

## Global Game Jam features a packed weekend at UMBC

*Hustle is the name of this game as participants have 48 hours to complete project*

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When the first annual Global Game Jam began at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County on Jan. 30, participants looked excited.

Two days later, in the university's Games, Animation and Interactive Media Lab, the 20 amateur video game developers seemed less excited and more hurried.

After all, they were getting down to the final moments of the competition sponsored by the International Game Developers Association that pitted them against more than 1,500 people in 53 locations and 23 countries.

Between 5 p.m. on Jan. 30 and 3 p.m. on Feb. 1, they slept little and drank plenty of coffee as they worked to conceptualize, design, program and create art for functional, interactive games.

"We're just really busy," said Lesa Wilcox, a senior visual arts, animation and interactive media major and the president of the university's Game Developers Club.

Wilcox and her team, called Team FatBird, were trying to complete a game called Feather Tether: Two birds, tethered together, race from earth to the moon eating fireflies and dodging obstacles.

With an hour to go, the team was having a problem with the tether. They wanted it to snap when an obstacle hit it, but weren't sure how to make that happen.

Wilcox was deep in a conversation with Arthur Gould, a mechanical engineering major from Catonsville who graduated last semester, about tether angles and mathematical slopes.

Other members of the team were on computers close by, chatting about "variable definitions" and "scripting language."

They never did get the tether to work.

Not far away, on another computer screen, a man with giant ears was chasing a Q-tip, and the Q-tip, controlled by a player, was running for his life, breaking open boxes of tacks to slow the man's pace and draw a humorous "ARGGHH."

The game, called Q-tip Nightmare, was the creation of Huge Ear Productions, a mixed team of UMBC students and out-of-town visitors.

When the deadline finally came, three out of four teams had submitted games to the Global Game Jam Web site.

Marc Olano, director of the university's Computer Science Game Development Track, led the event at the university along with Neal McDonald, an assistant professor in the school's visual arts, animation and interactive media program.

According to Olano, the video game industry has exploded nationally, with sales that rival the movie and music industries. At the same time, it is becoming more possible for individuals to create their own video game content and disperse it online.

The Global Game Jam was an acknowledgment of those realities that provided an educational opportunity for participants to try their skills in a competitive way, Olano said.

About half of the participants were UMBC students, while others came from the University of Baltimore and from as far as New Jersey and New York.

On the first day of the competition, Olano announced game guidelines to the participants.

A "play session" of their game had to last less than five minutes; the game had to comply with the theme, "As long as we have each other, we will never run out of problems;" and the game had to incorporate one of three adjectives: illusionary, pointed or persistent.

Olano and McDonald then led a brainstorming session to compile a list of concepts that the participants, once broken into teams, could work to bring to life.

McDonald wrote suggestions on a dry-erase board: "rock climbing with doofus;" "three-legged race back-seat driver;" "a rabid dog that can't die;" "auto-surgeon, don't flinch."

The third game featured two people meeting for a date in a dimly lit restaurant and trying to find each other, all while their shadows dragged them away from the lights.

A fifth team had given up the night before after their programmers hit an insurmountable hurdle in their design.

Afterward, the teams voted for four local awards -- Best Expression of Constraints, Best Gameplay, Best Art and Best Technical -- and Team FatBird won them all.

Everyone seemed happy with their accomplishments, despite the hiccups, and relieved the weekend was over.

"It was fun, despite the bags under our eyes," said Wilcox.

"I was afraid when I started this project that I wouldn't be up to it, but everyone really came together," said Jonathan Merkle, a UMBC senior in Olano's gaming track program who helped lead the Huge Ear Productions team.

"It's been great. It's been a lot better than I thought it was going to be."

Those interested can play the games online by going to [http://globalgamejam.com/Game\\_browser](http://globalgamejam.com/Game_browser) and clicking on the Baltimore, Md. location.