



**iGGi CONFERENCE 2026**

**15 – 17 SEPTEMBER**



## iGGi

The EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training  
in Intelligent Games and Game Intelligence

[www.iggi-phd.org](http://www.iggi-phd.org)  
@iggi-phd

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## WHAT IS iGGi?

The EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) in Intelligent Games and Game Intelligence (iGGi) was granted £25 million from research councils and partners to train 120 PhDs working in games research. After two funding rounds, now in its 13th year, iGGi has funnelled research talent into one of the UK's most successful industries and has been instrumental in transforming the way the games industry works with the academic community.

iGGi is a collaboration between the University of York, and Queen Mary University of London (University of Essex and Goldsmiths, University of London were also partners during the first funding round), as well as more than 80 games industry partners including most of the large UK and international game developers, UK games industry associations, and many smaller games studios across the UK.

iGGi enables industry partners to access and influence research, associated with games, in analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), audio, computational creativity, design, engagement, gamification, human-computer interaction (HCI), psychology, and software development. iGGi postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are working with game studios, startups, tech companies, and relevant organisations, including Creative Assembly, Draeus Group/GMD Online, Gritstone Games, Google DeepMind, Microsoft Research, PlaytestCloud, Square Enix, Sony IE, and many others to research new ideas for game creation and for understanding players. We also work closely with games sector organisations such as Ukie, Game Republic, BiG, SafeInOurWorld and WiG, allowing us to reach a broad range of games companies, in an industry where many innovations emerge from smaller organisations.

## ABOUT BiGGi CON 2026

BiGGi Con is the 2026 version of our annual iGGi Conference, an established showcase of all iGGi PhD Researchers, allowing a birds-eye view into their work, and a chance to bring academic research, innovation and the games industry together.

Through talks, workshops, and panels from researchers, academics and industry members, the conference provides a space for industry and academia to come together to discuss the latest developments, directions and opportunities in games research.

This year's iGGi Con is a special celebration of all things iGGi, past and present: **BiGGi Con 2026**.

While there will be other iGGi events – for two or three more years – none will approach the size and scope of BiGGi Con 2026.

A specific focus is given to the ever-growing body of iGGi Alumni – you can see this reflected in this programme brochure (see the new “iGGi Stories” section). As we are looking back upon 12 years of iGGi, its achievements, and all its individual journeys, we invite all of those who were ever involved in iGGi and/or those who wish to celebrate with us to come along to this grand spectacle! It's going to be fun!

## A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR AND CHAIR

It's been quite a journey. Together, we managed to move games research into the mainstream of UK research council funding. Some highlights:

**2005:** The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) sponsored a conference in Computational Intelligence in Games at the University of Essex.

**2007:** The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) found space in their portfolio for "an Industry/Academia Research Network on AI and Games Technologies". No mean achievement in competition with the physicists, chemists, mathematicians and engineers that usually won EPSRC's funding. Several of the industry people funded on that grant remain iGGi friends and advisers.

**2010:** EPSRC funded a large grant to investigate Monte Carlo Tree Search in games. It had been difficult to win over the referees that made the funding decision, but a couple of weeks before we had to respond to their comments, the world champion in the game of "Go", Lee Sedol, had been beaten, somewhat unexpectedly, by an AI player that combined machine learning and Monte Carlo Tree Search!

**2014:** IGGI1 is funded – bringing together the Universities of York and Essex, Goldsmiths, University of London and 80 partners from the games industry. Millions of pounds in funding for 60 PhD researchers working in topics relevant to the games industry. Games research has hit the mainstream!

**2019:** IGGI2 is funded – bringing together the University of York and Queen Mary University of London, and 80 more partners. Millions of pounds in funding for 60 more PhD researchers to work on topics relevant to the UK games industry.

**2023:** iGGi recruits a final, large cohort of PhD researchers.

**2026: BiGGi Con!**

## WELCOME TO BiGGi CON!

Many of the academics and industry partners who were there in the early 2000s remain a big part of iGGi now. The PhD researchers and new academics and partners keep iGGi vibrant, fresh and relevant. We have built something big, and long-lasting. Together. Thank you for your role in making iGGi a huge success!

We'll be telling you more of the story of the origins, the people and the projects of iGGi in the coming months. More soon...

*Welcome, iGGi friends!*

**Professor Peter Cowling**  
(Queen Mary University of London)

**Professor Paul Cairns**  
(University of York)

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

iGGi is excited to be working with a wide range of partners from Industry and Academia to facilitate Knowledge Exchange. These collaborations take shape in multiple ways. Forms of Knowledge Exchange we particularly welcome and focus on at this stage of our CDT's life are listed below:

**iGGi Networking:** the idea is that PG Researchers (PGRs) and Industry Members get an opportunity for informal 1-2-1 conversation, for either general chat, Knowledge Exchange, finding placement matches, or post-PhD positions.

**iGGi Placements:** during their time at iGGi, each PhD Researcher will spend a minimum of 8 weeks (but typically around 3-6 months) on placement. Companies who have engaged iGGi PGRs for this type of Knowledge Exchange include big players such as Google DeepMind, Microsoft, and Sony, and a large number of smaller games companies.

**iGGi Seminars/Workshops:** iGGi seminars and workshops are held in regular intervals around the year in various formats (i.e. online, in person, hybrid). These include talks by invited guest speakers from industry or academia; workshops organised by either our researchers/supervisors or one of our partners; panels with up to four contributors; demos on a specific technical topic or developed game; hackathons on a problem defined by an Industry Partner; and masterclasses.

**Post-doc Positions:** with around 10 iGGi PGRs each year completing their doctorate, we have a range of qualified candidates for post-doc positions which an iGGi Partner wishes to advertise; in some cases, we can even put the partner in touch with a potentially matching candidate.

**Sponsorship of Events:** Industry Partners can sponsor either a whole iGGi event or an element thereof, in turn for a customised return (e.g., marketing). iGGi can provide further info on request.

**Industry days:** Half- or full-day sessions with our PGRs, for example at mini-conferences, networking events, workshops, design jams or hackathons around particular themes of your interest, hosted at one of our sites or on your premises.

**Coaching and mentoring:** Even something as minimal as occasional emails is a great way to build relationships with iGGi PGRs and to share your valuable knowledge and experience.

**Access to your data, software or facilities:** Access to game data may be essential to the research of certain iGGi PhD projects, while our analyses can provide deep insight into your players and design challenges. Access to industry software also means our research is exposed to the acid test of industry work environments – and its results are far easier to integrate for you. And while universities have excellent resources, there is always equipment to which we would like to have access.

**PGR offers:** Introduce PGRs to your organisation or products through discounted memberships or subscriptions during their PhD.

### INTERESTED?

We always welcome new partners. If you are interested, please contact Susanne Binder, the iGGi Manager for External Relationships by emailing [iggi-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:iggi-admin@york.ac.uk)

## THE iGGi MANAGEMENT TEAM

**Professor Paul Cairns**, iGGi Chair (UoY)  
**Professor Peter Cowling**, iGGi Director (QMUL)  
**David Hull**, iGGi Manager (UoY)  
**Susanne Binder**, iGGi Manager (QMUL)  
**Dr Jeremy Gow**, iGGi Training Coordinator and iGGi Industry Liaison (QMUL)  
**Dr Ben Kirman**, iGGi Training Coordinator (UoY)  
**Dr James Walker**, iGGi Industry Liaison (UoY)  
**Dr Laurissa Tokarchuk**, iGGi Research Collaboration Coordinator (QMUL)  
**Dr Debbie Maxwell**, iGGi Research Collaboration Coordinator (UoY)  
**Dr James Goodman**, iGGi Outreach Coordinator (iGGi)  
**Professor Simon Lucas**, iGGi Co-Investigator (QMUL)  
**Professor Simon Colton**, iGGi Co-Investigator (QMUL)  
**Helen Tilbrook**, iGGi Administrator (UoY)  
**Oliver Roughton**, iGGi Administrator (UoY)  
**Shopna Begum**, iGGi Administrator (QMUL)  
**Professor William Latham**, iGGi Co-Investigator (Goldsmiths)  
**Professor Sebastian Deterding**, iGGi Co-Investigator (Imperial)  
**Professor Catherine Flick**, iGGi Responsible Innovation Lead (Staffordshire)  
**Nicole Levermore**, iGGi Alumni Network Contact (iGGi)

## iGGi PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS

|                                                                                  |                                              |                             |                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Able Gamers</b>                                                               | <b>Discord</b>                               | <b>Keywords Studios</b>     | <b>Samsung Research UK</b>            |
| <b>Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, University of Sheffield</b>           | <b>Dock 10</b>                               | <b>King</b>                 | <b>SightlessKombat</b>                |
| <b>Aerogility</b>                                                                | <b>Draeus Group / GMD Online</b>             | <b>Kingbee</b>              | <b>Sony Interactive Entertainment</b> |
| <b>AI and Games</b>                                                              | <b>Earcom</b>                                | <b>Laika</b>                | <b>Splash Damage</b>                  |
| <b>AI Factory</b>                                                                | <b>ESL</b>                                   | <b>Larian Studios</b>       | <b>Square Enix</b>                    |
| <b>Amazon Science</b>                                                            | <b>Failbetter Games</b>                      | <b>Lumirithmic</b>          | <b>Sumo Digital</b>                   |
| <b>BiG – BAME in Games</b>                                                       | <b>Filomedia</b>                             | <b>Meaning Machine</b>      | <b>Tabletop R&amp;D</b>               |
| <b>BOLDPRINT Studios</b>                                                         | <b>Fusebox Games</b>                         | <b>Microsoft Research</b>   | <b>Teach First</b>                    |
| <b>Center for Digital Narrative, University of Bergen</b>                        | <b>Game Republic</b>                         | <b>modl.ai</b>              | <b>Teknopilot</b>                     |
| <b>Centre of the Cell, Barts / The London School of Medicine &amp; Dentistry</b> | <b>Goodfire</b>                              | <b>Naren &amp; Benedict</b> | <b>The Chinese Room</b>               |
| <b>Channel 4</b>                                                                 | <b>Google Research</b>                       | <b>NATS</b>                 | <b>The Lord of the Games</b>          |
| <b>Creative Assembly</b>                                                         | <b>Gritstone Games</b>                       | <b>Nemisindo</b>            | <b>TIGA</b>                           |
| <b>DeepMind</b>                                                                  | <b>Horniman Museum &amp; Gardens, London</b> | <b>Neurocracy</b>           | <b>Ukie</b>                           |
|                                                                                  | <b>Ice Drop Games</b>                        | <b>Player Research</b>      | <b>Unity Technologies</b>             |
|                                                                                  | <b>Inhalation</b>                            | <b>Playtest Cloud</b>       | <b>Unusual Technologies</b>           |
|                                                                                  | <b>InstaDeep Ltd</b>                         | <b>Rain Games</b>           | <b>weavr.tv</b>                       |
|                                                                                  | <b>Into Games</b>                            | <b>Rebellion</b>            | <b>Women in Games</b>                 |
|                                                                                  | <b>ITU Copenhagen</b>                        | <b>Revolution Software</b>  | <b>Worldly Counsel</b>                |
|                                                                                  |                                              | <b>Rewind</b>               |                                       |
|                                                                                  |                                              | <b>Safe In Our World</b>    |                                       |

iGGi RESEARCHERS



## ALEX FLINT

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**Skills:**

Games User Research,  
Research Operations,  
Player Experience

Alex has an academic background in Psychology and Human-Computer Interaction. Their Master's dissertation comparing measures of perceived challenge and demand in video games was published at CHI 2023. Alex has previously worked on the Research Operations team at PlaytestCloud and as a freelance Games User Researcher. They are also a Student Video Games Ambassador for UKIE, and regularly volunteer at conferences such as CHI PLAY and the GamesUR Summit. When they aren't at their desk, you can find Alex birdwatching or playing roller derby.

## LEVELLING UP THE NARRATIVE TESTING PRACTICES OF INDIE VIDEO GAME DEVELOPERS

Alex's research focuses on levelling up the narrative testing practices of indie video game developers. Narrative testing is a specialised games user research (GUR) practice that requires resources and knowledge not easily accessible to indie developers, meaning they are often disadvantaged compared to their larger AAA counterparts. Thus, Alex's work proposes the direct study of indie developers to level the playing field by democratising narrative testing best practices and empowering non-research team members to conduct GUR activities. The successful completion of this work will impact how indie studios conduct narrative testing, ultimately leading to the creation of better games.



## AMY SMITH

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**Skills:**

User research, prompt  
engineering, text-to-image  
generative deep learning,  
computational creativity

Amy's research is currently focused on the intersection between HCI, text-to-image generative deep learning and computational creativity. This project explores whether the novel media produced by generative deep learning can be used to provoke and stimulate the imaginative/ideation/visualisation capabilities of the user – exploring how we can meaningfully discuss user prompting chains (sent to AI over time) to gain a deeper understanding of how users are interacting with generative AI technologies. To date, her work has been accepted to several conferences, including: Science, CHI, AAAI, SIGGRAPH Asia and ICCV.

## CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH GENERATIVE AI: A MIXED METHODS ANALYSIS OF TEXT-TO-IMAGE PROMPTING DATA

This project makes a contribution to the study of generative AI by examining how users interact with Text-to-Image and Large Language Model systems across creative, practical, and philosophical dimensions. Through a combination of mix-method analyses, from a pilot study to large-scale prompting datasets – to user interview data and theoretical inquiry grounded in existing philosophical frameworks around meaning-making, the work identifies three core prompting strategies and provides evidence that they recur across both controlled and open-ended settings.

See Amy's publications list: [tinyurl.com/mypublicationlist](https://tinyurl.com/mypublicationlist)

**BOBBY KHALEQUE**

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**Skills:**  
Procedural content  
generation, Data Science,  
Data Engineering,  
Game design

Bobby is a final year researcher at Queen Mary, currently writing up his PhD and working full time as a Systems Engineer at Leonardo. His research interests include computational creativity and using AI agents as design tools. Bobby has extensive experience in Unity Game development and data analysis.

**USING EXPLORATORY AGENTS TO EVALUATE GAME ENVIRONMENTS**

Bobby's research primarily centers on AI-assisted environment design for exploratory experiences, such as those found in Proteus and No Man's Sky. His PhD research explores how AI can be used to create dynamic and immersive game environments, for exploration, providing unique and engaging experiences. His research also delves into how AI agents can be designed to model player motivation and engagement for an exploration standpoint. This research contributes to the understanding of how AI can be leveraged to create more interactive and responsive gaming environments.

**CAM JOHNSTON**

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**Skills:**  
C++, Python, Unreal Engine,  
physics simulation

Cam holds an MPhys in Theoretical Physics from the University of Edinburgh, wherein he combined infectious disease models with fluid dynamics to examine the validity of wastewater-based epidemiology as a method of passively monitoring the prevalence of COVID-19 in an urban population. Cam joined iGGi in 2023 to explore the relationship between video games and physics.

**IMPOSSIBLE PHYSICS**

The virtual worlds of video games naturally invite a chance to play with the laws of physics. While games regularly tweak their physics, the goal is often to create a simulation of a world that feels realistic and familiar to players. This research seeks to do the opposite: to create virtual worlds that accurately simulate laws of physics unlike our own.



## DAN COOKE

University of York

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### Skills:

Data Science, Finance,  
Criminology

I have a keen interest in the world of finance and regulation and controls for prevention of crime in video games and wider financial marketplaces. I am interested in how criminals seek to exploit systems to transfer and disguise proceeds of crime or for the use of further crime. I have a background in accounting and finance and graduated with a MA in Applied Accounting from De Montfort University in 2019.

Outside of my professional interests I play MMO's daily and am involved in the community for Old School Runescape and Runescape. My research interests include money laundering, secondary marketplaces in video games and user experience.

## DETECTING AND PREVENTING MONEY LAUNDERING IN VIDEO GAME MARKETPLACES

The focus of my research is on detecting money laundering in video games using outlier detection methods to assess the risk of outliers relative to the data population. I aim to have identified money laundering risk and scale within the steam marketplace data i am working with and identify whether certain games or items have higher risk of being exploited for the purpose of money laundering purposes.

My current research is looking at using anomaly scores (how severe of an outlier a data point is) to assess the risk of laundering within certain groups using a multi level grouping analysis. This aims to assess different risk levels per item and game and challenge the assumption that the whole marketplace behaves the same and identify risk variance between groups.



## DIEN NGUYEN

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### Skills:

ML, Game AI, Unity

I graduated from the University of California, Irvine with a BSc in Computer Game Science where I became interested in the intersection of games and artificial intelligence – applying search, planning, evolutionary methods and knowledge representation to game playing and game design. My long-term goal is to work on the problem of formalizing game elements, representing game systems in a way that allows for automatic reasoning and inference. I also enjoy playing games where I can customize and theorycraft my playstyle to satisfy certain gameplay fantasies while beating the game.

## EFFICIENT AUTOMATED PLAYTESTING OF TABLETOP GAMES

The current strategy of automated playtesting is to play out the full game in thousands of iterations, which can be impractical for complex games with large state space and computationally expensive forward models. My research will focus on applying Go-Explore – a recent exploration paradigm that outperforms many state-of-the-arts – to improve the efficiency of automated playtesting of tabletop games by using an archive of interesting game states to reduce the time needed for self-play. The research will be primarily conducted within the TAG framework and aim to be game-agnostic. On successful completion, this research will improve game development cycles, resulting in higher-quality games, and potentially give unique insights into the game design process.



## DIMITRIS MENEXOPOULOS

**Queen Mary University of London**

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Dr Tom Collins

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**Skills:** Music Composition, Sound Design, Procedural Audio, Sonification, Audio Programming

Dimitris Menexopoulos, also known as Menex, is a versatile music composer, sound designer, audio technologist and multi-instrumentalist from Thessaloniki, Greece, currently based in London, UK. With an academic background in geoscience, electronic production and information experience design, he draws elements from a broad knowledge base across art, science and technology to inform his work. He has worked in film, games, XR, branding, fashion and the automotive sector for more than ten years. He is a full BAFTA member.

## EXPLOITING GAME GRAPHICS RENDERING FOR SOUND GENERATION

Procedural content generation supports the creation of rich and varied games, but audio design has not kept pace with such innovation. Often the visual aspects of every asset in the scene may be procedurally rendered, yet audio developers still largely rely on pre – recorded samples in order to carry out their tasks. However, much of the information required to determine smooth audio – visual interactions is already included in the game assets. For example, the size, shape, material and movement of assets offer potential types of data that can drive audio algorithms directly. This research explores how available graphics information in the game engine can be used to generate the sound effects produced when objects interact in real – time, by combining the affordances of procedural audio and sonification.



## DOMINIK JEURISSEN

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### Skills:

Game AI, Large Language Models, Reinforcement Learning, Imitation Learning

Dominik holds an MSc in Artificial Intelligence from Maastricht University and a BSc in Computer Science with a focus on Applied Mathematics from RWTH Aachen. During his undergraduate studies, he worked for 3 years as a software engineer at INFORM GmbH, contributing to their supply management software, add\*ONE. His long-term goal is to develop fully autonomous agents that can act in complex environments while continually improving themselves. As a result, he is familiar with many related fields, including reinforcement learning, continual learning, large language models (LLMs), and imitation learning.

## ZERO-SHOT LLM AGENTS IN COMPLEX STRATEGY GAMES

My PhD is a collaboration with Creative Assembly, focusing on researching AI for complex strategy games, such as Total War. With the recent rise of Large Language Models (LLMs), I'm exploring their potential to enhance game-playing agents. LLMs can instantly recall knowledge on almost any topic, perform basic reasoning, and are easily configured for a wide range of text-based tasks. These abilities make them especially promising for game development, where machine learning agents often struggle due to constantly changing game environments. During an internship at Creative Assembly, I worked together with the Creative Assembly's R&D team and NVIDIA to develop a prototype for an Onboarding Assistant that aims to help players when they are stuck in the game. My current research aims to improve the assistant by exploring systems for retrieving dynamic gamestate information.



## DORUK BALCI

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Dr Ben Kirman

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### Skills:

Game Design and  
Development, User Research

I am a game maker interested in the relationship between player creativity and game design. My work is centered around the transformative capabilities of players to invent their own metagames and play-practices, and how to support this through game design. My other interests include: drawing, literature, making zines and browser games, and playing with tools I don't really understand.

## DESIGNING FOR APPROPRIATIVE PLAY

How do we make games which we want to be messed with, changed fundamentally beyond our expectations in play? How do we make up rules that are intended to be bent, changed or broken? Why would we want that? Play practices that transform structures, subvert expectations and re-define their contexts are celebrated in many aspects of culture and can lead to personal and meaningful experiences. Yet research on this topic from a game design perspective has been scarce. In my project, I am exploring how we can design game systems that invite players to assume ownership of their play-practices through exploring alternative paradigms of game design.



## ERIN ROBINSON

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### Skills:

Installation Design,  
New Media Art, Immersive  
Experiences

Erin is a multimedia artist, experimental musician and PhD Researcher from London. Her work primarily involves the design of interactive installations, where she takes a participatory approach to evolving visual-scapes, but also takes form in fixed media, sound art, free improvisation, live visuals and immersive experiences. Her work critically engages with the concepts of posthumanism and postmodernism, exploring notions of authenticity and existence in the digital anthropocene by blurring lines between organic and non-organic entities, reality and virtuality, self and otherness.

## PARTICIPANT CONTRIBUTIONS OF AESTHETIC AND SEMIOTIC MATERIALS IN PARTICIPATORY NEW MEDIA ART

Erin's research adopts a practice-based approach to exploring participant-contributed materials, a technique positioned at the intersection of participatory and new media arts. This interactive technique enables participants to contribute aesthetic and semiotic materials to new media artworks through open forms of interaction (text input, drawing, video feed, etc). While traditional interactive media often impose restrictive computational frameworks, participatory practices (often conducted in person) allow participants greater freedom, resulting in deeper engagement and more diverse, unexpected outcomes that reflect the audience's perspectives and behaviours. Erin investigates to which extent and how using the strengths of participatory practices, digital artworks can achieve a richer and more personalised form of interaction, a more meaningful engagement with audiences.



## FILIP SROKA

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### Skills:

Game AI, DDA,  
PCG, VR

Filip is a Computer Science researcher specialising in Game AI. He acquired an Integrated Masters in Computer Science from Queen Mary University of London and is pursuing a PhD in Game AI with iGGi. An avid LEGO collector and investor, Filip brings a unique blend of technical and creative abilities to his work. He is excited about the potential of the Metaverse and is driven by the role of technology in shaping its future.

## ENHANCING SKILL ACQUISITION IN VR RHYTHM GAMES: LEVERAGING DDA FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING MAP GENERATION

His research explores the integration of Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment (DDA) and Procedural Content Generation (PCG) into VR rhythm games to optimise motor learning and skill acquisition. By leveraging learning theories, the project creates personalised, adaptive training environments. Beyond commercial gaming, this framework demonstrates how adaptive systems can be used to maximise engagement and training efficiency, offering high-value insights for game developers, immersive tech creators, and the digital health and fitness industry.



## FRANCESCA FOFFANO

**University of York**

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### Skills:

UX Research, HCI, Qualitative Research, Mix Method, Design

Francesca is finalising her PhD at the University of York, specialising in UX, player experience and design. Their work spans game experience (e.g. getting stuck), safeguarding the design's impact on players (e.g. emotional accessibility), design recommendations (e.g. emotional design) and game development (e.g. adaptive games). They primarily use qualitative research and mixed methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the player experience. They are currently open to collaborations with industry and academia for funding applications.

## EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE DESIGN: DO AND DON'T

When it comes to emotions in video games, players should feel like they are enthusiastically part of the experience. However, at times, players risk feeling forced or overwhelmed. So, how to design these experiences correctly? Through a dual approach, I explore how to design emotional experiences at their extremes. On the one hand, I examine which design components create recognisable emotional experiences. On the other hand, I examine how design can overwhelm players to the point where they struggle to finish a game, as the design makes it impossible for them to process the emotions presented.



## GEORGE LONG

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of London

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### Skills:

AI Game Balancing and  
Theorycrafting

George is an iGGi PhD student interested in AI assisted game design, specifically the process of game balancing. After graduating with a BSc in Computer Science at the University of Essex, he joined iGGi in 2021.

His research focuses on how AI can be used to balance games, in particular games with asymmetric elements. He has most recently been working on using agentic Large Language Models to theorycraft optimal strategies in games.

## AI GAME BALANCING AND THEORYCRAFTING

My research focuses on balancing games through identifying overpowered or unfair rules, which can then be accounted for:

My previous work identified how we can estimate unit point costs in miniature wargames. These wargames are played by forming armies comprised of units, the sum of each unit's point costs must be within the total army budget. Therefore it is crucial that these point costs accurately represent how useful the unit is in combat. We used Linear Regression and Linear Programming to estimate these point costs and improve the balance of an example game.

Currently, I am investigating how we can use Large Language Models to theorycraft optimal strategies in games. I used an agentic approach where an agent comes up with an initial theory, tests it out in games, and uses the results of the game to create an iterative feedback loop to improve the strategy.



## GORM LAI

Goldsmiths University  
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Professor Frederic Fol Leymarie

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**Skills:** C++, Python, Generative AI, Procedural Content Generation, Computer Graphics, Character Animation and Modelling

My work focuses on mixed-initiative co-creative AI and evolutionary techniques. I am an experienced senior graphics and game engine programmer with a swiss army knife certificate in cross-platform and experimental game development. I've worked on 17 commercial games since 2004; among them several BAFTA winners. Besides video games, my portfolio includes VR, a few interactive installations and non-game applications. As a cross-platform specialist I've helped bring games to, e.g. Windows, OS X, Linux, iOS, Android, Oculus Rift. Going back, I've worked on most modern platforms (Xbox 360/PS2/etc). I've co-founded the Nordic Game Jam as well as the Global Game Jam.

## ENHANCING ARTISTS' EXISTING WORKFLOWS USING MIXED-INITIATIVE METHODS

As a veteran with near 20 years of games industry experience, Gorm is aware of the challenges that developers face when producing assets for games. Using this background, Gorm is working on integrating mixed-initiative methods into Blender, the open source 3D content creation package. Gorm is specifically working on enhancing the workflow for modelling and animating characters, using evolutionary algorithms and machine learning for background processing while presenting the results using mixed-initiative methods that focus on enhancing artists' existing pipelines.

See Gorm's publications listed under <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=X7jqS3EAAAAJ&hl>



## JAMES GARDNER

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**Skills:**  
Python, PyTorch, CUDA,  
Generative Models, Computer  
Graphics

Final-year PhD student at the University of York and Co-Founder of pxld.ai, an AI startup for VFX. My research focuses on inverse rendering, scene representation learning, and world models. I previously held a Research Fellowship at the University of York and interned as a Research Scientist at Toshiba.

An MEng graduate and IET Prize winner, I contribute to the open source project Nerfstudio and have reviewed for NeurIPS, CVPR, ICCV, ECCV, and BMVC. My work is published in top-tier venues including TPAMI, NeurIPS, CVPR, and ECCV.

## LEARNING REPRESENTATIONS FOR INCOMPLETE SPHERICAL SCENE SIGNALS

My research explores how AI systems can build richer world models from the limited views available in images and video. I study representations that reason beyond the image plane: what lies outside the camera's view, how light and visibility shape observations, and how future views can be predicted from partial evidence. This work sits at the intersection of computer vision, machine learning, and computer graphics, aiming to learn models that are aware of space, direction, and scene structure. In the long term, it supports more capable systems for understanding, reconstructing, and editing visual worlds, with applications in immersive media, games, VFX, robotics, and augmented reality.



## JOSHUA KRITZ

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**Skills:**  
Game Design, Artificial  
Intelligence, Game  
Development, Game Studies

Graduated in Applied Mathematics in computer science, however my love for games pushed me to dedicate myself for studying them. This led me to brave many areas of knowledge, such as: psychology, design, education, production and entrepreneurship. My work as a teacher let me develop many of these skills in practice, besides invoking a new perspective about the world. On a personal level, I love new experiences that can teach me new knowledge and, most important, I am very open minded and easy to talk to! I believe discussion leads to enlightenment.

## USING SYNERGY TO ENHANCE CARD GAMES AUTOMATED PLAYTESTING

Trading Card Games (TCGs) rely on card synergies to create emergent and engaging gameplay. However, these games often contain hundreds of unique cards, making playtesting a major challenge. One way to improve this process is through automated agents that can playtest games exhaustively and generate valuable data. Despite the potential benefits, card game playtesting is still performed almost entirely by human players. Even with systematic testing, humans can only explore a limited number of possible interactions and strategies. Automated playtesting could significantly expand this coverage, but implementing it presents major challenges, which have prevented its practical adoption so far. My research focuses on addressing one of these challenges by developing a theory of card synergy that reduces the search space required to evaluate a card game effectively, making automated playtesting more practical and efficient



### KARL CLARKE

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**Skills:**

Virtual Reality, Behaviour  
Analysis, Environment Art

Karl Clarke is a PhD researcher in the iGGi programme studying how virtual environments affect spatial layouts and group behaviour in social VR. With a background in Audio Technology, his focus shifted during lockdown after discovering VR. He runs SONAR, a music group in VRChat that explores shared performance in virtual spaces. Through this, he self-taught game development using Unity, Blender, and C#. He's looking to collaborate with VR studios or platforms working on immersive social experiences.

### WHERE WE STAND IN VIRTUAL WORLDS: HOW SOCIAL VR ENVIRONMENTS SHAPE SOCIAL INTERACTION

Karl Clarke's research investigates how social interaction is spatially organised within social virtual reality, with a particular focus on VRChat. The project examines how users position, orient, and group themselves during interaction, and whether real-world concepts such as proxemics and F-formations extend into virtual environments. It also considers how features distinctive to social VR, including avatar scale, mirrors, environmental layout, and world design, influence conversational behaviour and group formation. Through in-the-wild observation, analysis of virtual worlds, and real-time player tracking, the research aims to understand how virtual environments shape social coordination, intimacy, and collective behaviour. The work contributes to the design of more effective social VR spaces, with implications for entertainment, performance, education, remote work, and future forms of online social connection.



### LAUREN WINTER

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Lauren was introduced to gaming from an early age when they received a PlayStation One as a gift. From there, video games became a huge part of their life, exploring new worlds through the eyes of a vast array of characters. Pursuing Psychology through Undergraduate and Master's study, Lauren's interests focus on the social experience in video games, and differences between human-human and human-AI interaction. Their side quests have also included topics such as gender representation in video games, and student use of generative AI in academic contexts.

### HOW IS SOCIAL PRESENCE BUILT IN TEAM-VERSUS-TEAM GAMES?

Lauren's work investigates the player experience in team-versus-team games such as League of Legends. This is achieved through the lens of social presence: the awareness of others in a digital environment. The social experience has been found to be one that is related, but separate to the more commonly explored facets of player experience. Through measuring player experiences in popular team-versus-team games, validating a purpose-designed questionnaire, and developing a bespoke game in Unity, Laurens' work explores how the 'social' in these social games is built between and within teams, and how all of the players contribute to this shared experience.



### LUIZA GOSSIAN

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**Skills:** Applied/Serious Game Design, Technical design, Rapid prototyping, Unity, Visual and Graphic design

Luiza is a multidisciplinary researcher, game designer and developer interested in translating real world concepts into engaging game mechanics. Her work explores how games can bridge the gap between serious and entertainment design, combining the strengths of both to tackle difficult topics in new and unexpected ways. As an experienced artist, graphic designer and photographer, Luiza uses her visual skills and psychology background to prototype experimental game designs, design game documentation and craft atmospheric experiences.

### SERIOUSLY CASUAL GAMES: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DESIGNING GENOCIDE GAMES

Luiza's work explores alternative approaches to serious games that blend the accessibility and engagement of casual game design with the applied foundations of research-driven game development. Using her project Detachment Undone, an abstract arcade game inspired by the ten stages of genocide, she is investigating how to design games about genocide that break away from traditional, narrative-centric approaches and embrace the ludic potential of games. Drawing on theories of intergroup and cultural psychology, she is exploring how these difficult themes can be expressed through mechanics in engaging, effective and informative ways.



### NICOLE LEVERMORE

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**Skills:**  
Neuroimaging,  
Electrophysiology

Nicole's academic background is within Neuroscience, having achieved BSc Neuroscience and Psychology, MSc Translational Neuroscience and an MPhil in Auditory Neuroscience. Outside of her research interests, she enjoys playing video games, hiking and playing the cello.

### STUDYING COGNITION AND MENTAL HEALTH USING VIDEO GAMES

Video games have enormous potential for research on cognition and mental health. In my project, I use video games to perform basic research into a common psychiatric disorder (ADHD), paving the way for improved diagnosis, monitoring and therapy. ADHD is typically diagnosed in childhood and is characterised by failures of attentional state maintenance. This project involves using cutting-edge neuroimaging techniques to investigate how subjects with and without ADHD switch between attentional states (for example, 'engagement' and 'flow') while playing a cognitively engaging video game.

The ultimate goal is to use video games to understand how mental health impacts people's ability to focus on cognitively demanding tasks and, potentially, to develop therapeutic intervention.



## NIRIT BINYAMINI BEN-MEIR

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**Skills:** Interaction and Experience Design, Research through Design, HCI research

Nirit Binyamini Ben-Meir is a designer/artist based in London. Her work explores the interconnection between society, technology and ecology. She is a tutor at the Information Experience Design program at the Royal College of Art London.

She uses participatory installations, digital tools and responsive plants to design interventions and create experiences for humans to interact with their biosphere. She combines ecological systems with technology to challenge human perception and attitude towards plants and the environment. She explores how playful interactions may shape cultures of plant care.

## THE BIO-DIGITAL GARDEN

Nirit's main research interests are around More-Than-Human Interactions and the coupling of living plants and organisms with computational interactions. She investigates how these hybrid interactions may help mediate relatable, sensory experiences with plants and influence people's attitudes towards ecological stewardship. She is developing the Bio-Digital Garden concept, which combines computational elements and living moss, a responsive plant that gives qualitative visual feedback to changes in its environment in real-time. Her research focuses on utilising human-computer-plant interactions to identify weaknesses in ecological stewardship, care for non-human entities, bridging temporal gaps and addressing plant blindness. She explores how socio-cultural contexts shape such interactions and sense of responsibility to ecological systems.



## OCÉANE LISSILLOUR

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**Skills:**  
UX Research, Psychology,  
Human Computer Interaction

I started as an undergrad in psychology. It was then that I realised that I could study video games for a living. This led me to relocate myself to the south of France to, mostly enjoy the sun, but also undertake a MSc in Technological Innovation and Cognitive Psychology and work with the CLLE, a branch of the national research centre. This helped me develop my knowledge of video games and motivational processes and convinced me that if I could survive the bureaucracy of the French Government I could probably do a PhD. Afterwards, I moved on to work in Aeronautics but landed back in academia in 2023 to join the wonderful iGgi community.

## ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GAMIFIED SYSTEMS FOR SERIOUS APPLICATIONS

My research focuses on the act of taking a regular activity and 'gamifying' it by applying mechanics commonly found inside video games (such as points). This technique has been widely applied within research but its psychological aspects have seldom been studied. The aim of this thesis is to critically assess the efficacy and applicability of this technique, particularly the score element mechanic. It focuses on understanding the different subjective functionalisation of numerical values in games as this has not been studied previously in the literature. This research hopes to better understand how to build adaptive systems that support autonomy and genuine motivation instead of pushing forced engagement through extrinsic rewards. Through that lens it focuses on developing co-adaptive gamified systems, allowing users to tailor motivational mechanics to their specific needs and workflows.



## PEYMAN HOSSEINI

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### Skills:

Machine Learning, Agentic AI,  
Natural Language Processing,  
LLM Efficiency

Peyman Hosseini is a PhD candidate working on Agentic AI and building on efficient solutions with small language models and post-training of large and small language models to enable these LLMs to be powerful on-device assistants. He has interned for the last 12 months at Samsung Research in the UK where he has led 3 paper submissions and 2 patent submissions on post training foundation models with reinforcement learning algorithms as well as building efficient on-device memory agents.

## POST-TRAINING LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS AND BUILDING EFFICIENT AGENTIC AI SOLUTIONS

Peyman's Rsearch targets post-training of foundation models, specifically large language models, to deliver personalized and powerful AI-powered solutions that are deployable on edge devices, such as mobile phones and personal computers. This is specifically important as Large Language Models (LLMs) are powerful yet impossible to deploy on edge-devices to their computational requirements. On the other hand, Small Language Models (SLMs), i.e., language models between 2-32B params, are more efficient but yet unable to handle complex tasks. Fine-tuning these models to work well in complicated setting enables a lot powerful, privacy-preserving AI-powered applicatios, such as personalized on-device recommendation systems and agents capable of memorizing users' habits and interests.



## PHILIP SMITH

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### Skills:

Game Design/Development,  
Software Design/  
Development

I was born and raised in Bermuda. I finished my undergraduate degree in Computer Science with a Specialist in Game Design at University of Toronto. For my Master's degree, I studied Computer Games Technology at City, University of London. My goal is to help expand the use of video games from purely recreational activities to viable avenues for aiding in real world problems.

## CONSTRUCTING A FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGING CITIZEN SCIENCE GAME DESIGN

My research focuses on maximizing player engagement in gamified citizen science. 'Citizen science' is the practice of employing volunteers from the public for the collection/processing of data for a scientific project. Gamified citizen science projects have relied upon prolonged engagement from volunteers, but the number of long-term participants have been unsatisfactory. My project aims to address this. The aim is to build a framework meant to guide game designers in creating engaging citizen science games based on Self-Determination Theory. It will adhere to the theory's concept of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators of engagement. Intrinsic motivation relies on player autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Extrinsic motivation relies on external incentives to gameplay such as in-game rewards. Recent efforts have seen me examine emergent play in citizen science games, a neglected research area that can expand our understanding of citizen science engagement.



## PRAKRITI NAYAK

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**Skills:** Applied Games,  
Neuroscience, Computational  
Science, Human Behaviour  
Modelling, Player Behaviour

Prakriti Nayak is a neuroscience-trained PhD researcher working across applied games, computational modelling, and behavioural neuroscience. Her background includes neuroscience research, statistical modelling, large-scale imaging data, and scientific editing. She is interested in how games and virtual environments can be used as powerful tools for studying cognition and behaviour. Her work brings together biological research and technology, with a focus on using interactive systems to better understand how people perceive, decide, and act in complex environments.

## PLAYER UNCERTAINTY IN NAVIGATION

Prakriti's research examines how uncertainty affects spatial navigation and decision-making. She develops computational models of navigation behaviour, focusing on how people estimate their position, choose routes, and move toward goals when sensory information is incomplete or ambiguous. Her work uses behavioural data from game-based navigation tasks, alongside Bayesian modelling and virtual reality experiments. Her research aims to understand individual differences in navigation and how uncertainty influences performance.



## PRASAD SANDBHOR

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**Skills:**  
Serious/applied game design,  
qualitative research, design  
research

Prasad is a serious game designer, researcher and educator specialising in environmental, nature-themed games, with an interdisciplinary practice informed by user-centred design and strategic management. In his PhD, he has developed the 'Thinking Through' framework for designing contextual role-playing games to support understanding of climate actions. He works at The Playful Learning at York (PLaY) Group, co-leads Play for the Planet Network and has co-founded the 'Play in Nature' initiative, which creates playful experiences that connect people with nature.

## THINKING THROUGH: DESIGNING ROLE-PLAYING GAMES TO HELP PLAYERS THINK THROUGH THEIR CLIMATE ACTIONS

Prasad's research focuses on designing games that encourage players to 'think through' their climate actions. He designed and evaluated 2 physical role-playing games (RPGs) where players immerse themselves in realistic, relatable scenarios drawn from their own lives and communities. He drew upon climate change education and communication research, utilising serious game design and user-centered design methods. Instead of dictating what players should do, these games foster spaces for reflection, discussion, and sharing the dilemmas, trade-offs, and tensions associated with climate actions. He has synthesised his findings into a framework for designing RPGs: the 'Thinking Through Framework'. It consists of 7 design principles aimed at researchers, designers, and educators in the fields of climate change education and communication, enabling them to create their own RPGs for climate action.



## ROSS FIFIELD

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**Skills:**

Games Design, User Research,  
Player Experience

My practice draws from speculative and disruptive design methodologies, with a commitment to developing future-proof solutions that benefit academic, educational, and commercial communities alike. I am looking for placement and knowledge exchange with studios and organisations that are open to collaboration on live, data-driven projects focused on social play, player engagement, and game discovery. My goal is to enhance the experience of play by helping people understand and find play on their own terms and provoke practical design solutions which meet these needs.

## WHAT IS THE PLAYER EXPERIENCE OF MATCHMAKING?

Have you ever struggled to find the “right” game for yourself or others in the moment? My research explores matchmaking beyond skill-based systems and algorithms, focusing instead on the meaning and context of personal and shared play experiences. By understanding how players engage with games socially and emotionally, I aim to help developers and communities create richer, more rewarding experiences. My work places player needs above rigid creative direction and challenges traditional, top-down, data-driven development models. Research to date highlights how matchmaking, player motivation, and context intersect to shape player expectations, rather than existing as isolated features of play. I welcome opportunities to discuss practical applications of this research. If you are exploring player retention, discovery, or product lifecycle challenges, I would be interested in collaborating on new approaches to matching players with their ideal play experiences.



## RUIZHE “JAY” YU XIA

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**Skills:**

Game-Playing Agents,  
Game Data Analytics, Play  
Style, Player Research,  
Reinforcement Learning

Ruizhe has bachelor degrees in Mathematics and Physics and a master’s degree in Artificial Intelligence. After a short time as a consultant he decided to pursue research into what got him into AI in the first place: game agents. He enjoys games of all kinds, but strategy and RPG games occupy a sizeable portion of his collection.

## DEVELOPING GAME AGENTS WITH DIVERSE STYLE AND SKILL

AI agents that perform with superhuman skill in increasingly complex games have appeared in recent years, but these agents are not always useful to game developers. Players within a game exhibit significant variance in their skill levels and play styles. Therefore, game agents with similar variance would better represent the player base. The research Ruizhe proposes will focus on three areas: measuring skill and play styles, developing game agents that mimic a range of human play styles and skill levels, and making these agents human-like. Upon successful completion, this research will improve the game development process via automated playtesting and will enable the development of AI agents that are more engaging and interactive.



## SAHAR MIRHADI

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**Skills:**

User Research, Player Experience, Qualitative Research, Games and Wellbeing

Sahar is a PhD researcher studying how video games support individuals through difficult life experiences. Her work has been published at ACM CHI Play and presented at conferences including Devcom. Beyond her doctoral research, she is a passionate Magic: The Gathering player and community advocate, collaborating with Worldly Counsel Heavy Play to analyse player motivations and team dynamics. She now works as a user researcher for the National Lottery Community Fund, helping to uncover user needs to shape better funding programmes.

## PLAYING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES: FROM GAME ASPECTS TO DYNAMIC COPING

Sahar investigates how specific game aspects facilitate player coping during difficult life experiences. Building on work linking game aspects to coping strategies, her research demonstrates how games support emotion-focused, avoidance, and meaning-focused coping. Using Constructivist Grounded Theory, she interviewed players of Disco Elysium, Darkest Dungeon, and Stardew Valley to develop the Games as Dynamic Coping Systems Model, which illustrates the dynamic interactions between players, game aspects, coping mechanisms, and outcomes. Additionally, her Negotiated Play Model provides insights into how gameplay adapts over time as players' mental capacity fluctuates throughout a life disruption. Together, these models deepen our understanding of what, how, and when video games support player coping during life's challenges.



## SARAH MASTERS

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**Skills:**

Design and Development

Sarah is an artist, game developer and researcher. They have an MA in Indie Game Development from Falmouth University (Distinction). They are an active part of the games community taking part in game jams and running their own commercially focused game studio working on the debut title Moth Terra.

## MAKING MEANINGFUL ECOGAMES

Sarah's work takes a research-through-design approach focused on exploring meaning in games and ecogames. Alongside a portfolio of games, their previous work includes running a workshop on Solarpunk vs Grimdark concepts, presenting the Cute Ecologies talk Moth Magic, and contributing to the development of Treescapes: A NERC-Funded Mobile Game exploring the social, cultural, and emotional values of trees. Their work also explores sustainable design approaches to games and interactive experiences.



## STEPH CARTER

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### Skills:

UX, Language Processing,  
Game Design, Data Analytics,  
JavaScript/Python/C#, Unity

Steph is an interdisciplinary researcher whose work spans psycholinguistics, HCI and game design. Their research investigates how game design can be used improve the participant experience in experimental tasks for second language acquisition research. They are also interested in research on accessibility in games, disability representation, games with a purpose, and have published work examining how AI/ML can be used to support professional roles in the creative industries. Outside of academia, Steph enjoys taking part in game jams, making pixel art and playing with their cats.

## GAMIFYING EXPERIMENTS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Steph's project explores how game design can improve participants' experiences in Second Language Acquisition experiments while still enabling the collection of high quality, controlled data. Although games and gamification are increasingly used in educational contexts, particularly for language learning, their potential in experimental design for SLA research remains underexplored. This project investigates how incorporating game elements into psycholinguistic tasks can impact the participant experience and maintain data quality. The findings aim to inform the design and development of gamified data collection tools for both language learning and cognitive research, while also providing some practical guidance for researchers interested in gamifying their experimental methods.



## SUNNY THAICHAROEN

Queen Mary University of  
London

Dr Jeremy Gow,  
Professor Anders Drachen

### Email:

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**LinkedIn:** [/thaicharoens](https://www.linkedin.com/company/thaicharoens)

### Skills:

Data Analytics, Esports,  
Player Behaviour

Sunny is a passionate esports enthusiast, with a love of MOBA games. His background is in engineering and entrepreneurship, with an MSc in Technology Entrepreneurship from UCL. He is the creator of YGOscope, a statistical game data platform for a competitive card game, Yu-Gi-Oh. Sunny is an avid player of competitive Dota and Deadlock in his spare time, and is also a keen theme park enthusiast. He is interested in modelling metagames of MOBAs through game data and player research, particularly how players adopt the most effective strategies when changes to the stable gameplay state occur.

## MODELLING OF ESPORT METAGAMES TO SUPPORT GAMEPLAY BALANCING AND DESIGN

The project focuses on how the META – most effective tactics available – of MOBA games shift during disruption (usually through gameplay updates) between states of ignorance and stability within the player space of these games, to deepen our understanding of how players adapt to the changes that these gameplay updates cause, and why. There is a large degree of variability of how new METAs develop. The only research currently available on the meta and metagame front has been based on defining the phenomena and resulting effects of gameplay updates, but little modelling has been done to bring these fragmented pieces of knowledge together and attempt to structure them. The study and structuring of this phenomena can be an ideal starting point in understanding how effective strategies develop not only in MOBAs or video games, but any other competitive game, e.g. chess, TCGs or sports.



## TAMSIN ISAAC

**University of York**

**Supervisor(s):**  
Professor Paul Cairns

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**URL:** [www.tamsinisaac.com](http://www.tamsinisaac.com)

**LinkedIn:** [/tamsinisaac](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tamsinisaac)

**Skills:**  
Live-Service Games, Player Research, UX Research, Qualitative Methods, Game Design

Tamsin Isaac is a PhD researcher with the iGGi Centre for Doctoral Training at the University of York. A lifelong gamer, her research explores how limited-time events shape player engagement in live-service games. She combines large-scale content analysis with qualitative methods to investigate how players experience time-limited content across platforms and genres. Tamsin holds a BSc and MSc in Psychology from the University of Plymouth and is particularly interested in player behaviour, motivation, disengagement, and ethical game design.

## UNDERSTANDING LIMITED-TIME EVENTS IN LIVE-SERVICE GAMES

Tamsin's research investigates how limited-time events (LTEs) influence engagement, disengagement, and re-engagement in live-service games. Although LTEs are widely used to encourage ongoing play, little research has examined how these systems are structured or experienced by players.

Her work combines large-scale content analysis with qualitative diary and interview studies to explore LTE design across platforms and genres. She is currently developing a cross-platform taxonomy of LTEs using data from over 2,600 Steam and Google Play games, alongside player-focused research examining how individuals decide whether events are "worth" participating in.

This research aims to support more ethical, sustainable, and player-friendly approaches to live-service game design.



## TANIA DALES

**University of York**

**Supervisor(s):**  
Dr Ben Kirman,  
Dr Louise LePage

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**LinkedIn:** [/tania-dales](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tania-dales)

**Skills:**  
Game Design, Unreal Engine, Unity, C++, C#, JavaScript, Blender, MetaHumans, Qualitative Research

Tania is an indie video game designer and developer, working with horror, science fiction and games which are a little strange, bizarre and uncomfortable.

## HUMANOID CHARACTER DESIGN AND EXISTENTIAL HORROR IN VIDEO GAMES

My research explores the relationship between humanoid character design and existential horror in video games. I adopt a mixed methods approach, investigating existing games, designer interviews and player surveys, along with a research-through-design methodology, reflecting on the practice of character design.

The core games I am exploring incorporate themes of existential horror, identity, self, and human existence. In video games with horror themes, non-playable characters (NPCs) are often used to prompt a reaction from the player, and it isn't always fear. There are often times when the NPC isn't acting in an outwardly threatening way, yet it still causes us to become unsettled. My research explores unsettling NPCs that incorporate themes of existential horror.



### TOBY BEST

**Queen Mary University of London**

**Supervisor(s):**

Dr Raluca Gaina,  
Professor Simon Lucas,  
Dr Alena Denisova

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**URL:** [I0rdr0b.github.io](https://github.com/I0rdr0b)

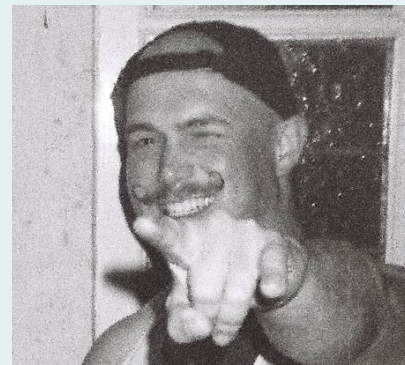
**LinkedIn:** [/tobybest1337](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tobybest1337)

**Skills:** Game Design, Game AI, C#/Java/Python Programming, Dungeon Master

Toby has always held video games as an integral part of his livelihood, ever since catching his first Pokémon on the Game Boy Color. The ever-developing evolution of technology, from the humble NES and R.O.B. preventing the video game market crash in 1983, to augmented and virtual reality today, has been a key inspiration, and one of the reasons why he studied Mathematical Computation at UCL. He has a keen interest in tabletop role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, and his research interests involve the potential of combining role-playing games' collective storytelling with the power of artificial intelligence and deep learning.

### GAME MASTER AI FOR TABLETOP GAMES

Artificial Intelligence is the field of creating digital agents capable of decision-making and rational thought to fulfil a core goal or aspect. For most games, an AI would 'solve' it by finding optimal winning strategies. Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) however, driven by collective storytelling and interactive narrative, have a more open-ended goal – maximising player enjoyment. This involves a Game Master (GM) acting as narrator and referee, running the campaign behind the screen. With no 'failure' state like traditional games, campaigns can continue until players lose interest or the narrative is 'complete'; even all PCs dying (a 'total party kill') can drive the narrative in new directions. This project aims to study the different elements to make a Game Master AI, and the implications for players and game designers alike. For example, whether it can replicate play experiences by replacing a human GM, or enhance experiences by working with a human GM.



### TOM WELLS

**University of York**

**Supervisor(s):**

Dr Claudio Guarnera,  
Professor William Smith

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**LinkedIn:** [/tom-wells-19980213uncanny](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tom-wells-19980213uncanny)

**Skills:**

Visual Neuroscience,  
Perceptual Experiments,  
Statistics, Coding, Graphics

Tom is a PhD researcher at the University of York investigating the uncanny valley in photorealistic human faces. His work combines physically-based skin rendering with perceptual psychology, using chromophore and pigment mapping to create controlled stimuli that probe the boundaries of human appearance perception. He also explores neural network approaches to cross-modal image synthesis, translating infrared facial captures into the visible spectrum. Tom's broader research interest lies in understanding why near-realistic faces unsettle us – and what that reveals about human visual cognition.

### BIOPHYSICALLY AND PERCEPTUALLY PROBING THE UNCANNY VALLEY

The uncanny valley describes the unsettling feeling triggered by artificial faces that are almost human. Despite decades of interest, the phenomenon remains poorly understood, partly due to the difficulty of creating stimuli that vary realism in a controlled, physically meaningful way. This research develops a physically-based pipeline for generating uncanny valley stimuli using chromophore decomposition and skin rendering. By manipulating the underlying biophysical properties of skin appearance – such as melanin and haemoglobin distribution – subtle, parametric variations in facial realism can be introduced without the confounds typical of image-editing approaches. Perceptual experiments then probe how these variations map onto affective and cognitive responses in observers. The goal is to produce both more rigorous stimuli and a clearer theoretical account of where realism breaks down perceptually.



## YOUNÈS RABII

**Queen Mary, University of London**

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Dr Jeremy Gow

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[knivesandpaintbrushes.org/younes](https://knivesandpaintbrushes.org/younes)  
[pyrofoux.itch.io](https://pyrofoux.itch.io)

**Skills:**  
Game Design, Generative AI

Younès is an awarded game designer and generative AI researcher. Their current research is concerned with the relationship between a game's rules, its narrative, and how to build AI systems that can understand these relationships, manipulate them, and invent new ones. Younès also has been a game developer for the past 10 years. They specialize in crafting new forms of play and making it accessible for their peers. Younès' work has been previously exposed in the French embassies and international conferences like the Game Developers Conference, the Gamedevs of Color Expo and the A MAZE Festival.

## KEEPING PLAYERS ON THEIR TOES: TOWARDS LIVE AUTOMATED GAME DESIGN

Younès' research goal is to bring to video games some of the most interesting properties of roleplaying games: their ability to trust every player with building a part of the game, and their ability to generate both new narrative and gameplay on the fly. Younès is working both on the AI techniques needed to allow that, and how to design the social spaces around those games in a way that won't hurt players or abuse creators. For the end of their PhD, Younès is designing a prototype in that new genre, counting among the first games to contain a form of Live Automated Game Design.



## ZOË O'SHEA

**Goldsmiths, University of London**

Professor Jonathan Freeman,  
Professor Sylvia Xueni Pan

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**URL:** [www.iggi-phd.org/people/zoe-o-shea](http://www.iggi-phd.org/people/zoe-o-shea)

**Skills:**  
Game Design, Player Psychology, Immersive Technology

Zoë is an Irish game designer and artist. Currently on an interruption of studies, she holds a position as Games Awards Manager at BAFTA. Her thesis is focused on game design and player psychology. Her qualifications include 3D Generalism, and an MA in Digital Game Design and Theory. Zoë has previously worked with companies such as A Brave Plan, Surgent Studios, Transport for London and LEGO. In 2019, Zoë was awarded a Digital Fellowship from the Royal Shakespeare Company in collaboration with Magic Leap where Zoë worked with other creatives to explore the future of theatre and Spatial Computing (Mixed Reality).

## TEND AND BEFRIEND: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PLAYER PSYCHOLOGY IN DIGITAL GAMES

Zoë is endlessly curious about the meaning and value that technology can bring to the world, exploring the human experience as a core principle of her work. She firmly believes in the importance of creating a more joyful and inclusive world. Many are familiar with the term "fight-or-flight" – a stress response activated when animals come into conflict with a stressor or threat. Less commonly known is "tend and befriend", an alternative theory of stress response which suggests that engaging with tending and affiliative behaviours under duress can soothe and protect us. Zoë's thesis investigates this phenomenon in digital games, with a focus on empirical data and design. Results demonstrate a consistent niche in the games industry for "tend and befriend" centric design and the value in synthesising previous design frameworks to create an intentional and polished experience for players.

iGGi ALUMNI

## iGGi ALUMNI

Here are all our iGGi Alumni to date. Congratulations to those (denoted with an asterisk) who have already graduated or recently passed their PhD viva!

iGGi Alumni of course include those who left the iGGi Programme prematurely. We would like to highlight here that each of these individuals had very well-founded reasons for withdrawing from their PhD journey earlier than planned; some were facing unexpected difficult personal circumstances, some were so happy with their placement position that they stayed on, others received attractive offers within industry. Each and every reason has its validity, and each individual who has ever been funded by iGGi can safely consider themselves part of the iGGi Alumni Community, regardless of their graduation status.

### FROM OUR 2014 COHORT

**Andrei Iacob**, University of Essex  
**Athansios Kokkinakis\***, University of York  
**Christian Guckelsberger\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Daniel Berio\***, Goldsmiths, University of London  
**David Gundry\***, University of York  
**Joe Cutting\***, University of York  
**Joseph Walton-Rivers\***, University of Essex  
**Matt Bedder**, University of York  
**Memo Akten\***, Goldsmiths, University of London

**Mihail Morosan\***, University of Essex  
**Piers Williams\***, University of Essex  
**Tom Cole\***, Goldsmiths, University of London

### FROM OUR 2015 COHORT

**Chris Madge\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Dino Ratcliffe\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Emily Marriott**, University of Essex  
**Janet Gibbs**, Goldsmiths, University of London  
**Jen Beeston\***, University of York  
**Rob Homewood**, Goldsmiths, University of London

**Sam Hughes**, University of York  
**Sha Li**, University of York  
**Stefan Stoican**, University of Essex  
**Tara Collingwoode-Williams\***, Goldsmiths, University of London

### FROM OUR 2016 COHORT,

**Andrew Martin**, Queen Mary University of London  
**Carlos González Díaz\***, University of York  
**Cristina Guerreño Romero\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**En Sattaur**, University of York  
**Henrik Siljebrått\***, Goldsmiths, University of London  
**Raluca Gaina\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Rokas Volkovas**, Queen Mary University of London  
**Rory Davidson\***, University of York  
**Shringi Kumari\***, University of York  
**Sokol Murturi\***, Goldsmiths, University of London  
**Thryn Henderson\***, University of York

### FROM OUR 2017 COHORT

**Charles Ringer\***, University of York  
**Cristiana Pacheco\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Daniel Hernandez\***, University of York  
**Elizabeth Vials**, University of York  
**Georgiana (Cristina) Dobre\***, Goldsmiths, University of London  
**Igor Dall'Avanzi**, Goldsmiths, University of London  
**Ivan Bravi\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Peter York**, University of York  
**Phoebe Hesketh\***, University of York  
**Myat Aung\***, University of York  
**Valerio Bonometti\***, University of York

### FROM OUR 2018 COHORT,

**Adam Katona\***, University of York  
**Adrián Barahona Ríos\***, University of York  
**Daniel Gomme\***, University of Essex  
**Evelyn Tan\***, University of York

**Kevin Denamgani\***, Univeristy of York  
**Martin Balla\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Matthew Whitby\***, University of York  
**Nathan Hughes\***, University of York  
**Nathan John\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Nuria Peña Pérez\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Oliver Scholten\***, University of York  
**Ozan Vardal\***, University of York  
**Ryan Spick\***, University of York  
**Terence Broad\***, University of York  
**Timea Farkas\***, Goldsmiths, University of London

#### FROM OUR 2019 COHORT

**Alex Fletcher**, Queen Mary University of London  
**Charles Gbadamosi**, Queen Mary University of London  
**Charline Foch\***, University of York  
**Elena Gordon-Petrovskaya\***, University of York  
**Guilherme Matos de Faria**, University of York

**James Goodman\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Jozef Kulik\***, University of York  
**Laura Helsby\***, University of York  
**Nick Ballou\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Sebastian Berns\***, Queen Mary University of London

#### FROM OUR 2020 COHORT

**Alan Pedrassoli Chitayat\***, University of York  
**Madeleine Frister\***, University of York  
**Marko Tot\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Maximilian Croissant\***, University of York  
**Michael Saiger\***, University of York  
**Michelangelo Conserva\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Kyle Worrall\***, University of York  
**Oliver Withington\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Yizhao Jin\***, Queen Mary University of London

#### FROM OUR 2021 COHORT

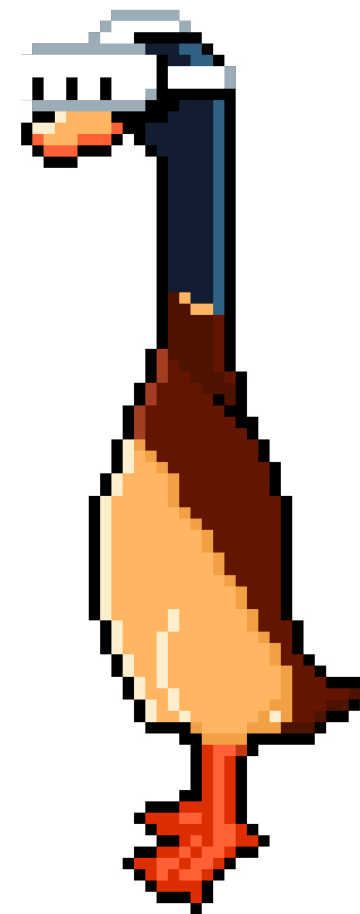
**Callum Deery**, University of York  
**Florence Smith Nicholls\***, Queen Mary University of London  
**Michael Aichmüller**, Queen Mary University of London  
**Pilar Zhang Qiu**, Queen Mary University of London  
**Remo Sasso\***, Queen Mary University of London

#### FROM OUR 2022 COHORT

**Evgenii Kashin**, University of York  
**Luke Farrar**, University of York  
**Yu-Jhen Hsu**, Queen Mary University of London

#### FROM OUR 2023 COHORT

**Connor Watts**, Queen Mary University of London



iGGi STORIES



## iGGi CASE STUDIES

**Link:**  
[www.iggi-phd.org/case-studies](http://www.iggi-phd.org/case-studies)

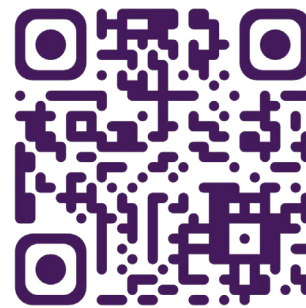
We are in the process of writing several iGGi Case Studies, to illustrate the diversity, achievements and talent within the iGGi Community: taking a detailed “snap shot” of selected individuals who have been part of the iGGi PhD Programme. By telling the story of their journeys, we hope to inspire others, in particular in the context of today’s uncertain job market. We would also like to demonstrate to our funders: EPSRC, Universities and industry partners, that their investment was well worth it and express our thanks. Follow the link to see the first few of these close-ups.

### METHOD

It makes sense to view these Alumni stories through the eyes and words of someone who is also walking on that PhD path. iGGi PGR Nicole Levermore was hired for this job and took on the role of iGGi Alumni Network Contact. Nicole contacted various iGGi Alumni and conducted interviews via video and/or email exchange. Based on the gathered information, she then wrote a magazine-style article about each individual.

### WORK IN PROGRESS

We acknowledge that capturing the true breadth of iGGi’s diverse people and the different types of journey they have taken, can only ever be a work in progress, so please watch this space. If you would like to know more about the iGGi Case Studies, and/or are an iGGi Alum and would like to contribute material, please speak to Nicole Levermore or email her via [iggi-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:iggi-admin@york.ac.uk).



## iGGi PUBLICATIONS

**Link:**  
[www.iggi-phd.org/publications](http://www.iggi-phd.org/publications)

During the 12 years of its existence, iGGi PG Researchers have achieved a total of over 600 publications on games research which are all publicly available and conveniently search-able via the iGGi Publications Database (see link). We would like to highlight that this is a free resource anyone with an interest in games research can access, and if that’s you, we would absolutely encourage you to do so.

### FILTERS

The automatic sort is by most recent publication, but you can set filters for year, author, type of publication, and iGGi Theme.



## iGGi NEWS

**Link:**  
[www.iggi-phd.org/news](http://www.iggi-phd.org/news)

**LinkedIn:** [/company/iggi-phd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/iggi-phd)

**BlueSky:** [@iggi-phd](https://bsky.app/profile/iggi-phd)

To keep up with iGGi-related (public) news, check out the NEWS section of our main website. You can also follow us on one of our main social media channels: LinkedIn or BlueSky.

For live-updates about BiGGi Con Talks as they happen, see our BlueSky channel.

## iGGi STAFF NEWS

One piece of recent news which has a big impact on an iGGi-internal level was the departure of two core members of iGGi Staff:

iGGi Supervisor Diego Pérez-Liébana (QMUL-iGGi Industry Liaison) and iGGi Supervisor and Alum Raluca Gaina (iGGi Outreach Coordinator) both relocated to Madrid with their 1-year-old daughter Amaia. Their previous roles will be covered by Jeremy Gow and James Goodman respectively.

While Diego and Raluca will still remain part of their existing supervisees' supervision teams in the shape of external/additional supervisors, their presence on site will be sorely missed. We wish them happiness and fulfilment on their future path, and we hope they will still join our gatherings as much as possible, if from a distance.



## iGGi WiGGi

**Link:**  
[www.iggi-phd.org/wiggi](http://www.iggi-phd.org/wiggi)

WiGGi stands for "Welcoming inclusive Games and Games inclusivity". As a sub-division of iGGi, WiGGi has been operating for over four years with view to creating an inclusive and friendly environment where underrepresented groups (ethnic or cultural minorities, minority genders, religious background etc) especially can thrive and be heard, whether that be in industry or academia or the games community in a broader sense.

## WIGGI EVENTS

WiGGi has been putting up monthly events, some of which were also accessible to the public (e.g., a Beach Break during the recent Develop:Brighton conference).

## GET INVOLVED

WiGGi would love to partner with more organisations that share a similar goal, or invite in more video game researchers or industry to take part in their events. If you would like to know more or get involved in some way, please contact WiGGi via [iggi-admin@york.ac.uk](mailto:iggi-admin@york.ac.uk) who will forward your query. You do not need to be a particular gender or group to join in with WiGGi. Everybody is welcome!

## **BiGGi CON FOREWORD**

We are delighted to welcome you to Queen Mary University of London for this year's iGGi Conference!

As always, we'll be showcasing the work of our doctoral researchers, as they share some of the latest advancements in Games Research, and bringing together academics and practitioners from across the world of games.

The iGGi Community has grown a lot over the years, and this year we're particularly excited to add seven (yes, seven!) Alumni Talks to the conference programme, highlighting what some of our amazing graduates have been up to. This is alongside our usual collection of excellent Talks from PG Researchers and our Keynote Speakers, including a new third Keynote from our always-supportive Industry Advisory Board.

We hope you enjoy this bumper iGGi conference!

**The 2026 iGGi Conference Committee**

## **KEYNOTE SPEAKERS**

**JACKIE MULLIGAN**

Co-Director of  
Game Republic Ltd

### **MULTIPLAYER, MULTILEVEL, MULTIVERSE: THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND GAME RESEARCH – AN INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE**

Jackie Mulligan shares the impacts and opportunities of academic research and Higher Education for the games industry, as well as the challenges of academia being lost in translation. The talk will cover positive projects undertaken by Game Republic, the largest games industry network and trade body in The North and its educational partners over the last decade and identify lessons learned.

Jackie's keynote will also use her own journey in a wide variety of sectors internationally including her leap from academia to tech start-up to now heading up Game Republic, highlighting the common and shared pain points and barriers to meaningful collaboration in a world that seeks simple solutions.

### **JACKIE MULLIGAN**

Dr Jackie Mulligan is co-Director of Game Republic – the largest and longest established games industry network and trade body in the North of England. The organisation established in 2003 by developers, has been privately funded by studios since 2011, running events, curating festivals, leading trade missions, supporting studios, educators and service providers to connect and providing development support.

Prior to working at Game Republic, Jackie has gained a vast amount of experience in different sectors. Jackie ran her own tech platform supporting networks of small independent businesses and local communities and appeared talking all things community and small business at live events and on BBC The One Show, BBC Morning Live, ITV The Tonight Show, BBC Look North, ITV Calendar, ITV Border, BBC Radio 5, BBC Radio 4 and Anglian News, Closer magazine, The Guardian, The Mail, The Guardian and Observer, The Express, The FT, The Telegraph and the i Newspaper. As an academic, Jackie undertook extensive research on events, creativity and innovation internationally and has spoken at conferences in the UK, Europe and the US on organisational culture, creativity and future trends. She has also worked in the Caribbean in tourism and heritage and for the national lottery on funded projects across the UK.



## CONSTANCE STEINKUEHLER

**Professor of Informatics at the University of California, Co-Director of the Games+Learning+Society Center**

### HERO, NOT CASE FILE: COMMUNITY-AUTHORED GAME DESIGN AT HOMEBOY GAME STUDIO

In this presentation, we report on an ongoing project called Homeboy Game Studio, a partnership between our Games+Learning+Society (GLS) Center at UCI and Homeboy Art Academy, the arts wing of Homeboy Industries, the largest gang-intervention and reentry organization in the world. Homeboy Art Academy engages gang- and institution-impacted young adults (ages 19-26) in culturally competent, asset-based arts education to inspire transformation and reclaim self-agency by centering their lived experiences and cultural knowledge.



## KURT SQUIRE

**Professor of Informatics at the University of California, Co-Director of the Games+Learning+Society Center**

## CONSTANCE STEINKUEHLER

Constance Steinkuehler is a Professor of Informatics at the UCI where she researches cognition, and social interaction in the context of multiplayer videogames. She is the Co-Director of the Games+Learning+Society Center and she formerly served as Senior Policy Analyst in the Obama White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Her work has been featured in Science, Wired, USA Today, New York Times, LA Times, ABC, CBS, CNN NPR and the BBC. Current projects include investigations of toxicity and extremism in online commercial games and game-based programs in incarcerated settings to foster inclusion, equanimity, and social connectedness.

## KURT SQUIRE

Kurt Squire earned his PhD in 2004 from Indiana University. His research is in understanding technology and society from a socio-cultural perspective. He has been exploring games for learning, theories and approaches to game-based learning, and the design of games for impact. Squire has authored over 100 scholarly works around technology, learning, and games. Squire began his career as a blogger, having co-founded joystick101.org and, later, writing with Henry Jenkins as a columnist for Computer Games magazine.

Squire ran a game development group at GLS which developed 17 game projects and helped spin out Filament Games. In these projects, he has developed games in collaboration with world renown scientists based on their work, e.g. ecologist Stephen Carpenter, neuroscientist Richard Davidson, stem cell scientist James Thomsen, and, for his final game with astronomer Adam Frank. The latter game (At Play at the Cosmos) was used in college astronomy courses around the world. Squire is a former elementary and Montessori teacher, as well as games journalist. Squire currently teaches courses in UCI's Game Design and Interactive Media Program and is working on technologies for wellness. More recently, Squire is interested in the interplay between social context and game design, working with youth at the Homeboy Art Academy in Los Angeles designing technologies, including games, responsive to their lived experiences in urban LA.

**THOMAS KEANE**

**Creative Director,  
Meaning Machine**

## HOW TO “BULLY” AI INTO MEANINGFUL GAMEPLAY

Generative AI has the potential to deliver radical new gameplay experiences – featuring emergent stories, unshackled characters, and unprecedented player agency.

But it won’t do it without a fight.

Left to its own devices, Generative AI will happily churn out incoherent, soulless slop. And contrary to popular belief, bigger models, better prompts and fine-tuning alone won’t solve the problem.

So stop trusting the model – and start bullying it.

**BEN ACKLAND**

**Technical Director,  
Meaning Machine**

## THOMAS KEANE

Tom Keane is a game designer whose work focuses on turning speech and language into gameplay mechanics. He co-founded Meaning Machine in 2022 – a game and technology studio which explores the creative potential of author-directed AI characters and quests. In his role as Creative Director, he oversees the development of a range of internal and partner projects that all use generative AI in their core mechanics. Dead Meat, “the interrogation game where you can ask anything”, is the studio’s debut.

## BEN ACKLAND

Ben Ackland is the Co-Founder and Tech Lead at Meaning Machine, a creatively-driven game tech start-up unlocking all-new gameplay experiences through generative AI. With 20 years of experience in innovative software development, Ben specialises in creating deep, meaningful NPC interactions through Meaning Machine’s proprietary Game Conscious™ technology – empowering both developers and creatives to explore bold new storytelling possibilities, while respecting privacy and enhancing accessibility.

## ALUMNI TALKS

## ALUMNI TALKS

|                                                                                                            |           |
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NATHAN HUGHES

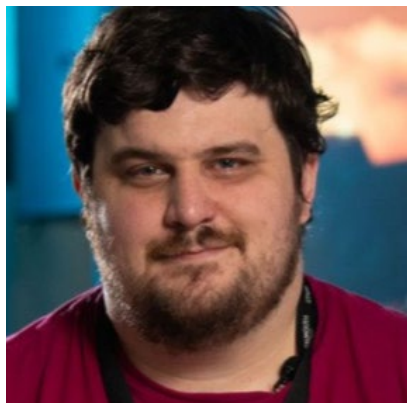
Research Associate,  
University of York

## BIOGRAPHY

Nathan Hughes is a research associate at the Centre for Assuring Autonomy (CfAA), researching the safety of human-AI teaming. They have a keen interest in how people use and experience technology, and have worked in several domains including healthcare, air traffic management, and video games. This cross-disciplinary experience has been driven by an ongoing fascination with human decision-making, and the ways in which the systems we build either help or hinder it.

## THE QUALITY OF SAFETY IS... GAMES? AN ALUMN'S JOURNEY FROM GAMES RESEARCH TO SAFETY SCIENCE

In 1967, Professor David Hazen once said, "if we knew what it was we would learn, it just wouldn't be research, would it?" This is certainly true of games research, and the many places it can take you. In this talk, I overview my journey from open world games to my current research on human-AI teaming in safety-critical contexts. Despite the seemingly vast differences between these fields, I have found my time in games has given me key skills to understand this new and increasingly important field. Attendees can expect to learn about the similarities between games and safety, the theories and philosophies of research gained that were most insightful, and the overlaps in methodological techniques that can be applied to both. The talk concludes with a simple takeaway: if we knew where our research would take us, it just wouldn't be fun, would it?



**JOSEPH  
WALTON-RIVERS**

Lecturer, Falmouth  
University

## BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Walton-Rivers is an AI researcher based at Falmouth University. He has run the Hanabi competition and CoG, and was in the first iGGi cohort based at the University of Essex.

## AI FOR BOARD GAMES

This talk will provide an overview of current interesting areas for board and digital games research for computational intelligence. It will explore some possible avenues and motivations for future work in this space.



**CRISTINA DOBRE**

Applied Scientist Researcher,  
University of Augsburg

## BIOGRAPHY

Cristina Dobre is a technical multimodal VR and ML researcher with a focus on social interactions in virtual environments. She is interested in the nonverbal cues that influence and shape free-flow social interactions in immersive XR. Currently, she is researching group engagement in VR classrooms, focusing on eye-tracking data. She received her iGGi PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London, based on an interdisciplinary work focusing on the underlying mechanics of VR/AR social interactions that help develop and model empathic and engaging virtual humans. She collaborated with multiple academic and industry partners, such as UCL, Microsoft Research, Dream Reality Interaction and Maze Theory game studios.

## WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH THE VR GAMES: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NONVERBAL CUES AND EMBODIMENT ON VR ENTERTAINMENT

Virtual reality entertainment, especially in the games industry, shows how creativity and innovation opens new avenues for how players experience gaming. However, there's not only creativity at play here. User's presence, place and plausibility illusions, and their embodiment are core decisive elements for VR entertainment. How can these impact and improve the gaming experience? How can nonverbal behaviours, oftentimes dismissed or little taken into account, impact how VR is experienced? This talk will discuss these open questions, will highlight the current gaps in this field and some ways for moving forward.



**NICK BALLOU**  
Research Fellow,  
Imperial College

## BIOGRAPHY

Nick Ballou is a fellow at Imperial College London who is professionally concerned with when/how video games are good vs bad for you (tldr: it's complicated), and personally concerned with his backend volleys on the padel court. His current project uses behavioral trace data, causal inference, and intensive longitudinal surveys to support healthy adolescent gaming habits.

## OPEN PLAY: FINDINGS AND LESSONS FROM TWO MILLION HOURS OF PUBLIC VIDEO GAMES DATA

Open Play is a public dataset of high-resolution video game play data spanning 5 platforms and >35k repeated surveys assessments of sleep, wellbeing, and attention, sourced from 2k US and UK 18–40 year olds.

I'll describe the dataset's structure and analytical affordances, with practical guidance on how researchers can use it to study tech behavior. I'll then present findings suggesting that late-night gaming is weakly with sleep outcomes, and that reported wellbeing experiences both in and outside games do not relate to subsequent play behaviour – patterns that run counter to prevailing theoretical accounts.

Finally, I'll reflect on lessons learned from collaborating with games industry partners on contentious research topics, and developing open source data collection methods in parallel.



**JOZEF KULIK**  
Senior Research and  
Accessibility Lead,  
PlaytestCloud

## BIOGRAPHY

Joe Kulik is a games user researcher with over a decade of industry experience and a specialism in game accessibility, a subject in which he holds a PhD. As Senior Research and Accessibility Lead at PlaytestCloud, he works with hundreds of studios to shape their research strategy and craft, helping them use player data to de-risk their games. He is a regular speaker and contributor to the games accessibility community.

## A BIRD'S EYE VIEW: HOW REMOTE USER RESEARCH AFFECTS HUNDREDS OF GAMES

Every year thousands of playtest run across games at every stage of development. From concept sketches and greybox prototypes, to vertical slices and launch ready games. That volume underlies a perspective that very few people get to see, which questions are concerning teams, when and how are they asking them, and what tends to change before the consumer sees the game.

This talk walks through the stages of game development and the types of research that influence the process at each stage. We'll look at how different research methods are used, what they're good for, what teams sometimes get wrong and how research outcomes often ripple out into design, marketing and commercial outcomes for studios.

You'll leave with a more practical understanding of games user research and how its affecting the games industry today.



**CARLOS  
GONZÁLEZ DÍAZ**

Postdoctoral Researcher,  
University of Augsburg

## BIOGRAPHY

Carlos González Díaz is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Augsburg researching on multimodal VR data and lecturing games programming in the beautiful Bavaria, Germany. He holds a PhD from the iGGi programme (York) on interactive machine learning for VR controls and an MSc in Serious Games from Skövde, the Swedish city that gave birth to Goat Simulator! His interests are diverse, from technical problems such as supervised and reinforcement learning in games, to human behaviour in VR and motion-controlled games. In short, giving a twist to technology from a human lens. He is also very social, come say hi to him if you spot him!

## EYE-TRACKING IN SOCIAL VR AND WHAT TO TAKE AWAY FOR GAME TECHNOLOGY

In this talk I will (1) present a summary of my postdoc research after IGGI, and (2) reflect on the implications of group behaviour in VR games. The first part of the talk will summarise findings from three studies investigating eye-tracking data and machine learning approaches for groups in Social VR. The second part will relate these findings to VR gaming. Come to this talk if you want to be surprised about how we behave with others in VR and make the most of it for your game.



**JAMES GOODMAN**

Director of Tabletop R&D

## BIOGRAPHY

James Goodman graduated with a PhD from iGGi in 2025 with work on using statistical planning algorithms in modern tabletop board games. He has since completed a short Postdoc in the Department of Classics at Reading University, whence comes the inspiration for his talk. He is a Director of Tabletop R&D, a Queen Mary spinout company, and a core contributor to the open source Tabletop Games Framework ([www.tabletopgames.ai](http://www.tabletopgames.ai)).

## WHAT HAS GAME AI EVER DONE FOR THE ROMANS?

How much would the ancient Romans have benefited from an understanding of Monte Carlo Tree Search? How well can computer scientists collaborate with classical archaeologists? Come and find out.

# iGGi WORKSHOPS

## iGGi WORKSHOPS

Each BiGGi Con Workshop will run during a multi-track sessions in parallel with other Workshops or Panels; see schedule in the PROGRAMME section of this brochure, or you can double-check [www.iggi2026.org/conference-schedule](http://www.iggi2026.org/conference-schedule) for the most up-to-date schedule information, since day/time of these sessions may have changed after printing this brochure.

In the following, we list each Workshop's title and abstract to give you a better idea what it's about and whether it may be of interest to you.

**To attend any of the Workshops, please put your name down on the (physical) sign-up sheets at the Reception Desk.**

### iGGi WORKSHOPS – TUESDAY

#### GAMIFYING CITIZEN SCIENCE

**Organised and led by:**  
Philip Smith

**Day scheduled and length:**  
Tuesday, 60 minutes

**Room:**  
GC101

**Description:**

This workshop will provide participants with an opportunity to hone their game design skills in a rarely invoked context, as well as contribute to citizen science gamification research.

Citizen science projects tend to lack meaningful long term engagement from their participants. While gamification has helped, it still faces similar pitfalls to non-gamified counterparts. A generalized design framework that can guide game designers towards practicing engaging citizen science game design could be a solution. I am conducting a design workshop that aims to identify the benefits and drawbacks of a proposed game design framework. Participants will work together in teams to create their own conceptual design of a citizen science game based on a given prompt and utilizing the design framework. Through working with the framework, participants will practice learn new techniques to bring gamified fun into the most unlikely of circumstances.

## iGGi WORKSHOPS – TUESDAY

**BUILDING AN ALUMNI NETWORK: HAVE YOUR SAY IN iGGi'S LEGACY**

**Organised and led by:**  
Nicole Levermore

**Day scheduled and length:**  
Tuesday, 40 minutes

**Room:**  
Peston LT

**Description:**

As the iGGi PhD programme has entered its mature stage, sustaining its diverse, interdisciplinary community becomes both a key priority and a unique opportunity. This workshop brings together participants of this year's iGGi Conference, including current iGGi Researchers and Alumni to celebrate, (re-)connect, share pathways past and present, and collaboratively brainstorm about the long-term future of the iGGi Alumni Network.

The first part of the session starts with a very short, relaxed and not-too-serious networking exercise during which you get the opportunity to engage in conversation with three or four other conference attendees. The second part shifts into an interactive co-design discussion focused on sustainability: How do we keep the iGGi Network running and active, independent of funding? We want to hear your ideas! Such as, for example, ideas for best communication channels and platforms (e.g., Discord, LinkedIn, community-driven Slack) to establish light-touch, community-led governance beyond iGGi's funding end.

While we are looking at input mainly from the iGGi Alumni and iGGi Researcher participants, since they are arguably crucial for the success of the project, we also highly value the opinions and ideas from all the other voices. We welcome everyone who attends BiGGi Con on this day to join this workshop, and in as active a way as possible: **You will contribute to building the foundation for iGGi's enduring legacy!**

## iGGi WORKSHOPS – WEDNESDAY

**RESEARCH IDEAS WORKSHOP**

**Organised and led by:**  
Laura Helsby

**Day scheduled and length:**  
Wednesday, 60 minutes

**Room:**  
GC101

**Description:**

This workshop will be run as a 'research ideas generation' event. Similar to modules, people will be placed into small groups and given a series of short tasks/problems to tackle. People will be encouraged to pair up with those who use different methods and have different approaches to foster creativity. No previous research experience is necessary.

iGGi WORKSHOPS – THURSDAY

DEVOPS FOR GAME RESEARCHERS

Organised and led by:  
Nathan John

Day scheduled and length:  
Thursday, <80 minutes

Room:  
GC103

Description:

DevOps is, admittedly, a bit of a dirty word. It sounds like the sort of thing that involves several dashboards, three cloud accounts, a YAML file you copied from Stack Overflow, and a quiet sense that everything is about to become more complicated than it was before.

This workshop is not that. Instead, we'll look at the useful bits of DevOps for game researchers: the bits that stop your Unity build only working on your laptop, help you share playable experiments with participants, and make sure your precious gameplay data actually arrives somewhere sensible. We'll talk about hosting WebGL builds with tools like GitHub Pages, S3, or similar static site hosts, collecting remote experiment data with lightweight databases or serverless endpoints, and keeping enough version information that future-you can work out which build produced which results.

The focus is practical, researcher-friendly, and only mildly cloud-flavoured. By the end, you should have a clearer idea of how to take a game experiment from "it works on my machine" to "people can play it remotely, the data is captured, and I might even be able to reproduce this later."

iGGi WORKSHOPS – THURSDAY

COLLABORATIVE WRITING WITH TYPST AND JUJUTSU

Organised and led by:  
Daniel Gomme

Day scheduled and length:  
Thursday, <80 minutes

Room:  
GC204

Description:

We'll create a collaborative zine using Typst for typesetting, and jujutsu for version control. Pick a topic that electrifies your brain, and find out there are nicer tools than LaTeX and git.

## iGgi WORKSHOPS – THURSDAY

**DESIGNING SERIOUSLY CASUAL GAMES****Organised and led by:**  
Luiza Stepanyan**Day scheduled and length:**  
Thursday, <80 mins**Room:**  
GC114**Description:**

Design frameworks for serious games tend to focus exclusively on their serious, applied, or transformative aspects, while those for entertainment games tend to focus on fun, engagement, and immersion. Those that attempt to bridge the divide do so by taking elements of both without presenting principles that are specific to seriously casual games, that is serious games with a ludic focus. Through the development of Detachment Undone, an abstract arcade game based on the ten stages of genocide, several potential principles have emerged. These principles are specific enough to apply to ludic-focused serious games about difficult themes yet general enough to be used for the development of games beyond Detachment Undone. The workshop will invite game designers to engage in co-creation activities to help develop and solidify these principles into a format that can be useful and effective for game designers in the development of their own seriously casual game projects.

## iGgi WORKSHOPS – THURSDAY

**AGENTIC AI FOR GAMES****Organised and led by:**  
Simon Licas**Day scheduled and length:**  
Thursday, <80 mins**Room:**  
GC201**Description:**

Large Language Models (LLMs) are rapidly evolving from standalone chat systems into agentic AI systems that can reason, plan, use tools, execute code, and iteratively improve their outputs. These capabilities are opening new possibilities for game research and development, from the creation of game-playing agents to procedural content generation (PCG) and automated game design. This 80-minute hands-on workshop provides an accessible introduction to agentic AI in the context of games. We begin with a concise overview of the core concepts behind agentic systems, including tool use, iterative refinement, code generation, and evaluation loops. We then demonstrate how these techniques can be applied to game-related tasks with examples in Game AI agent development and PCG. The session includes practical experimentation. Participants will work with a set of prepared examples and workflows (available in advance), allowing them to run live experiments and explore how modern LLM-based agents can generate, test, and refine game artefacts. Setup instructions will be provided before the conference to ensure that attendees can participate fully during the workshop. The session concludes with a discussion of lessons learned, current limitations, and emerging opportunities for agentic AI in games research. Participants will be encouraged to share experiences, identify promising application areas, and discuss future directions for combining LLMs with simulation, search, evaluation, and game design tools.

**Requirements: those wishing to execute examples should bring a laptop with Python 3.12 or later installed.**

# CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

DAY 1 – TUESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2026:  
Graduate Centre, Mile End Campus, Queen Mary University of London

|       |                                                                                                                                                                    |                             |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 13:00 | Conference sign-in opens for Day 1<br>Pick up your conference badge and printed programme, and sign in for the day.*                                               | Foyer                       |
| 13:20 | Informal Welcome: BiGGi Con Chairs Jeremy Gow and Laurissa Tokarchuk                                                                                               | Foyer and Peston LT         |
| 13:30 | Alumni Talk: Nathan Hughes<br>The Quality of Safety is... Games? An Alumn’s Journey from Games Research to Safety Science                                          | Peston LT                   |
| 14:00 | Alumni Talk: Joseph Walton-Rivers<br>AI for Board Games                                                                                                            | Peston LT                   |
| 14:30 | Track 1 >> Panel: Working with AI<br>Track 2 >> Panel: Games beyond Games<br>Track 3 >> Workshop: Gamifying Citizen Science<br>(Organised and led by Philip Smith) | Peston LT<br>GC201<br>GC101 |

|       |                                                                                                                                             |           |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 15:30 | Poster and Coffee                                                                                                                           | Foyer     |
| 16:00 | Keynote: Jackie Mulligan<br>Multiplayer, Multilevel, Multiverse: the Future of Higher Education and Game Research – an Industry Perspective | Peston LT |
| 17:00 | Workshop: Building an Alumni Network: Have Your Say in its Legacy<br>(Organised by Nicole Levermore)                                        | Peston LT |
| 18:00 | Close Day 1 – Graduate Centre building closes                                                                                               |           |

\*Please remember to **sign in** (at the Reception Desk) **at the beginning of each conference day** that you attend, since we need this information for fire safety and catering purposes.

DAY 2 – WEDNESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2026:  
Graduate Centre, Mile End Campus, Queen Mary University of London

|       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |           |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 09:00 | Conference opens for Day 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Foyer     |
| 09:30 | Welcome: iGGi Director Peter Cowling and iGGi Chair Paul Cairns                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Peston LT |
| 09:45 | Keynote: Constance Steinkuehler and Kurt Squire<br>Hero, Not Case File: Community-Authored Game Design at Homeboy Game Studio                                                                                                                                          | Peston LT |
| 10:45 | Coffee and Alumni Mixer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Foyer     |
| 11:20 | iGGi Talks – Game Design (Chair: Nicole Levermore) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Birds of Play: How Gamification Took Flight in Birdwatching – Alex Flint</li> <li>Playerly and Designerly Games: Structural Interpretation and Play – Doruk Balci</li> </ul> | Peston LT |
| 12:00 | Alumni Talk: Cristina Dobre<br>What’s Happening with the VR Games: The Impact of Social Nonverbal Cues and Embodiment on VR Entertainment                                                                                                                              | Peston LT |
| 12:30 | Lunch                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Foyer     |
| 13:30 | Alumni Talk: Nick Ballou<br>Open Play: Findings and Lessons from 2 Million Hours of Public Video Games Data                                                                                                                                                            | Peston LT |

|       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                         |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 14:00 | iGGi Talks – Players (Chair: Tamsin Isaac) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What We Can Learn about the Brain through Tetris – Nicole Levermore</li> <li>What Should I Do? An Experimental Onboarding Advisor for “Total War: Pharaoh” – Dominik Jeurissen</li> <li>The Jingle of Contrasting Constructs: Comparing Measures of Immersion and Challenge from the PXI and IEQ-SF – Lauren Winter</li> </ul> | Peston LT                               |
| 15:00 | Buzz Talks (Chair: Jeremy Gow)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Peston LT                               |
| 15:30 | Poster and Coffee                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Peston LT                               |
| 16:15 | Alumni Talk: Jozef Kulik<br>A Bird’s Eye View: How Remote User Research Affects Hundreds of Games                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Peston LT                               |
| 16:45 | Track 1 >> Panel: Responsible Game Design<br>Track 2 >> Panel: Experience of Industry and Academia<br>Track 3 >> Workshop: Research Ideas (Organised and led by Laura Helsby)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Peston LT<br>GC201<br>GC101             |
| 17:45 | Close Day 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                         |
| 18:00 | BBQ Buffet and Social Event / Alumni Speed Networking / Games Night from 18:00 until 22:00                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Foyer and other rooms<br>tba on the day |

DAY 3 – THURSDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2026:  
Graduate Centre, Mile End Campus, Queen Mary University of London

|       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                  |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 09:00 | Conference opens for Day 3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Foyer                            |
| 09:30 | Alumni Talk: Carlos González Díaz<br>Eye-tracking in Social VR and What to Take Away for Game Technology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Peston LT                        |
| 10:00 | iGGi Talks – Live-service Games (Chair: tba)<br>• Why Pugging in World of Warcraft is Awful (and what you can learn from it) – Lauren Winter<br>• Playing Against the Clock: A Cross-Platform Taxonomy of Limited-Time Events – Tamsin Isaac                                                                                                                                           | Peston LT                        |
| 10:40 | Poster and Coffee                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Foyer                            |
| 11:10 | Track 1 >> Workshop: Agentic AI for Games<br>(Organised and led by Simon Lucas)<br>Track 2 >> Workshop: Collaborative Writing with Typst and Jujutsu<br>(Organised and led by Daniel Gomme)<br>Track 3 >> Workshop: Designing Seriously Casual Games<br>(Organised and led by Luiza Gossian)<br>Track 4 >> Workshop: DevOps for Game Researchers<br>(Organised and led by Nathan John) | GC201<br>GC204<br>GC114<br>GC103 |

|       |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |           |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 12:30 | Lunch                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Foyer     |
| 13:30 | iGGi Talks – Game AI (Chair: tba)<br>• JSON-Bag: Game-agnostic Automatic Feature Extraction – Dien Nguyen<br>• ‘Journeys in the Dark’: Exploring Procedural Content Generation for Descent – Toby Best | Peston LT |
| 14:10 | Keynote: Thomas Keane and Ben Ackland<br>How to “Bully” AI into Meaningful Gameplay                                                                                                                    | Peston LT |
| 15:10 | Coffee and Alumni Mixer                                                                                                                                                                                | Foyer     |
| 15:45 | Alumni Talk: James Goodman<br>What Has Game AI Ever Done for the Romans?                                                                                                                               | Peston LT |
| 16:15 | Closing Remarks: Jeremy Gow and Laurissa Tokarchuk                                                                                                                                                     | Peston LT |
| 16:45 | iGGi The Musical 🎵                                                                                                                                                                                     | Peston LT |

## ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

### ACCESSIBILITY

BiGGi Con 2026 is held at the Graduate Centre on Mile End Campus of Queen Mary University of London. Main conference activities take place on the ground floor, first floor, and second floor of the building.

For complete accessibility information for the Graduate Centre, please view the access guide under this web address: [www.accessable.co.uk/queen-mary-university-of-london/mile-end/access-guides/graduate-centre-london](http://www.accessable.co.uk/queen-mary-university-of-london/mile-end/access-guides/graduate-centre-london)

- The main entrance is located off Graduate Square and features two large revolving doors which are manually operated, and to their left additionally one single door which is power assisted (push button).
- The building has step-free level access. There are three lifts to all floors.

- There is one accessible toilet (gender neutral) on each floor of the building. Additionally (at the western end of the building, straight ahead as you exit the lift), female step-free standard toilet facilities are located on levels 1, 3 and 5; male step-free standard toilet facilities are located on levels 2, 4 and 6.
- Room GC202 is our designated Quiet Room which you can visit to decompress and rest from the conference if needed. There is a code of conduct in place for using the room – details are available at the Registration Desk and in the Quiet Room.
- Food provided considers all registered attendees' dietary needs and requirements. (e.g., vegan, gluten-free, food allergies, and specialist diets have been catered for where we were aware of them at point of ordering)

Conference ambassadors are around during the event to signpost attendees.

### ACCESSIBILITY CONTACTS

If you have any questions or concerns, if you have any suggestions on improving Inclusion and/or Accessibility of our event, if you need any assistance during the event, or if you need to report anything relating to these topics, please speak to one of the **Accessibility Contacts on site: Susanne Binder, Shopna Begum and Karl Clarke.** (You can ask at the Reception Desk to locate them.)

### INCLUSION

The iGGi conference strives to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone present at the event. We ask everyone to help us work towards this goal and be supportive of all individuals who attend, participate in and work at the conference.

There is no place whatsoever for any form of discrimination such as (including but not limited to) racism, sexism, homophobia, islamophobia, anti-semitism, ableism, ageism or classism.

Please kindly use individuals' preferred pronouns where you are aware that they were stated (e.g. printed on the conference badges).

Attendees have the opportunity to tell us if they do not wish to be included in photographs or videos. Coloured lanyards indicate attendees' preferences. Please respect these preferences. Always ask for consent from the respective individuals before sharing any images or videos of them.

## THE 2026 iGGi CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

**General Chairs:** Laurissa Tokarchuk, Jeremy Gow

**Programme Chairs:** Filip Sroka, Toby Best, Ruizhe “Jay” Yu Xia

**Outreach and Marketing Chair:** Prakriti Nayak

**Poster and Workshop Chair:** Dien Nguyen

**Local Chair:** Karl Clarke

**Tech/Media Chairs:** Karl Clarke, Prakriti Nayak

**Alumni Chair:** Nicole Levermore

**General Management:** Susanne Binder, David Hull

**Admin Support:** Shopna Begum, Helen Tilbrook, Oliver Roughton

**Website/Industry Liaison:** Susanne Binder

**Contact Email:** *iggi-admin@york.ac.uk*

# iGGi THE MUSICAL

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