

DiGRA Workshop Call for Submissions
Eddo Stern and Danny Snelson
UCLA Game Lab
3.6.25

Institutional Limits: A Workshop on Experimental Game Labs

Submission Details

Workshop Application Deadline: May 15, 2025.

Email Submissions to: eddostern@arts.ucla.edu and dsnelson@humnet.ucla.edu

Participant Submission Guidelines:

- 1) Include name, title, and affiliation;
- 2) whether or not you will be attending DiGRA in person;
- 3) a statement on your involvement or interest in experimental game labs, as well as a short sentence of what you hope to contribute or learn from the workshop;
- 4) whether or not you're interested in a 5-minute lightning round presentation on your work in game labs—if so, please note the contours of what you might like to share in the workshop.

We're particularly interested in strange or unexpected approaches (ranging from unlikely interdisciplinary combinations to non-normative or counter-hegemonic practices) to game labs within (or without!) institutional settings. Please write us with your interests in experimental game labs generally.

Workshop Details and Core Questions

In this 3-hour workshop, we aim to bring together scholars and practitioners from a diverse array of game labs to discuss, interrogate, and collectively experiment with the challenges, tactics, infrastructures, politics, and strategies involved in starting, sustaining, and protecting interdisciplinary and experimental game research within university institutions. On the one hand, we will share concrete examples and cautionary tales of navigating institutional boundaries—such as securing funding, garnering administrative support, and aligning with broader academic priorities while preserving experimental freedom. On the other, we will highlight how these labs nurture playful, creative, and critical methodologies that push at the margins of game design, theory, and culture, often engaging critical, radical, or underground approaches in line with this year's DiGRA focus on limits and margins. In both directions, we draw upon our collective experiences in institutional negotiation, creative practice, and collaboration with external communities to illuminate how experimental game labs can serve as transformative, if sometimes precarious, spaces for open forms of ludic discovery.

Through this workshop, participants will: (1) help conceive and build an ongoing conversation and network of support for the production and maintenance of interdisciplinary and experimental game labs; (2) discover, share, and learn about successful strategies for establishing and maintaining game labs in often rigid institutional contexts across a wide range of scales; (3) encounter and discuss emerging trends in experimental game-making and research—ranging from the analog to the digital—and how they thrive (or fail) within university structures; and (4) engage in a series of hands-on exercises aimed at reimagining the politics and practicalities of game labs as hubs for radical experimentation. Altogether,

this workshop responds directly to DiGRA 2025's thematic call to examine limits and margins by situating experimental game labs as liminal sites—integral yet embattled spaces for critical, creative, and boundary-pushing work in game studies and design.

Drawing on our personal experiences from the UCLA Game Lab, along with examples from a diverse array of game labs—including, for example, the **Media Archaeology Lab** (UC Boulder), the **Game: Play Lab** (Ontario College of Art and Design), the **Technoculture, Art, and Games Lab** (Concordia), the **Nowhere Lab** (UC Santa Cruz), and the **MIT Game Lab**, among a wide variety of other labs. Our starting point is located in a North American milieu, but with this DiGRA workshop, we hope to expand and forge new global connections with game labs internationally. We will collectively explore questions such as:

- How do experimental game labs negotiate institutional limits while fostering non-commercial, political, and artistic game-making?
- How do experimental labs play a role in defining what constitutes research and/or creative practice? How do they help frame, legitimize, and create new frameworks for games-based research within the academy?
- How do different labs approach questions of collaboration and authorship to destabilize hierarchical forms of research that incorporate faculty, post-docs, staff, graduate, and undergraduate student academic labor?
- What infrastructures—funding models, administrative alignments, and interdepartmental partnerships—best support creative, critical, and interdisciplinary game research?
- How can labs preserve experimental autonomy within increasingly corporatized and STEM-driven university environments?

The workshop will unfold through a mix of presentations, structured discussion, collaborative mapping, and a speculative design sprint, allowing participants to share knowledge and develop actionable strategies for sustaining experimental game labs in institutional contexts.

Game Labs as Liminal Sites of Institutional Negotiation

University-based game labs have long occupied complex positions at the intersection of academic research, industry partnerships, and creative experimentation. While many labs align with commercial game development and technological innovation, experimental game labs—such as the **UCLA Game Lab** (Eddo Stern, Jenna Caravello, Danny Snelson), **Weston Game Lab** at University of Chicago (Ashlyn Sparrow and Patrick Jagoda), and **Tiltfactor** at Dartmouth (Mary Flanagan)—position themselves as sites of critical, artistic, and politically-engaged practice. These spaces challenge dominant narratives in game studies, design, and industry by exploring themes of representation, alternative play, and socio-political critique. For instance: **The Nowhere Lab** at UC Santa Cruz, led by Mattie Brice and Patrick Ballard, operates as a nomadic, decentralized lab, resisting traditional institutional structures by prioritizing grassroots, community-driven projects. **Gameplayarts** (Los Angeles), **The Hand Eye Society** (Toronto) and **Babycastles** (New York) exemplify independent para-academic models of experimental game spaces, operating as artist-run collectives that challenge the academy-industry binary. By bringing these diverse models into conversation, this workshop will explore how experimental game labs can expand, redefine, and resist institutional limits while fostering new forms of creative and critical play. As Darren Wershler, Jussi Parikka, and Lori Emerson argue in *The Lab Book* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), research labs are never neutral; they are shaped by their institutional histories, funding structures, and disciplinary affiliations. While many experimental game labs function at the edges of institutional legitimacy, they also define the outer limits of game design and research by supporting anti-capitalist, subversive, and avant-garde approaches to games.

Workshop Structure and Activities

This 3-hour workshop will be structured around a combination of panel discussions, collaborative mapping, and speculative lab design exercises.

Part 1: Case Studies & Challenges (60 minutes)

- **Introduction & Organizer Presentations (10 minutes) :**
 - UCLA Game Lab (design research and interdepartmental challenges)
- **Participant Lightning Talks (optional sign-up in advance):**
 - Attendees will be invited to present brief (5 minutes) case studies of their own lab experiences, focusing on building, maintenance, and experimental autonomy at the margins of the university.

Part 2: Mapping Institutional Limits (45 minutes)

- **Collaborative Exercise:** Participants will collaboratively map the institutional landscapes of their respective game labs in complementary groupings, identifying:
 - Key challenges (funding, administrative oversight, disciplinary tensions)
 - Institutional affordances (interdisciplinary networks, external partnerships)
 - Tactics for navigating constraints (grants, advocacy, informal networks)

Part 3: Speculative Lab Futures (60 minutes)

- **Design Sprint:** Participants will work in small groups to prototype alternative game lab models.
 - Prompts may include:
 - *What would a fully autonomous experimental game lab look like?*
 - *How to protect precarious game labs and participants in precarious times?*
 - *What alternative funding or publishing models might sustain radical game research?*
 - Groups will present speculative proposals for reimagining the future of experimental game labs.

Closing Discussion & Next Steps (15 minutes)

- **Key takeaways & synthesis**
- **Forming an ongoing network for experimental game labs** (mailing list, Discord, possible follow-up collaborations)

Expected Outcomes & Future Impact

This workshop aims to create a lasting knowledge-sharing network among experimental game lab directors, researchers, and practitioners. By documenting case studies, institutional strategies, and speculative futures, we aim to produce:

1. **A shared resource repository** (publicly accessible documentation of workshop discussions, strategies, and speculative designs).
2. **A white paper on institutional limits and experimental game labs** (co-authored summary of key insights).

3. **A working group or online platform** to continue dialogue and advocacy, with an emphasis on mentorship and collaboration for junior faculty or anyone interested in building an interdisciplinary experimental game lab.

Ultimately, this workshop seeks to build solidarity across experimental game labs, fostering a collective understanding of how to sustain, expand, and protect these essential spaces of play, critique, and creative resistance.

References

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- Jagoda, P. (2020). *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ruberg, B. (2020). *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games*. Duke University Press.
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- Anthropy, A. (2012). *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. Seven Stories Press.
- Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. MIT Press.
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Organizers Background:

Eddo Stern is an artist and game designer. He is the Chair of the Design Media Arts Department at UCLA, and founder and director of the UCLA Game Lab, a unique interdisciplinary center for exploring the edges, intersections, paradoxes, and potentialities of games and play. At UCLA he teaches courses on experimental game design, game culture, and digital game development; His work explores the uneasy and otherwise unconscious connections between physical existence and electronic simulation, surrounding the subject matters of violence, historical memory, and identification. He works with various media including computer software & hardware, roleplaying game design, live performance, digital video, and kinetic sculpture. He is best known in the games community for his experimental game/art projects, *Tekken Torture Tournament*, *Waco Resurrection*, *Sheik Attack*, *Darkgame*, and *Vietnam Romance*.

Daniel Scott Snelson is an assistant professor at UCLA in English and Design Media Arts and serves as faculty in the Digital Humanities Program, the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, and the UCLA Game Lab. He works creatively and critically on digital media poetics and aesthetics, with a focus on internet culture, video games, and virtual environments. His recent published work includes both poetic works written in video game platforms as well as scholarly investigations on the ways that games produce new modes of reading, most recently including the book *Elden Poem* (Hysterically Real, 2022), a book that utilizes the FromSoftware game to produce in-game poems and performances. His forthcoming book, *The Little Database: A Poetics of Media Formats* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), explores playful tactics for reading the everyday digital objects that populate ordinary hard drives.