

Call for Participants: DiGRA 2026 Workshop

Designing with Abstraction and Realism: A Hands-on Workshop for Games

1. Workshop Overview

Designers of serious games make constant decisions about how closely a system should resemble the world it references. This includes selecting which elements require accuracy, which benefit from simplification and where for instance metaphor may be more productive than replication. Ultimately these decisions influence how players understand situations, how seriously they treat consequences and whether learning transfer occurs beyond the game. Although these judgements sit at the centre of design practice, they are often handled tacitly. Teams describe experiences as realistic, abstract or believable without a shared structure for analysing what those terms mean or how they operate across different components of a game.

This workshop presents a framework that breaks abstraction and realism into seven dimensions: visual style, audio, mechanics and interface, rule systems, narrative, feedback and the Domain Culture System. Participants will apply the framework to a game or project they are developing or studying and will compare their placements with those of others, allowing the session to function both as a practical design activity and as a live test of how consistently the model can be interpreted.

2. Expected Outcomes

By the end of the session participants will:

- Understand abstraction and realism as multidimensional design variables.
- Apply the framework to analyse a game or project across seven dimensions.
- Evaluate coherence between representational choices, systems and cultural meaning.
- Interpret how different audiences may read the same design differently.
- Identify concrete priorities for clarification, redesign or further development.
- Contribute to the collective refinement of the model through optional anonymised comparison.

3. Workshop Format & Activities (3 hours)

This is a hands-on workshop designed for up to 40 participants, working in small groups with plenary sharing and is suitable for:

- Designers working on applied or serious games
- Researchers analysing representation, simulation or learning
- Doctoral candidates developing methodological approaches
- Educators supervising practice-based projects

The session is open to conference attendees.

Optional: participants will be asked to give non obligatory consent to anonymised use of ratings/comments for future refinement and publication.

Pre-work (optional, recommended)

Participants are invited to bring:

- A short description of a game they are working on (or have studied), plus any artefacts available (screenshots, demo link, design doc excerpt).

4. Attendee Guidelines

Registration for the workshop is limited and will be confirmed on a first-come, first-served basis. Detailed instructions for final registration will be shared with accepted participants.

Participants are requested to submit a short statement of interest (max. 150 words) to k.risley@soton.ac.uk by **15th May 2026**.

Participants should bring:

- A laptop or tablet for completing worksheets and recording reflections
- Notes or documentation relating to a game or project they wish to analyse

Provided during the workshop:

- Printed and digital framework worksheets
- Rating and comparison templates
- Projection for shared examples and group synthesis

5. Organisers

Kristina Risley – Post-graduate Researcher and Visiting Lecturer, University of Southampton, UK.

- PhD researcher in serious games for leadership development, studying Flow, identity and meaning making across simulation and tabletop environments: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4368-6175>.
- 10 years of senior HR and leadership development experience, designing and delivering organisational learning interventions.
- Lecturer across games, business and people development programmes.

Yekta Kalantar Hormozi – Assistant Lecturer, TU Dublin & Maynooth University, Ireland.

- PhD Candidate in Media Studies, specialising in games and cultural adaptation (The CultureCraft Model).
- Cultural consultant on 1001 Nights and 30 Birds, supporting authentic cultural representation in game production.
- 10+ years' industry experience as a UX designer (animation, character design, interactive media); visual designer on Algowatch (Creative Europe).

Dr. Liang Xu – Assistant Professor, Dublin City University, Ireland.

- Research focuses on immersive technologies (VR and games), NLP, and AI in education. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2619-1883>

- Experienced in incorporating Challenge-Based Learning and hybrid learning approaches alongside authentic assessment methods.
- Leads and contributes to interdisciplinary, real-world evaluation of learning technologies in educational settings.