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## COMMENTARY

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## (Un)Lucky Designs?: What Game Jams Can Contribute to Critical Gambling Studies

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### Introduction

Walk into any casino today and luck, it would seem, is in the air. At least, that is the sense one would get from watching online videos of people playing gambling games, where losses are routinely edited out and where winning spins are front and centre (e.g., Hoebanx & French, 2023). Or, consider how gambling is routinely advertised: big wins, bonuses, free spins, and other incentives often feature heavily, while we struggle to think of a gambling advertisement that features someone's unlucky experiences.<sup>2</sup> Luck, in other words, seems to be a key, symbolic resource in gambling games, and within gambling cultures more generally.

In this brief commentary, we describe an emergent method for deconstructing the role of luck (and other design elements) in gambling games. We introduced this method—game jams—in a recent *Critical Gambling Studies Blog* (Hoebanx et al., 2023). Here, we build on our initial work to articulate different ways that game jams can be configured to operate as a method for critically exploring how games make symbolic resources, like luck, into tangible containers for experience. This opens a window into the affordances and constraints of game design; something that (along with the concept of luck)

has not yet been much discussed in *Critical Gambling Studies*.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, we first touch on the theme of our 2023 game jam—(Un)Lucky. We next revisit our original game jam and, drawing from our 2023 blog post, offer a broader description of game jams. We then introduce *GameBling Game Jam 2.0*, the games that it produced, and four blog posts written by participants. We conclude our commentary with a reflection on game jams as a new methodology for critical gambling studies. In keeping with the thematic focus of this special issue, which features early career research, we end with some words of advice for those wishing to use game jams as a way to work through the wider implications of “gamblified” design.

### I'm Feeling (Un)Lucky: Designing for Luck

In 2023, the *Jeu responsable à l'ère numérique* (JREN; Responsible Gambling in the Digital Era) research group at Concordia University partnered with colleagues from around the University, and the province of Quebec, to recruit students to answer the following question: “How might gambling game designers incorporate luck into contemporary games?” To explore this question, students participated in the second edition of the *GameBling Game Jam*: a two-day virtual event

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<sup>2</sup> In making this observation, we also need to be careful not to paint a too-simplistic picture of gambling ads. See recent work in *Critical Gambling Studies* that nuances the scholarly narrative on this subject (e.g., Kroon, 2023; Nicoll & Albarrán-Torres, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> A search of the journal's website for “game design” returns one result: Reynolds, 2021. A search of the journal's website for “luck” similarly returns only one result: Matilainen, 2021.



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## I'm Feeling (Un)Lucky



*Graphic used on the recruitment poster*

during which they spent 12 hours creating video games based on the theme: (Un)Lucky.

Game jams, as "sites of informal learning" (Meriläinen et al., 2020), are increasingly used as formal teaching tools in game-design curricula (Hrehovcsik et al., 2016; Preston et al., 2012). They encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, student engagement, and enable students to apply their knowledge in a very unconstrained way (Aurava et al., 2021; Gledhill & Novak, 2019; Hrehovcsik et al., 2016). Game jams are recognized as beneficial pedagogical tools and methods that encourage innovative game design (Cook et al., 2015). Reflecting on the *GameBling Game Jam* series, we argue that game jams also have the potential to create new knowledge about gambling while attracting students and early career researchers to this exploratory process.

The *GameBling Game Jams* are part of JREN's broader research initiative to study gambling from sociological perspectives, and to move away from the characterization of gambling-as-sin—a frame that has historically obscured gambling's manifold meanings and functions (e.g., Lears, 2003)—as well as the more recent characterization of gambling-as-pathology (see Johnson, 2021, for a critique of this characterization). Our game jams were, thus, less focused on the application of technical knowledge, as described by Hrehovcsik et al. (2016), and more focused on providing students with opportunities to think creatively, critically, and broadly about gambling-related themes and their intersection with game studies.

For the second edition of our game jam, we chose the theme (Un)Lucky, which conjured

interesting oppositions, such as luck vs. skill, luck vs. control, and inherent luck vs. fabricated luck, amongst others. It also invoked broader ideas related to heterogeneous cultural interpretations of luck (like luck as fate, or luck as fallacy) and to embodied rituals of play (such as blowing on the dice or chasing wins on a "hot" slot machine).

In gambling studies, luck has been described as a magical-religious worldview (Reith, 1999/2005) that transforms gambling from a question of probabilities and, sometimes, some skill, into an event that can be controlled through ritualistic behaviours or through a property thought to be inherent in certain people, objects, and practices. According to Gerda Reith (1999/2005), "it is in this cognitive outlook that the tension of the gambling situation—the dynamic between uncertainty and order, chance and meaning—is to be found" (p. 156).

In his book *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*, Lears (2003) describes how American society historically embraced a culture of chance, welcoming luck, randomness, and fate as integral parts of life. However, Lears argues, contemporary American society has shifted toward a culture of control, characterized by the belief that reason, science, and technology allow individuals to manage their life outcomes. In such societies, uncertainties or unforeseen events often provoke feelings of anxiety and a sense of failure. For Lears (2003), gambling represents one of the few surviving elements of the previous culture of chance, now secularized and detached from its spiritual origins. Drawing insight into notions of luck from the writing of self-identified gamblers, Lears argues that these gamblers were,

perhaps, best positioned “to challenge the central dogma of our time: the idea that money is an indicator of fundamental value” (2003, p. 22). To illustrate, Lears drew from Jack Richardson’s 1979 *Memoir of a Gambler*, observing that “the desire for something for nothing is more than mere laziness and greed; it often involves a longing to transcend the realm of money-worship altogether” (2003, p. 23). In search of this transcendence, and as a justification for his gambling practices, Richardson wrote: “I want to know.... I want to finally know.... Whether I am to have any grace in this life” (Richardson, 1979, p. 25).

More generally, the scholarship on luck notes that it is often conceptualized as a force that brings either good fortune or adversity. However, as Sauder (2020) argues, while this common-sense idea of luck as a force, as something magical, has been of interest for anthropologists, its sociological appeal is limited. In Sauder’s view, a “useful sociological conception of luck has an existence independent from purposeful actions and cannot be reduced to them” (2020, p. 195). For Sauder, luck describes an occurrence “that involves chance, is consequential (either beneficial or harmful), and is at least partially outside the control of the person or people affected by it” (2020, p. 195).

Sauder’s description—particularly its emphasis on 1) the consequential nature of luck in an experiential register, and 2) the uncertainty about whether it is partially in or out of the subject’s control—seems to align well with how (gambling) game designers have mobilized this concept to incentivize continued play. Salen and Zimmerman’s classic *Rules of Play* (2003), for instance, argues that, in addition to questions of probability when designing games with random elements, game designers should also consider the way that players will interpret or misinterpret these mechanisms (pp. 288–289). They suggest ways for games to take gamblers’ common logical fallacies into account:

For example, think about the long shot fallacy. If your game allows players a choice between a long shot and a safe bet, you should expect most players to take the long shot and balance your formal system accordingly. Overemphasis on good outcomes and the lightning striking twice fallacies can help keep players optimistic in a game with a large chance element. Even if a player has seen a lot of bad luck, these fallacies keep hope for a turnaround alive. (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 186)

As this quotation illustrates, game designers might integrate luck into their odds-based games in a variety of ways, including by manipulating the chances of winning to give players “hope for a turnaround.” Thinking about the iconography of gambling games, we can also see many other ways that notions of luck are incorporated, by, for example, adding cultural symbols of luck (such as four-leaf clovers or the number seven), or by using sonic and haptic elements designed to emote the experience of being lucky (Schüll, 2014). Our theme, (Un)Lucky, was chosen to explore these design practices.

### **GameBling Game Jam 1.0: Slot Machines**

Slot Machines was the theme of the first edition of the *GameBling Game Jam*. The event was JREN’s first venture into the use of game jams as an innovative research method to deconstruct gambling game designs (Hoebanx et al., 2023). Most of the games created during the first edition interpreted the theme literally and featured slot machines as physical objects in the games. We also found a tendency among these games to portray slot machines negatively, focusing on players’ loss of control over gambling outcomes. Curious about the effects of a less concrete theme, we chose to focus on the abstract concept of luck for the second edition.



*GameBling 2.0 event banner.*

### **GameBling 2.0: (Un)Lucky**

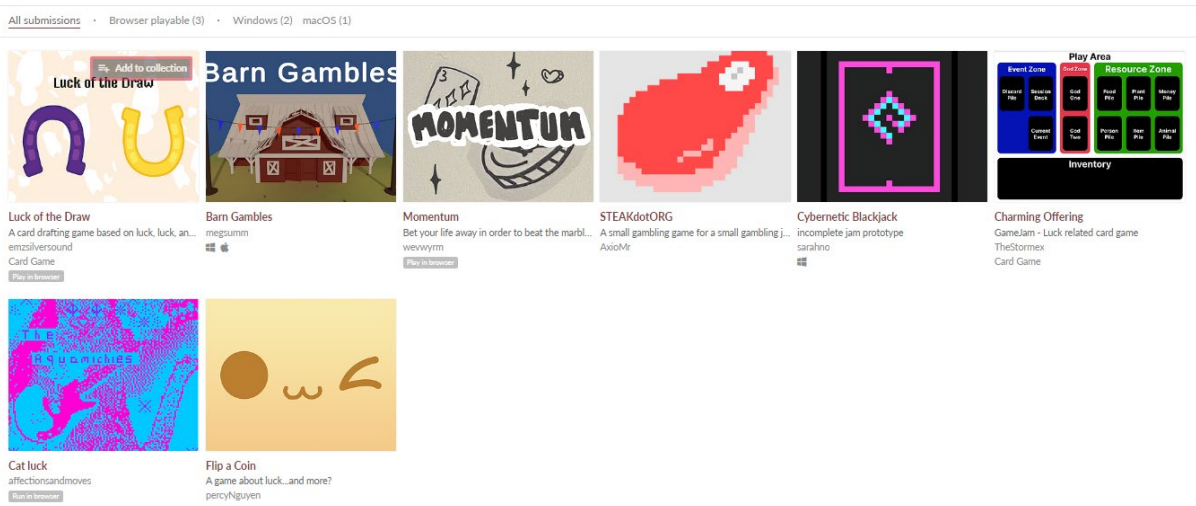
Supported by TAG (Technoculture, Art and Games Research Centre, housed within the Milieux Institute for Arts, Culture, and Technology at Concordia University), as well as HERMES and JREN (two research teams housed within the infrastructure of the Research Chair on Gambling at Concordia University), the game jam hosted sixteen students—the same number as the previous edition. They received a \$300 bursary for their participation. Accompanied by four organizers and a floating mentor, six teams generated eight unique games, 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, highlighting how the experimental space encouraged collaboration, diverse roles, and various interpretations of the theme. 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 on the [itch.io game platform](https://itch.io).

Of the sixteen original participants, nine participated in the subsequent 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 the previous year’s blog post was not able to achieve (Hoebanx et al., 2023). The outcome of the writing workshop was four blog posts about the following games: [Luck of the Draw](#), [Charming Offering](#), [Cat Luck](#), and [Flip a Coin](#).

Reflecting on the first edition (Hoebanx et al., 2023), we argued that game jams could be used as an innovative research method in critical gambling studies to generate new ideas and to explore common perceptions of gambling themes. Many of our conclusions were drawn from our own interpretations of the games and the short explanations provided by game jam participants when presenting their final products. What our conclusions were missing, though, was a reflection from our game designers in their own words. To remedy this situation, we proposed a second edition that would include data collection from past participants to further understand their design process. In Hoebanx et al. (2023), we proposed conducting interviews, but we ultimately decided to organize a writing workshop to offer participants the opportunity to [write blog posts about their games](#).

Submissions (8)



Screenshot of the game submission page.

(Note: STEAKdotORG was not submitted by a participant in the game jam.)

### Interpretations of the Theme

The games of the second edition portray luck in very different ways, resulting in seven games with unique dynamics. Three games are card games, a classic gambling game medium: *Luck of the Draw*, *Cybernetic Blackjack*, and *Charming Offering*. In *Luck of the Draw*, players attempt to influence their luck by choosing a series of cultural symbols of luck, such as a rabbit’s foot or the number 13. *Cybernetic Blackjack* is a reinterpretation of the game of blackjack, in which the player can peek at their opponent’s cards, giving them an edge in the game. Finally, *Charming Offering* is a resource-management game in which players must make offerings to two gods in the hopes of increasing their resources. Two other games are also based on widespread gambling mediums: *Flip a Coin* features a gruesome combination of coin flipping and Russian roulette, while *Barn Gambles* is a horse-betting game. The final two games are based on classic video game mechanics: *Momentum* is a tower-defense game that uses gambling iconography—the player must defend towers of cards against an onslaught of poker

chips. *Cat Luck* is the only adventure game, where the player is a witch helping a cat in a punk band make its way onto a concert stage.

In the first edition of the *GameBling Game Jam*, most games interpreted the theme by integrating slot machines as objects in the game. In the second edition, most games also integrate gambling objects and mechanics (e.g., cards, horse betting, coin flipping). Most of the games’ iconography is focused on representations of gambling, as several games reference playing cards (including in the tower-defense game, where their use is subverted), coins and poker chips, and horses (e.g., horse betting, lucky horseshoe). Surprisingly, both *Luck of the Draw* and *Cat Luck* feature cats prominently, another symbol associated with superstitions.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from *Cat Luck*, the games did not stray far from widely shared representations of gambling, showing that most participants associated games about luck with gambling games. However, despite remaining close to gambling representations, none of the games portrayed gambling in a negative way, with the exception of *Flip a Coin* (see [blog post](#) for further

<sup>4</sup> Nicoll and Albarrán-Torres (2022, p. 163) report the use of cat iconography, and iconography associated with cuteness and popular culture more generally, by gambling game designers to appeal to a female demographic and to depict a harmless image of gambling.

details). This is an interesting departure from the first game jam, where most participants' angle was to show the devious inner workings of slot machines. The academic setting in which these game jams take place might have played a role, as students perhaps associated our characterization of gambling studies as preoccupied with pathology and, therefore, felt the need to represent gambling negatively. Another explanation could be that luck, as a perceived magical property that might give players an edge over their odds of winning, is associated with success and, thus, positive representations of gambling. As a concept, luck is also more open to interpretation than a physical object like a slot machine. Finally, it is possible that slot machines, which have long-dominated casino floors (Schüll, 2014), have, because of their ubiquity and effects, become closely associated with their well-known addictiveness and, by extension, negative perceptions of gambling. The addictive and manipulative potential of slot machines might have overshadowed other lenses through which to analyze them, such as luck, but also cultures of chance (Lears, 2003) and play.

The central question of the game jam, "How do gambling games integrate luck?," was answered in different ways. Both *Momentum* and *Flip a Coin* integrate the concept through their iconography. Neither game integrates ways to boost players' odds, unlike *Luck of the Draw* or *Charming Offering*, where players might draw luckier or less lucky cards. In his [blog post](#), the creator of *Flip a Coin* explains that the purely odds-based mechanic, where the only action that the player can take is to flip a coin, is intentional. It is meant to reduce gambling to its simplest chance element and to remove the gratifying feeling of winning through a monotonous, entirely random game in which luck plays no part.

In their [blog post](#), the creators of *Charming Offering* explain that their intention was to include personifications of luck in the form of various gods that influence the outcome of the game. In this game, luck is integrated as the idea of fate,

which can be influenced through offerings. The concept of fate is also explored in *Cat Luck*. In her [blog post](#), the author explains that it is a reflection on the impact of luck on success in the art world. The obstacles encountered by the player to reach their final goal, the concert stage, are representative of the misfortune faced by the cat-artist. The *Luck of the Draw* game, on the other hand, quantifies luck by assigning positive or negative points to various lucky objects. In *Barn Gambles*, while the player cannot influence the luck of their horse, they can train their horse to perform better, showing an interesting integration of skill in influencing the outcome of the game. Skill also plays a role in *Cybernetic Blackjack*, where cheating is sanctioned by the game. By being able to peek at their opponent's cards, the player can gain an advantage over their opponent, but only if they can skillfully predict their adversary's moves. However, seeing the other player's hand does not entirely remove luck from the equation: the fate of the game, for instance, still rests on randomly drawn cards.

Most participants in *GameBling Game Jam 2.0* were not members of our gambling research teams and had no background in gambling studies. It is, therefore, interesting that their interpretations of luck are reminiscent of the literature we have briefly discussed. For example, *Luck of the Draw*, which relies on players' subjective interpretation of symbols of luck, is in line with Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) advice to take players' beliefs about luck and probability into account in the design of a game. Many games also contrasted skill and control, characteristic of cultures of control, with luck and randomness, associated with cultures of chance (Lears, 2003). For example, *Charming Offering*, *Barn Gambles*, and *Cybernetic Blackjack* each offer different amounts of control over the fate of the game, through choosing beneficial offerings, training your horse, or peeking at opponents' cards. And, in *Flip a Coin*, players' control is taken away entirely, as they are forced to gamble with their life. These games also featured uncertainty

about the amount of control exerted by the player in games of luck, as described by Sauder (2020).

The blog posts show how deeply the designers engaged with the game jam's theme when creating their games. By inviting students to create games from scratch, we do more than just participate in the practice of reverse-engineering games—as is seen in game-design studies, and, increasingly, in gambling studies (see, for example, Stange et al., 2017). Game jams also introduce a creative aspect to this reflection by allowing participants to explore the limits of game design. It is important to note that, while the games all reflect a deep engagement with the game jam's theme, the games are also fun to play. Participants demonstrated a remarkable attention to the enjoyment of the players. Designing gamblified games that are *fun* is an alternative approach to gambling studies that focuses less on gambling-as-sin (Lears, 2003) and gambling-as-pathology (Johnson, 2021), and more on gambling as entertainment and pleasure (Hoebanx & French, 2023).

### Some Recommendations and Conclusion

We have some recommendations for those interested in organizing their own game jams. Firstly, if your participants are not from game studies or computer science backgrounds, consider involving students with some game design and technical know-how, and / or game-design experts, to assist with the technical aspects of game development. In our *GameBling Game Jams*, the technical knowledge gap was seen as an opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration, rather than a barrier to participation. Alternatively, use easily learnable programs, focus on creating analog games, or presenting game concepts. Unlike game jams focused on students applying their technical knowledge to a creative project (Hrehovcsik et al., 2016), the primary goal of our game jams was to encourage students to think critically about the theme and its relation to key questions at the intersection of game studies and gambling studies.

The culture of game jams, much like the “crunch culture” in the wider games industry, is often characterized by intense, non-stop work sessions. While some advocate for a high-intensity format, we opted for a more relaxed schedule, with fixed working hours to ensure participants could rest and take care of themselves. We also made sure to include “hydration checks” and “shrimp checks” to remind participants to drink some water and to fix their hunched and slouched posture every few hours. This approach was well received, although some students chose to work beyond the set hours. We also recommend incorporating critical reflection activities during or after the jam, such as writing workshops or interviews, to capture participants' motivations and thought processes. These insights are as valuable as the games themselves.

Game jams are an opportunity to bring future game designers and critical gambling scholars into conversation to reflect on design aspects such as the gamblification of games (Zanescu et al., 2021) and predatory retention mechanics (Schüll, 2014); but also to reflect on player enjoyment, introducing a nuance to the experience of games in a way that differs from the method of reverse-engineering gambling games. In conclusion, game jams are a powerful tool for fostering collaboration between coders and non-coders, encouraging interdisciplinary research, and creating a low-stress environment conducive to creativity and innovation. Future research should continue exploring the convergence between gaming and gambling, and we encourage other researchers to adopt and adapt our methods to further this exciting field of study.

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