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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Spreadable Jams: Implementing Social Scholarship through Remodeled Game Jam Paradigms

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Game design communities often come together during ‘Game Jams,’ open social events in which game makers creatively respond to a design provocation by generating numerous prototypes over a short period of time. Such prototypes are often discussed between participants at the end of the event, then shared with a larger public audience. This fruitful process, which encourages collaborative sharing rather than competition between participants, differs in purpose, structure and outcome from many existing models of academic scholarship and scholarly communication. Inspired by the potential of such events, this paper argues that the game jam paradigm, and more generally, ‘spaces apart,’ can be effectively adopted, adapted, and repurposed to facilitate a broader social generation and dissemination of research creation prototypes, modelling an alternative kind of scholarly making in the humanities that runs parallel to, and is as equally valued and valid as, existing publication models.

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## Introduction

One of the goals of the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Research Team is to facilitate open social scholarship, to find ways to connect and communicate our academic work and methods to broader publics and to facilitate open and publicly accessible knowledge environments which encourage broad collaborative exchange. The challenge is not just to open up our signature habits of poiesis and praxis to and through broader social media strategies and platforms, but to develop adaptive ways and means of social exchange that preserve the rigour, standards, and expectations of our existing methods while leaving room for innovation. The problem with such a goal is that public social media platforms are increasingly becoming sites for careless diatribes and expressions of ignorance and intolerance. This paper explores these potential difficulties and, through the paradigm of ‘game jams’ (and other ‘spaces apart’), proposes a strategy by which we can collaboratively model and implement multiple scholarships in a socially extensible way, bringing new publics and new relevancies into our discourse fields while simultaneously diffusing our scholarly methods and perspectives outwards to inspire and expand civil public discourse.

What kind of environments are best suited to include publics in scholarly knowledge creation, scholarship, and debate in the humanities while also ensuring and maintaining civil discourse? Networked, digital environments such as social media platforms, which largely rely on the exchange of short, typed messages, emojis, or graphical memes from large numbers of users, establish limited virtual connections between largely disconnected participants and can encourage uncivil discourse. Alternatively, the development of ‘spaces apart,’ or opportunities to collaborate on digitally-enabled scholarship in real life and real time with small groups of diverse participants, overcomes some of the limitations of the depersonalization that accompanies virtual collaboration.

## Facilitating ‘Spaces Apart’

‘Spaces apart’ is a term that was introduced by Tom Schienfeldt during his introductory talk at the 2017 Triangle Scholarly Communications Institute (SCI) at the University of North Carolina. Schienfeldt (2017) defined these as places ‘where people of like-minded interests can get together and work without pressures,’

and this fundamentally describes the Institute. A Mellon Funded initiative, the Scholarly Communications Institute started at The University of Virginia in 2003 and transitioned to the Triangle Research Centre of North Carolina in 2014. Uniquely:

[the] SCI is not a traditional conference, but rather a forum for teams of individuals from diverse backgrounds to devote concentrated time to defining shared challenges, exploring creative strategies, and forging new collaborations, in a spirit of bold and open experimentation, and focused on one or more of a set of annually changing themes.

... Each year the SCI will accept 3 to 5 Working Groups which, over the course of four days, will help shape the agenda, creating space for both discussing and doing, in large groups and small, and for fruitful dialogue both within and across Working Groups, in a mix of structured and informal settings. The SCI will in effect host a set of concurrent and cross-pollinating seminars or development sprints on related themes.

The SCI is neither a venue for showcasing past successes, or implementing projects that are already on the drawing board; nor is it an occasion for invitees to speak to an agenda predetermined by a conference organizer. Rather, the SCI will offer the time, freedom, and diversity of participants to foster intellectual risk taking, collaborative and creative speculation, bridging of institutional divides, germination of actionable ideas, cultivation of new networks, discovery of common ground, all without fear of failure or the burden of having to produce immediate, concrete, sustainable deliverables. (SCI, 'About the Institute')

The SCI is thus an uncommon form of 'retreat.' Unlike a conference, it frames a set of spatial and temporal constraints that provide a limited-time space apart for participants to collaboratively explore and creatively experiment without the pressure of concrete output. After my time at Triangle SCI I described it as something I have not experienced since graduate school: a four-day opportunity to creatively brainstorm and collaboratively improvise with others, working through possibility and collaboratively generating openings rather than competitively or individually seeking argumentative closure. While this is not a unique model and recalls similar initiatives such as think-tanks, labs, and research centres that have operated in similar ways for much longer, Triangle SCI (as evident from the above summary) has not been imagined as a pressure-laden productivity engine. As well, to assume that similar opportunities are easily and broadly available to humanities scholars is a mistake. The knowledge economies that drive humanities scholarship are still deeply rooted in the myth of the 'lone scholar' and value publishable productivity. While most practitioners realize the fiction at the heart of such a paradigm, requirements for hiring, tenure, and promotion continue to assign the highest value and priority to single-author publications and research work, demanding the continued preservation, proliferation, and performance of such insular and egotistical practices. The alternative objectives of the spaces apart model are twofold:

1. To undermine the toxic effects of competitive isolationism on scholarly work by providing alternative knowledge economies and by encouraging collaborative creativity.
2. To assert the value of prototyping activity as an essential investment in productive potential, even if such productivity and traditional outputs are not immediately apparent.

My experience at Triangle SCI inspired me to start looking for other spaces apart opportunities within academia and beyond. Unconferences and their various facilitation formats (including the 'birds of a feather' and 'lightning talk' formats adopted at the INKE Victoria gatherings) instantly came to mind. I also recall one of my first meetings with the INKE group: after a traditional conference in Kyoto, a group of us took a walking tour to a Buddhist temple; during the walk Jon Bath and I were asked to dialogue with the other participants and, by the end of that journey, have a preliminary framework and first-year plan for INKE's new Modelling and Prototyping Team ready to present to the group. Other digital humanities groups have also created unique and innovative spaces apart: the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded 'One Week|One Tool' digital humanities 'Barn Raising' event at George Mason University in 2013 'brought together a group of twelve digital humanists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds and practical experience to build a working piece of scholarly software' (CHNM 2013). As well, the DH MakerBus initiative, started by Kim Martin, Beth Compton, and Ryan Hunt in 2013, transformed a 32-seat school bus into a mobile makerspace and digital humanities classroom that makes technology and education accessible to broader communities. Closer to home, my ten-year-old daughter's coding class recently held an open house showcase of their projects—a

pop-up exhibit called 'f5://imagination'—that integrated their work with other coders and encouraged them to share what they had learned and created with interested community members. And more generally (although there are many more examples I could include), the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* and, more recently, the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* have used the method of going out into communities, setting up temporary spaces, truly listening to stories from people who have been affected, and respectfully using those stories to shape reports and recommendations.

### 'Game Jams': Spaces Together

These examples confirm that we can get more creative with the ways that we imagine our scholarship becoming social by enabling such spaces apart, temporary environments that facilitate respectful, productive, and creative interactions between participants from diverse backgrounds. However, one model of collaborative knowledge production consolidates the various features of the above examples. Game design communities often come together during 'game jams,' open social events in which game makers, like musicians at improvisational 'jams,' creatively and collaboratively respond to a design provocation by generating numerous prototypes during a dedicated event over a short period of time. As 'spaces apart,' game jam environments use temporal constraints to provoke creative problem solving. The prototypes that result are shared and discussed between participants at the end of the event, then distributed to a larger public audience. This fruitful process, a collective and concentrated learning and building of experiences which encourage a collaborative sharing of prototypes rather than competition between teams of participants towards production-ready publications, differs in purpose, structure and outcome from many existing models of academic research and scholarly communication.

### Sample Jam

In March 2017, I co-organized a collaborative Game Jam event co-sponsored by Acadia, York and OCAD Universities, and affiliated with *Refiguring Innovation in Games* (ReFiG), a SSHRC-funded project 'committed to promoting diversity and equity in the game industry and culture and effecting real change in a space that has been exclusionary to so many.' The call for participation read as follows:

The proposition of a feminist war game is a potentially uneasy one. War is traditionally the arena of men and hyper masculinity while women, LGBTQIA+ persons and people of colour are most often marginalized and victimized by war. Critical questions could be raised about the relationship between masculine systems and violence, questions that could be addressed in relation to the wealth of conflict-based games on the market. A feminist war game might also present historical anti-war feminist activism, re-humanize the dehumanizing and objectifying functions of traditional military systems, or subvert the mechanism of war.

The aim of this game jam is to have conversations about feminism and war through the creation of games. (ReFiG 2017)

The jam ran from Friday March 24 to Sunday March 27 at the game lab at OCAD U and hosted twelve participants of quite varied skill and experience levels who split into three teams. Although I had read about game jam events for years prior to this, I had never attended or hosted one. However, some seasoned jammers were part of the organizing team, and their main concern—which should be required for all types of spaces apart initiatives—was running a safe and healthy development space that considered and facilitated the wellbeing of all participants. This included healthy catered food choices throughout the weekend and the establishment of a supportive, friendly and exploratory atmosphere not soured by competitive or evaluative pressures. The temporal constraints of the jam were perceived as generating a focused, process-based workspace rather than demanding finished prototypes or creating crunch-time stresses. Introductory provocations on the Friday evening were followed by healthy snacks, icebreaker introductions, and an initial brainstorm session that produced the three groups. Team planning was iterative, respectful, and collaborative rather than contentious, with participants building on each other's ideas. All participants regrouped at the end of the Friday evening introductory session to share their initial ideas (if they wanted to) and to receive feedback from others. Saturday morning began with casual conversations which naturally gave rise to project ideas that segued into work that was peppered throughout the day with honest conversations within and between teams regarding assets, skills, tools, and problem solving. Music selections agreed upon by all participants played in the background and added a general levity to the day. All agreed that good food

makes for happy jammers—something that was reconfirmed during my time at Triangle SCI in November, 2017. Over the full Saturday and Sunday sessions, constant and focused work was done, but none of this felt stressed or crunched. As well, while not a lot of dialogue between the teams went on during the working portions of the day, people reconvened around food and at the end of the day to talk about various things related to and beyond their projects. Sunday was a day with a better balance between breaks and work, and things wound down naturally by the end of the jam. We ended earlier on the Sunday and had a sharing session where the teams shared their prototypes (at whatever stage of development) to the rest of the group and received comments and constructive feedback. What impressed me most about the weekend was that not only were amazing and diverse prototypes produced, but friendships were begun from this temporary community. The constraints of time and potential stress involved in that limitation were balanced by the collaborative and respectful tone of the jam which, guided by the ReFig Safer Space Policy document (ReFiG 2015), contained no trace of uncivil discourse. The face-to-face IRL participation, shared theme (common goals), and combination of informal and project-related interactions enabled by the jam produced a shared, lived experiential context for the participants, resulting in an open social scholarship event that was not simply limited to those three days. Since the jam, participants have developed their prototypes further and shared them with publics beyond our little group of game creators, a more traditional book project that mixes contributions from the jammers with theoretical reflections by other scholars is in the works, and participants continue to connect with each other to share life stories and other personal and work-related game projects.

### Facilitating Open Social Scholarship

Importantly, despite their resemblance to some of the innovative spaces apart outlined above, game jams, such as the Feminist War Games jam, are still at the margins of traditional and habitual scholarly methods and forms of communication and exchange due to their reliance on output usually associated with entertainment, rather than critical, scholarly engagement, and with early forms of research prototyping, rather than publishable products. The fact that jams were not initially developed or run as academic spaces or practices is their advantage, as they are already being used in broader contexts by diverse populations. To introduce scholarly purpose to these environments is a way of migrating scholarship beyond academic boundaries, while also necessitating a transformation of scholarly practice into a more suitable form for public engagement. As well, game jams were originally developed as a way for creators and designers to kick-start their ideas and collaborate with others in an alternative, creative space apart from the stifling, stressful, and restrictive demands of industry-based game design work. As a space apart from corporate and institutional interests, from the signature pedagogies and research methods of traditional scholarly disciplines, and from the potentially unsafe and uncivil spaces of loosely moderated social media sites, game jam environments offer a unique opportunity for doing open social scholarship at a manageable, humanist scale.

Not only can the game jam paradigm be effectively adopted, adapted, and repurposed to facilitate a broader social generation and dissemination of humanities scholarship, but it also possesses a unique advantage: game jams are spaces apart that produce spaces apart—the game prototypes that result from these jams, like the jam events themselves, are environments that arise around a problem, but which also contain the tools to explore and experiment with solutions. In other words, game jams produce output that invites players to participate in the same kinds of constructive and problem-solving methods and processes that the game makers use to create the prototypes. While some games, like escape rooms, present a puzzle or problem but also have a correct answer or solution prescriptively built into that environment, other game types, such as Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) offer problem spaces without pre-programmed solutions, challenging the player with restrictions which enable collaborative and creative responses. *World Without Oil* is a well-known example of an ARG that in 2007:

Simulated the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis. It established a citizen “nerve center” to track events and share solutions. Anybody could play by creating a personal story – an email or phone call, or for advanced users a blog post, video, photo, podcast, twitter, whatever – that chronicled the imagined reality of their life in the crisis...The game encouraged excellence with daily awards and recognition for authentic and intriguing stories. (*World Without Oil*)

Eighteen hundred players from 12 countries participated and were observed by over 60,000 unique visitors to the site during the game’s first run. The game creators have since extended the potential of this event by offering the collective output of the players as an archive for others to explore and by posting cross-

disciplinary lesson plans that teachers can use to involve students in a similar, but temporally condensed, collaborative simulation.

Game Jams are also worth considering as alternative models of open social scholarly research and communication because they integrate the four types of scholarship outlined by Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Boyer (1990) outlines the 'scholarship of discovery' (combining freedom of inquiry with disciplined investigation), the 'scholarship of integration' (facilitating cross-disciplinary syntheses and connections between specialists and non-specialists), the 'scholarship of application' (responsible engagement, outreach, and service into broader communities to address consequential problems), and the 'scholarship of teaching' (transmitting, transforming and extending knowledge by stimulating active learning and critical, creative thinking) (17–24). Game jam spaces are instances of 'doing together' to achieve these scholarships and to productively implement and extend them beyond the event itself.

Game environments (digital, non-digital, or a hybrid of both) can thus be designed to function in much the same way as game jams themselves: temporarily enabling diverse communities bound by artificial constraints in a space apart and promoting collaborative, civil exchanges towards the rapid formation of multiple prototypes. Regardless of whether game jam events and game environments provoke or prescribe through their participatory, interactive features, game jams are experiences that engender further experiences. This kind of scholarly communication contains reporting and storytelling but is also fundamentally different from these methods in that game jams result in experience design and participatory provocation. If the jams themselves are carefully designed to include publics in face-to-face knowledge creation and debate while also ensuring and maintaining civil discourse, the kind of scholarly research and communication that they model offers an alternative to the deindividuation effects that can be facilitated by social media platforms and the competitive egotism reinforced by quantitative scholarly metrics. While some game environments that result from such jams might not engage communities of players in face-to-face collaboration, they can still model methods and perspectives that inspire and expand civil forms of public discourse and social scholarship practices.

## Next Steps

Having recognized the potential benefits and opportunities shared by spaces apart, game jam environments, and games themselves, what next steps are necessary to encourage the realization of this potential? Prioritizing, valuing, and making time to benefit from the collaborative, creative, and speculative opportunities generated by spaces apart is a necessary first step on the part of individual researchers, institutions, scholarly organizations, and communities. In other words, broadening our ideas of what we value as academic practice and as the purposes of scholarly work is essential. Indeed, one reviewer for this article communicated a concern that my submission did not effectively demonstrate how 'the "jam" model has been used to produce scholarly work of publishable quality,' usefully prompting me to clarify for the final version of this paper that instead of adopting (or appropriating) the game jam model to fit within our current scholarly and academic environments, I am arguing that our current economies of knowledge production be diversified and adapted to accommodate the valuable potential of co-creating provocative prototypes through open social scholarship practices. Further, prioritizing the same spirit of universal accessibility at the heart of the above game jam example, additional work needs to be done to find ways to circumvent the inherent privilege in participating in spaces apart. How can we make sure to invite and foreground the participation of diverse voices and broad demographics in such opportunities? There are some possible strategies that can be used to ensure that spaces apart do not become exclusive events. For example, the Refresh: Annapolis Valley coding class for young girls was taught by volunteers and was a pay-if-you-can scenario. Pop-up events can be funded by institutions (yet still organized as public outreach and consultation events). Jams need to foreground collaboration with relevant communities and need to be held in accessible spaces. Most importantly, we need to ensure that the ownership of any labour or prototype output remains with the participants, and is not claimed or appropriated by event organizers. That said, the collaborative and sharing environment encouraged by game jams and spaces apart can be understood as a creative commons for the respectful exchange of ideas. It might be beneficial to create an event-related statement that outlines the rights and responsibilities of participants to their ideas, creative output, and to each other, so that everyone agrees upon the ways that creative output from the event can be subsequently shared, utilised, and properly credited by all involved.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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