

# **(Academic) Game [Design|Research] Programs Labs: What Are They and How Do You (Not) Start One?**

Mark Chen, Pepperdine University  
Roger Altizer, University of Utah  
Mia Consalvo, Concordia University  
Sean Duncan, Indiana University  
Tracy Fullerton, University of Southern California  
Liz Lawley, Rochester Institute of Technology  
Casey O'Donnell, Michigan State University  
Scot Osterweil, Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Kurt Squire, University of Wisconsin Madison

**Abstract:** Academic game labs take on a variety of forms at the universities that house them. Their funding structures, resources, and positions can come in varied nuanced configurations. This panel brings together a bevy of directors from academic game labs to share stories about starting, managing, shaping and even leaving labs. They have all attempted to define (and differentiate) the goals or missions of their labs, their relationship to the larger academy, and where they stand with regards to game studies/research as a field/discipline. Panelists will discuss their struggles and triumphs, how they and their labs have changed over the years, and anything else that can be packed into an hour-long discussion. The panelists will synthesize their experiences, field questions, and offer insights to those working with labs, hoping to start one, or seeking to better understand the various possible functions of a game lab.

## **Featured Panelists Include:**

**Roger Altizer – University of Utah – Director of Digital Medicine, Center for Medical Innovation - Associate Director, Entertainment Arts Engineering, <http://eae.utah.edu>**

Entertainment Arts & Engineering is the overarching term used to describe the interdisciplinary work between the College of Engineering and the College of Fine Arts at the University of Utah. This work encompasses the wide array of fields in video game design and development, and students from both colleges work closely together throughout their academic careers. This partnership between disciplines reflects the current state of the interactive entertainment business world, and EAE students leave the program prepared to work effectively in a team environment.

**Mark Chen – Pepperdine University – Director of the Gameful Design Lab (founded September 2014), <http://gamefuldesignlab.com>**

The Pepperdine Gameful Design Lab (GDL) focuses on increasing gaming literacy among all populations with an emphasis in targeting those traditionally underserved. The GDL believes that participating in gaming culture and game design can lead to agency in everyday life and provide players/designers with a voice through powerful storytelling. This year, the GDL laid the groundwork for some awesome LA-area projects that might all crumble once funding lapses come summer. Mark will attempt to borrow some chutzpah from Liz.

**Mia Consalvo (1) – Concordia University – Director of the mLab (founded 2013), <http://www.mlabgamestudies.com>**

What does a game lab look like, and what is it good for, if game development is not your central focus? How can it help build a community for students and promote research at the same time? The mLab is currently engaged in such activities through a series of actions and strategies, which Mia will discuss in this panel.

The mLab's mission statement: The mLab is a Canada Foundation for Innovation funded lab, which opened in 2013. Our goal at the mLab is to provide a space for anyone — researchers, designers, students — to come together to study, learn, play and create. We're committed to deepening our understandings of the impact of digital games on everyday life. Through experimentation, deep exploration, and play, we strive to inspire better games, create more knowledge and have a lot of fun. All with snacks.

**Sean Duncan (1) – Indiana University – Director of the Playful Culture Lab (founded September 2013), <http://playfulculturelab.org>**

The Playful Culture Lab is the latest iteration of a game design and research laboratory, currently housed within Indiana University's Center for Research on Learning and Technology. The mission of the lab is to push games beyond their conception as "technologies" and to investigate the educative potential of games and play as cultural practices. The work is aimed at transforming how education considers games — not as tools to implement within educational environments, but as participatory cultures in which learning is already embedded. Recent research projects have addressed learning within online affinity spaces, including gaming affinity spaces, and have been funded by the Digital Media and Learning Research Competition as well as the National Science Foundation.

**Tracy Fullerton – University of Southern California – Director of the Game Innovation Lab (founded September 2004), <http://gameinnovationlab.com>**

The premier center for experimental game design research at USC, the Game Innovation Lab was founded in 2004 and is directed by Professor Tracy Fullerton. The mission of the lab is to pursue experimental design of games in cultural realms including art, science, politics, and learning. The international success of games that have emerged from the lab, including *Cloud*, *fIow*, *Darfur is Dying*, *The Cat and the Coup*, and *The Night Journey*, have made it a hub for indie and experimental games culture in Los Angeles. Our Playthink Salons attract speakers and participants from across the city and across disciplinary boundaries. Associated faculty include award winning game designers Richard Lemarchand (*Uncharted* series) and Peter Brinson (*Waco*, *The Cat and the Coup*) as well as pioneering games user researcher Dennis Wixon (*Halo*, Microsoft Surface). The lab has a strong history of collaboration with cross-disciplinary experts in many fields, including education and technology. Our commitment to an iterative, participatory process brings users, stakeholders and designers into constant dialogue. Current projects are supported by Microsoft Research, The Gates Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The National Endowment for the Humanities, The Gilbert Foundation, and The Department of Education.

**Liz Lawley – Rochester Institute of Technology – Director of the Lab for Social Computing (founded in 2004), now housed at the RIT MAGIC Center (founded 2013), <http://labforsocialcomputing.net>**

The RIT Lab for Social Computing was created out of smoke and mirrors and chutzpah, with a budget of zero, no physical space, and nothing but business cards to mark our presence. From those humble beginnings, the lab built funding relationships with sponsors, brought in grant money, provided support for many undergraduate and graduate students, and developed partnerships with businesses to build community games like *Picture the Impossible* and *Just Press Play*. When RIT recognized the importance and value of the games and media work happening at RIT, Liz's lab became part of the larger MAGIC (Media, Arts, Games, Interaction, & Creativity) Center.

**Casey O'Donnell (1) – Michigan State University – Associate Director of the Games for Entertainment and Learning (GEL) Lab, <http://www.gel.msu.edu> - [Former Director of the University of Georgia Game Lab]**

Dr. Carrie Heeter founded the Communication Technology Laboratory (1980 to 2005), which was transformed in 2005 into the GEL Lab and directed by Brian Winn. The mission of the GEL Lab is to design innovative prototypes, techniques, and polished games for entertainment and learning and to advance state-of-the-art knowledge about social and individual effects of digital games. The GEL Lab is an association of game research and design faculty and students at Michigan State University, primarily in the College of Communication Arts and Sciences. The lab does externally funded research and development work and funds several graduate students and employs roughly 20 undergraduate students at any given time.

**Scot Osterweil (2) – Massachusetts Institute of Technology – Creative Director, Education Arcade, <http://education.mit.edu>**

Scot Osterweil is the Creative Director of The Education Arcade and a research director in the MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing Program. He is a designer of award-winning educational games, working in both academic and commercial environments, and his work has focused on what is authentically playful in challenging academic subjects. He has designed games for computers, handheld devices, and multi-player online environments. He is the creator of the acclaimed **Zoombinis series of math and logic games** and leads a number of projects in the Education Arcade, including the MIT/Smithsonian curated game, *Vanished* (environmental science), *Labyrinth* (math), *Kids Survey Network* (data and statistics), *Caduceus* (medical science), *iCue* (history and civics) and the Hewlett Foundation's *Open Language Learning Initiative* (ESL). He is a founding member of the Learning Games Network ([www.learninggamesnetwork.org](http://www.learninggamesnetwork.org)).

**Kurt Squire - University of Wisconsin – Co-Director of the Games+Learning+Society Center in the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery, <http://gameslearningsociety.org>**

GLS designs games for learning and studies game-centered learning systems.

GLS delves into how videogames capture our imaginations, how their power can be used to transform learning, and what this engaging medium means for society.

## **Endnotes**

(1) Could not attend live panel. :(

(2) Joined us last minute; hurrah!