



MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Digital media design student Joyce Dijamco (left) and her sister Jana Dijamco take part in Winnipeg Game Jam on Friday. The event drew students, video game creation hobbyists and businesses from the city's burgeoning technology sector.

Hundreds participate in biggest ever Winnipeg Game Jam

Game on!

GABRIELLE PICHE

JUSTIN Chommany poured over his drawings.

Beside him, fellow Kildonan-East Collegiate students tinkered with plans to transform the sketches into a video game.

"Our working title right now is Canadian Simulator," Chommany, 17, said Friday.

His team's vision was to place a "socially awkward guy" as the game's lead. Players would go about day-to-day life as the man, waving at people they encounter.

"You have to wave... or else you die," Chommany said. "We'll just put this poor man in increasingly more difficult situations."

Chommany was nervous. He and his team had the weekend to build a video game. They were among at least 200 people to participate in the biggest ever Winnipeg Game Jam. It was the

event's first in-person session since the pandemic began.

The weekend event drew students, video game creation hobbyists and businesses from the city's burgeoning technology sector.

"I'd love to see talent... stay in Winnipeg, whether it's starting their own studio or contributing to an existing studio that might be hiring," said Daniel Voth, Winnipeg Game Jam's co-organizer.

Canadian video game hubs like Vancouver and Montreal often draw Manitobans, he said.

Connecting business to local developers, and fostering community, will ideally keep skilled video game creators in Winnipeg, Voth added.

"I think a lot of people maybe aren't immediately aware that there is a community," he said.

But there is one, and it's growing, he added.

Winnipeg Game Jam hit maximum capacity for in-person attendees — there was limited space in Manitou a bi Bii daziigae, Red River College Polytechnic's innovation centre, where

the event was held.

Speakers from global and local gaming companies headed to the school to address pursuing a career in video games and avoiding burnout, among other things.

Complex Games was one of the event's partners. It's a Winnipeg-based game development studio that England-based Frontier Developments acquired last November. It's hiring game designers, among other roles.

Ubisoft — which opened in Winnipeg in 2019 and announced it would add 200 jobs by 2030 — was at the event.

New Media Manitoba, another event partner, attended. It's the sector council for the province's interactive digital media industry, which includes video games.

The industry generated around \$186.9 million in GDP in 2016, up from \$39 million in 2012, according to New Media Manitoba's latest statistics.

In 2016, the interactive digital media industry had around 3,230 full-time equivalent workers in Manitoba.

"I'm sure now... coming out of the

pandemic, where it's been booming, (that number) is going to be like four, five (times higher)," said Jonathan Le, a training manager with New Media Manitoba.

The sector council hopes to expand the industry.

"To do that, we need a talented and skilled workforce, and game jams are a great way to develop those types of people," Le said.

Creating a pipeline for talent — from schooling to landing a job — is necessary, Le added.

Liang Sun brought his Kildonan-East Collegiate interactive digital media students to Manitou a bi Bii daziigae Friday.

The classes are always full — 20 students in Grade 11 and 12 each, he said.

"I wanted to (give them) a taste of the possibilities that they could go into," Sun said. "It's much closer than they think. The industry is really booming in Winnipeg... and I have a lot of confidence it's only going to get bigger."

His students sat on the campus of Red River College Polytechnic's game

development program.

Manitoba has an interactive digital media tax credit; eligible businesses receive an up to 40 per cent credit on labour costs and marketing.

Jehan Moorthy sat near students Friday, ready to give tips and suggestions — and remind people about e-sports, the main focus of New Frontier Esports and Entertainment, the company he co-founded.

Moorthy was also looking to meet Manitobans ready to break into the gaming world. New Frontiers is expanding.

"I really foresee that perhaps in five to 10 years, there'll be far more game development studios here," Moorthy said.

About 67 companies were part of Manitoba's interactive digital media sphere in 2016, according to New Media Manitoba.

Games produced during Winnipeg Game Jam are on indie gaming platform itch.io for free.

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Mining company set to invest \$176M in new concentrator

MARTIN CASH

THE owners of the only producing lithium mine in the country are preparing to invest \$176 million to build a new concentrator in Manitoba, which may be a precursor to an even larger investment in the province.

Tantalum Mining Corp. of Canada Ltd., which owns the lithium Tanco Mine near Lac du Bonnet, has already begun preliminary work on the site and is in discussions with neighbouring Sagkeeng First Nation.

Consultants are preparing the information needed to apply for permits.

The new processor will be able to handle 3,000 tonnes of ore per day as opposed to its current capacity of 500 tonnes per day.

Bill Curry, vice-president of North American business for Tantalum, said the additional capacity that will become available will initially be deployed to reprocess the mine's tailings to extract lithium and cesium.

"We currently have over 60 years worth of tailings," he said. "We know

there is recoverable amounts of lithium and cesium in the out tailings."

The mine was acquired by Sinomine Resources Group Co., Ltd., a Chinese-owned company listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, in 2019.

Last November, the federal government announced a new policy that it would not allow state-owned enterprises to own critical minerals in Canada. Lithium is one such critical mineral.

While the parent company has approved the capital expense, Curry said he understands he will still need to negotiate his way around the federal government's policy.

The federal government has already ordered Sinomine to sell its five per cent stake in Vancouver-based Power Metals.

"We understand it is just one additional hoop we need to go through to be able to build this plant," he said. "But we want to build it. It is a good idea."

For many years it was concentrated on mining tantalum, but with the increased demand for lithium — used in batteries that are now in desperate

demand for the electric vehicle market — the company recently refocused its efforts on lithium production at the Tanco mine.

But even with its increased focus on lithium and the work it can do on its tailings, the additional capacity will mean Tanco will have to somehow find additional tonnage to satisfy the additional capacity.

Curry said one way to do that will be to find outsourced feed.

The company already has a memorandum of understanding with Grid Metals Corp., a lithium exploration company that has been aggressively drilling a property that's only about 35 kilometres away from Tanco's site.

"Grid is getting to the point where they are going to want to do a bulk sample," Curry said. "And lithium mines and exploration operations in Ontario will want to talk to us for multiple reasons. We have the technical expertise."

Robin Dunbar, CEO of Toronto-based Grid Metals, said, "We have been in discussions with them about supplying

ore to their operation. If they have more capacity that would probably increase the chances of that happening, so that is probably good."

He said Grid is in the process of applying for an advanced exploration permit, which they need to do to get a bulk sample done.

"Before that we will do some testing with Tanco on a much smaller scale," he said.

Tanco and Sinomine are also thinking about the possibility of investing in a much larger lithium hydroxide plant, which would process the lithium into a state that the battery manufacturers need.

That would require about a \$1-billion investment.

Snow Lake Lithium, a lithium exploration company with a promising lithium property near Snow Lake, has signed a memorandum of understanding with LG Energy Solutions, a large Korean battery manufacturer, to investigate the possibility of building a lithium hydroxide plant in Manitoba. But Snow Lake Lithium is now under

new management and that plan may no longer be in place.

Dale Schultz, the company's vice-president of resource development and a member of the board, said that company is now talking to both Tanco and LG.

Regardless of how technically appropriate a new processing plant at Tanco's mine may be, the company is going to have to navigate its way through national security concerns.

An official with the provincial government, who spoke on condition that his name not be used, said the province takes the federal government's concerns about state-owned entities owning critical minerals in Canada.

"There is a lot of concern around this," he said. "We always welcome the foreign direct investment, but out of national interest this is a concern."

He also said there are other proponents looking at developing a lithium hydroxide plant in the province.

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