

New Directions in Classics, Gaming, and Extended Reality

Welcome

A very warm welcome to the New Directions in Classics, Gaming, and Extended Reality conference, hosted by the [Bristol Digital Game Lab](#) and generously funded by the [Institute of Greece, Rome, and the Classical Tradition](#), the [University of Bristol Faculty of Arts](#), the [Department of Classics and Ancient History](#), and [Centre for Creative Technologies](#). A big thank you for all those who have travelled far to attend this conference, and for those joining online. For those of you who don't know me, I'm [Dr Richard Cole](#), Lecturer in Digital Classics here at the University of Bristol, and co-director of the Bristol Digital Game Lab.

When I first had the idea for the conference, I sensed – based on the vitality of work being done to both create and research games and XR experiences set in the ancient world across academic, commercial, and heritage contexts – that there was potential to come together to define emerging themes in the use of these tools for exploring the past. It was one of my colleagues at Bristol, though, who asked the difficult question – did I actually know what these directions might be? I certainly had an inkling (indeed, connecting up games and XR was one of them, while another involved bringing academics together with industry experts), but I wasn't entirely prepared for over 30 expressions of interest to the call I sent out at the start of the year. The result? 24 incredible presentations to look forward to across two days, from both academic and industry speakers, representing eight different countries, and all working at the cutting edge of their field. The presentations have been grouped into thematic blocks that are, I believe, suggestive of some of the New Directions actively being taken. To help trace this, there are printouts of the programme in the room, and for those online, you can find the programme on the [Game Lab website](#).

Conference Practicalities

The conference will be run in a hybrid capacity, with speakers attending in person and online. Panels are either entirely in person, remote, or a mix. All panels have Chairs who will introduce each speaker in turn, take questions from the audience (both in person and hybrid), and keep panels to time. Hybrid attendees are welcome to put their questions in the chat in advance of (or during) the Q&A. Speakers have around 15-20 minutes to present, followed by up to 10 minutes of questions after their presentation. The conference is not being recorded, as the aim is predominantly to share ideas, within this room and online, which may in turn develop into something more concrete – more on that later.

We have two fantastic postgraduate student helpers on hand to support the running of the conference, including the hybrid elements. [Lily Bickers](#) and [Julia Higgins](#) will be able to field any questions you may have, and I am on hand to help as well. They will also be taking pictures and some video for our event writeup – please let them or me know if you do not want to feature in any pictures or video. We also have a local Classics student from Redmaids High School, Arlo Burgess, doing work experience with us.

Housekeeping for in person attendees:

- The closest toilets are to the left as you leave the Research Space, then left again. They are both accessible. There are also toilets downstairs.
- There's a kitchen to the right, with a fridge and tap to refill water bottles.
- Please note that the doors to the staircase leading up to the research space (both coming from 3-5 and 7 Woodland Road) require a UCard. Our postgraduate helpers will be on hand to provide card access during the breaks. If at any point you cannot get back in and no one from the conference is around, please ask the estates assistants at the desk entrance to 7 Woodland Road who will be able to help. The same is true of the main entrance to 7 Woodland Road itself.
- We're not expecting a fire alarm test, so treat any alarm as real. In the event of an evacuation, use the nearest safe exit point (the closest one to this room is down the stairs as you leave the space). The assembly point for any evacuation is the car park of the closest villa not in alarm.
- We will have tea, coffee, snacks and lunch provided by the excellent team from Kate's Kitchen. Lunch will be served in this room from 12:00-13:30 on both days. You can eat here or enjoy lunch outside. There will be pizza and popcorn this evening from 19:00 for anyone who wants to stay for Antiquity Games Night, and a Mezze dinner tomorrow for all speakers and attendees, also from 19:00 in this space. We have catered for a variety of dietary requirements. If you have any questions, please just come and ask.
- There are power sockets in the floor and around the room for laptops. Please be mindful of cables when moving about the space.
- For the Q&A, we will use the chairs by the Game Lab banner, with the speaker sitting on the right as you face the screen. The Chair for the panel will join the speaker at the front.
- The top windows in this space are fully automatic, and open when the Co2 levels rise. I have opened all the manual doors and windows, but we may experience the automatic windows opening. They are quite loud, so if you are presenting, the best option is to wait for them to finish opening.

Introducing the Demos

One of the aims of this conference is to think collectively about the act of play and our sense of discovery as a group of researchers, game, and XR developers, all with a vested interest in history, heritage and the ancient world. As such, we have three demo sessions scheduled each day where I encourage you to embrace the emergent and unexpected. We have two gaming PCs with a variety of games set in antiquity, including some of the latest releases. We also have the Meta Quest 2 headsets for viewing a range of experiences, from the [Virtual Reality Oracle](#) (which I know many of you are familiar with), to Faber Courtial's ancient [Rome](#) experience and Ubisoft's [Assassin's Creed Nexus](#), released late last year. Note that the second demo session each day is scheduled over lunch.

For those familiar with VR, feel free to jump in. For those less familiar, the team and I are happy to help with onboarding during the demo sessions.

We also have the team from [The Uncertain Space](#), the University of Bristol's virtual museum, which offers a unique way to experience artefacts from many different collections in one place. The team is on hand to help you delve into this innovative VR space and think through the future of exhibitions.

Alongside these demos, we will have a unique series of showcases from the industry presenters at this conference, including the [Roman Villa Experience](#) from the Newt in Somerset, [Zubr Curio's Acropolis AR app](#), the [St. Giles HeritAlge video game project](#), Preloaded's [Wonders: Pyramids of Giza Fortnite island](#), and the flyover of Hadrian's Wall in Microsoft Flight Simulator by [Time Machine Designs](#).

For those joining hybrid, there is a link on the Bristol Digital Game Lab website (under Events and this conference) to a list of demos that we have available at the conference, which you are most welcome to explore during the demo slots if that is of interest. Several of them are free to access. There will also be an opportunity for those joining hybrid to engage in real time play with in person attendees – more on that below.

Antiquity Games Night

In addition to playing individually, this conference offers a means to play together. This evening, Alexander Vandewalle and I will be hosting the sixth iteration of Antiquity Games Night, and our first hybrid event. For those unfamiliar with Antiquity Games Night, AGN is like a reading group, only with games. The initiative emerged last year, when Alex and I (over a beer at the Interactive Pasts 3 conference in Leiden) discussed ways to facilitate increased cooperative play amongst scholars, students, designers, and others. We both firmly believe that playing together, and discussing games in real time, can lead to new insights related to how people play, the types of choices people make, content or strategies that otherwise go undiscovered, how scholars evaluate in-game content, and much more. So far, AGN has facilitated online co-op games of *Smite*, *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition*, *Return of Rome* (where we were all annihilated by the AI), *A Total War Saga: Troy*, and *Fortnite* (where, surprisingly, we won all our battles...).

At 19:00 BST tonight, we will attempt to conduct a hybrid version of AGN, with a potential 12 player co-op session of [Age of Mythology: Extended Edition](#) from 2014. The choice of game is both a nod to our nostalgia for the original 2002 version, and a chance to look forward to the forthcoming [Age of Mythology: Retold](#), scheduled for release later this year.

Everyone is welcome to play and / or participate. We'll have the game set up on the two gaming PCs, on my laptop, and Alex's laptop. For those joining online, you can participate directly by downloading the game from Steam to your PC and joining the co-op session, or you can watch via Discord. We will share the Discord link to the Zoom meeting later today ([invite link to AGN Discord](#), for reference). For those joining AGN in person, you can also download the game from Steam to your laptop and join the co-op session, or watch the playthrough on the main screen with a slice of pizza and popcorn in hand.

Now, I think we're about ready to play. First, though, are there any questions?

To note, I've uploaded a copy of this Welcome brief to the Bristol Digital Game Lab Events page, under the conference heading, for reference as the conference progresses, as it contains links to the relevant games and experiences mentioned. You can also find the final version of the programme and a booklet of abstracts and bios for each speaker, as well as digital copies of any handouts.

So, to get us kickstarted, let's first hear from two local industry success stories in the use of AR and VR to broaden access to the ancient world.

Jack Norris, Director of Zubr, a specialist AR and VR studio - is presenting Acropolis AR. This is an educational augmented reality app that lets you restore the modern ruins back to their former glory.

After working on different versions of this app for three years, with multiple trips to Athens and close collaboration with academic partners, Zubr are hoping to partner with other organisations who can help realise this application into an educational tool for schools, and also use the app framework to enable AR exploration of other historical sites.

Next we have Peter Mansfield, who will be discussing Villa Ventorum: How VR can enhance an experience. This is a case study on how virtual reality can be used to enhance a guest experience, without being the main attraction.

Peter studied Mechatronic Engineering at Lancaster University and started his career on the MOD Engineering Graduate Scheme in Bristol. There he undertook an industrial placement at an engineering design company, specialising in bespoke tooling and process planning for construction projects where they used VR to improve process and efficiency. He joined the Newt 2 years ago on the eve of opening of the Roman Villa and looks after all things tech in the museum spaces from audio guides to VR. He is also lucky enough to consult on the Newt's future developments including museums in Cornwall, Greece and Amsterdam.