

Game Jamming for Diversity & Awareness¹

Raising Awareness about the Impact on Gender and Identity in Video Games

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Abstract: *This report details the organization and conduct of the GSE² Identity Jam, a short game-creation event held in May 2023 for students at the University of Klagenfurt. The goal was to raise awareness among video game students and aspiring video game developers about issues of identity and gender. The event, which included workshops by university lecturers on gender representation in video games, spanned two days and tasked students with creating small video game prototypes that reflect and creatively address (personal) issues of (gender) identity. The overarching goal in creating this event was to promote the Sustainable Development Goal of Gender Equality by sensitizing students to both the impact of (gender) representations in video games, as well as letting them explore this topic for themselves on a practical level, thus defining this project as a participatory and solution-oriented approach.*

The website of the game jam, which includes the playable game prototypes that were made during the event, can be found at <https://itch.io/jam/gse-identity-jam>

Keywords: *Gender Identity; Representation; Gender Equality; Video Game Development; Education; Diversity*

1 Edited by Tom Tuček

2 GSE = Game Studies and Engineering, a master's programme at the University of Klagenfurt

Members of the Project

Kseniia (Ukraine): *"To me, GloCo means raising awareness by organizing projects within a like-minded international community."*

Rachel (Germany): *"Working at GloCo means I can make an impact on my community while sharing my experiences with people from all over the world."*

Tan (Germany): *"Sharing information and personal impressions over intersectional connected topics in an academic, global framework."*

Motivation for the project and problems tackled

The video game industry is today's dominant entertainment industry. Over the last few decades, video games have become an integral part of everyday life, with a considerable impact. At the same time, there is a prominent lack of representation of diverse identities in games, as well as among the people working in the industry. Target audiences and representations overwhelmingly focus on white, young, hetero, cis-male, and able-bodied identities, with differing identities being excluded.

However, independent small-scale video game developers (colloquially known as "indies") and hobby developers tend to exhibit much more diverse representations (see Kilzer 2022, 82; Ho, Escobar, and Tran 2022). So-called game jams—short game development events that are accessible and typically revolve around given themes—have also started to be employed by people seeking to foster such representations, and some organizations have started to arrange game jams specifically for the purposes of diversity and inclusion (see Kerr, Savage, and Twomey-Lee 2020). Game jams are relatively easy to organize and often result in engaging, collaborative experiences for participants.

As the project team is part of the GSE master's program at Klagenfurt University, Austria, we decided to organize such a game jam for our

fellow students, as many of them aspire to become game developers and leave their mark in the game industry. Partly, the motivation was also personal, as participating as a non-binary person in an English-speaking study program proved more challenging than expected. Many students were new to ideas and concepts of gender being seen as more than biology or a rigid binary. How could we change that? How can we interest students in not only realizing their preconceptions but also engaging with them critically? How can we package that goal without making the activity seem too dry or too 'political' to the potentially critical student's eye?

A game jam seemed to be the perfect opportunity for that, especially in connection with a class that already prepared students to tackle identity-related topics. The class "Selected Topics in Game Engineering, focusing on Issues in Gender Studies: Mechanics of Identity" was offered in the summer term of 2023, and participants were invited to our game jam. To ensure the importance of queerness's representation specifically within video games was understood, we worked with two experts (Elisabeth Millonig and Nic Kilzer) during our project, who each led an interactive workshop at the beginning of the game jam.

In organizing this event, we hoped to let people express themselves in a safe space while addressing serious issues in a low-threshold way, facilitated by the playful environment of game jams. We wanted to let students create games that are personal and can start conversations around their own and others' identities. Lastly, as this was our first time organizing a game jam for such a serious topic, we hoped to create a replicable formula for people who wish to organize similar events.

Project description

Partly due to the mentioned initial personal motivation, we focused on gender identity in our planning. However, not every student would feel inspired, comfortable, or willing to engage with gender identity on a personal and creative level. Therefore, the intersectionality of different identity aspects was examined within the prior class sessions. Additionally,

students were encouraged to work either in small groups or on their own during the jam, so that everyone would be closely connected to the design process.

The game jam spanned over the course of two days. On the first day, the two experts we invited to join held their respective workshops on gender diversity and representation in video games. This was followed by a brief introductory workshop on the game engine *Ren'Py*³, which students were encouraged to use to create their projects. Afterward, so-called diversifiers were announced, decided on within the team beforehand, to offer students additional inspiration and help them think creatively about how to engage with the topic of identity in their game projects. These diversifiers were:

- Telling my story
- Telling the story of a loved one
- What I struggle with
- Walking in someone else's shoes / Switching roles
- Where I come from, ...
- A diverse cast of characters
- Choices matter
- Gameplay / Story changing depending on the character you play as
- Celebrating difference

After receiving input from our two guest speakers and us, students worked on their projects from the afternoon of the first day of the jam until the afternoon of the second day. We reinforced breaks by closing our jam room in the evening and reopening it in the morning. We provided the students with food, snacks, and beverages throughout the entire event. After the project deadline on the second day of the jam, students presented their prototypes to each other.

3 *Ren'Py* is a free-to-use and very accessible game engine specifically created to encourage the development of visual novels (text-based games with limited interactivity). See <https://www.renpy.org/>

Fig. 26: Group picture of all participants, workshop holders, and organizers.



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With more than 25 participants across both days, a total of 13 game projects were created, finished, and uploaded during the jam. Around half of the projects were created by people working alone, the rest by people working in teams of two. The games ranged from a pen-and-paper role-playing game for multiple players to several visual novels and more mechanics-based games. For example, the game *I Just Want to Find the Bus, FFS!*⁴ allows players to explore challenges faced by people with different identities as they look for the bus stop at night, thereby offering an intersectional exploration of identity. The game *Meant to Be?*⁵ is a visual novel about a dating application for seniors, while *Fitting In*⁶ deals with identity more abstractly, playing with different geometrical shapes.

4 <https://vulvarine.itch.io/i-just-want-to-find-the-bus-ffs>

5 <https://dzezabel.itch.io/meant-to-be>

6 <https://bubblewrapfox.itch.io/fittingin>

Following the jam, students discussed their projects in greater depth in the Mechanics of Identity class, which took place the day after. Here, students overwhelmingly reported that they enjoyed the task of developing a game prototype within roughly 24 hours. The food, support, and care they received from the organizing team, as well as the generally relaxed work environment, were highlighted especially in comparison to other game jams.

Fig. 27: Jammers presenting the games they created once the jam had finished.



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Connection to Global Citizenship Education and the Sustainable Development Goals

Global Education is “education that enables people to reflect critically on the world and their place in it” (UNESCO 2022, 2). The game jam we or-

ganized does exactly this by prompting students to reflect on the (gender) identities they inhabit and those of others, and how these are represented and explored in video games.

The students who participated in our project come from diverse backgrounds, both in their studies and in their countries of origin. Being part of an international study program, they are also likely to seek employment in other countries later. Educating and sensitizing students to matters of (gender) identity can have a long-lasting impact, as the students take what they have learned back to their respective communities and future workplaces, disseminating their newly gained knowledge further. This diverse pool of participants in our project combines the local and global aspects of Global Citizenship Education by fostering students' awareness at the local level, which can later be extended to the global level.

This is also important, as the awareness of diverse gender identities and their representations that our project promotes ultimately supports the *Sustainable Development Goal* of Gender Equality. Many of the students who participated in our jam seek to be employed in the video game industry later on and can utilize what they have learned during our project there, for instance, by creating more diverse representations of gender identities that can reach players worldwide or facilitating more diverse teams in development, and thereby making big changes.

Letting students explore the topic of the game jam and develop a game project by themselves also lets them take on an active role in their own learning and creating an experience, which stands in line with the goal of GCED to “empower” people to “understand, imagine, hope and act” (UNESCO 2022, 2). Game jamming can therefore also be seen as a participatory method to promote the goals of GCED and in working towards the *Sustainable Development Goals*.

Lastly, the students' game projects can reach many people worldwide, as they are stored and presented online. Through this, many people can play the games created during the jam and take inspiration from them. Creating digital games that are globally accessible, therefore, also corresponds to the aspect of glocal solidarity promoted by the *GloCo* project.

Lessons learned

In this section, we will quickly examine the challenges and difficulties the project team faced and the experiences gained in the process. Generally speaking, we underestimated the amount of work required to organize the program, the room, and the food, and how exhausting it would be for our team. Moderation and being available to students with any questions about the jam or problems with their prototypes also took up considerable time and effort. Especially so, as even when all students were quietly working on their projects, we still had to be present at all times, as university law prohibits students from being left unsupervised for any period of time. For a project of this size, having three team members is the absolute minimum, especially during the jamming time. Regarding the time frame, we found that 2 days strikes a good balance, giving participants enough time to work and design without exhausting them or the project team.

Although we were worried that some students might not respond well to the topics, all projects showed that students approached the themes of identity, diversity, and representation in video games earnestly. Some were more personal, others were very abstract, and some included potentially questionable or even problematic ideas. The post-event discussion about the prototypes helped dissect not only students' intentions, but also provided space for discussion and for expressing impressions. Even if students are thoroughly prepared for a topic, there will be situations that need unpacking and critical reflection, and it is important to create a space and establish tools beforehand that allow for constructive criticism and collective critical thinking.

After the game jam, participants occasionally approached us to compare their experiences in the Identity Game Jam with those in other, larger game jam events. They described it as healthier (food-wise and mental-health-wise), calmer, and more focused. It was also repeatedly mentioned that they enjoyed the absence of pressure to finish and publish a polished game. This was the case firstly because we underlined this sentiment several times, and secondly because we did not include ratings or rankings of the created games, unlike other game jams. As

we wanted the students to focus on their design ideas and concepts, it was a relief to see that they understood our intentions and were able to acclimate themselves.

Students were also given a short questionnaire about the game jam more than a month after the event. They were asked to rate their agreement on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating full agreement and 1 indicating complete disagreement.

Some important data show that students had mixed feelings about the workshops, but generally agreed that they would be able to use what they learned in the future. As considerable time had already passed when the data were gathered, this can be considered evidence of a sustainable, long-lasting effect on participants. It was also mentioned that students would have appreciated the workshops held right before the start of the jam if they had been held at an earlier date. The reason is that they had already formed the ideas they wanted to work on when the game jam started, but the workshops provided new insights they could not easily implement on short notice. Giving more time between the input and the start of prototype design, therefore, seems like a solid consideration.

For further reading

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