

GAME JAMS AS PROOF-OF-CONCEPT ENTREPRENEURIAL LAUNCHPADS

Thom Kaczmarek*

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WHO I AM AND HOW I GOT HERE

There is no single path to the game industry. The industry itself is like an ocean, and the paths you take are like rivers. They bend, they curve, and sometimes they become dead ends, asking you to start over. Try to get in during the dry season (like now) when there are no opportunities, and it feels impossible. Alternatively, during a wet one (like COVID), you feel like you do not deserve it. However, that is imposter syndrome talking; we all have it.

My path began during the sunny, cloudless summer of 1997. I was staying at my cousin's place in the countryside. We were playing *Heroes of Might and Magic II* (New World Computing, 1996). It was a small, stuffy room, but it had a door to a balcony. While one of us played, others chilled there and enjoyed the weather. However, our parents thought that we were being unhealthy, spending 'hours' in front of the computer screen and not wanting to come down and eat. After some back and forth, they kicked us out and locked the room (like on a proper key, an old house in the old country).

Luckily, back then, games came with handbooks that included most of the details, such as stats for spells and units. So, we spent a few days in the garden, recreating the level to the best of our memory, and then carried on playing outside. Now our parents struggled as

* Thom Kaczmarek is an award-winning game developer, founder of www.gic.gd, Senior Lecturer in Games Design at University of the Arts London, and Global Game Jam Regional Organiser for the UK and Ireland.

they could not get us back into the house. We spent all day outside, discovering the power of creation and imagination through 'level design'. Upon my return home, I told my parents that I wanted to make games in the future and share my passion with others. They laughed at me. Not because it was cruel, but because it was surreal.

You must understand that both my parents were working class. None of our family ever attended university. My father's place was city-owned (US housing projects/British council housing), and at times, growing up, I depended on free school meals. Moreover, if you can read this, you are in a more privileged position than I was. Most game development knowledge (and programming languages) is English based. To even start, I had to learn the language first.

Poland did not have a copyright law for software (and, by extension, video games) until 1994. Our everyday life was what you would call the (illegal) grey market today. For us, *Monopoly* (Hasbro, 1990) was a western copy of our beloved *Eurobiznes* (Labo Market, 1983). Nintendo was an overpriced imitation of our Pegasus (Bobmark International, 1991). Pegasus was a Taiwanese unlicensed clone of the Famicon (Nintendo, 1983)/NES (Nintendo, 1985). So, due to piracy and unfavourable market conditions, Nintendo did not have an official distributor until 2014.

It was normal for us to play games in languages we did not know (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, English) that we bought from shady market stalls. We picked games based on cartridge art that promised way more than the actual visuals. Many were hacked variants, such as *999 in 1*; some were glitchy and unplayable. I was able to make a deal with a local seller, taking home several games a week, playtesting them and reporting back (i.e., which ones worked, what they were, and which were good). It was a nice quality assurance testing gig.

This experience strengthened my resolve to play hard games and try to break them (some of which became part of my portfolio). It also sparked my interest in role-playing games (since they were cheap to photocopy or borrow). Nevertheless, I never got into tabletop and card games, as I could not afford them.

My first computer was a salvaged 80s hand-me-down from my

mother's workplace. It was an IBM Personal Computer (model 5150). It had an Intel 8088 CPU at 4.77 MHz and 16 KB of RAM. Instead of a physical hard drive, it ran on two 5.25" floppy drives (yes, the 3D-printed save icon size of Blu-Ray Disc). For input, it had only a keyboard and no mouse. Finally, it had a pure Diskette Operating System with a third-party Amdek 310a monitor giving that amber font colour. I also got a few random floppy disks, which were amazing for several reasons:

- They had three games: *Arkanoïd* (NovaLogic, 1988), *Space Strike* (Fiegel, 1982) and *Dig Dug* (Atari Inc., 1983)
- One of the floppies had a start-up screen with ASCII characters. By trying different key combinations, I discovered how to make them: ALT + up to 4 Num Pad Digits (causing even more Level Editing and Worldbuilding) in a text editor.
- One of the floppies had a password-protected file. This inspired me to make an augmented reality game where you must hack into some top-secret files by looking for instructions, passwords, and floppies hidden around the apartment.

When I got internet access years later, I learned about programming through various online communities. *Blitz Basic* (Acid Software, 2000) and *Borland Delphi* (Borland Software Corporation, 1995) were my first. Then there were different game editors, such as the *Games Factory* (Clickteam, 1996) and *RPG Maker* (ASCII, 1997). I started finding people with shared interests, making games, and working with others (for free), and a small snowball became an avalanche. This included:

- 2002 - took part in the first national game-making competition
- 2006 - organised the first national game jam, with sponsorship of CD Projekt (which ran for 4 years)

- 2007 - founded Zjazd Twórców Gier (now Game Industry Conference) in Poland
- 2009 - had a chance to go abroad to the UK to study Game Design, and I took it
- 2012 - won the IGDA Accessibility Challenge during the Global Game Jam (GGJ)
- 2018 - started teaching Game Design Full-time
- 2020 - started running my own GGJ site (since 2024, it is the largest site nationwide, often in the top 10 globally)
- 2021 - became GGJ Regional Organiser for UK & Ireland
- 2026 - I am writing this chapter for you

Decades later, when I came back to visit that cousin, the first thing he asked me was if I remembered that summer when we played *Heroes*. And right there, it all came back.

WHAT YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND

First, you must earn the right for your voice to be heard. You must make people care. Never assume your voice does not matter; it does. The challenge is that the games industry is full of competing ideas, opinions, and ambitions. If you want to influence a project, you must learn how to cut through that noise.

The game industry is a team industry. Every person contributes to the implementation and eventual shape of a game's vision, which must satisfy players, critics, investors, and senior stakeholders alike. As teams become larger, individual contributions can appear smaller. As teams get smaller, individuals take on a wider range of responsibilities, often beyond their specialism. Either way, game development is rarely about a single person bringing their vision to life. Game development is about collaboration.

To work in games, you must first accept some uncomfortable realities. Many people enter the field because they love games. They play them, watch them, analyse them, and often have a favourite title that influenced them. However, enjoying games is not the same as

wanting to make them professionally. A parallel distinction would be enjoying an expensive meal and wanting to become a Michelin-starred chef who makes it. Consumption and creation are very different experiences.

Likewise, many aspiring developers believe they have a unique game idea. Often, they are either reinventing the wheel or participating in parallel invention. This is partly due to survivorship bias. Most players only see polished, commercially successful games from a narrow slice of genres and platforms. As a result, it is easy to underestimate how many similar ideas have already been explored, prototyped, and released.

The scale of competition further reinforces this point. Steam hosts more than 146,000 games, with over 20,000 added during 2025 alone (Backlinko Team, 2026). Itch.io contains more than ten times as many titles (itch.io, 2026a). Any game you create will compete against this enormous volume of content, as well as all future releases.

The same reality applies to employment. You are not competing only with your peers from the same graduating cohort. You are competing with graduates from previous and future years. Professionals transitioning from other industries. Experienced developers who have lost their jobs and are re-entering the market. In the UK, undergraduate enrolments in Computer Games and Animation almost quadrupled from 4,065 students in 2013/2014 to 15,450 in 2023/2024. In the same period, according to TIGA, the workforce doubled from 13,700 (as cited in Ukie, 2015, p. 16) in 2013/2014 to around 28,000 game developers (TIGA, 2025). The supply of aspiring developers exceeds the number of available opportunities. Do note that industry roles include other areas: audio, computer science, production, and writing.

This is why a degree alone has never been enough. Qualifications function as an entry point to help employers filter applications. They show core knowledge and real persistence, plus solid time management and problem-solving skills. In rare cases, the reputation of a particular institution or degree may put you on an interview pile.

Degrees merely start conversations; they never secure jobs on their own.

So why go to university rather than take online courses? Many online resources are full of low-effort materials; they are often unfinished and unstructured. Some even charge a significant amount for knowledge that's available for free elsewhere. Few, such as Rami courses (Ismail, 2026), offer demonstrable quality that can be valued alongside degrees.

Despite this, to progress beyond the interview, employers and investors require evidence. They want proof of what you know and what you can do. This is done through a portfolio and often through internal assessments or practical tests. You need to provide evidence that you can work under pressure and meet meaningful deadlines without extensions. Demonstrate that you contribute effectively both independently and as part of a team. Finally, they seek cultural fit: people who can collaborate professionally and positively. In practice, a strong recommendation from someone who has worked with you can carry as much weight as technical ability itself. In a collaborative industry, your reputation is one of your most valuable assets.

If, after considering these realities, you decide that a career in the games industry is not for you, that is a valuable outcome. Better-informed decisions made early can save considerable time, effort, and financial investment. However, if you remain committed to making games, it is worth examining Game Jams.

What is Game Jam?

A Game Jam is many things (Lai & Khosmood, 2023), but put simply, it is like a music jam, a spontaneous artistic creation. A game jam is a time- and theme-constrained event. During it, participants conceptualise, design, and develop a prototype subject to specific constraints. The jam can be in-person (best for newcomers), hybrid, or virtual (best for individuals). Game jams are one of the most effective ways to gain experience, build a network, and test new ideas as you make games.

A significant portion of people taking part in such events do not share their work. For many, it is more about fulfilment from participation (belonging, challenge, extenuating factors). The game itself is often hacky and barely playable. At times, it simply attempts to answer a question of what can be done within a specific time frame, such as a oh game Jam (Kaminski, n.d.).

As a side note, the games that have cut features and many glitches are the ones that shipped. Only after they sell and win awards do they get the GOTY/Director's Cut treatment, which restores them closer to their original vision.

What Game Jam is not?

It is NOT a competition, although some may feel that way due to peer-assessed rankings. It is NOT a celebration of crunch time. Limits are not about unhealthy, unwarranted, nonstop marathons. They are about technical and artistic constraints. Such constraints originated decades earlier in the demoscene competition subculture.

Why do people take part in Game Jams?

Three primary reasons form a Jamming Experiential Triangle: Belonging, Challenge and Extenuating Factors. Those reasons can occur in person or online and, on their own, can be sufficient to satisfy participants. They shape participants' behaviour without institutional assessment through mirroring industry conditions.

Belonging

Game jams derive much of their value from the unique combination of community, challenge, and contextual factors. As temporary communities of practice, they foster a sense of belonging. Shared goals, collaboration, and peer support shape participants' experiences. This environment reduces the fear of failure and legitimises experimentation. It encourages participants to explore unfamiliar

ideas, technologies, and creative approaches. Consequently, participants contribute to something larger than themselves rather than working in isolation.

Challenge

The challenge inherent in game jams also acts as a strong motivational force. Tight deadlines, unfamiliar collaborators, and new technologies require rapid problem-solving and adaptability. Additional voluntary constraints, often referred to as diversifiers, further encourage creative risk-taking. They push participants beyond conventional or safe solutions, forcing them to ask “what if?”

Extenuating Factors

Game jams are also distinguished by several factors that set them apart from formal educational settings. These include restrictions on time, theme, software, hardware, or team composition. Some have opportunities for public showcases, industry interaction, and peer recognition. Practical considerations such as team size and participants' personal commitments further shape outcomes.

Finally, many established game jams benefit from strong brand recognition. Some even have notable success stories (Game Maker's Toolkit, 2026). Long-running events attract participants through their reputation. High-profile organisers leverage existing audiences. Successful games reinforce game jams' reputation as spaces for growth and entrepreneurial opportunity.

Jams as proof-of-concept for entrepreneurial launchpads?

The entrepreneurial value of game jams has grown, and entry routes into the game industry have become less predictable. Historically, aspiring developers could focus on securing funding or employment opportunities (Satvat, 2026a). Today's games sector has heightened

competition, reduced job security, and fewer entry-level opportunities. There is a decline in several structured talent-development programmes. The closures of Sumo Digital Academy and nDreams Academy in the UK reduced pathways into the industry (Cassidy, 2026). This highlights the challenges faced by early-career practitioners seeking industry experience.

In this environment, game jams offer an accessible way to demonstrate capability. Rather than relying solely on qualifications, applicants can demonstrate practical skills. Testing teamwork, adaptability, and the ability to deliver completed projects under real constraints. A successful game jam project can serve as a proof-of-concept prototype. Demonstrating participants' ability not only to generate ideas but also to execute them. This is valuable as the industry places greater emphasis on demonstrable execution than on ideas alone.

Game jams allow participants to build professional networks and identify potential collaborators. Many future entrepreneurial teams begin as temporary jam teams. Using the event as a low-risk environment to test both a concept and the team's ability to work together. Repeated participation creates a track record of delivery. This helps establish credibility within developer communities and provides evidence of consistent practice.

Importantly, game jams create opportunities regardless of what participant ultimately seeks. Is it external investment, publisher support, crowdfunding, or employment within an existing studio? Compressing development into short, intensive cycles, jams provide practical insight into production realities. Those conditions help developers understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. Traditional routes into the industry became increasingly competitive and uncertain. In turn, game jams outgrew being simply learning spaces. They are entrepreneurial launchpads that allow idea validation, capability demonstration, and opportunity creation. Opportunities that may feel otherwise inaccessible.

The entrepreneurial potential of game jams can be illustrated through the *Found Guys* (SquidMaker, 2021). A small experimental

prototype was created during the 2021 Global Game Jam (Brent, 2021). The team consists of a Game Design student and two Fashion students with interests in music production and 3D modelling. Months later, I encouraged the team to expand the concept by adding a local multiplayer mode and to submit it to the Games Innovation Challenge. Despite their initial hesitation, they completed the work over a single weekend. The resulting project secured third place in the competition, earning them a small cash prize.

This achievement provided the validation needed to pitch the project to the UK Games Fund Tranzfuser programme. Through it, the team secured £5,000 in development funding. Although the team eventually disbanded, the project fulfilled its purpose. It enabled participants to gain funding experience, develop professional skills, and build confidence. They need to better understand collaborative development and the game industry as an ecosystem. Ultimately, it supported their progression into careers within and beyond games (Satvat, 2026b).

SKILLS YOU WILL NEED

A newcomer may have a very different experience depending on whether they take part in online-only formats or in-person events. In online-only or hybrid events, you will have to do a lot of independent learning and utilise online materials. It will likely result in a combination of Google, AI search, and YouTube tutorials. A lot of those materials are based on post-mortems of how something specific was made. It rarely offers a solution for how to make something specific you want to make. On this topic, Miziziz has a great series, 'Four Game Developers, One Art Kit, We Each Make a Game' (2019), which I recommend to everyone.

This is why I advise you, as a newcomer, to join an in-person jam (while first acquiring new knowledge and skills). Please do not come with a team of your classmates, friends, or colleagues; it is not in the spirit of these events. Part of the challenge is working with new people, but it is not outright banned. If you take part online, it will be

the opposite, as it is hard to make new teams where people communicate differently.

If you have a readily accessible portfolio/samples of your work, you should be able to join any team. Speaking from experience (and ongoing research), the average team size is around four or five people. You can go it alone, but you will miss out on a lot of experience.

Many jam sites offer dedicated team-building sessions. Some even feature industry speakers and mentors. Those are your opportunities to network and meet new people (even if you will not work with them, do remember their names and stay in touch). As I mentioned earlier, in 2012 I took part in my first Global Game Jam, during which I met Doug Pennant and stayed in touch. Over a decade later, I had the opportunity to invite him to the students' showcase, which he took. He brought up this experience in his book *The Pocket Mentor for Game Production* as an example of how networking is a long but productive game (Pennant, 2024, p. 64).

For a general jam, there will be a lot of programmers, designers, fewer artists, and even fewer audio people. Narrative is often skipped (but there are some longer story-driven jams). Depending on your strengths, you may be in higher demand than others. I remember a sound artist who, because of signed Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), could not talk about his work. To evidence his updated skill set every year, he jammed. I met him during the 2019 Global Game Jam at Goldsmiths University of London. There, through Discord (Discord Inc., 2026), he took part in projects from Japan to the USA. He composed sound bites and tracks for dozens of teams' games, expanding his portfolio over a single weekend.

Soft Skills

Game jams require rapid delivery, teamwork under uncertainty, and resourcefulness. All of this depends on your communication skills. As time is of the essence, clear communication becomes a default, in turn improving your social skills (Smith & Bowers, 2016)

As team formation is often part of the game jam, you negotiate

the roles and distribute leadership and responsibilities. Google found that team success depends more on interaction than individual talent (Thomson, 2015). Effective collaboration enables the sum of their efforts to exceed the sum of their parts (Janz, 2014). This is a crucial predictor of startup survival and long-term success. Jams are a trial by fire in conflict resolution and communication under pressure. However, it is better to gain this experience in a low-stakes, voluntary environment rather than in your first job.

As you will be surrounded by others, working towards the same goal, it is easy to give and receive feedback. Do acknowledge each other's skills and even ask for help (Aurava & Sormunen, 2023); it is all part of the jam experience. Jams are collaborative, cooperative, socially inclusive environments. Participation in them helps you gain interdisciplinary knowledge relatively quickly. You will stop thinking of yourself as a 'student' and start perceiving yourself as a 'developer'. Recurring participation shapes your professional identity, boosts confidence, and grows your network. All the above are key preconditions for entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Due to time constraints, you will be forced to improve your time management. This includes scoping and planning, and budgeting time for the completion or progression of specific tasks. On an ongoing basis, you will consider and evaluate the game design process and reorganise your work to adapt to new realities. Those are repeatedly cited soft skills that transfer to studio formation and startup work (Aurava & Sormunen, 2023).

Technical Skills

AI is data-driven, so by its very nature, it is backwards-looking, while data informs creativity and is forward-looking. Creativity is not cloning; it is not creating derivatives but creating something new and unexpected. However, it will help to speed up repetitive tasks and work as an assistant.

Jams cultivate rapid prototyping, risk-taking, scope management, and iterative design. This allows you to learn how to pivot quickly,

which is a key entrepreneurial competency. Pivoting is informed by the technical skills and tools you have access to. Jams are viewed as a valuable complement to STEAM education (Mora-Zamora & Céspedes-Vindas, 2024).

Game jams teach you to evaluate games by viability, not polish. What is your Minimum Viable Product (MVP)? What issues require creative problem-solving and technical improvisation? Rather than worrying about the software's brand, you pick it based on its ability to deliver and its compatibility with the rest of the project. You do not avoid technical debt as you reuse and remix other people's work. This helps you better evaluate the materials and tools you use, and it also raises questions about ownership, authorship, and licensing (Fowler et al, 2016).

Depending on skill distribution in your team (for example, a lack of programmers), you may be forced to learn new things. It can be visual scripting, a no-code game engine, or the development of a non-digital prototype. Any of those can still teach you a lot about game development and related processes.

Willingness to learn and open-mindedness to break rules are what will get you through any game jam.

WHERE THIS IS ALL GOING

Building and testing game ideas and teams is a valuable form of experiential learning. It also reflects how the games industry develops new intellectual property. Many studios run internal jams to test ideas, tech, and new opportunities. The skills developed through these activities, from teamwork to project management, are relevant. Furthermore, many successful commercial games began as game jam projects. This demonstrates that small experimental ideas can evolve into viable businesses.

Public game jams have produced some of the industry's most notable success stories. *Noita* (Nolla Games, 2020) originated as a prototype developed at the Gamma 256 event in 2007, before its commercial release. *Hoplite* (Magma Fortress, 2013) from the Seven-

Day Roguelike challenge became an early mobile success. *SUPERHOT* (SUPERHOT Team, 2016) emerged from the Seven-Day First-Person Shooter game jam.

The Global Game Jam birthed *Surgeon Simulator* (Bossa Studios, 2013) and *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* (Steel Crate Games, 2015). *Baba Is You* (Hempuli, 2019) grew out of the Nordic Game Jam into a genre-defining puzzle game. *Rollerdrome* (Roll7, 2022) evolved from an unsuccessful GMTK Game Jam into an award-winning action title. *Ludum Dare* was a breeding ground for many influential titles. The *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017) prototype established many of the themes and mechanics that were later expanded in the final game. *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021) was so popular that its creator abandoned other projects to focus on it. *Dorfromantik* (Toukana Interactive, 2022) grew from a simple prototype into a classic, cosy strategy game.

The same pattern can be seen in internal game jams. *Do not Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013), *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen & Himsel, 2011), and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) all began as jams. *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014) started as a joke prototype created to let developers unwind. However, its videos gained enough online attention to encourage more development. *PEAK* (Aggro Crab & Landfall Games, 2025) contributed to the popularity of the Friend-slop genre.

Together, these examples demonstrate that game jams are far more than student exercises. They validate ideas and help turn prototypes into commercial games.

As developing big AAA titles becomes riskier and less rewarding, the way games are funded and developed is also changing. After the Indiepocalypse (Pederchini, 2017), successful indies are publishing others. To give you two examples:

- *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014) allowed Coffee Stain Studios to expand into publishing in 2017. They released *Deep Rock Galactic* (Ghost Ship Games, 2020), a success that enabled GSG to expand into publishing as well. One of the projects they published was *Deep Rock*

Galactic Survivor (Funday Games, 2024). Its success allowed FG to announce in 2025 that they would help publish *Scritchy Scratchy* (Lunch Money Games, 2026).

- The success of *Among Us* (Innersloth, 2018) enabled the studio to create a publishing branch, Outersloth, in 2024, which, as of March 2026, has funded 24 indie games (Innersloth, n.d.), among which: *One Btn Bosses* (Midnight Munchies, 2024), which started as a jam game; *Mars First Logistics* (Shape Shop, 2025), which was a rapid prototype; and *Rogue Eclipse* (Huskrafts, 2026), which was first developed as a highly restricted vertical slice.

Your question should not be IF you can make a game; you can. As game development becomes more democratic, you should ask HOW to make one and eventually make a living from it. Hopefully, at this point you can see that starting small and proving that the core game idea works is key. If you have this evidence, then you should keep working on that idea and try to turn it into a highly successful title or even a franchise. So do not just dare to dream; make your dreams come true.

RESOURCES

The first step in preparing for a career in the games industry is building a professional online presence. Focus on essentials rather than a fancy personal website through services like Wix. Start by creating a professional email address based on your real name or an appropriate pseudonym. Consider your discoverability. If your name is common, a consistent professional or artistic pseudonym can help make your work easier to find and remember. Avoid using addresses created during childhood or adolescence! They can undermine an otherwise strong application.

Professional Identity

A well-maintained LinkedIn (LinkedIn, n.d.) profile should serve as the centre of your professional identity. Once completed, LinkedIn can generate a clear and professional-looking CV at no cost. It is also important to make personal social media accounts private. Recruiters and employers can review an applicant's online presence for any red flags. The LinkedIn mobile app offers additional networking features, including a personal QR code. This code can be saved, printed, and used to connect with industry professionals at events, conferences, and career fairs (see Figure 1).

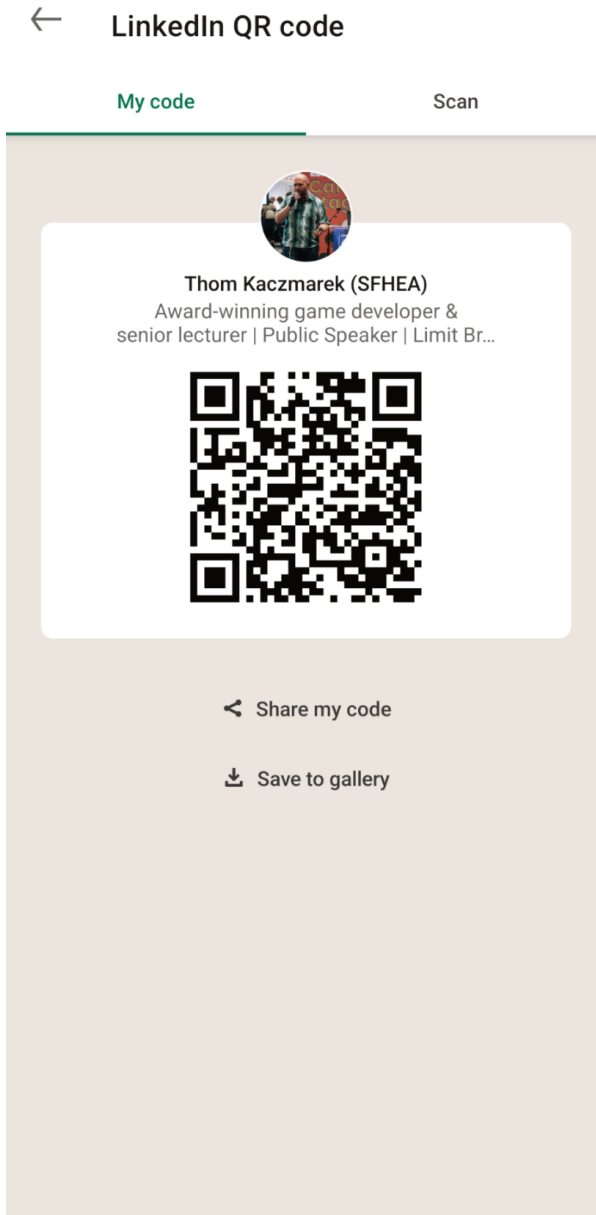


Figure 1 My LinkedIn QR code

Accuracy is critical when presenting your experience. Student projects are valuable, but they do not make you a Lead, Senior, or Principal developer. Using inflated job titles can lead recruiters to associate your profile with more senior roles. As a consequence, you will miss out on internships, placements, and graduate roles. Instead, precisely describe your contributions and demonstrate your growth. You can do it through regular posts about projects, achievements, and skills. Following professionals in roles you aspire to will help you understand industry expectations.

Alongside LinkedIn (LinkedIn, n.d.), you should maintain a platform that showcases your specialist skills. Programmers should share code for their projects (GitHub, n.d.), and artists should share their concept art and 3D models (ArtStation, n.d.). At the same time, game designers should publish playable prototypes (Itch.io, n.d.), preferably using HTML5 builds that run directly in a browser.

Online Communities

It is important to join online communities and begin actively developing your craft. Discord (Discord Inc., 2026) has become one of the primary communication platforms for game developers. It hosts numerous communities dedicated to learning, collaboration, and networking. Some focus on specific issues (Women in Games, n.d.; Limit Break, n.d.), content creators, or areas of expertise. Alongside community participation, invest time in learning from industry resources. While some professional materials are behind paywalls, there is a wealth of high-quality free content available on YouTube from creators and organisations (Brown, n.d.; Cain, n.d.; Game Dev Local, n.d.; Game Industry Conference, n.d.; GDC Festival of Gaming, n.d.; Millard, n.d.). These resources provide an excellent foundation for aspiring game developers.

Game Jams Participation

Seek out opportunities to participate in game jams, many of which are hosted on platforms such as Itch.io (2026b). The largest events typically occur annually, allowing you to plan and reserve time to take part. Whenever possible, prioritise in-person game jams over online alternatives. While both provide valuable experience, face-to-face events offer unique opportunities. Mentoring, networking, peer learning, and collaboration are difficult to replicate online. As you participate, focus on making games and ensuring that your contributions are properly credited. If no suitable jams are currently available, explore game jam highlight videos (Game Maker's Toolkit, 2024) and showcases. Learn the theme, consider what you would have done, and see what others have made. Seek out developer post-mortems and breakdowns from successful participants (JimmyGameDev, 2025). This provides insights into development processes, team organisation, design decisions, and production workflows. You can use it all to inform your own practice.

Refining your Portfolio

Begin refining your portfolio by focusing on quality rather than quantity. Developing expertise requires practice and experimentation. As your body of work grows, it is important to identify and showcase your strongest projects. Group your work around clear themes, such as a genre or specialism, to demonstrate a coherent professional identity. Your application should highlight only your best and most relevant work. Your online presence should focus on recent projects that reflect your current abilities but can be wider. For each piece, clearly explain the tools, technologies, and design decisions involved. Finally, create an annual highlight reel that showcases your achievements and key contributions. Host this as a short, accessible video on platforms such as YouTube (n.d.), Instagram (n.d.), and TikTok (n.d.), or as animated GIFs. This will provide recruiters with a quick and engaging overview of your skills and development.

Actively Apply

Begin actively applying for jobs, internships, placements, and competitions. By this stage, you should have developed a portfolio that demonstrates both the quality of your work and your growth over time. Through all the above, from Jams to online communities, you will build professional connections within the industry. You will have strengthened both your technical abilities and your soft skills. Both are required to work effectively within development teams. Those experiences will make you a more capable and well-rounded game developer.

What Game Jams are there?

Game Jams vary in size and format depending on their specific heritage and the (in)direct influence they have on one another.

- (Online) Ludum Dare (2002-2025/28) had the most events throughout the year and was the oldest virtual jam
- (Online) 7D* Challenge is a Seven-day format where asterisks * stand for various game genres, such as
 - Roguelikes (2005-)
 - First-Person Shooters (2012-)
- (In-person/Copenhagen) Nordic Game Jam (2006-) inspired GGJ, and the team-based, theme-driven format
- (In-person/Online/Hybrid) Global Game Jam (2009-) is currently the largest worldwide event
- (Online) GMTK Game Jam (2016-) is a competition run by one of the largest Game Design YouTubers and now also a Game Developer, Mark Brown

At any point through a year, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of jams taking place (itch.io, 2026b)

Global Game Jam as an example

In the case of Global Game Jam (GGJ), universities and game studios are likely locations. They address the biggest challenges facing new participants, such as access to hardware and software. However, many sites require participants to bring their own hardware, as funding can be an issue. As such, feel free to use free alternatives like Blender (Blender Foundation, 2024), Discord (Discord Inc., 2026), and Godot (Godot Engine, 2026). There is no shame in using open-source software. Do note that GGJ offers Board Game Design & Upload (Global Game Jam, n.d.), which further lowers the technological barrier to entry.

Many of the participating locations (known as sites) are open to anyone, but some are restricted. This can be due to security policies to give access to internal students, employees, or residents, so make sure to do your research first. However, if you think about attending a specific university, you may be able to meet its students and staff and become familiar with its work.

Alternative to jams?

Competitions provide an excellent way to test your skills, gain visibility, and expand your network. Internationally, the Independent Games Festival (n.d.) has recognised student talent through its Best Student Game category since 2004. It offers aspiring developers a prestigious platform within the wider GDC Festival of Gaming. The Rookies (n.d.), established in 2010, has a strong reputation through industry partnerships and judging panels. Its annual awards and regular challenges are particularly valuable for artists and designers. Its industry visibility can help participants secure employment opportunities and evaluate potential universities. Since 2013, the Student Game Competition (ACM CHI Play, 2026) has provided a more academically focused environment. Within it, students can showcase innovative game projects and research-informed design approaches. Likewise, the Games for Change Student Challenge

(n.d.) has encouraged students to develop games with educational, social, or civic impact since 2015. In a similar spirit, Global Game Jam Next (n.d.) was introduced in 2018 to support developers under the age of legal majority.

New opportunities continue to emerge. The Student Games Festival (n.d.), launched in 2025, demonstrated its commitment to supporting student talent. They sponsored a Chilean team to attend the event in Warsaw, Poland, with backing from the games industry.

Students in the United Kingdom have access to additional opportunities. BAFTA Young Game Designers (BAFTA, 2026) has inspired young creators since 2009. It helped launch the careers of numerous developers. Alfie Wilkinson's game Egglien (Spacespy Games, 2022) was released on major platforms while he was still in his mid-teens (BAFTA, 2023). More recently, GameBridge (n.d.), established in Cambridge in 2023, has rapidly become a key event for students across the UK. Local game development studios and industry partners such as Frontier and Jagex support it. Together, these competitions and events provide valuable opportunities to gain recognition and feedback. For many, they were the first steps towards a professional career in games.

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AI DISCLOSURE

As I am dyslexic and learned British English as a second language, I used Grammarly to ensure compatibility with APA 7 and grammar.

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