorithm is employed to increase newcomers' luck and invite them to indulge in gambling. However, from day five onward, the win / lose ratio is altered to 45% versus 55%, subtly reducing players' win rate to ensure profit for the casino. Given that the odds are against players, bankruptcy is meant to occur with time, forcing players to resort to Russian Roulette. Russian Roulette has odds of 5 to 6 for a chance of winning a thousand dollars. However, losing only once will result in death, or rather, an immediate game over.

Original Intention

Flip a Coin is a ridiculous and satirical take on gambling games. The game takes a critical and humorous stance as it punishes players with a virtual demise for their gambling endeavours. As the game progresses, a new twist emerges: from the tenth day onward, the game forces players to wager a higher amount than their previous bet in the Heads or Tails minigame. This rule effectively trains players to adopt a high-risk, high-reward approach. From risking bankruptcy to betting one's very existence, the stakes in play evolve over time to mirror a gambler's growing greed. The introduction of Russian

Roulette as a means to address bankruptcy adds a poetic and extreme layer to the gameplay. The chamber-spinning minigame is but a poetic and extreme analogy of modern gambling machines, highlighting the irony of risking one's mortality for another shot at the thrill of gambling. It exposes the disconnect of gamblers from reality and their compulsion to satisfy an insatiable abyss of avarice.

Flip a Coin communicates a narrative of stress and suspense through sound design. The juxtaposition of the upbeat casino jazz in Heads or Tails to the silently spinning cylinder of the Russian Roulette revolver speaks volumes about the severity of the nature of gambling.

Critical Theorization

Marionneau and Nikkinen (2022) note that suicidality increases amongst heavy gamblers as opposed to their nongambling counterparts. Citing a past United Kingdom study on gambling-related suicides and suicidality, the authors note that "19.2 percent of problem gamblers had thought about suicide in the past year, in comparison to 4.1 percent among those with no signs of problem gambling." Similar studies in Sweden and Italy also reveal an increase in suicidality amongst problematic gamblers (Marionneau & Nikkinen, 2022). While the severity of gambling is not directly linked to suicide, indebtedness and shame are bridging processes that connect the two acts (Marionneau & Nikkinen, 2022).

Upon reading this study, I realized that indebtedness and shame are two missing factors that define the harms of gambling in *Flip a Coin*.

As the player's balance could never go below zero, this unrealistic game mechanic takes away the anxiety-inducing debt that is present in heavy gamblers. Certain forms of monetary punishments would serve as a great middle ground, a transition from normal life to one of indebtedness and fear, forcing players to resort to gambling their own life. Introducing new options to the game, such as offering different types of loans, would help to ground this virtual game to the actual world and present a much more realistic demonstration of gambling problems.

Incorporating shame into *Flip a Coin* would be another needed but difficult task as I have not experienced first-hand compulsive gambling. It then would be best to crowdsource data from past and present problem gamblers to depict this heartfelt embarrassment from gambling problems.

Flip a Coin can be played here

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Game Credits

Art

Glass: https://www.pngwing.com/en/free-png-bmteg/download

Kawaii face: http://clipart-library.com/clip-art/kawaii-face-transparent-background-5.htm

Russian Roulette: https://depositphotos.com/vector-images/russian-roulette.html

Sounds

CasinoBG Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99ABAddEiQs&ab_channel=MelodySounds-CopyrightFreeMusic

Cocking Revolver: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZPUqxZRiLQ&ab_channel=TMGOTBEATZ

Coin spin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7c0xKlRkFlw&ab_channel=SoundEffectsLibrary

Pick sfx: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shI-BL0y8Kg&ab_channel=Jocabundus

Revolver Click: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Potg0kDqIXc&ab_channel=FreeifyMusic

Revolver Spinning: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjZElXeXgQU&ab_channel=PSSoundeffectsFX-NoCopyright

Shooting SFX: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgB3fY0Amhs&ab_channel=ScottRoman