

# How to Create and Host Game Jams and Hackathons



In early 2017 a few organizations teamed up to host the Social Justice Game Jam. During the process of organizing and hosting the game jam mistakes were made and lessons were learned. This guide is the essence of those experiences, we hope this will encourage others to organize similar events and give them some direction when they do.

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# What is a Game Jam

A game jam is basically an [Iron Chef](#) for game developers. It's an event where developers will, individually or in teams, design and create a playable game that around a common theme within a very limited amount of time. All sorts of people participate in these events including coders, artists, composers, writers, and more.

Each jam has a theme to give participants direction. Sometimes it's a single word, a recent game jam theme was "[Waves](#)", some people made surfing games, some made ones about visualizing sound, others made games simulating being in a statum doing the wave. Sometimes it's to promote a product or idea, companies have game jams where participants use their software or create content for their platforms while other times they have [an idea they want promoted](#). And finally sometimes it's around something fun or silly like pizza or [bad box art](#).

Game jams can be held as an event at a venue or as an online event or both.

Jams at venues tend to be between 24 and 48 hours, any longer and it's hard to set aside enough time, and shorter and too much time is spent on setting up and teardown to be worth it. Due to everyone being on site people generally form teams on the spot. This is a major selling point as it can be a useful way to network and experience working with people you would not ordinarily get to. After forming teams people work pretty solidly for the duration of the jam stopping only to eat and (sometimes) sleep.

Online jams don't have these limitations as venues so tend to be between 24 hours and a month with some of them hitting the extremes of one hour to a whole year. Online jams tend to be much less intense due to potentially longer timeframes that require breaks for work and school and the lower pressure environment of working from home. People participating in online are more likely to go in by themselves or with friends than collaborate with strangers, this and the lack of face to face interaction mean these events are a lot more about making a game and less about socializing and networking. This also leads to a lot more teams dropping out part way through and not submitting projects at the end.

Because online events are not limited to a venue pretty much anyone with an interest can attend, this can drive up the attendance numbers and let you choose a theme with a much narrower appeal.

Some game jams are run as a competition while others are more of a social event designed to help encourage people to create things and meet other people. Competition events tend to have prizes and judges, often some of the prizes will be for things like best art or music while others will be donated by a sponsor like Unreal for the best game using their engine. The non

competitive events tend to be focused community building. There tend to be less or no prizes, and if there are prizes they are less likely to be cash prizes and more likely to be door prizes.

For an in person game jam the structure is generally as follows. Friday night everyone shows up, dinner is provided and there is an opening ceremony kicking off the event. The last part of the ceremony is where people pitch ideas and form teams. From then till Sunday evening it's lots of work broken up by meals, sometimes events will have talks during lunch or something similar but most events don't. Sunday evening along with dinner each of the participating teams presents their game, sometimes but not always there is judging, feedback, and prizes.



Source: [Extra Credits](#)

The above video is the keynote speech for the most recent Global Game Jam.

## **Part 1: Organizing**

### **Determine Viability**

The first step was figuring out if this was even an event that people would attend. Find your local game developer community and gauge their interest. If your area doesn't have a game industry you might be able to find game developers at local schools and colleges or online groups on Facebook and Meetup.

Next is to make sure you have the experts to add some weight to the games. Local law schools are a good place to find people. Students tend to be younger and more familiar with games and the positive impact they can have. They are also more likely to have weekends off and to appreciate the benefit of having another project on their resume.

Another good way to bring in experts is go directly to their organizations and ask them to send someone to pitch an idea. This will give them a chance to make a game that directly address their goals and increases the chance the expert stays over the whole weekend.

Finally even if they can't afford to attend for the whole weekend they might be interested in helping promote the event or give a few words during the opening or closing talks.

### **Lockdown Time and Place**

Once you are confident that there is enough interest in the jam the next step is to secure a venue and date for the event. An event that takes up an entire weekend is a major commitment for most people so the more notice you can give them the more likely they will be able to attend. Sponsors and other partners also often require a significant amount of notice to be able to commit to helping.

Running this event through a nonprofit legal aid organization makes it possible to find venues that will donate their space, if not prepare to spend the majority of your money here. Good places to look for space with 24 hour access are universities and shared workspaces.

Hosting at universities has a couple advantages and drawbacks. The first advantage is timing, schools need a lot less space during the weekend so there are almost certainly some rooms you can take over. Universities will also often donate space and when they do charge it's generally much less than an equivalent space would cost elsewhere. Finally when you host an event at a university it makes it a lot easier to draw in their students to participate.

The main downside of working with a school is the amount of bureaucracy that can be involved, the time you spend trying to confirm the space directly cuts into the time you can spend promoting it. Universities also often have contracts about who can cater to events on their campus, and their caterers tend to cost more for an equivalent quality than what you can find elsewhere.



Coworking spaces are places where people and companies can rent variable amounts of space to use as an office. They provide some of the atmosphere you get from an office to people that don't otherwise have access to one.

They are good because they are often set up to allow people to come in and work for a day, outlets and seating is plentiful and the internet and coffee are strong. These work spaces also tend to be cheaper than most event spaces, and many of them offer 24 hour access so this will be easier than normal to arrange. The last benefit is you can often ask them to donate a couple of months of desk time to a winning team that wants to continue development of their game after the jam.

The main downsides of using a coworking space is working around the people that are working there. They will have to cordon off some spaces where people have permanent desks and there might not be enough space for the number of people you would like to have.

Regardless of the type of venue you need a few keep in mind when choosing a space. First and foremost is reliable power and wireless, without those two things people aren't going to be able to work. Next is parking and public transportation, you want a space that is accessible as possible. The amount of space and how it is arranged is important, you want to have enough space for everyone both when doing opening ceremonies and presentations. At the same time it's helpful to teams if they can separate from each other a bit, ideally there would be lots of small rooms or alcoves but even just being able to have a few empty chairs between teams helps.

## Commission Artwork

Early on we commissioned a piece of artwork to use as both a banner and a flyer. Unique and distinctive art helps grab attention when put on promotional material and helps the event stand out. It is also a useful way to show potential partners that you are serious about the event and are investing in making it a success.

Hiring someone to create the art. It's possible to find free art but it tends to come with a catch. It often takes a significant investment in time to find and adapt, it is often lower quality and not as good a fit. A piece of custom art can also be reused for different promotional materials and will go a long way to making your event look professional. Make sure to get copyright assignment from the artist or have them place it under an open copyright license like [Creative Commons BY](#) so that you and others can use the art long term.

## Make Multiple Budgets

Make a spreadsheet that has all the money you have currently have to spend and everything you need. Have at least two budgets with one being the minimum required to host the event and the other being an ideal budget that would let you do everything you want. This makes it much easier to adapt to getting more or less money as sponsors sign on or drop out.

Sample Budget for 100 Attendees:

Item	Cost
Dinner Pizza Friday Night (Costco Pizza Low Cost)	\$300
Snacks for Weekend	\$300
Dinner Tacos (Medium cost Diner)	\$700
Lunch x2	\$400
Light Breakfast x2	\$250
Closing Reception	\$700
Supplies (name badges, tape, ect)	\$300
Venue	Get Donated!
Art	\$250
Video	\$600
Total	\$3800



## Assemble a Team

You aren't going to be able to do this sort of event by yourself, picking the right partners and creating a diverse team will help spread the workload and improve the event.

At a basic level having more people involved lets you delegate work, moreover if you do a good job selecting people to work with they will be able to do their portions even better than you. For the SJGJ Evan Witt was given responsibility over the recording space since he is a composer while Ket Ng handled food since he has a event and culinary background.

Having a variety of people also can help boost attendance. Most of the attendees at the SJGJ came from people reaching out to their circles and from going to local events with flyers and talking it up.

## Get Outside Support

If you are fortunate enough that your organization can cover the entire cost of the event that removes the absolute necessity of sponsors but even in that case there are benefits of bring someone. In addition to providing funding sponsors can provide a venue, promotion, food, swag, and prizes.

Similar to financial sponsors getting leading members of the community who are willing to give a small talk or be judge is invaluable. Their presence will draw more people to your event and help you provide more value to those who do attend.

Types of Support:

- Traditional Advertising
- Social Media Promotion
- Cash
- Prizes for winning teams
- Participation Swag Bags
- Judges





## Promote Event

In Seattle this was done is largely through a little posting on facebook and a lot of showing up at event and directly networking with people. Make a stack of flyers with the relevant information and then just show up, circulate, and be personable. Having a diverse team is invaluable here everyone on our team moved in slightly different circles and had networks they could reach out to. This is another place where assembling a team can help.

## Organize food

Not every event has the budget to provide food, drink, and snacks to attendees but if you can it will boost attendance and help participants be more productive. Just like pretty much every other event free food is a great incentive for people to show up, especially those for whom spending an entire weekend doing something high stress and unpaid. Furthermore providing food rather than having attendees bring or find their own means there is one less thing for them to worry about and lets them focus on their project.

When you are taking people's registrations I highly recommend having them both list any dietary restrictions they may have as well suggest snack they might want you to provide. In addition to having the benefit of providing food you know people will want people that make requests will feel more invested and are less likely to not show up to the event.



The system that worked quite well at the SJGJ was to have minimal breakfast, a cold lunch, a hot dinner, and a steady supply of snacks and drinks.

For snacks we had an assortment that included things like chips, mixed nuts, goldfish crackers along with some healthier options like grapes and oranges. For drinks we had the usual bottled water and soda but also invested in getting an electric kettle so

we could offer an assortment teas along with cocoa and instant coffee. This proved to be a big hit as it can get a bit chilly in February. One thing we didn't do which we should have was

provide sharpies along with instructions to put names on water bottles. Encouraging people to reuse bottles would have saved a small amount of money and a lot of trash.

We kept breakfast simple, between people sleeping in, eating at home, and eating snacks/leftovers we didn't need much. We provided a modest amount bagels, coffee, and donuts. People also ate leftovers and snacks

Lunch we also kept simple, cold sandwiches and the turkey/swiss rollers from costco with fruit and veggie platters and a vegetarian option. Cold lunches are cheaper and give people more flexibility on when to eat them, if you don't have a way to reheat them hot food loses much of its appeal when it cools.

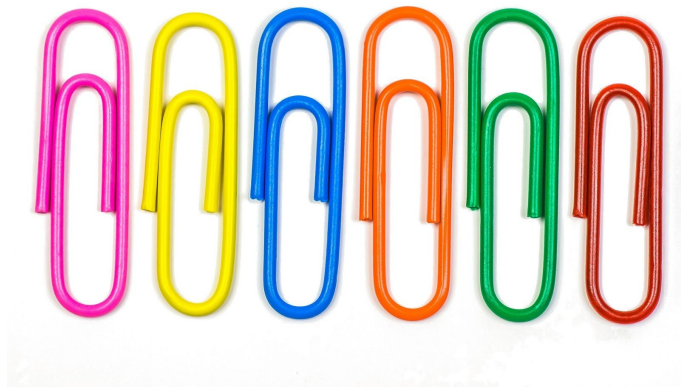
Dinner is where we spent the bulk of our funds. We ordered catering from three different restaurants, a different one each night. You are going to need to accommodate a wide variety of dietary restrictions so spend some time doing research on what restaurants are available. Special consideration should be given to meals that are still good when cold (pizza) and foods that are easy to customize to suit preferences (taco bar).

## Order Supplies

It makes your life a lot easier if you simply order all the office supplies you need online rather than trying run around and buy them in person. Also make sure to buy them as early as possible, if you don't shipping delays and errors can cost you time and money. With all of your supplies be sure to order enough big plastic tubs to hold them, it makes it transportation a snap and when you are done it's a convenient way to store them until the next event. For each tub print out two copies a list of everything that is in it and tap it to the top and side. This makes it easy to find things without having to open them. This also helps packing up after the event because it reduces the chance of forgetting something.

### Supply List:

- Serving utensils for food
- Painters tape
- Gaffers tape
- Black and colored Sharpies
- Dry erase markers
- Paper towels
- Electric kettle
- Lanyards and badges
- Badges + badge holders and lanyards



All the plates/cups/silverware and the like were bought with food just prior to the event.

## Part 2: The Event

Functionally the event can be broken down into a couple main parts. Shopping before the event starts, setup, event kick off, each of the meals, end of event, clean up.

### Pre Event Shopping

This will be where you will be buying all of the food we could in advance, this is mostly snacks and drinks but also can include things like fruit and veggies that you plan on serving with meals or bagels and cream cheese for breakfasts. This is also the time to grab any last minute office supplies you need for the event. Try to have this done at least an hour before you can be on site setting up.



### Setup

If you have done your homework and determined how you are going to use your space setup will be easy. It's mostly a matter of getting registration ready for when the attendees show up and rearranging some tables and chairs. Beyond that there are lots of little things making sure parking is clear and posting the wifi password that taken care of but only take a few minutes each. Inevitably at least one of them will end up being a problem that will take some time to sort out, this is why you give yourself a lot of time to get organized before people start showing up.

### Opening Ceremony

This is the big kick off where you welcome everyone and get them pumped up and organized for the weekend. The first half is fairly straightforward, greet everyone, explain the premise and reasoning behind the jam, talk about any prizes you might be awarding, and maybe have someone important in the community give a short talk.

After that we moved to the game pitches. We started by seeding the room with a few ideas for games submitted by the organizations, after that everyone who had an idea for a game got in front of the room and gave a 2 minute pitch on what they wanted to make. After everyone was done pitching they stood at points around the room and everyone else went around and joined

teams. Very little oversight is needed for this part, teams are good at making sure each has neither too few or too many people.

Often there are less people with specific skills like music/audio production than there are teams, and at the same time most teams won't have enough work to keep one of those people busy the whole weekend. One solution is to centralize some of the specialized skills in one group that everyone else goes to as needed. We did it with our audio folks but it would also be a good way to handle only having a few lawyers. A team might go to them and request, as an example, two pieces of orchestral music along with sounds effects to go with a protest or demonstration. Then the audio team would split up the work so each person could work in their area of expertise. This also allowed us to dedicate one space for audio recording and offload the work of organizing people that wanted to use it.

## Event

Once the event is running there is relatively little you need to do, when people are working your main job is to minimize and prevent things that would stop them from working. The main things are being the go between for the attendees and the event space and making sure meals show up on time.

## Take out the trash

When you get 20+ people and have them more or less live somewhere for a couple days they tend to generate an impressive amount of trash. You will want to regularly go around and empty any bins that are nearing to full. You are going to need to do it eventually and if you wait too long people will keep stacking and cramming things in and it will make your life that much more difficult when you do. If you have more than one type of trash (e.g. compost or recycling) be sure to have enough of those bins too and to clearly communicate what goes in what. Often people will put compostable eating utensils and cups in the trash if they aren't explicitly informed.



## Meals

Between opening and closing ceremonies picking up, putting out, and cleaning up meals will be one of the main things keeping organizers busy. The main meals are planned and only need to be delivered or picked up, the one thing to look out for are unexpected dietary restrictions. You won't be able to cover every possible situation but if you do a good job of getting a variety of healthy snacks like fruit and veggie platters you will often be able to scrape together meal just by grabbing one or two additional things.

## Closing Ceremony

This is the big payoff of the jam, it's where people can show off their work and see what everyone else made over the weekend. This is similar to the open ceremony where the organizers will say a few words before getting out of the way and letting teams present their games. The exact amount of time you give to each team varies but you should aim to keep the presentations under 90 minutes in total. If you have 10 teams you might give each team 4 minutes to present and 4 minutes for the audience and any judges to ask questions.

One thing to watch out for is teams running over their allotted time. For many this will be the first time they have had to present a project. That compounded by a busy weekend and little sleep means people will tend to ramble.

Having the moderator make it clear that teams will have to stick to their allotted time and giving half time and 1 minute warnings are the easiest way to keep people on track. Another method that might work is

Something that worked well for the SJGJ is to have one laptop hooked to a projector and as many people as possible load their games onto it. When each team presents from their own laptop there are inevitably some issues that eat into presentation time. In addition when teams are presenting from their own computer they sometimes try to keep working up to the deadline and end up without working builds, having to get it working on another machine reduces the chances of this happening.

## Cleanup

This is the point where sticking to the schedule pays off. If all goes well people will start leaving and you can get to the task of cleaning up the garbage and resetting the venue to how it was. Use tubs with lists to make sure you have everything, and load up any extra food and supplies to take back to the office.

## Part 3: Wrapping it Up

### Reporting

Once the event is over you will have to document the process in a couple ways. First of all you will need to get your books in order and send any invoices to sponsors, the financial aspects of the event are probably the most time critical.

Next you will want to produce some sort of report that sums up the event, both high level content like who you are and what a game jam is and specific content like what some of the best projects were. Writing this report does a few things for you, the participants, and the sponsors. For the participants it helps provide proof of work done that can added to a portfolio. For sponsors it's a place where you can name and thank them for helping with the event that will get a lot of traffic. For you it's a chance to show off your organization to the public and potential employees, volunteers, and donors.

### Postmortem

In addition to creating outward facing materials after an event you also need to take some time to examine the process and see what went well and what could be improved for next time. If you have done the reporting you are already thinking about how the event went, now is a chance to evaluate it and try to come up with actionable ideas that you can do to improve future events.

In addition to taking notes while writing reports be sure to reach out to everyone who participated in the event to get their feedback. For people who participated in the event this can mean something as simple a short survey sent out after the event is over. For those that helped host the event try to meet up with them in person afterwards and get their feedback, for the SJGJ we met for lunch a few days later and got a lot of great feedback. Talk to your venue and any sponsors that actively participated in the event to see what they thought.

## Conclusion

It will take some work to organize but hosting a game jam can be a fun, powerful, and cost efficient way to work with people from other industries to create content that can improve training and outreach.

The main obstacles to hosting one of these events is a lack staff time. We learned a lot through our process of trial and error but even with what we know now we estimate doing it again would take about 100 hours of work in preparation on top the weekend.

Not all places are fortunate enough to have a large tech/gaming industry to draw participants from but if you hunt most cities have hobbyists and university clubs interested in game design. Failing even that you can switch to hosting an online only event. It will save on time organizing and costs but require a lot more work to keep people who are working remotely engaged.

If you have gotten to this point and are interested in hosting a jam then the best thing you can do is attend one, ideally it would be a local event but an online one will do too. Block out an entire weekend and make sure there is nothing else competing for attention, going through a jam once will give you some experience that you can refer back to when planning the event.



## Credits

The information contained in this guide is largely gathered from hosting the Social Justice Game Jam. This would not have been possible without the help of numerous people and organizations.

### **Supporting Organizations**

[IDGA Foundation](#)

[Living Computers: Museum + Labs](#)

[NWJustice Project](#)

[Oculus](#)

[Playtest Northwest](#)

[Real Change](#)

[Unity3d](#)

### **Staff**

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### **Judges**

Hon. Don Horowitz, former Superior Court Judge

Mike McCain, Creative Director at HareBrained Schemes

Rebecca Heineman, CEO & CTO at Olde Skuul

John Krajewski, Founder/CEO Strange Loop Games

### **Art**

Jam Banner by [Lil Chan](#)

The rest of the art in this guide is from [Pixabay](#) and in the Public Domain