Spatial Reasoning: Re-Coding Spaces for Inclusive Informal Game Making

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Informal game making occurs in a range of settings, including game jams and game workshops. In this paper we ask who attends informal game making events, and how they are connected to the persistent lack of diversity in formal game design programmes and in the games industry (Jenson and De Castell, 2018). We present findings from surveys of three game jams and our experience of running six introductory game making workshops. We conclude by identifying some of the ways in which informal game making events construct code/spaces that contribute to persistent structural inequalities in access to game making education and work, and in the normalisation of problematic pedagogic and working practices.

Game jams are defined as 'accelerated' and 'constrained' forms of collaborative game-making (Kultima, 2015), and are an increasingly popular way for amateur, independent, and professional game developers to network and develop their skills. Previous research on game jams have presented them as an increasingly popular and useful informal learning space for creativity, innovation and inclusion (Locke et al., 2015; Fowler et al., 2013). However, the existing literature on game jams rarely engages with the ways in which such events exclude, or their entanglement with the broader political economy and production practices of the games industry. While many game jams are advertised as open to all, a very narrow demographic often attends. The first part of this paper draws upon findings from surveys and observations of three game jams advertised as events for digital and non-digital game makers to 'collaborate, create and connect'. The authors attended, surveyed and observed three volunteer-run, day-long game jams in three different cities in Ireland.

We identified a range of free, hopeful, and affective labours at our game jam events (see Kennedy, 2018). These game jams relied upon significant invisible labour by unpaid female volunteers, with support from mostly male full-time academics and industry representatives. The events themselves predominantly attracted young male programmers, both working and students, who sought to improve already existing skills and informally network as a potential route into the industry. In some cases, groups of students from particular game-making programmes attended the events. Significantly, we found that the attendees had the necessary gaming and social capital to hear about, attend, and take advantage of such events. They were able to devote an entire day of their weekends to these events and embraced the intense sprint mentality, highly prized by the wider technology industry. Despite the best intentions of the organisers, these events were strongly shaped by, and in turn contributed to, the wider gender and class imbalance of the local industry and formal games education programmes. We identified a number of barriers which excluded others from participating – from financial, to temporal, spatial and cultural. Given the skill set of attendees, digital game making dominated, while the non-digital was largely sidelined.

In the second part of the paper we detail our findings from running six informal game making events in two different cities. We sought to challenge the language around who can make games, what might constitute a game, and to develop a range of technical and non-technical skills (Kerr and Savage, in press). Others have argued that all-female game jams, after school clubs and incubators are required to diversify the games industry and games culture (Kennedy, H. 2018; Harvey and Fischer, 2015). In our project we took a different approach. Informed by the experiences of our collaborators we organized 'female-friendly', adult, beginner, game making workshops in two different locations in Ireland over a three-year period. These workshops on game design, game writing and game coding were observed by researchers, and both entry and exit surveys were conducted. While our workshops were successful in attracting a diverse range of participants by age, gender, class, nationality, and occupational or skill background, when we ran our coding workshops we struggled with the expectations of attendees, and the influence of the hardware and software. Both coding workshops were highly labour intensive to prepare and to support. The software programmes presupposed prior computing knowledge and required reasonably powerful computers to use. One in particular prioritized individualized, skill-based learning using pre-made assets. Finally, both of the programmes we used required us to establish accounts and become part of the wider political economy of the games industry (Kerr, 2017).

Developing informal learning events that are not only diverse in participants but that also accommodate and empower diverse skills and knowledge requires interrogating these highly contextual socio-cultural norms and increasingly standardized tools for game development (Pelletier and Johnstone, 2018). Others have explored how game engines can narrow game design options and both rationalize and deskill game developers (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Kitchin and Dodge (2005; 2011) broaden the discussion by introducing the concept of code/space to understand particular assemblages that only exist because of code (Kitchin and Dodge, 2005). We contribute to this literature by exploring the influence of code/space on initiatives aimed at diversifying game making. While the original conceptualization of code/space restricted its use to 'the rules and instructions of software' (2005:163), we agree with those who suggest that connecting code/space to wider socio-cultural norms is a productive way of understanding the entanglement of code/space and identity (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017). Code comes with a high degree of technicity and a set of normative assumptions about what constitutes learning to make games, and what game makers might want to make. Game jams and game workshops

that use game design software create code/space that may serve to narrow game design possibilities and reinforce structural inequalities in access to game making. Our findings have implications for both formal and informal game making events, as well as forms of public engagement which deploy game making in the promotion of science, technology, engineering and maths.

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