

GAMERella Podcast E01

Gina Hara & Courtney Blamey – GAMERella, Canada

- 1 **Intro:** 0:04 *Welcome to the GAMERella Podcast. I'm Desiree De Jesus and*
2 *in this episode, I talk with GAMERella Game Jam co-founder*
3 *Gina Hara and GAMERella co-organizer, Courtney Blamey*
4 *from Canada. We talk about organizing inclusive and alternative*
5 *game jams, community building and more.*
- 6 **Desiree De Jesus:** 0:23 Gina, Courtney, thank you so much for joining us.
- 7 **Gina Hara:** 0:27 Thank you so much for having us.
- 8 **Courtney Blamey:** 0:28 Thank you so much for having us.
- 9 **Desiree De Jesus:** 0:29 Lovely. So tell me your origin stories. Who are you? And what
10 do you do? Let's start with you, Gina.
- 11 **Gina Hara:** 0:37 My name is Gina Hara. I'm a Hungarian Canadian filmmaker and
12 artist. I have been working in different art and technology labs
13 for 15 years now. And I've been working at Tag, that is Canada's
14 largest and most established games Research Center located at
15 Concordia University. And been doing a lot of activism, a lot of
16 event organization and a lot of research and making projects in
17 both, games and films over the last decade pretty much. Makes
18 me feel old.
- 19 **Desiree De Jesus:** 1:19 No, experienced.
- 20 **Gina Hara:** 1:21 Yes, that's it. Wise and experienced.
- 21 **Desiree De Jesus:** 1:24 And Courtney, tell us about you.

22 **Courtney Blamey:** 1:26 So the professional version is that I'm a PhD student at Concordia
23 University, in the comms department and I have a really thorough
24 focus on sort of game studies and constructing meaning making
25 in games. But also, I'm British and come over to study in Canada,
26 specifically, because Quebec has such a plethora of game studies
27 spaces and Game Studios, but I'm really interested in the power
28 and meaning making in games. And that's kind of where I come
29 into this sort of space. And, I'm trying to get to the point where I
30 can say I'm a game designer, and putting it more and more onto
31 my biographies, and onto websites and such to kind of amplify
32 my own sort of challenging the imposter syndrome, where you're
33 like, "Well, am I really a game designer?" It's like, "No, I've
34 designed games. I'm a game designer." So yeah, I would say
35 that's kind of where I come into this. Been here in Canada for
36 five years now. I was previously over in the UK. I did a joint
37 honors degree in game design and creative writing, which is kind
38 of where I started to really get into the more professional space
39 of games. But I've always been a gamer passionate about
40 gaming, and gaming spaces as well. And I think realizing I could
41 actually make games and talk about games in a professional
42 sense, and not just sit on my couch playing them was like the
43 doors opened, and then there was too many doors open, and I've
44 been looking forward to seeing what's behind every one of them
45 really as I've been going.

46 **Desiree De Jesus:** 2:50 I like that description of it as these doors, or these different
47 pathways. And I'm wondering if you could share a bit about how
48 you discovered that you wanted to make things that you kind of
49 wanted to do some of that behind the scenes work instead of just
50 playing games, as you put it?

51 **Courtney Blamey:** 3:07 Yeah, I think that it kind of came from, I've always wanted to do
52 writing. Writing was really where I started off. And I was really
53 interested in being a game writer and doing narrative design. And
54 then there was a very humbling conversation that happened in
55 our undergrad, which was there's not enough narrative design
56 positions to fill this room, let alone hire you all, which is good,
57 because it's good to have the reality of the situation. It wasn't
58 meant to discourage, but rather to give some perspective to a lot
59 of the students in that space. And I think that's changed a lot in
60 the last five years as well. But really, for me, it was the creative
61 side really wanted to express my ideas. And I found that games
62 as a medium, I dealt with so much more than sort of books and
63 films and storytelling in that way, because I really liked the
64 interactivity of the game space. I've also played so many games.
65 I've had so many gorgeous stories and aesthetics and modes of
66 telling these really meaningful, deep emotional narratives that I
67 want to get in there and get into the thick of it, and do that for
68 myself too. And tell stories that I think are really interesting, also
69 for others in telling their own stories, right? So I think that's why
70 for me the door opened to, "Okay, so I don't want to just sit and

71 play these games, I want to make these games. And I want to
72 open these spaces to folks who can also make amazing games as
73 a result of that.” Meanwhile, seeing several other doors that are
74 opened and knowing that you can kind of open a door and then
75 you can shut that door for a bit and maybe go into another one.
76 And I think that’s something that gaming really or game spaces
77 really offer which is daunting, but also fabulous in its own way.

78 **Desiree De Jesus:** 4:38 And Gina what about you? What was your path to enjoying
79 games and wanting to make games?

80 **Gina Hara:** 4:45 My past has been kind of windy. I made a movie about that.

81 **Desiree De Jesus:** 4:50 Yes. Tell us about this movie.

82 **Gina Hara:** 4:54 Shameless self-promotion. But I grew up in Hungary and I didn’t
83 have access to any video games. I was reading game magazines
84 like those printed ones. And walkthroughs of games I wanted to
85 play. And I had no idea there’s such a thing as a game designer.
86 But I was also fascinated by films. And so I ended up studying
87 and becoming a filmmaker. And I ended up making a film, titled,
88 “Geek girls.” It’s a documentary, but well, partially on my
89 journey and other people’s journey, like different geek spaces.

90 **Desiree De Jesus:** 5:31 It’s a brilliant documentary, if I may say.

91 **Gina Hara:** 5:34 Oh my God, thank you. And, after I moved to Canada, I went to
92 film school, and I kind of missed the interactivity that I worked
93 with. I used to work with video art before.

94 **Desiree De Jesus:** 5:58 Which art? What does that mean, “Video art”?

95 **Gina Hara:** 6:02 Single channel, multi-channel, video installations in galleries.
96 And so coming to a very traditional film school, I kind of wanted
97 more interaction. And then I ended up finding Tag, and games.
98 And I was like, “Oh, games are like interactive, moving image.”
99 And suddenly, I rediscovered this love that I had, but kind of had
100 to bury because of life was pushing me in a different direction
101 and I just didn’t have access and all that stuff. And I just threw
102 myself in it. And I was so happy, and suddenly, I had this very
103 encouraging supportive community. And there was really no
104 shame associated with gaming, which I had experienced before.
105 Like playing games is a waste of time. And that’s the kind of
106 environment I was coming from.

107 **Desiree De Jesus:** 6:58 And that’s something that you were hearing from friends or
108 family?

109 **Gina Hara:** 7:02 Yeah, mostly family. My family would obviously encourage me
110 to study and learn languages and have a degree or two or three.

111 **Desiree De Jesus:** 7:12 Right.

112 **Gina Hara:** 7:13 And read books. Like, why would you play games when you
113 haven’t read all books by Dostoevsky or something? That’s
114 where definitely I come from. And then I got really interested in
115 the interactivity of games, and all the different narrative
116 structures of games. And so of course, I saw these people making
117 games around me. I think that was a Global Game Jam coming
118 up, right at the time when I got involved with tech. So I was like,
119 “Oh, I want to try to make games.” But it was super intimidating.

120 But I think so far that answers your question. And I know you
121 have some other questions coming up.

122 **Desiree De Jesus:** 7:50 But that's great. It's just a conversation. This is so wonderful to
123 hear about the different paths that the two of you have taken. I'm
124 hearing a lot of similarities of kind of not being satisfied with
125 playing, but really wanting to be able to create experiences for
126 people as well. So I'm wondering, what was your first moment
127 where you said, "You know what? I've kind of played around
128 with making games but now I want to invite other people into this
129 as well.?" I want to help other people make gains. How did that
130 shift happen for you?

131 **Gina Hara:** 8:27 I made a couple of games and I just didn't feel that it's the right
132 medium for me. That's not the right medium for the things I
133 wanted to share and tell thoughts and emotions and whatnot. But
134 at that point, I had enough knowledge. And I had a lot of
135 institutional power or access to opportunities that I wanted to
136 share with people. Because I felt like I understood what it feels
137 like not having that access. And so I just thought, well, I don't
138 necessarily want to make games. But I have an opportunity to
139 give access to other people to make games who want to make
140 games and they will make like 5 million times better games than
141 I would ever make. So I wanted to invite those people and give
142 them kind of my seat at the table.

143 **Desiree De Jesus:** 9:23 That's an interesting way of putting it. And, Courtney?

144 **Courtney Blamey:** 9:26 Yeah. For me, I've always been inclined to be... I've always
145 really wanted to teach. I've wanted to teach students how to make
146 good games, and to think critically about the games they're
147 making, which is why I'm on the path I've chosen, to do this PhD
148 and to get the degrees and spend the time making so that I can
149 also be like, "Hey, look, I've made the things to support this."
150 And I think that is where I've kind of got to the point where I've
151 done a couple of game jams. I worked as a more producer role in
152 those game jams - not in game jams, sorry, like a summer
153 internship. And then a second one that was part of a UK a
154 government grant just called the transfuser project with a team
155 called a loaded teaspoon. And so I had kind of taken a much more
156 setback role in the production of games. But I enjoyed managing
157 the teams and looking at how the teams interacted with each
158 other, or team members interacted with each other. And I felt like
159 I had been well-versed in that support role almost in helping
160 manage and assist a team to reach their best potential, that I really
161 wanted to be able to do that for folks who were coming into this
162 gaming space, who were either like, "I have not even opened the
163 game program before. I know how to do very basic sketching."
164 And might feel out of their depth. And I wanted to transfer the
165 skills I had as a producer, or an assistant in those spaces into
166 welcoming people into those spaces and being like, "Hey, it's
167 okay. Of course, it's nerve wracking, but people do it all the time.
168 And I guarantee you can do it too." So for me, it was very much

169 feeling I had that skill set to bring folks in and know that they had
170 that support. And someone who has been through it as well, who
171 knows that nervousness and that feeling of imposter syndrome.
172 And especially, if you're in those spaces, they don't necessarily
173 welcome more folks. And it's trying to continue to push that
174 forward in this space as well, in assisting them and making sure
175 that while they might feel out of their depth, it's not for any lack
176 of skill. It's imperative that they know that they most likely have
177 the potential, they just haven't been allowed to feel that potential
178 or have been sidelined, or pushed back and not been given a space
179 at the front to see what they can do.

180 **Desiree De Jesus:** 9:27 I'm hearing both of you talking about space making. That you
181 want to give someone a seat at the table, and you want to make
182 space for others. What do you think are some of the barriers that
183 prevent people from seeing themselves as game makers or game
184 makers in the making?

185 **Gina Hara:** 11:53 I actually have a quite concrete answer to this, because we have
186 been running GAMERella for eight years or something, and
187 we've always followed up with surveys. And one of the things I
188 was the most curious about is that what people see as obstacles,
189 or what are the obstacles that people face trying to get into the
190 game industry or getting well with games. And interestingly, one
191 of the biggest one as Courtney has already mentioned is imposter
192 syndrome. It's feeling that I don't have the skills, that I would
193 need to make a game. And that is one of the reasons why we

194 started the workshop series to kind of help people recognize that
195 they do have the skills. Which is 90% of the time, what people
196 say, when they're done with one of our workshops is that, "Oh, I
197 kind of already knew that. Oh, I didn't realize that that's enough
198 to make it." So I think imposter syndrome is one of the biggest...
199 I mean, obviously, there's systemic obstacles as well. But
200 surprisingly, the biggest one is people not believing that they
201 have enough knowledge.

202 **Desiree De Jesus:** 13:01 So how does that work with the workshops? I think that's such a
203 great idea, having the surveys at the end, and you have real
204 concrete data that's pointing to a need, as well as something that
205 you were able to do that made a difference for folks. But what's
206 that journey like for people who have come through the game
207 jam? So they're starting with workshops?

208 **Courtney Blamey:** 13:26 The idea at least for the ones that I've helped to set up with is that
209 the workshops are supposed to help them have these very basic
210 fundamental skills, and abilities with different programs, and
211 comfort in engaging with that practice before they enter the game
212 jam. So if they are completely new to the game space, and it's
213 literally their first time opening these programs, that's not what
214 they're doing on, day Zero of the Game Jam. They've had some
215 time to engage with those different programs, engage with those
216 different concepts, engage with the different people who we
217 bring into these workshops series, like sound and sound design,
218 puzzle making, narrative, character building, etc. So that then

219 they can feel that comfort, or at least feel some level of comfort.
220 I mean, I don't think they waltz into the game jam, being like this
221 will be a breeze or anything like that. But it at least helps dissuade
222 any of that initial nervousness of being like, "Well, when I'm put
223 into a team, and I have to tell my teammates, oh, I don't know
224 how to do that they're not going to feel as insecure because
225 they'll have some experience in doing so." And so as a result, the
226 workshops help to supplement that anxiety. And then they can go
227 into that game making space and go into those teams. And they
228 probably seen team members in those workshops too, raising
229 their hand being like I don't know this. So it also creates a
230 community space too of knowing that there are going to be folks
231 entering during that game jam space who might be first in some
232 of those things. But there's also folks there who might feel just
233 as clueless or out of their depth as you are and that is creating a
234 really good strong sense of solidarity too that it's all good.

235 **Gina Hara:** 15:03 And it also ties back into what you were asking earlier Desiree
236 about obstacles. And another thing often people identify as not
237 knowing anyone else who is making games. And okay, how
238 could I go to a game jam? When I don't have a team? I don't even
239 know anyone who plays games or makes games and as Courtney
240 said these workshops are a great opportunity also to meet other
241 people who are there also just kind of feeling it out and trying
242 things for the first time and that community. And then often the

243 people who teach the workshops are mentors during the game
244 jam, so more familiar faces.

245 **Desiree De Jesus:** 15:43 And are those mentors, people who've also come up through the
246 game jam?

247 **Gina Hara:** 15:47 There are some. Yeah, there are a couple of workshop teachers
248 we've had in the last few years who have either made their first
249 game at GAMERella five-six years ago, or have been around
250 camera for a while.

251 **Courtney Blamey:** 16:02 Which is awesome.

252 **Desiree De Jesus:** 16:03 It really is. Now if we could backtrack just a bit. What is game
253 GAMERella? Tell us about it's early days. Where does the name
254 come from?

255 **Gina Hara:** 16:15 Oh, I love that question. People always think it comes from
256 Cinderella, but it does not. It comes from Barbarella.

257 **Desiree De Jesus:** 16:25 Great movie.

258 **Gina Hara:** 16:26 Yes, thank you. And it comes from my own experience of trying
259 to attend Game Jam. And it was an idea that Cherisher and I came
260 up with in 2013 summer, I think. And we were really just trying
261 to make a space that is cozy and gentle and welcoming, and
262 comforting and supportive. And not like many of the game jams,
263 we saw at the time that were very, like brutal, like 48 hours,
264 crunch competition. There's a lot of masculine energy. And so
265 we wanted to make a space where we wouldn't feel intimidated.
266 And that's how I kind of, obviously, we have experiences,
267 various intersectional experiences, mostly as women. So at the

268 very first year, we kind of thought of it as like a game jam for
269 women. And that kind of why it's at the end, it says 'Ella', but
270 very quickly, we recognize that, "Oh, of course, like it's not just
271 our experience feeling excluded." So we very quickly opened up
272 and even in the first year, it was never exclusive. GAMERella
273 was never exclusive. We never said like, "Oh, only these people
274 can come or anything." So we have always had an amazing
275 diversity from year one. But in our communication, we very
276 quickly started to say like, "It's really for anyone who feels that
277 they haven't had the chance to make a game." We don't want to
278 put labels out, but anyone who feel that they have been
279 historically marginalized in game spaces or in academic spaces
280 as well.

281 **Mordecai 18:24** So what was the first step? You came up with this great name, and this
282 great idea to be welcoming to anyone who would like to make a
283 game but hasn't had a chance to? How did you get started?

284 **Gina Hara:** 18:36 So we're lucky to be in tag, which is the research center I
285 mentioned, techno-culture art and games. And we were research
286 assistants at the time, and we proposed it to the lab directors and
287 we asked for a lot of money. And we said we will organize it and
288 we had access to university spaces, and university equipment. So
289 that was kind of like we had that power. And that's pretty much
290 how it went. I actually don't remember if we had workshops in
291 the first year, we definitely had mentors.

292 **Desiree De Jesus:** 19:13 Where did you find mentors?

293 **Gina Hara:** 19:15 Probably around the lab. And at the time, there was a lot of
294 research going on about indie game making, which was in
295 Montreal. At the time, it was really like an early phase of the
296 surge of Indie Game that was happening. So we had tons of
297 people around him from indie studios who were kind of hanging
298 out at the lab because they didn't have an office space yet. And
299 lots of knowledge and lots of experience was lying around. So it
300 was fairly easy. So most of the early mentors were coming from
301 these indie studios and like other game makers around the lab or
302 veteran jammers who have been participating in many game jams
303 before. r

304 **Desiree De Jesus:** 19:57 Right.

305 **Gina Hara:** 19:58 Yeah, only later on we started we reaching out to have... Also
306 diversify the experiences of the mentor. So we have mentors from
307 triple A's. And we have mentors who are poet game makers and
308 anywhere in between.

309 **Desiree De Jesus:** 20:13 Well, it seems that you're pretty well placed as well-being in
310 Montreal to have these pre-existing relationships that you can
311 draw from. That's great. So what kinds of games have been made
312 through GAMERella? What have you seen?

313 **Gina Hara:** 20:27 I've been talking so much. Do you want to answer Court? Do
314 you?

315 **Courtney Blamey:** 20:30 I mean, I can only attest to really a couple years' worth. But I
316 mean, the breadth that we even saw in the last two were
317 incredible. I mean, there was one which was more of like a... It

318 was made in Bitsy. And it was a trip through the grocery store,
319 like through convenience store. And it was telling a story that
320 way, which was really awesome. There was another one that was
321 like you can't succeed, like you can't win the game. And it was
322 like a frog - I can't remember the exact aesthetic, but it was like
323 a frog. And you were trying to save your friend. And every time
324 you lost it fell down. The screen would go a bit more spooky and
325 weird and wonderful. And it was clearly a thing of like, you could
326 succeed only so much. But eventually it would catch up with you,
327 you'd start to fail again. So I liked that as a mechanic. And then
328 there was another one, which was like a platformer. So there's a
329 whole breadth of different approaches, especially around a single
330 theme, right? It's not like everyone makes a platform game, or
331 everyone makes a narrative game. There's a plethora of
332 approaches, which is really awesome.

333 **Gina Hara:** 21:33 The games are on the websites going back quite a few years. So
334 people are curious after listening to podcast, by all means.

335 **Desiree De Jesus:** 21:33 So I'm curious, you've mentioned themes. How do you pick a
336 theme? What's kind of that process, when you're saying to
337 yourselves, "Alright! We are going to start planning for next
338 year's game jam?" How does it start?

339 **Gina Hara:** 21:57 Well, we have a thing that Courtney names, "The huddle."

340 **Courtney Blamey:** 22:01 Yes.

341 **Gina Hara:** 22:02 And I love that name.

342 **Courtney Blamey:** 22:03 Yeah, we basically draw in a lot of different voices into a room.
343 Well typically voices into a Zoom Room over the last couple
344 iterations. But usually people meet in a space. And they come
345 from all kinds of different backgrounds, like they're either senior
346 academics, Junior academics, or there's folks who are solo devs,
347 indie devs, or people who come from industry. We had someone
348 from EA for the penultimate one we just did, who was in the room
349 with us talking about these ideas. And we kind of just sit together
350 and think through what is topical at the moment, what can
351 generate a lot of really interesting ideas, what isn't too reductive
352 or too constraining. And we come up with these really weird and
353 wonderful ones. I think there was something about bacon one
354 year, which was hilarious. I can't remember what it was. But
355 there's things like connection, was one that we talked about, and
356 pride. And then you have to talk about things like, "Well, is that
357 going to potentially spin things in a particular direction for some
358 folks or, do we want to try and include that into a bracket of
359 something else." And so we all sit together, we slowly whittle
360 down a gigantic list somehow into one. It's usually through some
361 ruthless sort of survivor style voting out to get there. And we also
362 include, things like modifiers, so that those who might be a little
363 bit more seasoned game jammers can challenge themselves to.
364 So it's things like don't use any words, or use the sound effects
365 as generated by your own voices, like human voices and things
366 like that, or include all the colors of the rainbow. Just to try and

367 give them that little extra design challenge, if they're a little bit
368 more seasoned, if they've been to one or two, and they want to
369 see if they can push themselves. So that's kind of how we
370 generate that theme through a lot of conversation, a lot of
371 reflection, especially on current events and situations we find
372 ourselves in and what would be poignant to branch out from as a
373 game design endeavor, let's say.

374 **Desiree De Jesus:** 24:10 Okay, so you've met with the huddle. Love that name. You've
375 gotten some feedback. You've kind of worked through some
376 different ideas. What's next after that? Do you then decide on
377 which workshops you're going to offer?

378 **Gina Hara:** 24:23 Yeah, so as I mentioned that at the end of each year, we do a big
379 survey. And we use that survey to make the next year even better.
380 In the first year, we didn't have workshops, and then we quickly
381 realized that people need to gain some confidence and learn some
382 skills. And then every year we learn something new. Because it's
383 really about the experiences of the jammers, and especially those
384 who come to GAMERella and make their very first game. I'm
385 always so interested to hear about you know what made them
386 come out to this game jam and not to another game jam. What
387 made them feel that this is going to be safe or supporting? And
388 what did they miss or what did they wish that we had extra. So
389 almost every year we add something new. So we look through
390 those surveys and so we think about how we can add those things.
391 And what's feasible things from like offering daycare or one year

392 we added a quiet prayer room. Fairly early on, we added tech
393 support, if someone didn't have computers or whatever tech they
394 were using, we would get those things.

395 **Desiree De Jesus:** 25:43 So you would also provide laptops or computers?

396 **Gina Hara:** 25:46 Yeah, and from the first year on we always provided food. Just
397 basically try to eliminate as many obstacles as possible.
398 Obstacles that are easy to eliminate, like, come spend a weekend
399 here worry-free. Like if your mom will won't look over your kid,
400 if you don't have money to go out, and have takeout during the
401 jam weekend, there's food. So many obstacles are so easy to get
402 rid of and so why not take care of those. And then there are the
403 bigger ones that take many, many years and collective effort to
404 overcome.

405 **Desiree De Jesus:** 26:31 So I'm really hearing this addressing on kind of a practical level
406 to make sure that barriers to like basic needs are being met during
407 the jam. But I'm wondering what are some of the things that your
408 survey respondents suggested that you've put into practice?

409 **Courtney Blamey:** 26:50 I think one of the major ones was folks really resonated with
410 having mentors. They really appreciated having them just on
411 hand to ask. They didn't feel like any question was stupid as a
412 result of that. And also, it meant that they got to spend some time
413 with folks in the industry and they could strike up conversation.
414 So one of the big things was between the two years I was on
415 helping with GAMERella was we got more mentors, basically.
416 Because we were like if you like mentors, we'll get you more

417 mentors, for sure. And so I know that, that was one of the things
418 that respondents of the survey were really egging us on for. They
419 really liked having these mentors in this space. We want to see
420 more of them and from even more different kinds of
421 backgrounds. And when we ran the global one, we tried to go as
422 global as we could with it. It was a little bit of a challenge. But
423 we got some folks to cover some time zones. But I think that was
424 one of the main things at least from my experience, it was a big
425 request.

426 **Gina Hara:** 27:46 Another thing that I think we offer and getting overall positive
427 response about is, we have a support person around. We've never
428 really come up with a label for this person. We just call them the
429 support person. Actually, the person who have been with us for -
430 I don't even know- four years now is Milo. So shoutout to Milo.
431 And their job is to just make sure that people feel well, and that
432 people don't feel stressed. They don't feel pressured. They are
433 not too anxious about the whole experience. And so Milo is
434 literally just there to hold hands and give hugs and listen to
435 people and if needed, give advice. And it's been, I think, from
436 the feedback of people, it's a really ground-breakingly different
437 experienced compared to other jams.

438 **Desiree De Jesus:** 28:45 That sounds like a really unique position to have, and also kind
439 of a great responsibility, as well. How did you vet people for this
440 role?

441 **Gina Hara:** 28:56 So Desiree is actually secretly a past organizer of a GAMERella.

442 **Desiree De Jesus:** 29:06 True.

443 **Gina Hara:** 29:07 When you were around, did we have Milo or not yet?

444 **Desiree De Jesus:** 29:11 No. Not, yet.

445 **Gina Hara:** 29:12 Do you remember, like we talked about that we need someone?

446 Because I think before Milo it was just us organizers trying to

447 just spread ourselves so thin and just take care of everything. And

448 then if someone was not feeling well, we would also be that

449 support person. And I just remember being so exhausted.

450 **Desiree De Jesus:** 29:36 It's true. We wore lots of different hats. Overlooking hospitality,

451 and making sure food was good. That there were enough mentors

452 to go around. But also during my time we had the blanket fort.

453 That kind of resting space and that faux fireplace - not fireplace.

454 What do you call it? Were you roast Mashmellows?

455 **Gina Hara:** 29:59 Yeah, it was like a campfire.

456 **Desiree De Jesus:** 30:00 Yeah, campfire. That's the word. And I just remember how that

457 created such a warm feeling, just to have the soft space to kind of

458 get away from the desk and screens. And you would sometimes

459 see people kind of having little meetings around there, and then

460 just being recharged and ready to go back. So it's neat to hear

461 about this evolution of kind of organizers addressing it and kind

462 of going from, "Okay, I'll be back. I have to check it on this

463 thing." To now having someone who's dedicated to it.

464 **Gina Hara:** 30:33 I feel like we were growing towards it. And you're right, we had

465 the blanket fort. Everybody loves the blanket for it. We would

466 just always supply hot chocolate and cookies, unlimited. And I

467 remember people making jokes that GAMERella was so perfect
468 that all we need now is a massage therapist.

469 **Desiree De Jesus:** 30:55 Wow, that's next level.

470 **Gina Hara:** 30:56 That's the only thing. And I felt like that was kind of what gave
471 me the idea that "Oh yeah, if we could just have an extra
472 personnel who literally just is here to make sure we feel okay."
473 And I don't even remember how we found Milo little but, they're
474 amazing.

475 **Desiree De Jesus:** 31:13 That's so good to hear. So you've done a good job of helping to
476 foster the safe, inclusive space when you're in person, and having
477 opportunities to recharge and refuel. So I'm wondering how you
478 were able to make that shift to online space during the thing that
479 shall not be named?

480 **Courtney Blamey:** 31:36 My first experience in organizing a GAMERella was doing it
481 online. And I hadn't organized an in person one before and I
482 hadn't actually even attended one prior to this so I was very much
483 thrown into the deep end. But it was really apparent to me how
484 much it was a real challenge because there was a lot, as Gina's
485 already discussed, it was a lot of the in-person activities and
486 resources and support that really shaped GAMERella into the
487 cozy supportive space that it was. And so going into what feels
488 like a very clinical discord server and trying to foster that same
489 cozy, welcoming, supportive friendly space was definitely a
490 challenge in itself. You know, we couldn't send hot chocolate
491 through discord chat.

492 **Gina Hara:** 32:23 We thought about it, though.

493 **Courtney Blamey:** 32:24 Oh, we tried.

494 **Gina Hara:** 32:24 We thought about getting Tim Hortons, which is like a big coffee
495 chain here in Canada, gift cards to every single person.

496 **Courtney Blamey:** 32:32 It was just totally unfeasible to do and they didn't reply to my
497 email, which is a real shame. But things like childcare and stuff,
498 you can't... You can only do so much remotely with everyone
499 being home. And we were doing it kind of in the, I mean, gosh, I
500 don't even know what version of lockdown we were in but were
501 in one. And so it definitely came with its own challenges. But we
502 did pivot as a result of that to try and generate, "Okay, well, if we
503 can't provide that version of it, what can we do with the
504 affordances of discord and the support folks that we have and the
505 mentors that we have." Knowing what our limitations were. And
506 I think we did a pretty good job. We introduced things like
507 temperature checks, so folks could respond with an emoji when
508 Milo would be like, "Hey, how's everyone doing?" And then
509 Milo could go check up on folks who might put like a really
510 nervous emoji or throwing up emoji or whatever, just to be like,
511 "Hey, seems like you might be stressed. What's going on?" And
512 that was a really nice easy way for them to sort of anonymously
513 be like, "I'm freaking out right now." And also, I would ping
514 frequently in the chat to be like, "Hey, go hydrate. Go stretch
515 your legs." It's really important because I do think part of the
516 being online thing is you don't have that initiative to step away

517 from the screen where you might in-person, or where you get into
518 conversations or you have the blanket fort, or you have the pizza
519 or whatever to try and pull you away. It's very easy to go into
520 that, "Oh, I'm just going to keep going. I'm gonna keep going."
521 And not rest sort of mode of things. So it was ensuring that, that
522 didn't gain any kind of momentum in the online version too.

523 **Gina Hara:** 34:10 I'm glad to hear that you saw it so positively because me coming
524 from the offline jams, I actually thought the first online
525 GAMERella was a bit of a... I felt bad about it. Because we
526 promise GAMERella to be this gentle jam. I know you've talked
527 about slow gems before. And GAMERella does take place over
528 two days, but we do encourage people to sleep, but we do think
529 of it as a gentle jam. And I did feel that it was a lot for people to
530 be on the discord and the zoom and I think we had three different
531 platforms. I know I've talked to a couple of people personally
532 who dropped out of the jam because it was just too much for
533 them. Couple of neurodiverse people, they felt that it was just a
534 lot of input and sensory overload. So I felt really bad about it
535 because I feel like with a jam like GAMERella, when you
536 promise people a certain thing, in a certain space, you're very
537 seriously responsible for delivering that space. And I personally
538 felt that the first online one, I felt I failed a few people in that one,
539 in that year.

540 **Courtney Blamey:** 35:33 I also think, because we've had conversations about this, because
541 you came from having done all of these in-person versions. It was

542 a really distinct difference that you felt in the fact that you
543 couldn't supply the resources you wanted to and we couldn't get
544 the gift cards for the hot chocolate, and we couldn't provide
545 health care and things like that. And even just like general
546 goodies. We have goodie bags for folks to take away with a
547 bunch of merchandise and game keys and stuff like that. I mean,
548 we worked our butts off trying to contact people for that. And we
549 got some pretty good swag, but it was hard to even do that. So I
550 do think it came with like its own struggles, for sure. And I think
551 if I had done any in-person jams, I think I would have noticed
552 more the discrepancy between the two. Because you have a
553 history with it. Right? You had a really comfortable aesthetic that
554 was attached to it. And it was totally turned into flux with having
555 to move everything online.

556 **Gina Hara:** 36:29 Yeah. But then we really found the affordances, kind of like the
557 pros, right? Okay, if you're online, we don't have a capacity
558 anymore. In person, we always have the capacity. People could
559 only attend from the City of Montreal, and then suddenly we
560 we're online. Anyone can attend from anywhere. And the
561 mentors can be from anywhere. And suddenly, that was a huge
562 revelation, which led to the global edition last year.

563 **Desiree De Jesus:** 37:00 That's fantastic. I do remember when you and you were trying to
564 have satellite locations, kind of jamming at the same time. But I
565 can see how having it kind of be more normalized that everyone
566 is online that, that's the way that you could sync up with people

567 in different time zones, and in different contexts much more
568 easily. Now, I'm wondering, I haven't heard you mentioned this
569 yet, but I know in the past, you've had speakers come and kind
570 of motivate or inspire. What made you think to include this as
571 part of the experience of GAMERella Game Jam.

572 **Gina Hara:** 37:40 I think at the first GAMERella we just had the director of the lab
573 speak. At the time it was Lynn Hughes. And Lynn has had an
574 amazing career and it was just really inspiring to hear someone
575 with 50 years of career speak in front of you. And it really filled
576 people up with hope. And like, "Oh, this is totally possible.
577 Someone else has done it before me." And I think it really plays
578 into this fact that role models are so important. To see someone
579 who looks like you do the things that you aspire to do. And so
580 that immediately clicked with me. People were literally crying in
581 the audience. Hearing someone, so strong and accomplished, a
582 woman or a person of color speak like people would often during
583 keynotes in GAMERella. So I think we got that one right very
584 early on. It was kind of like a stroke of luck, or - I don't know -
585 maybe I was just thinking smartly. And so we kept that around.
586 And yeah, role models are super important. And it's important to
587 have it at the beginning of the Game Jam.

588 **Courtney Blamey:** 39:01 Yeah, sets the tone really, doesn't it? I mean, for the first online
589 one, we had Kishonna L. Gray come and do a talk. And I mean,
590 she's awesome, generally professionally speaking. But she came
591 in with this amazing analogy about having a slice of the pie and

592 being like, “Oh, you can’t have that slice of the pie. Because
593 privileged folks don’t let you have access to it. So go make your
594 own pie.” And I honestly could go and watch that over and over
595 again and just feel invigorated to kick in a door, because it was
596 so motivating, but it set a really clear tone. And it was really
597 supportive as well. And I think that’s what these keynotes do, is
598 just really sets the tone. It sets the tone massively for the jam and
599 you can feel people kind of like... Like Gina says, people get
600 emotional during them, but also they get to write this high of like,
601 “Yeah, I can do this and I’m going to kick it. It’s going to be
602 great.”

603 **Desiree De Jesus:** 39:55 So I liked that idea that these speakers are kind of changing what
604 people think is possible for game jams or game making. How
605 have your own views about what’s possible during a game jam
606 shifted, whether through the course of GAMERella or just with
607 the pandemic?

608 **Gina Hara:** 40:17 I feel like seeing the pros in a difficult situation, if you’re able to
609 do that, which is difficult, is a huge triumph and can be really a
610 big strength. And just even me having difficulty in participating
611 in a game jam, ended up becoming a thing where over a 1000
612 people at this point, had the chance to make a game or often make
613 their first game and stuff. And I think, for me, making an edge or
614 trying to make an advantage out of what is your difficult or your
615 challenge which is may be the hardest thing to do. But I feel like
616 for me, it was through organizing the jams, first participating in

617 it, and then organizing them. And I can relate to my other
618 experiences as a filmmaker and artist.

619 **Courtney Blamey:** 41:17 I think for me, it was a thing of considering we did the last two
620 through pandemic in different levels of lockdown and stuff like
621 that was that even with everything that was going on and all the
622 hardships folks were facing, people's passion still weren't
623 dwindled. We broke records once and then again, one after the
624 other with these game jams of people signing up to do it, and it
625 just went to kind of show like -

626 **Desiree De Jesus:** 41:43 That's incredible.

627 **Courtney Blamey:** 41:44 Even with everything that was going on people were jumping at
628 opportunities, and burnouts, rife right now, it still is. And the
629 folks still were like, "No, this is something I really want to do,
630 and I'm really passionate about, and I want to get my foot in the
631 door some way, or somehow." So I think that, that's one of the
632 really nice things that we could kind of come away from this,
633 where it's like even with thou shall not be named, people still
634 continued and passions persevered.

635 **Gina Hara:** 42:15 Yeah, let's go with Courtney's answer. Please cut mine out.

636 **Desiree De Jesus:** 42:20 At the same time, Gina, you and I when we were co-organizing
637 together, we were thinking about how can we help other people
638 in other places to experience something as great as a safe and
639 inclusive, welcoming, Game Jam, gentle jam as you're putting it.
640 So I wonder if you could speak a bit about how your views about

641 organizing have expanded perhaps, and what you think Game
642 Jam organizing might look like going forward?

643 **Courtney Blamey:** 42:56 I can jump in first if you'd like. Give you some time to think. I
644 think one of the major things that we figured out in the second
645 online version for the global version was and it kind of touches
646 on what I was talking about just now, burnout is real. And when
647 we were reaching out to folks to be mentors, we did find there
648 was a drop off in people who are able to do it, and it's to no fault
649 of their own. Everyone's in a lot of stuff right now and
650 everyone's going through a lot. So I think having a compassion
651 and an empathy for those who are volunteering their time is super
652 important as we go forward in these end game jams, especially if
653 they're not necessarily on honorarium positions, or if their
654 volunteer positions. Even if they are honorarium positions, it's
655 still their own time that they're dedicating outside of their craft.
656 And so I think that's one of the key things that I kind of learned
657 over the space of two years, if not even a year in itself, was that
658 it's something to consider is when you're bringing folks onto this
659 team is, we talk a lot about the participants and affording spaces,
660 but also the team itself needs to function as a unit and that means
661 compassion for self in the team, and compassion for team
662 members that are organizing as well. And folks who are coming
663 in to assist those, either as mentors or workshop leaders or
664 keynotes, I think compassion for everyone involved and all the
665 moving parts is really a massive key to success. And checking in

666 with folks as we go to be like, “Hey, how are you doing? How
667 are your hours looking? Like “Don’t kill yourself trying to get
668 this done. We can figure things out.” Right? So I think that’s at
669 least for me a big part of what I learned during the process of
670 doing GAMERella online and then GAMERella global for sure.

671 **Desiree De Jesus:** 44:45 And you said a magic word, honoraria.

672 **Courtney Blamey:** 44:48 Yes.

673 **Desiree De Jesus:** 44:50 Can you tell us a bit more about that?

674 **Courtney Blamey:** 44:52 Yeah, I mean, I can kind of just nod to it which is when you are
675 afforded the space and the money and the finances to pay your
676 people to the best of your ability, because there are some really
677 cool folks out there who honestly, even with honoraria’s were
678 just like, “No, don’t worry about it. We’ll just dedicate our time.”
679 Because they just want to give back to the community, which is
680 wonderful and selfless. But they’re also folks who would love to
681 give back to the community, but they’re freelancers or they’re
682 thoroughly underpaid, even in a junior dev position. And so it’s
683 important, if you want to encourage a collection, and a diversity
684 of folks to come in and to be supporting, your organization in
685 your event is to, pay them if you can in the same way to show
686 that they’re also respected and worthy of taking up that space and
687 deserve recompense for their time.

688 **Gina Hara:** 45:44 Yeah, I agree.

689 **Desiree De Jesus:** 45:47 If you want to talk about the manual at all, Gina? The role of the...

690 **Gina Hara:** 45:51 Yeah, let's talk about that. So Desiree and I wrote a manual a few
691 years back of how to organize a gentle Game Jam, or an inclusive
692 Game Jam. We called it an inclusive Game Jam guide. Because
693 I feel like some of my background, as I mentioned is in
694 filmmaking and filmmaking, I think similar to game industry is
695 like a very... There's a lot of knowledge gatekeeping. And I think
696 it's very important to share the knowledge that you gather. And
697 so I think at that point, I have organized 30 plus game jams.
698 Because I have organized many other game jams, not just
699 GAMERella, and I was like, whether I see it or not, I have a lot
700 of knowledge about it. And I want to give this knowledge, put it
701 on paper, in case someone else can use it. So maybe some people
702 will not make the same mistakes that I made. They can skip a few
703 years ahead or in experience. And it's online for free. And I think
704 it still works really well for an offline Game Jam. And we are
705 hoping that maybe with these interviews, and this podcast, we
706 can kind of update that knowledge. Did you want to talk a bit
707 about this Desiree?

708 **Desiree De Jesus:** 47:28 I was just so excited because I was just thinking about how the
709 podcast really builds on much of that desire that you had to share
710 knowledge. I think in that respect, that you bring so much
711 generosity, to your approach to game jam organizing, not just for
712 participants, but for people who want opportunities to give back,
713 who want opportunities to mentor and share their knowledge as
714 well. So I'm really glad to hear how you've connected those two

715 pieces. I think they're excellent avenues for people to grow, and
716 I'm really excited about what's going to come from this podcast.

717 **Gina Hara:** 48:13 Thank you, I hope people listen to it. Because ultimately, we
718 started GAMERella with the hope that we can help people get
719 into the game industry that ultimately down the road will create
720 a more diverse game industry. And if that is truly your goal, then
721 it shouldn't just happen in Montreal, it should happen
722 everywhere in the world. So then I'm so happy to share the
723 knowledge we have gathered from the success of making
724 GAMERella and please, people make game jams around the
725 world. And as you mentioned, there has been a couple of satellite
726 locations. I know people in New York, in Budapest, in France,
727 the couple of countries, and places that organized local people
728 were like, "Oh, we are going to organize the GAMERella, which
729 I'm always happy about." And I think maybe the first manual
730 came from us sending information to the satellite locations. This
731 is how we organize it. But I've always been just like, do your
732 own jam. You can call it whatever you want. Just make a better
733 game industry at the end. What a Freudian slip, make a better
734 film industry. That's my next mission.

735 **Desiree De Jesus:** 49:30 I love that. So could I get a final takeaway from each of you?
736 What is something that you would like people to know about
737 Game Jam organizing?

738 **Gina Hara:** 49:42 I think my final point is, appreciate your community organizers,
739 whether that's Game Jam, or arcade or not even a game event.

740 There are so many people volunteering their times and energy
741 and even if it's a paid position, like so much blood and tear and
742 love and sweat goes into community spaces and those people I
743 feel like need some love and appreciation.

744 **Courtney Blamey:** 50:14 I think my takeaway would be that on the flip side of that is,
745 community organizing is also an incredibly rewarding
746 experience. You just have to take care of yourself during the
747 process of it. There's nothing more fulfilling than closing out an
748 event and having folks come up to you and basically tell you this
749 event was and then insert exactly what you wanted to hear. It's
750 an incredible experience. And it means that you come away from
751 a 48-hour game jam, and two weeks of intense work prior to that,
752 that happens in the background being like, "Okay, we did it,
753 actually. We did, and it was worth the blood, sweat and tears."
754 But it's an incredibly rewarding experience. You just have to
755 make sure you check in with yourself during the process, and
756 don't give yourself over to it entirely mind, body and soul.

757 **Gina Hara:** 51:07 And we did change people's lives, which I always forget, because
758 my head is always so buried in the daily tasks, but it's true. We
759 have dozens of people who made their first game at GAMERella
760 and now are senior positions at triple A game studio, or have their
761 own indie studio. And I guess we did change the game industry
762 a little. Who would have thought?

763 **Desiree De Jesus:** 51:36 You can dream. But it's so wonderful to see that without being
764 too cheesy, but that dream has come true in a certain extent. Now,

765 if I may, I am so curious, both of you have mentioned that, and
766 we can't end our conversation without kind of following through.
767 You've mentioned self-care and checking in with yourself. What
768 does that look like?

769 **Courtney Blamey:** 52:02 It's a very good question. I think myself, I have grappled with
770 this over the last year, for sure. And I really think it's almost... I
771 mean, you say it after kind of having the reflection, and it does
772 sound like stuff people have already said, but it is actually taking
773 time for yourself. Doing things that are selfish, not in ways that
774 impact other people.

775 **Gina Hara:** 52:30 They are not selfish. You just think they are selfish.

776 **Courtney Blamey:** 52:32 You think they're selfish. If you're not inclined to give yourself
777 that space and afford yourself that time and space for just you,
778 that's for me, what self-care looks like. I mean, it's branded, as
779 doing a face mask in the bath and drinking wine. But that's your
780 marketed version. For me, it's like, when we close out this
781 podcast, I'm going to take a walk to a cafe and grab myself a chai
782 latte. So I'm going to get some fresh air. I'm going to get a coffee
783 that I absolutely adore, and has been a very newfound addiction
784 of mine. But it's going to be something that I'm away from a
785 screen, and I'm with myself. And, I think that that's for me a big
786 part of self-care. And recognizing when you need moments like
787 that, when you need to take a step away from things and check in
788 with yourself. I have the massive privilege of having access to
789 therapy. And I know a lot of other folks don't. But I do think that

790 it's one of those things, that checking in with yourself is super
791 important. Because it's very easy to get lost in the proverbial
792 source of the day to day and forget that you are a corporeal body
793 that exists in this world and society, and it needs taken care of in
794 its own different way.

795 **Gina Hara:** 53:44 Absolutely. And it's so important to take care of both mind and
796 the body. I kind of wrecked my back the first online GAMERella
797 because I literally didn't get up from my chair for a whole week.
798 And it's so important, mind and body. And I think structurally
799 also, it's so important in the preparation phases to build in
800 support for yourself. And I think it might seem difficult or even
801 impossible but delegating is so important. Asking for help and
802 delegate and learn how to do it and learn how to teach people
803 how to do things and let them do it.

804 **Desiree De Jesus:** 54:29 And wear comfortable shoes.

805 **Courtney Blamey:** 54:31 Yes. Oh my goodness. Yes.

806 **Gina Hara:** 54:33 For the in-person event, for sure. My motto and I think Courtney
807 has heard me say this many times, is don't take yourself too
808 seriously and don't take your game jam to him too seriously.
809 We're not saving lives. And that is kind of my motto is we're not
810 saving lives. If something doesn't work out, it's okay. If someone
811 leaves, if someone quits, when something falls apart, it's fine.
812 We are not saving lives. So it's going to be okay. And just keep
813 telling this to yourself.

814 **Courtney Blamey:** 55:14 Even if need that a 100 times.

815 **Desiree De Jesus:** 55:16 That sounds like a really hard one lesson. How did you come to
816 that wisdom? That little nugget?

817 **Gina Hara:** 55:25 Oh, it's just after a few panic attacks. Yeah, it's perspective
818 because when you're in it, like, I'm actually not kidding, I had
819 some panic attacks. And it was just like, you lose perspective of
820 how, ultimately, it's just a game jam. We're making games. And
821 of course, game is a very important cultural object of our times,
822 but it's okay. Like, you're not saving lives.

823 **Courtney Blamey:** 55:55 I think it helps take the pressure off, really, doesn't it? And it also
824 reminds you to have fun in the process, too with the participants.

825 **Courtney Blamey:** 56:02 Yeah. Exactly. And they'll be grateful.

826 **Desiree De Jesus:** 56:06 Well, Gina, and Courtney, this has been an absolute pleasure
827 talking with you about GAMERella. And learning about how to
828 support people as whole people. Now, how can people find you
829 and support GAMERella?

830 **Gina Hara:** 56:23 I have the usual social media things. You can type in my name
831 Gina Hara. And as we mentioned, I'm a filmmaker. I invite
832 everyone to watch my film Geek Girls. You can probably find it
833 in your local library or school. And if you liked it, send me a
834 message.

835 **Courtney Blamey:** 56:43 Same for me. I'm mostly on Twitter. It's just my name, it's
836 @courtneyblamey. I've actually just recently made developed
837 and published a game with a research team, and called it comes
838 in waves. And it is focused on the experience of frontline workers
839 in the pandemic. It came out from a class and games or social

840 class and games project, where we're trying to have the difficult
841 conversation about the representation of social class in video
842 games and game spaces. So please go look, and go play it. It's
843 been a labor of love over two years. And we're trying to set up
844 some really important conversations as a result of it. a

845 **Courtney Blamey:** 57:24 And how people can support GAMERella? I guess, spread the
846 word. How can people support GAMERella, Courtney?

847 **Courtney Blamey:** 57:31 I mean, if you want to run your own. Like we said, it doesn't have
848 to be hashtag GAMERella. If you want to do one that's your own,
849 with your own naming on it, don't hesitate to reach out to either
850 of us. We're more than happy to share resources and have
851 conversations. In the same way that doing your first game jam is
852 probably supremely daunting as a participant, running your first
853 Game Jam is probably extremely scary. And I got to do it with
854 the amazing support of Gina and other fellow peers. So it wasn't
855 as scary a process. There was built-in awareness, but trying to do
856 it from scratch is probably a lot. So don't hesitate to reach out
857 and ask us the questions you think might be silly, and we've
858 probably asked ourselves at least a 100 times.

859 **Gina Hara:** 58:16 Yup, well said.

860 **Courtney Blamey:** 58:17 And follow us on Twitter.

861 **Gina Hara:** 58:20 Well, we do have. We have Instagram now too.

862 **Gina Hara:** 58:23 Yes, we do have an Instagram.

863 **Gina Hara:** 58:24 Yeah. GAMERella Game Jam. I think it's called.

864 **Gina Hara:** 58:27 I believe so. Yeah.

865 **Gina Hara:** 58:28 And please share the podcast. Tell your friends about the podcast.

866 **Desiree De Jesus:** 58:35 Well, thanks so much for joining us today. And we'll check you
867 out online.

868 **Courtney Blamey:** 58:40 Thank you.

869 **Gina Hara:** 58:41 Thanks, Desiree.

870 **Outro:** 58:42 *So that concludes my conversation with GAMERella Game Jam*
871 *co-founder Gina Hara, and GAMERella co-organizer Courtney*
872 *Blamey. We talked about the importance of inclusive space*
873 *making and shared insights into how game jams and workshop*
874 *series can foster community and eliminate impostor syndrome. I*
875 *hope that you are inspired by their practical tips. We'll be back*
876 *next week with a very special episode. Thanks so much for*
877 *listening.*