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CRICKET MUNCHING GAME MAKERS

Local game developers built six games in three days

The image of gamers hanging out with pizza is a pretty standard one, but you usually don't see crickets as the pizza topping.

At the Cricket Dare game jam Friday-Sunday, July 28-30, game developers built games at Fertilab Thinkubator, a coworking space in downtown Eugene. The theme of the jam was "crickets are good" thanks to a sponsorship by Craft Crickets, a local cricket farm that sells the insects as eco-friendly protein for human consumption.

The jam coincided with Ludum Dare, an international thrice yearly game jam, so some gamemakers went with another theme: "running out of power."

A game jam is a gathering of people interested in making video games — the game makers get a theme at the beginning of a weekend and have just a few days to build a (semi)-completed game. More than a dozen people participated, munching on crickets to fuel their creativity, and six brand new games came out of it.

Checking out the scene on Saturday there were few different teams. One team of three, Ted Carter, Magdalen Rose and Will Bucknum, built a platformer (think old-school Mario side-scrollers) fighting game called "The Legend of Cricketoa," starring a superhero named Cricket Girl. Carter said, "Cricket Girl's powers are like chirping and jumping really high."

Rose added, "We started with crickets, then went to cricket fighter. What would it fight? Frogs!"

This sort of collaborative storytelling and idea generation is pretty typical of a game jam. In this team, Rose is the visual artist, Bucknum does sound design, and Carter is the programmer, but they all work together to figure out which ideas can come to fruition.

By Saturday afternoon, Carter had set up a robot on his screen to perform fighting motions, and Rose had created a character design to layer on top of it. On her screen the character is drawn with each part of each limb separated. Rose said, "This is the character all segmented, so we're going to rig it and animate it on a robot and that way it could run and jump and stuff. All these parts will move separately."

Another game maker, Jeronemo Rodgers, worked with sound designer Michael Jones to build "Super Funk Kaiju Cricket." In that game you play a happy dancing cricket that rams into buildings to feed and grow in size. Each smashed building lets out a call of encouragement in a deep, excited voice — "Yo," "Fressshhh," or "Rad."

Ted Brown is a game developer and organizer who has been in the games community in Eugene for several years. He says he's proud of what came out of the jam. "Ted and Magdalen — they had a bigger vision, but they had to cut it short" due to time constraints, he says. "With Jeronemo, you saw just the emergent playfulness, the kind of wild exploration and letting the game lead him."

Brown made his own game to match the Ludum Dare theme of running out of power — a sort of mining simulation in which robots work to get materials before they run out of fuel. He says a game jam is an invigorating experience. "Friday, nothing. Sunday, wow, we made this?"

Brown invites anyone to join in for the next jam, likely to be this winter. "Even if you don't know if you like making games or not. When it's done and you're quivering and shaking from caffeine and exhaustion, one of two things will happen: either you'll want to do that again, or never again. You'll know in your heart of hearts that this is for you." ■

For more information on local game jams and the game developer community, go to the Facebook page IGDA: Eugene (Eugene Area Game Developers). For more info on Ludum Dare, go to ludumdare.com.



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