

UGA participates in first Global Game Jam

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Laptops were open. Whiteboards were quickly covered with lists and preliminary sketches. The air was thick with ideas and off-the-cuff concepts—penguins riding narwhals, cheerleaders with knives, Sarah Palin doing *something*.

The first Global Game Jam had begun, and the University of Georgia was a part of it.

From Friday, Jan. 30 to Sunday, Feb. 2, teams across the world totaling more than 1,600 people competed with one another to create the best independent video game. The time limit was a mere 48 hours, and their only guidance was the theme “As long as we have each other, we never run out of problems.”

As the 5 p.m. starting time grew ever closer, the Athens team busied itself by setting up laptops, extra monitors and video cameras to stream their event live on the Internet.

New Media Institute professor Dr. Casey O’Donnell spearheaded the Athens team. O’Donnell is also the founder of the Athens chapter of the Georgia Game Developers Association, which has grown to 30 members since he established it in 2008.

Of those 30 members, 16 dedicated themselves to the weekend’s task of producing a game in just two days. The group’s enthusiasm and hard work reaffirmed O’Donnell’s decision to come to UGA, where he hopes to continue building interest in video games. “In Athens you have an independent music scene, an independent movie scene, and it’s the right kind of culture to have an independent game scene thrive,” he said.

At 5 p.m. the Athens Game Jam separated into three groups to brainstorm what they were going to create. Their ideas ranged from the dark and nefarious—hedonism and drugs—to the lighthearted and silly—lemmings and LOLCats.

After reuniting and discussing their concepts, the final game was born from each groups’ ideas. “The cool thing was that it was just organic and it happened here,” O’Donnell said. “They jumped right in and took elements from each thing. They ended up pulling ideas from different places and it came together well.”

Once the idea was established, everything from game code to art and sound assets had to be built from scratch. The game, titled “Escape From Ralph’s Seafooditorium with Ursula and Olly,” was the collaborative effort of a diverse group of students and enthusiasts—in addition to programmers, artists, sound designers and writers were key members of the team.

O’Donnell worked with several students to program “Escape From Ralph’s,” including 24-year-old Brandon Treadway, who is currently pursuing a master’s degree in computer science.

“From an engineering standpoint, [48 hours] is very very little time,” Treadway said. “It was definitely a challenge. The art guys make all the things look pretty, which is very time consuming, but we have to take all that and actually make it work.”

The creative aspect of game design attracted many of the Game Jam’s participants, including its two principal “art guys.” Alliene Bouchard, 28, and Jason Allen, 27, produced a large portion of the game’s 2-D artwork.

“There’s a lot of expression here,” Bouchard said. “In the art school there’s a lack of rational production; this is the perfect town to blossom a [game] program out of right now.”

Allen, who graduated with an MFA from the University in 2008 and has previously worked on four episodes of Adult Swim’s Frisky Dingo, saw the Game Jam as a learning experience.

“On top of the prop design I ended up doing a lot of animation,” he said. “But the animation for games is set up completely differently than it would be for a television show. So I learned a lot about animation for a video game.”

Victoria Castilla, a theatre and film studies major at UGA, did the voice work for “Escape from Ralph’s” and picked the names Ursula and Olly.

“I wanted to do the voice acting because I’ve always wanted to be a cartoon or something unrealistic, so I wanted to be the voice actress,” she said.

Learning to work as a team in such a short time period was one of the Game Jam’s biggest challenges—but it also proved to be a great success.

“We had good communication,” said Castilla. “Everybody’s been communicating so far. That’s why we’ve gone this far.”

After the Game Jam was complete and the team had dispersed for some much-needed rest, O’Donnell reflected on the resounding success of the event.

“It was crazy how well the team gelled,” he said. “There might have been moments when people were tired and grumpy, but there were no arguments, there were no tantrums. It was just really cool the way people worked together and I was really impressed. That’s that cultural thing that I was talking about.”

*To find out more about the Athens Game Jam and check out the team’s work, visit <http://gamelab.grady.uga.edu/ggj/>*