

Running Cambridge Battlecode

How we ran a programming competition from scratch



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Last December, Oli sent a message in the CUCATS Discord server to gauge interest in something like Battlecode — an international programming competition where teams write bots that battle on an elo ladder — but run locally in Cambridge. Excited by the prospect, I reached out. We hopped on a Discord call, and he showed me a Google Doc he'd written when he was 14 containing a bunch of science facts about Titan (the moon of Saturn).



oli CMBC 13/12/2025, 14:09

i really wanna run <https://battlecode.org/> but for cambridge, would people be interested? <https://screeeps.com/> kinda vibe, writing a bot over lent + live elo ladder, then ladder scores become hidden last week with in-person CL finals end of lent?

Then... we did nothing for a while.

Oli and I got the Cambridge Union as a venue and secured Jump Trading as sponsor and then mostly forgot about it.

Later I found out that one of my friends, Andy, had won MIT Battlecode at the end of January. He taught me the techniques his team used to win, and described the limitations of their game. We spent several evenings brainstorming game ideas and discussing balance.

The two-week sprint

Two weeks before launch, we started programming. I realised we desperately needed more people, so I recruited a bunch of my friends.

For the few nights before launch, we were up until 5am in a Discord call. Two days before launch we were still drowning in bugs.

Somehow, 200 people showed up to the launch event. I read out a lore piece, we described the game, then we launched the platform. Oli and Andy sat there fixing bugs in real time as I handed out food.

I hosted a sprint stream from 5 different cities: Cambridge, Boston, New York, London, and Derby, my hometown. I even managed to get a bunch of the MIT Battlecode devs on stream.

For the first week the best strategy was to spam builder bots that ran towards the opponent's core and blew themselves up. We had some games last over ten minutes. We fixed that, and then realised that we'd forgotten to update the scaling on bridges, leading to bridge spam. Eventually we managed to get the balance to a reasonable place.

The finals

A few weeks before the finals, 60 giant boxes of merch arrived at my accommodation and sat stacked precariously to the ceiling of my room until finals.



We hosted the finalists in Cambridge for a few days. We took them sightseeing and punting; I ran a game of Blood on the Clocktower and also a few board games evenings in the hotel lobby.

One night, a group of us ended up at a random playground in Eddington. Another night, one of the finalists said he was hungry at 2am, and so we walked with him to a random petrol station and ate crisps outside it, while teaching him British slang. Someone climbed a bridge.

On finals day, we woke up at 6am, loaded the boxes onto a van and started preparing the venue. People started flooding in from 10am.

A few things nearly went wrong. The dinner venue and hotel wanted final details two weeks out, but I couldn't do that until UK qualifiers were over. We did seeding wrong for grand finals and had to redo it at 5am. And two hours before the finalists dinner, I realised we were short on seats. I called the venue, and thankfully they picked up.

What we'll change

We chose Python for accessibility reasons; this was a mistake. Python is the bane of our existence.

python is genuinely made by schizophrenics



olifog committed on Apr 13 · ✓ 10 / 11

Next year we'll use WASM with Fuel for counting, which theoretically lets people use any language.

We had a ton of Python sandboxing issues, mostly to do with code exfiltration. Our approach was to use Python subinterpreters instead of separate processes. People found all sorts of crazy Python exploits (for example, modifying properties of the global controller class to do inter-unit communication). This caused a lot of security headaches.

Other things on the list: more juice (screen shake, particles, small bits of feedback that make it feel like a real game), a tutorial that gets new players to a submittable bot, a better tournament viewer, and more creative marketing (we have lots of ideas :D).

Final thoughts

Running Cambridge Battlecode was one of the most memorable things I've done at university. Fixing bugs late at night with the other devs.

Merch boxes stacked to the ceiling. Eating crisps outside a petrol station at 2am with a bunch of strangers.

We've already started coming up with game ideas for next year. Hopefully, I'll see you there!