# What is British Games Research?

## British DiGRA conference

## 20-21 May 2025

# Conference Booklet

Hosted by the Game Cultures research cluster,
Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research,
Birmingham City University

Co-chaired by Dr Poppy Wilde and Dr Nick Webber

BRITISH DiGRA

BCMCR | Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research

Abstracts are provided in order of presentation at the conference.

# What is British Games Research? Explaining the theme

Nick Webber

The idea for the theme for this event came about as BCMCR's Game Cultures research cluster reflected on why we might want to host the British DiGRA conference at BCU. After attending British DiGRA 2024, and after hosting the successful History of Games 2024 conference, we decided to submit an application to host this conference. It was only after discussions with other researchers at the main DiGRA conference, though, that we landed on the theme for the event.

Over the years it has been active, the British DiGRA board has often asked itself what British DiGRA is for. Is it just a conference? What else can and should it do? These questions sit alongside discussions within DiGRA at international level about how the larger organisation relates to and empowers local chapters.

British DiGRA is, of course, in full, the British Digital Games Research Association. The board of British DiGRA is elected to run the organisation, but also has a role to represent us in discussions at international level within DiGRA more broadly, and therefore within discussions about (digital) games research. If BDiGRA is doing that for us, it seems like a good idea for us to have a sense of what is being represented. From this came the question 'what is British (digital) games research?' Digital here is in parentheses because it is broadly optional: the 'digital' in the name DiGRA has proven contentious and is often ignored in our discussions, something evidenced by the 'analogue games' track for the 2025 DiGRA conference in Malta.

British DiGRA 2025, then, sought to find out something about British games research. The call for papers asked:

• What is distinguishable, and even distinctive, about British games research?

• How can we talk about British games research in a way that embraces the diversity of culture in Britain?

And, thinking in terms of games research:

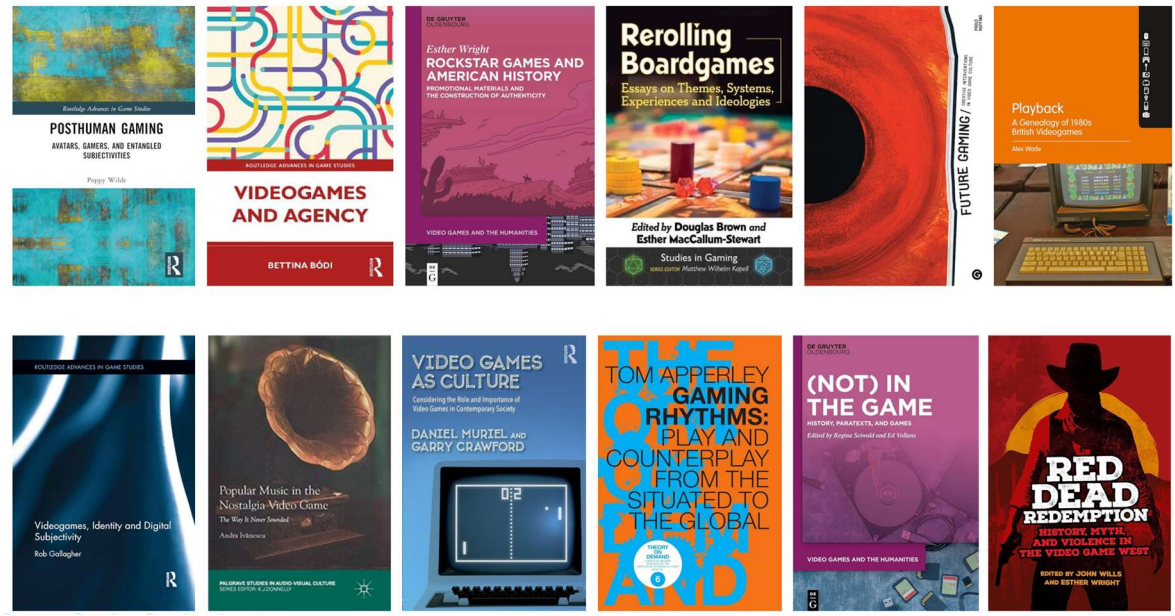
• How do constructions of Britishness relate to ideas of Europeanness and to the constituent countries of the UK?

British games research as an idea was always going to mean different things to different people. In its broadest sense, some people might imagine that the phrase describes any research about games happening in the UK. The discussion about national game studies and associated traditions is playing out elsewhere, producing an increasingly well-formed idea of what, for example, Australian games research or Italian games research is about. This would be an idea of British games research along similar lines –

and in thinking what British games research is about specifically, we might also address an assumption that Britain is at the centre of everything.

Depending on your view, you might also include research happening about British games, or games in Britain, or games with British themes, and so on. These ideas would speak to research in British Studies, a discipline well-established in US and European academia (much like American Studies in the UK, the original home of many Film Studies programmes). Or you consider British games research to be about shared themes and interests, approached in particular ways due to working within the intellectual context of British universities: research in a system facing intense challenges, about a cultural sector facing similarly intense challenges. Equally, you might take the view that British games research doesn't really mean anything – and that British DiGRA represents a network produced simply by geographical proximity, rather than anything else.

Questions of whether or not the nation and 'Britishness' are actually meaningful in our discussions, and if so how, are ones with many fascinating answers. How these ideas relate to more local, or regional, or global contexts can help us to understand a lot about contemporary game making, games-related policy, industry structures, game consumption, fan cultures, and even research priorities. The lightning talks and papers received at British DiGRA 2025, as you will see in the abstracts that follow, explored these ideas in thoughtful and compelling ways, offering a range of perspectives and approaches on these issues. Our discussions at the conference produced a sense of – and new questions about – what British games research is and might be, and identified valuable new directions for games research in the UK.




*A selection of books representing research published by speakers at the conference*

# Lightning

## Losing control in Roguelikes

Charlotte Gislam

*PCG, Roguelike, posthumanism, agency*

My research looks at how the unique interaction between human and non-human agencies when playing video games generates their intra-story worlds. I argue that this relationship between player and game, could be used as a way of patterning engagement with non-humans outside of game spaces. In particular, my research focuses on the implications for how we could find new methods to understand and interact with the climate crisis.

In the lightning talk I will provide a glimpse into this work by focusing on the loss of control Roguelikes produce for their players. By looking at the interaction between player and the Procedural Content Generation system, using Returnal (2021) as an example, I demonstrate that Roguelikes decentre the human by openly removing control through the withholding of exact spatial knowledge. These games require the player to overtly work with (and against) the game and its systems to uncover the current layout of its space. While this decentring of the player is more easily recognisable in the genre of Roguelikes, I conclude the talk by motioning towards the similarities found in the co-construction of game space in other game genres which do not use procedural production.

## British Queer Game Studies?

Andrew Bell

*Regional Game Studies, Queer Game Studies*

In this lightning talk, I consider what the identity of British queer game studies might look like, highlighting work from UK-based scholars, such as Manifestations of queerness in video games (Pelurson, 2023) and talk about my own challenges in locating myself within queer game studies when the majority of important works come from further afield, such as the US. Queer Game Studies (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017), Video Games Have Always Been Queer (Ruberg, 2019) and Unbound Queer Time in Literature, Cinema, and Video Games (Belmonte Ávila and Encarnación-Pinedo, 2025) are all extremely valuable works that have enabled my own research. However, as a practice-based researcher from the UK, whose entire childhood fell within Section 28 of the Local Governments act 1988, I feel that there is a particular identity to queer studies in general within the UK, which is obfuscated by the lack of a cohesive community of British queer game studies. My own research focuses on queering design practices, specifically through a focus on the avatar, where I consider what it means to cross, or

dissolve the monster-non-monster divide. This research is conducted through practice, which is informed by my work as a UK game developer.

**Transgender emergence in video games: representations, player reception, and design practices**

Robin Longobardi Zingarelli

*transgender representation, video games, trans game-making, independent games, queer games, player reception studies, identity tourism*

In the past two decades, trans theory has proposed new ways of conceptualising gender identity and bodily autonomy through self-exploration and political affirmation. Trans emergence has also been noted in the video game industry and queer independent game-making, both in terms of narrative design and avatar customization practices. At the same time, many transgender individuals report employing video games to explore their own gender identity. Despite this, transgender representation in games has often been criticised by trans players and game scholars, who have shown how transgender characters are usually either consigned to the role of supporters or portrayed as oddities and subjected to stereotyping.

Several questions arise. How do video games and trans presence intersect? How does transgender representation change the use of video games as a means to explore gender identity by trans players? To what extent are transgender players and designers able to benefit from the introduction of transgender themes?

This PhD project addresses these issues by blending a critical investigation of the video game medium with trans theory, autoethnography, player reception studies, and ethnographic research on players and game designers. This project analyses a broad range of video games featuring transgender representation, from independent to mainstream, to assess in what fashion this medium has been or can be the driver of change, suggesting the possibility of reclaiming video games as an emancipatory tool.

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## **Environmentalism and eco-gaming in British game studies**

Will McKeown

*eco-gaming, ecocriticism, colonialism, climate change*

Wade (2016) and Webber (2018) convincingly explore cultural identity of British games, yet the idea of what British games research is has remained relatively underdetermined. Given the urgency of the climate crisis outlined by the latest IPCC report (2023), I will suggest that an important and future-facing priority for British game studies is to replicate the current prominence of climate awareness and environmentalism in other international schools of thought. For instance, eco-gaming and environmentalism have received notable attention in the field of game studies on a global scale (May and Hall 2024; Abraham 2022; Chang 2019; Abraham and Jayemanne 2018; Kelly and Nardi 2014; Chang 2011). Of these authors, only Jayemanne is currently UK-based, and the association of environmentalism and British game studies represents an opportunity for further development. Further to this, it is logical that a "British" approach to studying games should address, or at least be sensitive to its history of colonialism, and the exploitation of subaltern lands and people (Mukherjee 2018; Mukherjee 2015). This talk will attempt to make a case for foregrounding environmentalist approaches to game studies whilst remaining cognizant of the means by which landscapes and cultures have been and continue to be exploited.

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## Historical Affects in Videogames: Feeling the Eighteenth-Century

Jack Orchard

My research explores the potential of videogames to surface historical affects and experiences. Drawing on my PhD on eighteenth-century literature, I focus specifically on this period to investigate how games can evoke historical empathy and comparable affective and epistemological states to works of pre-digital media. This lightning talk will address my existing research, beginning with a reading of the French Revolution simulation game We. The Revolution (PolySlash, 2019) as a ludic exploration of revolutionary despair. I will also discuss Hollow Knight (Team Cherry, 2017) through the lens of eighteenth-century Gothic romance, and its critique of Enlightenment philosophy. I situate this work within broader theoretical contexts, such as historical games that invoke specific periods to foster historical empathy (Boddice, 2018; Fox, 2023; Hiriart, 2024) and games that generate similar affective and epistemological states to pre-digital media (Burn, 2021; Kirkland, 2022).Finally, I will outline my future projects, including an exploration of the parallels between the mid-eighteenth-century cult of sensibility and the concept of ‘empathy games,’ an examination of the similarities between Gamergate and the ‘Feminisation Debate’ of the 1740s and 50s, and my long-term plans to expand my engagement with the Gothic into a micrograph on the Metroidvania genre.

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# Panel: Game making

## Future Factory: Envisioning Sustainable High-Value Manufacturing through Applied Game

Prasad Sandbhor, Andy Bell, Grace Jandrell

*Applied game design, games for change, climate action games, future envisioning, speculative design*

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has established that addressing climate change requires a comprehensive overhaul of our operations across all sectors, combining both top-down and bottom-up approaches to mitigation and adaptation.

High-Value Manufacturing is a critical sector that produces highly engineered, long lived products, such as aircraft, power stations, and rail, road, and naval systems. The United Kingdom is a leader in this field, ranking as the 12th largest manufacturing nation in the world. While High-Value Manufacturing in the UK drives innovation, creates employment, and generates revenue, it accounted for over 40% of the UK's consumption-based carbon emissions in 2022. To achieve national and global net-zero goals within the High-Value Manufacturing sector, further transformative interventions are necessary.

In response to this, we designed and evaluated an applied game called 'Future Factory'. The game is based on the future envisioning technique known as Episodic Future Thinking, which involves imagining detailed future scenarios for decision-making and emotion regulation. It is a card-based role-playing game that immerses players in a post-net-zero world of sustainable manufacturing. Players take on leadership roles in a forward-thinking factory, collaboratively addressing real-world challenges to achieve sustainability while exploring strategies for innovation in High-Value Manufacturing.

Future Factory was developed over 6 months through iterative playtesting with experts in climate change communication, environmental education, speculative design, game design, and High-Value Manufacturing. We evaluated the game with 31 professionals from the manufacturing sector across six play sessions. Each session included gameplay followed by a structured debrief to collect qualitative data on player experiences, insights, and the perceived impact of the game.

In this presentation, we will share the design journey of Future Factory and key findings from our evaluation. Our contributions include: (1) a detailed account of how to design a role-playing game centered on future envisioning, (2) exploratory findings regarding how the game facilitated participants' creative thinking and the potential applications of the game principles in the real world, and (3) recommendations for researchers and practitioners designing applied games for climate change and future visioning.

We believe that as the UK manufacturing sector strives to meet net-zero targets, integrating innovative and interdisciplinary tools like the Future Factory game can help bridge the gap between abstract goals and actionable strategies, engaging stakeholders at all levels of the system.

**Politics and Play: Games, Objects of Study, and National Curricula**

Alison Croasdale

*games education, schools, curriculum, media*

When we talk about 'British game studies', we discuss not only work occurring in a place but also across time: what has been, what is, and what could be in the future academic work. This paper considers both the recent past and future of the shape of the study of games, through the lens of how the historically defined school curricula for the nations' secondary students paves the way for future scholars of games (and other digital media), or not, and how these structures of political power represent a way of defining games as objects of study that has become institutionally entrenched nationwide.

In the same way the nations that comprise Britian are not unified in their politics, neither are they united in the kinds of media education provided for students, particularly for the focus of this paper, between the ages of 11-18 in England (Connolly, 2021). If we take the 2013 English National Curriculum as a worst-case example, we observe how the study of any kind of digital media has been removed from core study (Gove, 2013). Even within the 'Media Studies' qualifications students study selectively, the objects of study are limited, outdated, and not productive of engaged students in the field of media study generally, and particularly regarding games. In the case of the English curriculum again, in Media Studies at GCSE the 'game study' is limited to Fortnite, and at A Level, the Assassins Creed franchise, with the 'content' around both texts leaning heavily into concerns of industry and marketing. In vocational qualifications at Levels 1/2 (GCSE equivalent), students encounter games as objects of study, but indiscriminately, with AAA games aligned with mobile apps and similar, under the banner of 'interactive media.' Vocational qualifications at Level 3 (A Level equivalent) offer optional modules on game design and game writing, but these rely on teaching staff possessing the necessary technical skills (a rarity, as school Media teachers are often non-subject specialists) (Green and Connolly, 2022). These insights into curriculum design for pre-HE students give context for the young people that are emerging into HE and represent a concern for how a large sector of formal education devalues or ignores the study of media, games, and play. It also contextualises the concern that students are entering HE without a broader experience of critical media literacy (Ávila, 2021), and with limited understanding of what study of media forms can represent.

The paper concludes with a more hopeful note, sharing an example of game making research conducted in a London secondary school, designed to counteract the limits of the prescribed curriculum. The case study in question demonstrates the potential of introducing game study, and practical game design, into classroom spaces, as an opportunity for both inspiring critical engagement with the study of games, but also to organically generate broader understanding of the nuances of games in under 18-year-olds. By reconfiguring games-as-objects-of-study, the research presented here demonstrates one form of resistance to institutional, political limitations shaping game studies in British educational spaces.

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## **Engine Workers: Exploring the Impact of Game Engines on Digital Artists in the UK**

Paolo Ruffino

*Game Engines, Digital Artists, Creative Industries, Platform Economies, Artistic Practice*

This presentation will discuss preliminary findings from the "Engine Workers" research project, which investigates how game engines like Unity and Unreal Engine are shaping the work and lives of digital artists in the United Kingdom. These artists, increasingly reliant on game engines for asset production and distribution through platform marketplaces, are becoming key players across diverse sectors including media arts, game development, film, fashion, and architecture (Chia 2022; Nicoll and Keogh 2019).

The project employs a mixed-methods approach, combining data collected during a workshop with 12 Engine Workers at King's College London in early May with follow-up interviews. This research responds to the conference theme "What is British Games Research?" by focusing on the lived experiences of artists within the UK's creative industries ecosystem.

Game engines like Unity and Unreal Engine have transcended their initial confines in videogame development, evolving into versatile platforms that now influence a wide array of creative and scientific fields. These powerful tools are not just limited to gaming; they have reshaped Hollywood visual effects, virtual production, and even pre-visualisation of movie sets, as well as contemporary art and architecture. Game engines are also utilised to create training simulations for various industries, including the

military (Malazita 2024). As these engines standardise aesthetic and functional practices, they simultaneously raise critical questions about artistic authorship, expressive diversity, accessibility, environmental sustainability, and the impact of increased digital consumption. The project builds on existing initiatives such as the training sessions organised by arts institutions such as FACT in Liverpool and Arebyte in London, which aim to introduce artists to game engine production. These initiatives have helped to establish early forms of bottom-up knowledge about asset creation and distribution, and have created communities of digital artists working with game engines at different stages of their careers. The project explores how these fledgling communities are resisting, challenging and experimenting with the implications of 'engine labour'.

By examining how game engines impact artistic practices, production models, and economic realities, this research project contributes to a broader understanding of the UK's evolving creative landscape. It highlights the significant influence of game technologies beyond the gaming sector, demonstrating their pervasive impact on various creative and economic domains crucial to the UK's economy.

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# Panel: Culture

## Digital Cultural Heritage and Play: Exploring UK Heritage through Mixed Reality Play and the LoGaCulture Project

Charlie Hargood, Jack Brett

*Mixed Reality, Cultural Heritage, Locative Games*

UK games research has often seek to apply the interactions and technology of games to other research problems such as education, health, or tourism through what is broadly

understood as ‘Serious Games’. A particularly promising avenue of this work is Mixed Reality (or Locative) Digital Cultural Heritage (MRDCH) where the UKs rich variety of heritage locations have untapped narrative potential that new mediums (such as play) can explore, along with a need for new avenues of engagement. Pre-smart phone research in this domain would often seek to create experiences with multiple bulky devices connected together as limited prototypes such as the Ambient Wood project Weal et al. (2003) or the Chawton House experience (Halloran et al. 2005), or the Riot! mixed media experience in Bristol (Blythe et al. 2006). However, the arrival of smart phones enabled UK research to develop a range of interactive playful experiences to engage with cultural heritage such as the range of locative narrative centric games created by the StoryPlaces project (Hargood et al. 2018), or the mixed reality games developed by the Nottingham Mixed Reality Lab (Wetzel et al. 2017).

LoGaCulture (Locative Games for Culture - https://logaculture.eu/) is an example of contemporary research in this space including 3 UK teams from Bournemouth University, University of Southampton, and the National Trust all designing and exploring MRDCH games for the Avebury stone circle site in Wiltshire. Avebury is a world heritage site and the largest stone circle in the world with a multilayered history of events through neolithic, medieval, Victorian, and contemporary periods that makes it rich in narrative potential as a subject for locative games. The LoGaCulture UK team has identified a number of specific research topic in this space that they are targeting with their work: technologies to support the creation of MRDCH games, designing for social experiences in these works, the delivery of immersion and presence in these experiences, and effective Ludonarrative in MRDCH games. The project also seeks to develop a new ethical framework for MRDCH experiences both for creators and policy makers to inform on potential risks and mitigation strategies.

As part of this exploration LoGaCulture has launched a paid commissioned for 10 UK game designers to create 2 MRDCH games each for the Avebury site over the course of a year. The design process is documented through diaries, surveys, and interviews capturing a comprehensive picture of the creative process in 20 games. This longitudinal study helps to understand the impact of different design practices and the impact of different creativity support technologies. At the same time the anthology of games themselves (to be released as part of a summer 2025 festival of games at Avebury) provide a means to understand how different mechanics and ludonarrative approaches engage visitors with the stories of the site. In this conference presentation we present the potential for UK MRDCH games, the LoGaCulture project and its goals, and early observations from the Avebury creative commission.

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## "Let's Play, Bab!" Hyperlocalisation and Birmingham's Games and Gaming Culture

Regina Seiwald

*hyperlocatisation; Birmingham; community practice; research; policy*

Video game studies in the UK has emerged as a dynamic field, bridging academic discourse with industry and public engagement on a global scale. While global trends impact local development, the local (in the sense of 'location') is often overlooked in research (Wade and Webber 2016; Kirkpatrick 2021; Mandiberg 2021). This paper explores how local expressions of game, gameplay, and playfulness influence British games research by "locat[ing] the past spatially" (Wade and Webber 2016: 2), with a specific hyperlocal focus on Birmingham as a city that exemplifies the synergy between local culture, innovation, and policy development. In this context, the hyperlocal is understood as a term borrowed from architecture and geography, as focusing on a small geographical area or region (Rode 2021), as well as from sociology and media studies, as responding to and incorporating the local (Lindén et al. 2024: 794). By examining local industry presence (e.g. facepunch studios in Birmingham, Codemasters and Rare in "Silicon Spa"), research hubs (e.g. BCU's Games Cultures research cluster, the Creative Industries incubator at UoB, Aston University's A-GamE Centre, BOM, etc.), public engagement with games (e.g. boardgame cafés, arcade halls, VR studios, the Birmingham Anime & Gaming Con, etc.), and local game-based initiatives and community programmes (e.g. Digital Birmingham or the interactive game-book A Rainbow for Amala), this study considers how geographical and temporal contexts influence gaming cultures and research (Wade and Webber 2016; Stokes 2020; Swalwell 2021).

Birmingham's status as a hub for both virtual and physical gaming spaces offers a rich tapestry for analysis. These places and events not only contribute to the region's economy but also facilitate public engagement with games and gaming, demonstrating the increasingly blurred lines between the production of games and their consumption. The UK Games Fund, bolstered by a £3 million government grant (gov.uk 2024), highlights the growing recognition of games as a significant economic and cultural

force, and local projects, such as the interactive digital game-based book A Rainbow for Amala, funded by National Lottery through Arts Council England, move games into the community.

The core argument of this paper is thus that games research must account for both the past and future trajectories of gaming culture if unique regional – in this case, 'British' – iterations and manifestations want to be defined (Wade 2016; Webber 2020; Kirkpatrick 2021). This spatio-temporal approach aims at generating an understanding of how the local context, such as regional gaming communities, university programmes, research initiatives, industry presence as well as council and government support, shape attitudes towards game studies and inform broader policies. By investigating how these elements interact in Birmingham and the surrounding area, this paper argues that British games research can move beyond global frameworks to embrace regional diversity, fostering an inclusive understanding of a games and gaming culture that resonates with local communities.

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## A Framework of Exclusion? Analysing the UK's Video Game Research Framework

Danielle Kleinerman, Bruno De Paula

*culture, research, UK government, policy*

The Video Game Research Framework (DCMS, 2023) is a document that 'aims to facilitate and promote high quality research on videogames.' The framework posits videogames as interdisciplinary (Deterding, 2017; Taylor, 2024), recognising the role that different disciplines play in forming part of the fabric of videogame research. However, the framework encourages and exemplifies research aims in a limited number of fields, mainly pertaining education, health, law and innovation, favouring quantitative, large-scale, longitudinal methodologies, concerned with the general 'impact' games have on those who interact with them directly. This is accompanied by an underlying logic that sees videogame's economic potential as pivotal for undertaking videogame research.

While we do not dispute that these fields are indeed relevant for games-related research, our main concern is localised in the erasure of one of the main reasons why videogames are such an important aspect in contemporary societies (Muriel and Crawford, 2018): their cultural value. Even if the framework recognises that games are 'an important part of our daily lives, and of the UK's social and cultural fabric', a brief examination of the kind of research put forward by it as desirable ones, as discussed above, downplays games as cultural drivers. Where does this leave, for example, games research aligned with cultural studies, itself a quintessential part of British academic history? How is the range of work done in British (Video) Game Studies since at least the early 2000s (e.g., Carr, 2005; Jayemanne, 2020; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Webber, 2018), being perceived, if at all? Significantly, the framework, which is over 70 pages in length, does not directly cite any existing games research, cultural or otherwise.

Another point of concern in the document is in the mistrust of data collection by researchers, who are encouraged to 'be aware that direct engagement with players for research study can lead to self-reporting and subjective data, rather than objective data directly from industry.' Not only does this (1) raise a worrying prejudice against researchers operating out of universities or academic institutions, (2) suggest that data should be "objective" rather than "subjective", but it also (3) places the videogame industry at the centre of games research, alienating players.

The framework has—or might still—be used to highlight 'shared priorities with Research Councils and their funding streams.' Beyond this, it is unclear whether the document has any bearing on the livelihoods of game studies researchers in the UK. We propose to analyse the document, using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), to better understand:

1) What areas of games research are deemed legitimate, and by omission, which are not.

2) What underlying biases are at play, and how these prioritise certain disciplines and subject areas over others.

3) What implications this research framework might have for games studies in the UK.

Our final aim is to use the framework to catalyse British games researchers to consider the following: What is our role in reacting or responding to the current (and/or future) framework of the same kind, if at all?

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# Panel: Approaches to horror

## Red in Tooth and Pixel Claw: Nature-Horror in ZX Spectrum Games

John Wills

*Nature; Spectrum; Survival-Horror; 1980s; Computer Games*

The culture of nature (see Wilson, The Culture of Nature, 1991) and how humans have grappled with their relationship with the natural world, veering between romanticization and worship and extraction and destruction, takes on new resonance in a digital domain. How games have reprogrammed such a complicated sensory, historic, spiritual and physical relationship remains of interest, with potential impact on climate crisis understanding (see, for example, Chang, Playing Nature, 2019). This paper explores an early digital culture of nature by looking at a range of titles for the 8-bit British ZX Spectrum computer popular in the 1980s. Specifically, it looks at how 1980's games depicted forms of ecology and nature on screen, and through a variety of gaming

mechanisms, involved the player in a simulated experience of nature, at times familiar, and at times highly unfamiliar. The paper explores a number of case study titles to highlight forms of digital play. These include Ant Attack (Quiksilva 1983), Sabre Wulf (Ultimate Play the Game, 1984) and The Rats (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), the latter serving as an adaptation of a James Herbert 1970's novel. Collectively, I argue that such titles produced an experiential sense of nature as a constant and looming 'threat' and encouraged players to conceive and tackle nature that way. The games contributed to a wider process of gamifying and vilifying nature in a new digital era (see Wills, "Exploring the Culture of Nature…" 2002), often presenting it as barrier to progress (also seen in titles such as Atari's Pitfall! 1982), that transplanted older colonial, literary and cultural ideas around the natural world into a virtual domain.

The case studies also highlight an underlying horror of (digital) nature. Borrowing from popular film and literature, and the genres of action and horror, such a range of titles for the ZX Spectrum sought, within the confines of limited graphics and memory, to provide a sense of wilderness and its creatures as fundamentally scary. The Rats offered a plague of rodents destroying London, Sabre Wulf provided a colonial view of the great outdoors and violent discovery, while Ant Attack drew on engrained notions of the 'other' (especially insects), putting giant ants on screen in a nod to the 1950's B-movie Them! (1954). My choice of case studies highlights the emergence of nature-horror titles in the period (often displaying gothic tropes), with all kinds of creatures symbolizing evil and danger. Collectively, such Spectrum games also might be deemed early experiments in the game genre of survival-horror (Perron, World of Scary Videogames, 2018) and speak to modern gothic gaming (Kirkland, Videogames and the Gothic, 2022). Arguably, they help build a virtual culture of nature that endures to this day - of pixel nature red in tooth and pixel claw.

**Roll for Sanity: Are Horror Games Horrifying?**

Ben Rimmer, Esther MacCallum-Stewart

*TTRPG, tabletop roleplaying game, tension, horror, game design*

How do tabletop roleplaying games cultivate horror, specifically fear and tension during play? Whilst videogames have ample opportunities to scare their players, from mysterious fog and camera angles, to things that go bump on the soundtrack, TTRPGs rely much more heavily on 'theatre of the imagination'. This paper explores the mechanics used in TTRPGs, and asks whether it is possible to truly scare a player. If a game is meant to be fun, how do horror games navigate between things that are genuinely frightening, and still provide an enjoyable, safe experience for players? We look at some of the systems that have dominated this area – namely, the ever-present spectres of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) and Call of Cthulhu (CoC) but move beyond this to examine alternative systems which try to recreate horror, either through game

mechanics, or by providing guidelines to induce terror in player groups. Recent developments in TTRPGs often rely heavily on strong characterisation and imaginative practice, but this is at odds with horror games, which often need to scare players through scarcity – for example through sanity or stress systems which drive players to madness and irrationality, or by relying on group behaviour to collectively sustain a willingness to be afraid whilst playing. We ask whether horror games are in need of further design in order to achieve this, or is this simply a monster we can never remove from under the bed?

**The evolution of folk horror in Britain across media: "The Excavation of Hob's Barrow" and new approaches to the folk genre within the industrial complex of the video games industry**

Eugenio Triana

*Folk Horror, Genres, Worldbuilding*

Folk horror as a genre was first defined as applying to the medium of cinema (Rod Cooper, Kine Weekly 1970). It gained wider acceptance in film studies conversations after it was popularised by Mark Gatiss' "A History of Horror" Documentary series (2010). The works highlighted by these critics and historians as defining folk horror often centre around a series of British independent horror films of the late 1960s and early 1970s: "The Blood on Satan's Claw" (1971), "Witchfinder General" (1968) and "The Wicker Man" (1973). These films sought to emulate the success of distributors like Hammer horror in the American market, and often painted British folk traditions as forbidding and foreign.

This essay examines how the more varied production practices of the video game industry has led to a re-examination of the British folk horror tradition, as exemplified by the horror video game "The Excavation of Hob's Barrow". Created mostly by a single developer, Shaun Aitcheson, "The Excavation of Hob's Barrow" draws on its creators experiences of growing up in Yorkshire to paint a more nuanced and complex picture of British folk reality and traditions. Influenced by the works of 19th century horror short story writer MR James, "The Excavation of Hob's Barrow" also situates its story within the philological concerns of the 19th century, as a metaphor for our own interest in the revival of folk traditions in an increasingly technologically dominated world.

Comparing "The Excavation of Hob's Barrow" to the folk horror revival in film with films like "The Witch" (2015) and "A Field in England" to show how the different production modalities of video games allowed Aitcheson to produce a cultural artefact that was more uniquely in accordance with British traditions.

## Panel: Political sensitivities

**British Literary History and the New Ludic Economy of Character**

Rob Gallagher

In her 1998 monograph The Economy of Character literary critic Deidre Shauna Lynch argues that 'in Britain more than in other national cultures characters have belonged not only to literary history, but also to a transmedia context' (1998, 11). This might seem like a strange claim to make in a survey of Eighteenth century novels. In recent years there have been many useful accounts of transmedia ecosystems, of the role of videogame characters within them, and of the changing terms on which characters are made and monetised in the digital era (Wilde 2019; Thon 2019; Blom 2023). Many of these have focused on the US, and on the relationship between media such as comic books, movies and games (Mikos 2017). Others have looked back to the emerging 'Media Mix' of postwar Japan (Steinberg 2012). Yet Lynch's account of a transmedia culture of novels, plays, 'print shop windows… waxwork displays and shops that sell china figures' catering to a popular appetite for 'merchandising, commodity tie-ins and spin-offs' (1998, 11) offers us a different genealogy for today's transmedia culture.

Lynch is not alone in having located important precedents for contemporary transmedia forms in the trajectories of British characters like Bram Stoker's Dracula and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (Denson and Mayer 2018; Pearson 2021), Dickens' Mr. Pickwick and George DuMaurier's Trilby (Haugvedt 2023). Such studies help us see that the modes of handling, enacting and engaging with characters that videogames and other 'new' media make possible have precedents that long predate cinema. But Lynch does more than just shift the timeframe and geographical focus for debates about the (pre-)history of today's transmedia characters. Stressing 'the reciprocal shaping of eighteenth-century Britain's market culture and its culture of character', Lynch foregrounds the role of transmedia characters in enabling audiences to situate themselves within social and economic landscape of a rapidly commercializing society (Lynch 1998, 19).

This paper proposes that a British game studies might be one that draws on such histories and theories to cast a new light on the contemporary 'economy of character' and the role of videogames within it – to think about what video characters do, economically, culturally and politically. Such an approach need not pay overmuch respect to national borders – to do so would be not just counterproductive but perverse given the global flows that have seen Derby-born Lara Croft drift between English, American, Japanese and Swedish ownership over the course of her career. It could however, help us to understand the significance of characters in an age where the phenomenal 'commercial success' of popular 'gacha' games like Genshin Impact (MiHoYo 2022) 'rests on how compelling the characters are' (O'Dwyer 2023, 246), to investigate the changing nature of character design in an age of platformised creative

tools like Epic's Metahuman creator (Chia 2022) and to explore the way character design has become a point of political contestation in the age of "Gamergate 2.0" (Baud and Harrer 2024).

**Video Game Nasties: The Origins of Video Game Censorship in the UK**

Andra Ivănescu

*censorship, regulation, violence, BBFC, rating boards*

Censorship is a pervasive yet polarizing concept in contemporary society. While often normalized in everyday contexts—such as watershed restrictions on television or moderation of hate speech—it remains contentious, linked to debates on free expression, "cancel culture," and political polarization. Despite its prominence in these broader discussions, video game censorship in the UK has received little attention. This paper explores the origins of video game classification in the UK, situating it within the nation's unique history of censorship.

As Mathews (1994) notes, "censorship as a way of filtering culture lies at the core of English custom," reflecting a coercive societal tradition that has regulated games (from skittles to football) alongside literature, theatre, and film. The UK's early adoption of age-based ratings for video games in 1986, a world first, was a direct response to the 'video nasties' moral panic of the 1980s (Petley, 2011). However, this history is also shaped by international concerns about video game violence, beginning with Death Race in 1976 (Kocurek, 2012), and culminating in the establishment of global rating boards like the ESRB (US) and Sofurin (Japan) in the 1990s. Simultaneously, the UK's engagement with video games reflects a unique context, marked by the bedroom coder culture of the 1980s, tabloid-driven moral outrage, and Thatcherist entrepreneurialism.

This paper examines the development of video game ratings by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), formerly the British Board of Film Censors, and its ties to prior media regulation through three key case studies: Jack the Ripper (1987), Carmageddon (1997), and Manhunt 2 (2007). Jack the Ripper, developed by the St. Bride's School (also known as the Silver Sisterhood religious movement) in Ireland (RoI), was the first video game to receive an 18 certificate from the BBFC. Publisher CRL deliberately pursued this age rating as a marketing strategy to boost the game's appeal, embodying a transgressive relationship with authority that aligns with a distinctly British cultural tradition. Carmageddon, developed by Stainless Games, was notable for its groundbreaking physics engine and its thematic connection to the earlier Death Race controversy, which sparked the first major video game moral panic. Initially denied classification by the BBFC due to its graphic content, Carmageddon was ultimately passed without censorship following an appeal. Similarly, Manhunt 2, developed by Rockstar Games, was denied classification and became the focus of widespread media attention and public outcry. Its ban prompted a judicial review, questioning the BBFC's

role and authority in regulating and censoring video game content. These three case studies illustrate the evolving tensions between the video game industry, the BBFC, and public perceptions of morality, showing how video game censorship in the UK has both reflected and shaped broader societal debates about regulation, free expression, and the role of authority in controlling media content.

By situating video game regulation within the broader context of the UK's media censorship history, this paper contends that video game classification plays a central role in cultural governance, influencing not only public perceptions but also industry standards and practices.

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## Trauma-informed Gaming: The Quiet Things and Beyond

Erica Masserano, Alyx Jones, Stephen Mooney, Jamie Popowich, Angela Szczepaniak

*Trauma-informed, mental health, narrative, creative, practice-based, documentary, playtesting, walking simulator, independent games, best practice, design, voice, player experience, identification, content warnings, interactive narrative, accessibility*

Silver Script Games are developing The Quiet Things, an autobiographical narrative game funded by the UK Games Fund and based on the developer's real-life experiences of childhood abuse and trauma. (https://www.silverscriptgames.com/presskit). The

project aims to stimulate conversations about abuse and mental health by embedding real diary entries in the game design, through player interaction, and play experience. These themes and compositional mechanisms raise various questions, challenges and problems around voice, sensitivity, identity and representation as these intersect with player perception and identification. The developer is also interested in how to avoid dramatizing, inaccurate and inappropriate representations and causing the player harm.

Working with Silver Script Games, academics from the Creative Writing field in the University of Surrey are leading trauma-informed research and playtesting around player experience of the narrative, as well as the production of a "Making Of" documentary which doubles as a critical reflection on this unique process. These will inform the game directly in developing mechanisms to present players with sensitive content in a trauma-informed fashion while enabling play practices that are engaging, empathetic and narratively satisfying. They will also act as a study in best practice in the gaming industries with interactive narrative projects that wish to engage players with sensitive and potentially traumatic themes and play-practices.

The presentation will showcase the findings of the first phases of our qualitative, interdisciplinary research, including our discussions on sensitive content and content warnings in games, preliminary results from our supported playtesting with 15 participants, and any other insights afforded by the documentary practices embedded in the project.

Key questions include:

• How can a trauma-informed approach to game design inform choices around player perspective and access to gameplay information with the goal of making accessible, complicating and enriching player responses and practices in engaging with traumatic real-world experiences sensitively in-game and post-game?

• What kinds of narrative techniques, forms and structures coming from contemporary creative writing practices in innovative writing, screenwriting and autobiographical writing are best suited for integrating immersive textual engagement with sensitive topics and themes into interactive digital narratives in trauma-informed ways?

• How can the industry use focused research and playtesting to inform best practice considerations on design and narrative decisions around sensitive topics?

Approaches include:

• Creative consultancy: academics will act as creative consultants (including script and dialogue consultation) providing feedback on concepts, narrative, mechanics and representation of the issues addressed by the game. They will also provide best practice

analysis on sensitive materials and their portrayal in games and on player identification in relation to that (including content warnings).

• Playtesting: academics will source Surrey students to playtest the game and document their feedback on sensitive content and the play-practices, recording their responses and experiences for further discussion that will inform the developer's decisions.

• Practice-based research: methodologies will include practice-based creative-critical responses and reflection by academics and industry partners as captured in the "making of"; reviews of existing approaches to the themes in literature and interactive media, as a wider impact-based study of materials around, and best practice approaches to, designing and playing games which tell sensitive stories

# Lightning strikes back

### RuneScape: From Britain to the Big Time

Will Butler

*Game Development, Globalisation, UK Games Industry*

My PhD research explores the role and responsibility of game developers within the games preservation ecosystem. I'm currently conducting a case study on the Cambridge-based game publisher and developer, Jagex, known for their legacy MMORPG, RuneScape. This one-to-one access to commercial game developers allows a bottom-up evaluation of their development methods, workplace culture, and insights into their flagship game RuneScape. Developed primarily by brothers Andrew and Paul Gower, RuneScape launched in 2001 and quickly became a success in a time where dot-com businesses were not making profits - especially in the UK.

One of RuneScape's key appeals is its homage and remixing of classic British fantasy. The creators themselves credit Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams, and J.R.R. Tolkien for establishing the comic humour and witty tone of the game (Calvin, 2021: 14). While Jagex maintained its British identity for the first few years of its operation, by 2003 the company had nearly 30 employees (Dodson, 2003) and the passage from its corporate site that denoted it was based in England was removed. Replacing it with a message that read: "Jagex intends to become a significant operator in all the major gaming markets worldwide".

This quick talk examines the timeline in which Jagex shifted its vision toward a global market, analysing this in parallel with other role-playing game history as well as scholarship concerning implications of the globalisation of the games industry.

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## With or Without You: the opportunities & challenges of researching the European videogame industry

Garry Crawford, Charlotte Gislam, Gaynor Bagnall, Victoria Gosling, Neta Yodovich

*culture, value, game studies, industry, impact*

This paper draws on multifaceted research from GAMEHEARTS, a three-year multinational Horizon Europe project. The overall aim of this project is to explore the social and cultural value and importance of the European videogame industry. This project involves working in close parentship with key companies and organisations from the videogame sector, as well as others within the wider cultural industries. In many ways, this project draws on a history and tradition of British Game Studies, that has often offered a focus on the 'wider social, cultural and political context of digital games' (Crawford MacCallum-Stewart, & Ruffino, 218: 9). However, in an era of an increased emphasis on industry collaboration and results being measured in terms of impact, the importance of this paper lies in the questions it raises about the continued criticality of academia and more particularly British Game Studies.

## Conversations with Complexity: Making a Meal out of a Mountain

Oliver Bates, Ben Kirman

*research through design, game design, conversations, complexity, systems*

We are game designers who make games with people about politics, futures, complexity and real issues. Meal Deal is a card game about gig working delivery riders. It is not a "good game". It is unfair and the delivery algorithm and police can be unjust to players. But this is a central dynamic of the real systems under which couriers work.

In our work we are exploring game design as a form of research through design, where we do research, glean insight and create knowledge through designing, making, and playing games. Through this process, conversations are necessary to confront the gritty reality of real-world systems, making visible the complexity of systems, the complexity of our lives, and the complexity of unknowable futures.

Meal Deal is not a neat product that proposes a solution, or has a specific pedagogic aim, but an artefact of a game design process that engages a dialogue with the dynamics of the system.

How do we, as researchers, value the process of game design as a way to generate knowledge, without falling into the trap of making games that are shrink wrapped

products that smooth out the jagged and uncomfortable edges of the systems they represent?

**Gaming Generations: Exploring the History of Play in Mid-Twentieth Century Cardiff through Co-Productive Game Making**

Rhianedd Collins

*video games; history of play; hyperlocal; interdisciplinary; intergenerational; landscape; oral history; co-production; mid-twentieth century*

Digital gaming is not only transforming styles and forms of play but the landscape of play in Britain. This may evoke dystopian fears of children permanently glued to consoles and phone screens rather than running through puddles and climbing up trees. The digital evolution of play, however, has yet to and likely never will replace children's playful engagement with their external, local environments. Instead, it is an extension of the landscape of play. When children interact with video games, they navigate landscapes both similar and different to their own (Giddings 2014).

This talk introduces my interdisciplinary PhD research explores how co-creating and playing historical video games might introduce younger generations to the historic play landscape of their local community during the mid-twentieth century in Cardiff – a city that experienced considerable economic, industrial, demographic, and cultural change during the interwar and postwar period (Johnes, 2012; Davies, 2007). Using oral history and co-production methodologies with older adults and children, this project explores using game making to facilitate intergenerational connections within local communities, and to encourage reflection about changing play landscapes. It examines the meanings and emotional experiences of historic and contemporary places of play and how games might conduce intergenerational understanding and socialisation around these spatial themes.

**Gaming towards a theory of digital fashion**

David Cumming

*fashion, digitial fashion, mechanics, digital owernship, players, fashion systems*

My present research agenda surrounds recent convergences of videogames and fashion. Central to this enquiry is 'digital fashion;' a loosely defined umbrella term applied across academic and industrial discourses to encompass fully or semi-digital fashion garments, rendered through computer graphics software and 'worn' by means of digital technologies and platforms including social media, extended reality, and virtual worlds. It is broadly acknowledged that most digital fashion forms trace a genealogy back to videogames somehow. Videogames have therefore been promoted as a field to investigate various dimensions of digital fashion, from digital ownership to consumer behaviour.

Often forgotten however in these endeavours are the ludic qualities of videogames; a conspicuous oversight should videogames be construed as the 'native' domains of digital fashion. My ongoing research, situated in the fashion capital of London, works to put into focus the ludic mechanics and playful systems of videogames which shape how players understand, interact, and relate to digital fashion objects. With focus particularly on how such mechanics and systems are informed by and reflect neoliberal capitalist values, I work to highlight how problematic, exploitative tendencies of conventional fashion are replicated in digital fashion systems despite their purported egalitarian and ecological virtues.

**The Genius Loci in UK**

Daniele Monaco

*genius loci, philosophy of dwelling, philosophy of games, ludic subjectivity, British landscapes*

This research, part of my PhD project, delves into the analysis of the genius loci (spirit of the place) as a framework for understanding the existential connections between humans and places in real (Malpas 1999), folkloristic, and game worlds (Gualeni and Vella 2020), focusing on the UK context. Drawing on Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling (Heidegger 1971; 2009; 1977) and Norberg-Schulz's perspective on the Genius loci (Norberg-Schulz 1980; 1992; 1974), this study examines how places possess unique identities and foster belonging and continuity with the communities that inhabit them.

Employing phenomenological, ethnographic, and autoethnographic methods, I investigate how the concept of Genius loci has evolved from Southern Europe to the UK, highlighting its influence in British culture (Durrell 1971; Lee 1925; Pope 1731) through festivals and folklore, as the Jack-in-the-Green in Hastings (Leech 2008). Then, I compare such influence to the representation of British places in video games, as in Dear Esther (The Chinese Room 2012) and Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (The Chinese Room 2016), displaying how the unique identity of British landscape and cities enhances virtual experiences and conveys a specific nuance of hybrid genius loci: often grounded in natural imagery, but universally accessible through the digital screen.

Beyond observing the influence of genius loci in British festivals and imagery, this study contributes to the research on ludic positionality (Vella 2015), suggesting that the player and their being-in-the-gameworld (Vella 2016) can foster a relationship of dwelling in (Vella 2019), enriching our understanding of places in both physical and digital realms.

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# Lightning returns

## Re-Reading EDGE Magazine's "The Girl Issue" Cover

Harrison Charles

*video game adverts, history, sexuality, gender, magazines*

In this lightning talk, I conduct a visual/textual analysis of “The Girl Issue” cover (2003) of EDGE magazine – a UK-based gaming publication – as offering varied readings which highlight established arguments yet also challenge heterocentric assumptions around UK gaming cultures. The cover – advertising Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball (Tecmo, 2003) – features a silhouetted figure that is assumed to be a female game character. Dominant interpretations would suggest it is a gendered (sexual) representation for heterosexual male desire and viewership (Summers and Miller, 2014; Fisher, 2015), especially if it acknowledged that gaming adverts have historically been connected to (heterosexual) “male adolescence” (Burill, 2008; Bootes, 2024). Yet, it we also acknowledge queer gamers/viewership has always been a part of gaming cultures (Ruberg, 2019), this cover becomes ambiguous as to its intended audience with no overt indication that it is for the sole (sexual) viewership of heterosexual male

engagement. Instead, re-reading “The Girl Issue” beyond dominant perspectives could allow alternate interpretations to become visible that may also suggest engagements to queer gamers. Revisiting such (historical) material to consider other readings embedded within them invites reflections to heterocentric assumptions around gaming artefacts that have defined our notions of UK gaming histories and cultures.

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## **Asylums and Acrid Smoke: Comparing the (Re)Presentation of Victorian London in Alice: Madness Returns and Assassin’s Creed Syndicate**

Joanne Mills

*Representation, Victorian London, Embodied Experiences*

Building on concepts of ‘ludo-compression’ (Aarseth, 2019), and game play aesthetics as a method of fostering an engaged connection with the user, this paper considers the Victorian London of both Alice: Madness Returns and Assassin’s Creed Syndicate; representing the author’s current research immersion and engagement within video games and game-like environments, where the audience as player takes on a “situated, embodied” role within digitally mediated “emergent perceptual experiences” (Schniz, 2020; Keogh, 2018).

While very different games, both (re)presentations portray a comparison between industrial, claustrophobic streets and more affluent areas through both the allusion to the design and placing of smoke-filled views, buildings, and dock areas (Alice: Madness Returns, and the Alhambra Music Hall in Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate) and recognisable landmarks and buildings (Assassin’s Creed Syndicate). Further, the threat of underlying monstrosity in both plain sight and behind closed doors is achieved through both environment design and game play objectives in both games, not lease in the portrayal of psychiatric care, medical treatment, and child exploitation.

This paper is also of potential relevance to current debates on digitalisation and online engagement, and the development of innovative and interdisciplinary titles occupying spaces between art, play, and education.

**Posthuman Game Studies and why Britain should care**

Poppy Wilde

*posthumanism, posthuman game studies, Enlightenment, humanism, colonialism*

This lightning talk discusses the emergence of posthumanism, and specifically critical posthumanism, in game studies. Starting with an overview of critical posthumanism, I note its key themes and concepts, including the rejection of anthropocentrism, and of ideas of a static "self" in control of one's own actions. I demonstrate critical posthumanism's rejection of binary dualisms, including Cartesian dualism (and therefore its difference to transhumanism), and highlight critical posthumanism's roots. I then map some of the ways in which critical posthumanism has been used in game studies, including, for example, posthuman explorations of agency as distributed, views of entities as entangled, and new materialist approaches. I draw attention to a small selection of recent contributions to the field from scholars based in Britain, such as the contribution on "Games, Gamers and Posthumanism" from Tanya Krzywinska and Douglas Brown (both University of Falmouth) to The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television (2015), the special issue of Convergence on "Politicizing Agency in Digital Play After Humanism" (2022), co-edited by Aleena Chia and Paolo Ruffino (Goldsmiths and King's College London respectively) and featuring work from other scholars based in Britain, including Rob Gallagher (King's College London), and the 2023 publication Posthuman Gaming: Avatars, Gamers and Entangled Subjectivities by Poppy Wilde (Birmingham City University). Further, I argue that, as a colonial country with a strong history of oppression, as well as country through which much Enlightenment thought gained traction and mobilisation, Britain now owes it to the world to critically reinterrogate its humanist histories.

**British Cultural Studies and Games in Chinese Television**

Charlotte Stevens

*British cultural studies, China, representation of games, television*

This presentation reflects on the influence of British cultural studies on my approach to reading and understanding the representation of video games in Chinese popular television, and in particular the ways that gaming is shown as integrated into daily life.

I have two purposes: first, to start from Raymond Williams's proposition that 'culture is ordinary' to approach the diegetic negotiation that takes places in Chinese dramas about gaming. When the camera appears to move through a computer monitor into an animated space, or visual elements from a mobile battle arena game appear as graphical overlays in the players' diegesis, the drama makes an argument about gaming as ordinary - a part of lived experience, and not a magic circle.

Second, I propose to reflect on the transnationalism of it all: the intellectual training that shapes my reading of this corpus, as a Canadian scholar, trained using British (leftist) intellectual tools, bringing those tools to bear on Chinese texts. This includes a 'historical and cultural situating of the artistic work' (Kacandes, 2004: 158), which extends a reading of form and aesthetics into (in this case) interrogating the tensions around capitalist logics of Tencent producing both games and dramas that promote gaming.

**"Video games research" according to the UK Government: An autopsy of the Video Games Research Framework**

Leon Xiao

The previous Conservative UK government published the Video Game Research Framework (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/video-games-research-framework/video-games-research-framework) to encourage further research. This was the culmination of a consultation process involving academic researchers that said government considered relevant.

I was involved in that process and therefore have access to the list of researchers who were consulted. Personally, I was rather unhappy during the process to have found a lack of "traditional" game studies representation from the humanities. This is also apparent in the final output linked above.

This document reveals how that UK government, in my opinion, poorly, understood British game studies.

I will discuss details of the Framework; share data on the disciplinary make-up of the researchers consulted; and identify an obvious bias towards social science research in the fields of psychology, law, and health research. This may partially be explained by how the loot box issue (i.e., gambling-like in-game purchases offering random rewards) has dominated the public debate.

I then wish to open the floor to some discussion as to how we can ensure more humanities-focused game studies could be appropriately recognised and included more often in policy discussions. I request that no participant record the contents discussed as the data is confidential.

**Boffins, Bottoms and The Yob – Britishness and the early UK games magazine**

Robin Bootes

*Games magazines, cultural intermediaries, gaming culture*

Responding to this conference's core query of 'what is British Games Research?' I am expanding my previous research on the 1980s UK gaming magazine by examining them

as specifically British texts. Both in the sense of how do they portray a sense of Britishness, and to what extent are they peculiarly British per se.

Potential themes of interest at this stage would include: the British as inventors (Sir Clive Sinclair) and entrepreneurs (Alan Sugar), and the narrative of conflict they share; the use and appropriation of British subcultural tropes (e.g. punk and 2000Ad) by magazine staff to build a sense of alternative authenticity; and the rise of juvenile content (or toilet humour) as a form of playful demotic labour.

The early gaming magazine acted as the pre-eminent way to learn about games and understand what it meant to be a gamer in the 1980s. They were both records and agents of change at a germinal point for gaming culture. However, the popularity of such early UK titles as CVG and CRASH has arguably led to a normalising of their highly contingent style. A regional re-contextualising of the UK gaming press would enable a clearer understanding of these unique and influential texts.

# Panel: Global perspectives

### British Games Research should not be British

Catherine Flick

*games research, funding*

In thinking about what it is to be doing British Games Research, this immigrant-cum-recent-British-citizen questions whether there should be a distinct thing that is British Games Research. The modern games industry is inherently international; modern academia as well, and so a concentration on what distinguishes or should distinguish British Games Research really misses the point of both. Of course as academics in Britain, we are beholden to British funding bodies, but these are not the be-all and end-all of games research in Britain.

Indeed, the very notion that there might be such a thing as British games research supposes some sort of exceptionalism (whether good or bad) about the games research done within these isles. This notion is fairly unpalatable to a modern, international, collaborative mindset that seeks to understand and make amends for the wrongs of the past. For this reason alone, the concept of British Games Research should probably be placed on the back burner.

Unlike in my origin field of philosophy, there are no specific understandings of a distinct style of games research present in any continent, nor is it even a coherent field; there are, however, different aspects of games research that build a more holistic view of what it is that games are, how they are made, and what impacts they might have. These are more aligned along classic scientific field boundaries of such disciplines as

computer science, psychology, and arts and humanities. This is reflected in the UK Research Excellence Framework Units of Assessment – none are specifically games research, and we find ourselves awkwardly straddling several whose whims may not bend toward something as "frivolous" as games.

So instead of thinking about what makes games research British, perhaps we should be thinking about what position we would like games research to have in Britain. Is there something specific about games research that separates it from these other disciplines? Should we be pushing for a separate Unit of Assessment, or at the very minimum, a subheading on one of the larger ones?

To circle back to the Britishness of our games research, while we are largely beholden to our UKRI funders, we have many opportunities to broaden our funding horizons. The EU research programme is largely available to us despite the impact of Brexit; other international opportunities exist in smaller forms as well. But we also sometimes forget that we are only really nibbling at the corners of a huge, international industry that needs a better understanding of itself in a time of significant economic and socio-technological change. Games researchers are well positioned to do this. But we also need to have a coherent understanding of what it is we do and how it fits into the scientific tradition to carve out both internal and external perspectives of what games research is. This is not an explicitly British thing, nor should it be. Games are international collaborative creations, and so should games research be.

**British Esports in the Global Digital Imaginary**

David Murphy, Joshua Jarrett

*Esports, Ideology, Creative Industries, Urban Geography*

On 2nd November 2024, London's O2 Arena played host to the most watched esports event in history, the final of the League of Legends World Championship (Šimić, 2024). In the run up to the event, London mayor Sadiq Khan lauded its significance, calling London a 'leading destination for Esports' and a chance to globally showcase the UK 'capital's cutting-edge gaming industry' (Stubbs, 2023). This paper draws critical attention to the discourses surrounding the event, arguing that esports tournaments on this scale provide megacities, such as London, an opportunity to reimagine themselves as existing at the centre of a global digital economy. In other words, world esports tournaments of this scale can be understood as symbolic events that negate political economic contradictions existing between cities, creative economies, and the digital landscape.

The idea of a globally spanning event taking on a cultural, infrastructural, and economic significance beyond its spectacle has a long history in urban policy in general and London in particular. In 1851 London played host to the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of

Industry of All Nations': a showcase of modern industrial technology and design (Gunning, 1994: 423). The city was the stage for the summer Olympics on three different occasions, as well, in 1908, 1948, and 2012. In the case of the Olympics, much has been written about the 'legacy' of these events (Thonley, 2012), as each event provides a different means of reimagining the city and its relationship with a changing world.

Recent research on the international significance of esports industries and events has made reference to similar phenomena. According to Yu (2018) the growth of esports in China is framed as a way to foster both 'national pride and international goodwill', promoting China as the 'epicenter' of the global digital economy. McCauley et al (2019), on the other hand, point to the roles that regional events like DreamHack play in not only fostering local markets, but also integrating local markets into a broader, platform based 'global media landscape'. By bringing this research into conversation with work on creative cities and urban policy (Evans 2009; Zukin 1996), this paper posits the LoL World Finals as a continuation of a longstanding industrial practice of using large scale global events to reimagine the city.

Why are British politicians interested in hosting Esports events in cities with little to no economic presence in Esports? This presentation will provide some answers to this question by contextualizing the League of Legends London World Championships in efforts to reimagine Britian as a global destination for STEM industries in general and knowledge workers in particular. Put another way, the hosting of globally facing Esports events (like the LoL Worlds Finals) brings digital and urban imaginaries together, placing London at the forefront of global digital culture at a time when British urban centres are struggling to maintain their economic and cultural relevancy.

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**The Ludoindustrial Complex: The Politics of Patterns of Consumption in Cold War Videogames**

Alex Wade, Regina Seiwald

*Cold War; Consumption; United Kingdom; East Germany; West Germany*

The Cold War was a geopolitical and ideological conflict that profoundly shaped global culture, economics, and technology, with videogames as emerging cultural artefacts during the 1980s and 1990s reflecting and contributing to these dynamics. Games and gaming hardware mirrored the ideological divides between capitalism and socialism, embedding narratives of competition, resourcefulness, and ideological alignment/critique into their mechanics and themes (Seiwald and Wade 2022; 2023).

This paper examines the gaming cultures of the UK, West Germany, and East Germany during this period, analysing how videogames reflected, simulated, and criticised economic ideologies and consumption patterns. Central to this analysis is a concept this paper terms the 'ludoindustrial complex,' positioning videogames as both products of Cold War ideologies and drivers of contemporary cultural and consumer trends.

In capitalist contexts like the UK and West Germany, videogames epitomise the 'unconscious cultural force' (Trigg 2001: 108) of 'conspicuous consumption' as theorised by Veblen ([1899] 1994). While Veblen linked consumption patterns to social hierarchies, this paper perceives them as reflexive socio-economic frameworks, driving a leisure lifestyle. In capitalist societies, players sought conspicuous prestige through high-performance gaming setups and exclusive titles, echoing aspirational consumption trends in broader society, such as by importing consoles from Japan before they became available in Europe. Bourdieu's (1986: 243–48) concept of 'distinction' is evident here as gaming communities desired and possessed desirable hardware and software, utilised to master complex game mechanics, often before others had access to these machines.

These practices illustrate how videogames mediate the interplay between material consumption and social positioning, extending beyond mere purchase of goods into the cultivation of cultural status. In contrast, East Germany's socialist system prioritised the utility of games over their symbolic value, while players acknowledged the latter. Gaming hardware and software were scarce, expensive, and often dated, necessitating creative practices such as hacking, which emerged as markers of skill and status. Like their capitalist counterparts, gamers would aspire to own hardware unavailable in their territory. Bourdieu's concept of working-class consumption as the 'absence of luxury goods' (1984: 386) demonstrates how practices are mimicked along class, cultural, and political lines, while operating as an antidote study as East German gaming cultures emphasised resourcefulness and functionality as markers of cultural capital. These

similarities, differences, complements, and contrasts in patterns of hardware, software, mass media consumption, and distribution form the 'ludoindustrial complex.'

The ludoindustrial complex builds on Baudrillard's (2007) theory of simulation and original exposition of the consumer society as an artifice of anthropological symbolic exchange, where simulation of patterns of consumption take on and ultimately absorb the nature of reality: videogames do not merely mirror consumption patterns but actively shape human engagement with economic ideologies, which altered from the post-war social contract to market-based mechanics intersecting with the rise of videogames as a focus of consumption and the ludoindustrial complex. The geographical and political contexts of Cold War gaming reveal how games contributed to consumption theories, reflecting cultural practices and shaping social structures where videogames were often the first time people would encounter the digital (Kocurek 2016).

In using videogames as functioning artefacts of cultural and economic analysis, this paper advances the understanding of how digital media simulate and inform consumption patterns, while the comparative study highlights the enduring relevance of Cold War gaming cultures for theorising contemporary socio-economic dynamics across the scope of the ludoindustrial complex.

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# Panel: Countering hegemony

## From Dundee to Dominance: The Scottish-British Lens on the American Dream

Esther Wright, Iain Donald

*Grand Theft Auto; Rockstar Games; British Games; Scottish Games; Cultural Test; American Dream*

Rockstar Games' Grand Theft Auto (GTA) represents a unique intersection of cultural influences that reflect both British and Scottish identities. While the series is recognised globally as an iconic product of the games industry and a "clear mirror of American geopolitical and particularly urban imaginaries" (Salter, 376), its roots in the United Kingdom have significantly shaped its design, narrative, and subtext. GTA's technical and artistic achievements are used to showcase the UK's game industry. Individual titles arguably pass the U.K.'s "cultural test" (BFI, 2019), entitling Rockstar to tax relief despite their fictionalised American settings and stories, pushing the boundaries of what we consider a "British" game (Webber, 138). We explore how GTA encapsulates elements of British and Scottish cultural identity.

GTA originated in Dundee with DMA Design but has thrived critically and commercially under the auspices of Rockstar North in Edinburgh. This Scottish provenance gives the series a distinct creative lens. The developers' Scottish sensibilities manifest in the series' humour, social commentary, and rebellious attitude, all of which align with broader Scottish cultural traits, such as scepticism of authority and a tradition of satirical critique. The anarchic spirit and irreverent tones can be traced to Scottish cultural figures like Billy Connolly and Irvine Welsh. Yet, a broader British cultural framework is evident in the game's storytelling and themes. British fascination with American culture—particularly its excesses and contradictions—forms the backbone of GTA's satirical narratives, and Rockstar's brand identity. Key creatives and executives, including the Houser brothers as co-founders, have publicly maintained their "love" of American culture, while simultaneously emphasising their British roots. The influence of British gangster films – Get Carter (1971) and The Long Good Friday (1980) – alongside American genre cinema, music, and other forms of popular culture, is particularly notable in the early GTA titles, which blend elements of British and American crime fiction. The meticulous world-building, which merges fictional settings with real cultural references, also has distinct Scottish and British elements. From the name of the game's stock exchange (BAWSAQ), through various easter eggs, the series carries the DNA of its creators.

Thus, these games deconstruct and exaggerate elements of American society, such as capitalism, consumerism, and crime, while simultaneously drawing on British storytelling traditions, such as dark comedy and moral ambiguity. The distinctly British identity of Rockstar has long been credited with the series' ability to offer cultural, political, and social critique of American culture (Wright, 16). This often-cited external, "outsider" viewpoint, it is claimed, allowed for a nuanced exploration of themes like class and social mobility, which resonate within both British and American contexts. The developers' ability to parody the "American Dream" (cf. Wills; Ouelette) is arguably

informed by their own cultural and historical experiences, particularly industrial decline and socio-political struggles, which parallel the struggles faced by GTA's protagonists in their quest for power and survival.

This paper will therefore argue that GTA's global dominance owes some of its success to this creative heritage, as the developers leverage their outsider perspective to critique American culture.

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## No Dungeon Masters Please, We Are British: Britain's Game Design Revolution

Thomas Apperley, Ian Sturrock

*Tabletop Roleplaying Game, Game History, Archival Research, Gamebooks*

Considering the growing scholarly interest in the histories of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPG) (e.g. Peterson 2012, 2022; Trammell 2023) and British computer games (e.g. Gazzard 2016; Kirkpatrick 2015; Wade 2016), the role and influence of British game designers is relatively unexplored (Apperley 2022; Sturrock & Apperley 2022). This paper examines several innovations made by British designers working in—or adjacent to—the Games Workshop/Citadel ecosystem in the late 1970s and early 80s who, we argue, sought to reimagine Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) without the role of the Dungeon (or Game) Master (GM).

The reliance on a DM posed a significant commercial challenge: in traditional TRPGs, only the DM was typically required to purchase rulebooks, modules, and supplementary materials, while players could participate without significant investment. By exploring alternative formats, designers broadened the market by making every player a potential consumer of game materials. Games Workshop and Citadel brought RPG mechanics and themes into new formats that emphasized accessibility, shared agency, and clever marketing strategies, such as affordable starter sets and highly visual, appealing product lines designed to attract a broad audience. British contributions began with The

Warlock of Firetop Mountain (1982) a collaboration between the key executives of Games Workshop but published by Puffin (see Zagal & Lewis 2015). It was the first of many Fighting Fantasy gamebooks, a series which allowed solo players to act as both protagonist and game master through branching narratives and dice-based mechanics. In 1983, Games Workshop released Talisman, a board game that distilled RPG elements into a DM-free experience with randomized encounters and structured competition (see Brown & Waterhouse-Watson 2016), while Warhammer Fantasy Battle (1983), developed by Citadel, shifted storytelling into player-versus-player wargaming with RPG-inspired rules (see: Lindahl et al. 2024). Collectively, these innovations, driven by British companies expanded the accessibility of fantasy gaming by reducing reliance on a central game master.

Using archival data from British TTRPG periodicals, and a close analysis of selected games, the paper argues that by reworking existing TTRPG traditions largely imported from the USA, British game designers revolutionized fantasy gaming by breaking away from the reliance on a Dungeon Master. By creating systems where adjudicating storytelling and gameplay were shared or automated gaming was made more accessible to solo players and newcomers, which opened the hobby to broader audiences. By introducing diverse formats like gamebooks, board games, and PvP wargames, they redefined fantasy gaming, emphasizing world-building through art and storytelling which transformed the TTRPG market. Through codified systems and shared responsibility, British designs fostered and spurred creative experimentation that had a lasting influence on the development of the modern TTRPGs and wargame industries.

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**Driving Towards Change? Cosy Driving Games and Petroculture**

Bettina Bódi

*cosy, driving game, petroculture*

Oil is deeply embedded in modern life, influencing both large-scale industries and everyday activities. Despite growing concerns about oil consumption, known as "petromelancholia" (LeMenager 2014), oil-related practices shape identities, particularly in terms of gender, referred to as "petromasculinity" (Daggett 2018). Videogames, often linked to hypermasculinity, reflect this connection, especially in genres like driving games. Some games, like Mario Kart (Nintendo 1992–) offer a playful and cheeky take on the genre. Others, like Gran Turismo (Sony 1997–) and Forza Horizon (Microsoft, 2005–), itself developed in the UK's own tech hotspot "Silicon Spa" located in Leamington Spa, glamorise cars and oil consumption, thereby reinforcing the bond between petroculture and masculinity (op de Beke 2024). This paper explores how nonhegemonic forms of play, such as slow play and cosiness, can help videogames distance themselves from oil dependency. It examines cosy games with driving/riding mechanics nostalgic for different, easier times: Lake (Gamious 2021), set in the 1980s Oregon, and Season: A Letter to the Future (Scavengers 2023), set in an anachronistic pre-digital fantasy world.

Cosiness, a nebulous aesthetic category (Waszkiewicz and Tymińska 2024) that emphasises safety, abundance, and softness (Short et al. 2018), can be seen as challenging traditional game mechanics focused on competition and progress. Cosy driving games prioritise deceleration over acceleration (of speed, of growth, of progress), introducing a new way of experiencing time ("petroduration" in op de Beke 2024). Both Lake and Season encourage players to slow down and appreciate their surroundings. In Lake, players control Meredith, who returns to her hometown to cover for her postman father while he goes on holiday. The game involves driving around a picturesque town, delivering mail, and doing favours for the townsfolk in the form of side quests. It challenges genre expectations with its focus on safe driving and community interactions, yet also reflects a nostalgic longing for a time of abundant oil resources, or "Easy Oil" (LeMenager 2014). Season: A Letter to the Future features Estelle, who documents her world before a significant change in seasons. Players explore on a vintage bicycle, using analogue devices to capture sounds, images, and notes. The game's design encourages slow, contemplative play, rewarding exploration and reflection ("nature playing" in Fizek 2024). These case studies illustrate how theories of petroculture, nostalgia, and cosiness intersect, suggesting that nonhegemonic play can help video games move away from oil dependency and imagine a world beyond oil.

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# Workshop: Building our intellectual project

Nick Webber, Poppy Wilde (conference co-chairs)

This workshop operates to bring together the themes of the conference. It aims to create both something for the community of researchers who have gathered at the conference, as well as something useful for British DiGRA, thinking about next steps.

Questions we will be asking include:

- What are the common threads and themes we’ve heard come out over the last few days?
- How does being in the UK, or about the UK, shape our approach? Does it make a difference? If so, what difference?
- What questions do we need to ask, and what questions are urgent, in and around British Games Research?

See the appendices overleaf for some of the participant generated responses to these.

# Annual General Meeting

At the annual general meeting held at the end of the conference, the new British DiGRA board was elected. This included the re-election of three previous board members: Dr Andra Ivănescu, Dr Charlie Hargood, and Dr Hadi Mehrpouya. Newly elected members are: Amanda Nicole Curtis, Dr Joanne Mills, Dr Adam Jerrett, Dr Harrison Charles, Mark Chapman, and Robin Longobardi Zingarelli.

*The conference chairs would like to thank to our local organising committee, the BCU estates, facilities, IT, and catering teams, BCMCR, the boards of DiGRA and British DiGRA, and everyone who came, presented, participated, and responded so enthusiastically to our call for papers.*
*Search #BDiGRA25 on BlueSky to see various posts from attendees capturing the conference!*

# Appendix

As part of the workshop on "What is British games research? Building our intellectual project" the conference chairs asked participants to respond to specific questions. Responses to some of these questions as captured during the conference are included below, whilst some responses and suggestions were gathered on paper and have been taken by the new British DiGRA board members to digitise and action.

**What are the common threads and themes we've heard come out over the last few days?**

- *Cultural pride*
- *Colonialism*
- *British nations hyper-local*
- *Interdisciplinarity*
- *Disillusionment*
- *The issues of teaching games in HE*
- *Ambiguous identity*
- *Research framework(s) = awful*
- *Local vs hyper-local vs homogeneous Britain*
- *Criticality*
- *[Cultural] Odour*
- *Moral panic*
- *Policy*
- *Class and capital*
- *Positionality*
- *Under-represented voices*
- *Technocentrism*
- *Tea towels*
- *British pop culture*
- *Unique contributions*
- *IMPACT!!!*
- *Lack of representation for non-English British identities*
- *Counter culture*

poppy_wilde 5/19/2025

# What is British Games Research?

Building our intellectual project

**Prompt questions: How does being in the UK, or about the UK, shape our approach? Does it make a difference? If so, what difference?**

• What defines British games research?
• Is there a distinct intellectual tradition or approach?
• Are there gaps, exclusions, or blind spots in our current landscape?
• Should we even define it nationally?

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**Legacy of Empire**

Wider influence on British people from the world outside and wider influence out to the world.
'Britishness' as cool and multiplicity of identities (British vs Scottish vs local/hyperlocal)
Scale of interest

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> **Dependable Porcupine** 5/21/25 2:16PM
> Non-white, immigrant and minority experiences

> **Dependable Porcupine** 5/21/25 2:19PM
> English vs Northern

> **Dependable Porcupine** 5/21/25 2:20PM
> Football as part of identity

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**Gaps, exclusions, blind spots (sorry)**

- we need to stop treating "Britishness" as synonymous with "Englishness." What about Scotland/Wales/NI/"The North", etc.). There are points about: class, dialect, accent, infrastructure, access, community that all have bearing here. Related: English (language) as a tool of oppression and colonisation - we need reflection on this and how and what it could be doing within games,globally
- Greater geographical diversity of perspectives - how to make hyper local not hyper marginalised
- Colonialism is an important consideration for us all, but we need greater diversity of people speaking to these themes (I.e., not just white British people; migrant experience and perspectives)

- Cultural imperialism of exporting hegemonic ideas of “Britishness” in game content (usually Englishness) versus how to localise this and what might that mean (e.g., how do they sell Thank Goodness You’re Here literally anywhere else?)
- We are so spread and siloed - this is a massive challenged for coherence (within HEIs and outside of them)
- English academics aren’t used to being peripheral, but they *are* in international game studies conversations (the Americans don’t pay attention to us) is this a barrier to inclusivity (across class, gender, racial/ethic lines)
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**Class, Deprivation and Privilege**

Many in work force from working class backgrounds; working class developers & designers and middle/upper studio owners - where wealth goes

Many games courses recruiting from wider social categories

Building on personal experiences and building those into games (c.f. Humour in GTA, more specificity in fantasy games, etc.)

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**Research vs Impact**

What is impact? Some of the most impactful work (by audience size/engagement) is not necessarily of high research value

REF exercise and HEI management looking for 4* research with high impact - where is games research in this?

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**Heritage, state ideology, taken-for-grantedness**

British dominance/ the Anglo-centric in academia is so weighty we take it for granted, so in isolating a British Game Studies we are forced to look critically at this cultural (and colonial) legacy. At the same time, we are really poor at game heritage and preservation, so cultural histories and traditions are inconsistently presented and engaged with

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**International questions**

Global north / anglophone bias incentives in research?

- Do studies about non-anglophone games get pushed from big journals like Game Studies to regional cultural studies journals?

Incentive structures around overseas students rerouting expertise?

- More students from overseas requires more expertise, teaching and supervision of non-western games/companies/genres eg Gacha games?

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**Teaching**

Teaching in HE is also shaped by the same political forces that dictate Primary through FE education, so that leans into certain exclusions, blind spots and biases.

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**A set of conflicting questions**

Is "Britishness" something we can identify and is it actually relevant to any of our approaches? Do we reject the notion of "British games research"?

"Opportunities and Constraints" the UK offers particular pathways for games research but also particular boundaries.

Is this a matter of British instutions rather than British identity?

There is a contrast between British games research and research elsewhere such as europe.

British research is symbiotic with education.

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**What defines British Game Research**

British game education is treated very vocationally, so game research orbits it in a unique way.

Ongoing divorce from Japan and America centric game discussions and conversations which can lead to a tendency to historicise

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**British games research is constantly defining itself already**

Any prescriptive definition, even if accurate, will always already be outdated by the constant ongoing observation and or analysis by/of/about British games/gaming/research that exist in a state of always becoming what it is

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**Identities, policies, interdisciplinarity, Britishness itself**

Subaltern British identities non-white, non-English experiences explored in research and industry
Gender diversity in the research community is experienced as a positive
Hyper-local research
Tension between gov policy and funding bodies on one hand, and approaches to research
Interdisciplinarity, but with national trends in terms of approaches
The focus on Britishness itself - what is national character within colonial legacies - would other nations focus on themselves in the same way or is it in itself a national obsession.

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**Gaps, exclusions, blind spots**

Non-white British voices are underrepresented.
A lack of industry presence or engagement of game makers

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**The distinct intellectual approach defines British Games Studies**

A focus on textual analysis, close reading, and cultural studies.

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**More blind spots!**

The room is very white, which reflects both the state of the industry and of academia in the UK. This also inflects our teaching and our

relationships with colleagues. It is difficult to raise this in a way that isn't met with performativity, but it is also difficult to offer solutions that require investing in building community when a lot of us are precarious and/or cooked in various ways.

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**Should we define nationally?**

It can be restrictive or homogenising, however it could provide strategic benefits if it matches the scale of the organisation's objectives.

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**What/which national?**

We need to better define/understand what we mean when we say British+nation politicaly, geographically, regionally, culturally before we answer the question

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**Something something, translation/localization**

We might learn more about Britishness by observing how clearly non-British elements of games are localized or how British-made elements are exported, or how the same element is consumed, regulated, or censored differently between “Britain” and elsewhere.

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