

# MJ Johns *(they/them)*

PhD Student, Computational Media | [www.mjjohnsdesigner.com/mljohns@ucsc.edu](http://www.mjjohnsdesigner.com/mljohns@ucsc.edu)



## Overview

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I am a non-binary experience designer, developer, and educator, with over 10 years of professional experience in entertainment technology and user experience design. Currently I am pursuing a PhD in Computational Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

My background is in software development with a focus on novel technology. I hold a terminal master's degree in Entertainment Technology from Carnegie Mellon University (2013) and a Bachelor of Art in Computer Information Science from the Ohio State University (2011). In 2016 I founded my independent game studio Astire Games, LLC, for which I am the CEO and Creative Director overseeing end-to-end product development.

I am passionate about developing experiences for positive impact including games for health and advocacy, accessible multiplayer games, and immersive VR/AR/XR experiences for training and education.

My research interests include Human-Computer Interaction, Ubiquitous Computing, and IoT (and associated unique opportunities for novel interfaces), as well as technology-enhanced learning.

## Education

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### PhD Computational Media | In-Progress | University of California, Santa Cruz

- *Coursework:* Educational Psychology (EPSY) 408 – Learning, Knowledge, and Human Development
- *Publications:* [Productive Struggle](#) in Higher Education and [From Floundering to Flourishing](#)

### Master of Entertainment Technology | Dec 2013 | Carnegie Mellon University

- *Concentration:* Game Design & Development

### Bachelor of Art – Computer Science | March 2011 | The Ohio State University

- *Major:* Computer Information Science *Minor:* Mathematics
- *Emphasis:* Computer Graphics and Visualization

### Certificates and Supplemental Education

- Certificate of Effective College Teaching Practices – ACUE, May 2021
- Certificate of Leadership and Management – Denius-Sams Gaming Academy, May 2015
- E-Learning 9-Course Sequence – University of Illinois via Coursera, Summer 2020
- Dynamics of Diversity Certificate – University of Texas, Nov 2020
- One-on-One Leadership Coaching – Coaching 4 Good, May 2021

# Teaching Experience

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## Assistant Professor of Instruction | University of Texas | Jan 2022 – Dec 2023

Full-time faculty in the department of Computer Science teaching 6 courses per year, mentoring students, serving on committees, and developing course curriculum.

### Courses Taught

C S 303E Elements of Computers and Programming (200 students per section)  
C S 329E Elements of Mobile Computing  
C S 371M Mobile Computing  
C S 378 / AET 335K Virtual Reality Development for Video Games  
ADV 378 Immersive Hack Lab

### Research and Publications

Senior Fellow, Texas Immersive, Space Shapers project in collaboration with PBS, 2022-2023  
Senior Fellow, Texas Immersive, Virtual Beings research and Think & Do Symposium, 2022  
“Teaching a 200-Person Class like a 20-Person Class” Teaching Innovation Grant, SU 2022

### Advising and Mentoring

C S 370 Undergrad Student Research (supervised student projects)  
Mentor for high school student interested in pursuing Computer Science at UT

### Service to the University

Faculty Annual Review Committee for C S Non-Tenure Track Faculty, FA 2022  
C S Professor Week Speaker, FA 2022  
Math FIG Guest Speaker, FA 2022  
C S Welcoming Environment Training for TAs and UGCAs FA 2022  
Faculty DEI Action Plan Working Group (formed by Dr. LaToya Smith, VP of Diversity, to create an action plan to build a more inclusive community culture across the University) SU 2022  
Bridging Disciplines Faculty Panel for Digital Arts and Media 2018-present  
Hack Texas volunteer judge FA 2022

## Assistant Dept Chair of AET | University of Texas | Aug 2020 – June 2021

- Oversight of independent studies, certificates (such as BDP and Honors), and special study opportunities
- Coordination of course enrollment, contribute to advising, and class substitution petitions
- Coordination and support of diversity and inclusion initiatives
- Support of department curriculum objectives as chair of the curriculum committee

## Assistant Professor of Practice | University of Texas | Aug 2018 – Jan 2022

Full-time faculty in the department of Arts and Entertainment Technologies (AET), teaching 6-7 courses per year, mentoring students, serving on committees, and developing curriculum. I have designed and developed new courses, spearheaded the creation of our Special Honors program, and pursued research and creative projects to further the field of entertainment technology.

## Courses Taught

AET 339 Augmented and Virtual Reality for Games  
AET 310 Foundations of Creative Coding (required for all majors)  
AET 339/AET 334C Level Design  
AET 339 Game Prototyping/AET 334K Video Game Prototyping  
AET 339 Virtual Reality for Games/AET 335K Virtual Reality for Video Games  
AET 346 Game Scripting and Modding  
AET 334F Video Game Scripting I  
AET 334L User Interface and User Experience for Video Games  
AET 139/AET 170 Research Methods/Proseminar (required for Honors students)

## Research and Publications

Augmenting Reality through Generative Audio, ongoing collaborative project FA 2021-present  
One Sunday Afternoon showcase at Currents New Media Festival and WildFlower Center, 2020-2021  
VR Futures Planet Texas 2050 Co-Principal Investigator, funded for \$90,000 Aug 2019 – Dec 2020  
User Experience in the High-Tech Era, published Aug 2019, Journal of Design and Creative Technologies  
Finalist, Inter-Disciplinary Team in President's Award for Global Learning International Research, 2019

## Advising and Mentoring

Faculty Advisor and Program Coordinator for AET Undergraduate Honors Fall 2019 – Fall 2021  
Senior Design Project Mentor: *MarkAR (AR Project) and Hurricane Preparedness (VR Project)*  
Bridging Disciplines Project Mentor: 10 individual senior creative projects  
UT SAGA Lab Faculty Mentor overseeing client-student projects (2018)  
Undergraduate Research Supervisor for the VR Futures PT 2050 Research Project

## Service to the University

Faculty Innovation Center Colleague Connections Host for New Faculty Symposium FA 2021  
AET Events Committee FA 2021  
AET Haunted Open House Event FA 2021  
Fine Arts Diversity Council FA 2020 – FA 2021  
Kendra Scott MOU Committee and Department Representative SP 2021 – SP 2022  
Transformational Online Instructional Continuity (TONIC) Award SP 21  
Reviewer for AET Transfer Applicants SP 2021  
CoFA Spotlight Interview: Moving AET's Tech-heavy VR Class Online SP 2020  
School of Design and Creative Technologies Executive Committee (elected) FA 2019 – FA 2021  
Chair, AET Curriculum Committee FA 2019 – SP 2021  
Peer Mentor for new AET Faculty Member FA 2020  
CoFA Dean Search Committee April 2020 – December 2020  
AET Department Faculty Search Committee: Immersive Media SP 2020  
CoFA Ideas Lab Co-Organizer and Mentor FA 2019 – SP 2020  
CoFA Collaborative Learning Breakfast Club Co-organizer SP 2020  
AET Department Faculty Search Committee: Department Chair SP 2019 – SP 2020  
Non-voting member, Promotion Committee for Michael Baker FA 2020

SDCT Staff Search Committee: Admissions Coordinator FA 2019  
Bridging Disciplines Program Digital Arts and Media Faculty Panel and Subcommittee FA 2018 – Present  
Game Development and Design Steering Committee (inter-departmental) SP 2018 – FA 2019  
AET Admissions Committee FA 2019  
Non-voting member, Promotion Committee for Sven Ortel FA 2019  
VR Hardware Wrangler, soliciting VR equipment and managing storage and student access 2018 – 2020  
Co-Facilitator, Search Committee Diversity Workshops FA 2019 – SP 2020  
TV Interview Representing UT Game Design and Development on Local News SP 2019  
Design Department Faculty Search Committee: Interaction Designer FA 2018 – SP 2019  
AET Department Faculty Search Committee: Creative Coding Instructor FA 2018

## Lecturer | University of Texas | Jan 2018 – Aug 2018

Part-time adjunct faculty in the AET department. Created a new course – AET 339 AR and VR for Games. Contributed to early curriculum development in the Games emphasis and future course planning, as well as serving on the Game Steering Committee.

## Instructor | Art Institute of Austin | Oct 2015 – Mar 2018

Part-time adjunct faculty in the department of Game Art and Design. Taught between 8 and 10 courses per year, led workshops, spoke on panels, participated in a future-focused task force, and hosted Open House events.

### Courses Taught

GAD 300 Level Design & GAD 320 Advanced Level Design  
GAD 315 Programming for Artists  
GAD 325 Game Prototyping & GAD 340 Advanced Game Prototyping  
GAD 330 Project Management for Game Art and Design  
GAD 345 Interface Design  
GAD 350 Game Animation & CA 340 Animation Dynamic Systems

## Summer Instructor | University of Texas | SU 2016-17, SU 2019-20, SU 21-22

Department of Radio, Television, and Film (RTF) in 2016 and 2017, then the School of Design and Creative Technologies Extended Education (SDCTx) in 2019 and 2020, and Department of Computer Science (CS) in 2021 and 2022. Taught the full game development pipeline to high school students, including concept development and ideation, level design and planning, working with art assets, world building, gameplay scripting, and integrating audio, animation, and particles.

## Course Author | Pluralsight | 2017 – 2020

Design, record, and edit online courses for Game and VR Design and Development.

### Courses Taught

Game Prototyping in Unity  
Unity VR Fundamentals & Designing for Virtual Reality  
Prototyping Game Systems for Swords and Shovels

## Teaching Assistant | Carnegie Mellon University | Jan – May 2013

TA for the Intro to Maya course covering modeling, texturing, rigging, and animating.

## Teaching Assistant | Ohio State University | SU 2010

TA for the Summer Math Bridge Program, a prep course for incoming freshmen.

## Math Tutor | Ohio State University | 2008 – 2011

Tutored math courses including algebra, calculus, statistics, remedial math, and business math.

## Counselor | Young Women's Summer Institute | SU 2008, SU 2009

Led a group of middle school girls pursuing STEM studies

## Education Assistant | Ohio State Fair | SU 2006, SU 2007

Led instructional booth demonstrations on topics ranging from nutrition to farming equipment

## Assistant Instructor | Taylor's Tae Kwon Do | 2004 – 2006

After achieving the rank of Black Belt I began assistant teaching the younger age group classes

# Industry Experience

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## Director/CEO | Astire Games, LLC | 2016 – Present

In 2016 I founded the indie game studio Astire Games based in Austin, TX. We do a variety of contract and consulting work, as well as developing our own internal projects (PC, mobile, VR/AR). As director, I oversee all projects and hiring, and I handle the creative and tech direction, biz dev, and marketing. I also mentor teams of interns - we have had five successful internship teams with 3-7 interns in each.

### **Published Games:**

- Cosmos Arena Mobile 2021
- Litterbug! 2021
- Spell Sigil 2020
- One Sunday Afternoon (in Collaboration with Yuliya Lanina and Chris Ozley) 2020
- Cat Cave 2018
- Cosmos Arena 2018
- Death's Daughter 2018
- Freaky Fotobooth (in Collaboration with Retora Games) 2017
- Out Foxed 2017
- Slapdash Bones 2016

## System Designer | Certain Affinity | 2015 – 2016

Worked on scripting and design for two shipped AAA titles, collaborating with teams of over 100 developers across multiple game studios.

## Technical Designer | Planet3 | 2015

Worked as part of a collaborative team of educators, instructional designers, and game developers to build an edutainment platform to teach middle and high school science.

## Technical Designer | Part Time Evil | 2014-2015

Design and scripting for mobile games, onboarded and mentored interns.

## Technical VR Designer / Prototyper | Virtuix | Feb – Aug 2014

Created VR showcase pieces to demo at events using the Virtuix Omni – a 360 treadmill allowing the user to walk/run in VR. Also helped with the creation of the SDK/Unity integration and hardware design and assisted with the live booth demos/showcases at SXSW, GDC, and private demos for VCs and investors.

## Design Intern | Etcetera Edutainment (SimCoach) | SU 2013

Designed content and interactions for health and training applications, combining principles of game design and instructional design with User Experience.

## Special Operations Intern | Schell Games | SP 2012

Assisted with general office tasks, organizing inventory, and displaying studio artwork.

## 3D Art Intern | Carnegie Mellon | SU 2012

Modeled and textured 3D art assets for the learning project “Alice” which teaches kids to code.

## Junior Multimedia Developer | Five Star Development | May – Dec 2011

Promoted from intern to full-time developer. Worked closely with Instructional Designers and SMEs while designing and programming interactive media and games for training applications and websites using HTML, CSS, JavaScript, Flash, and ActionScript3.

# Professional Recognition and Publications

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## Conference Presentations and Showcases

- One Sunday Afternoon 360 Animated Experience showcase at Currents New Media Festival in Santa Fe 2022
- Panelist, From Game Jam to Production: Bridging the Gap, IndieCade Horizons 2022
- Litterbug! Showcase, IndieCade Game Tasting 2021
- Invited Keynote, Ericsson Virtual and Global Programs Support March 2, 2021
- Presenter, VR Futures Research, Planet Texas 2050 Research Showcase Nov 2020
- Presenter, "Supporting Technical & Creative Projects, Collaborative Online Learning", TEL Symposium 2021
- Guest Lecture, “Game Development Education”, TinyHacks 2021
- Litterbug! Honorable Mention at Climate Jam 2020
- Showcased AET Student Project Reel, Vive Input Utility Sponsored Session, VRDC 2019
- Roundtable Leader, Student Networking Session, IndieCade Oct 2019
- Speaker, “Non-Human Behavior AI”, Montreal Int’l Games Summit 2017
- Panelist, “Improving Reality with Virtual Reality”, Austin Game Conf. 2017

- Panel Moderator, “Weird Tech”, Unite Austin 2017
- Speaker, “Non-Human Behavior AI”, PAX Dev 2017
- Panelist, “Breaking into the Industry”, Classic Games Fest 2017
- Presented a Unity Workshop for High School Teachers, Ai 2017
- Panelist, “Surviving as an Independent AAA Studio”, SXSW 2017
- “Most Innovative” Award for Sundown Arcadia (Gear VR), Intel Showcase, Austin Game Conf. 2016
- Featured Speaker, Unity Women in Gaming Austin 2016
- Speaker, “Technology and User Experience”, Unite LA 2016
- Panel Moderator, “The Reality of Virtual Reality”, PAX South 2016
- Panel Moderator, “The Reality of Virtual Reality”, PAX West 2016
- Panelist, “The Current State of VR”, Texas Women in Games 2016
- Speaker, “Creating Immersive Interfaces/Interactions”, PDC 2017
- “Webz of War” Exergaming Research, Games for Health 2013
- Audience Choice Award, Pittsburgh Global Game Jam Showcase 2013
- Public Speaking Portfolio: <http://thefutureisimportant.com/>

## Publications

- IEEE 2013 Research Publication: “Webz of War: A Cooperative Exergame Driven by the Heart” published in International Games Innovation Conference, <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/6659125/>
- UT’s Journal of Design and Creative Technologies 2020 “[The Transformative Power of Games](#)”
- UT’s Journal of Design and Creative Technologies 2019 “[User Experience in the High-Tech Era](#)”
- Gamasutra Article “[Marketing vs. Promoting](#)”
- Dev Blog (2013-present): [www.meganlaurajohns.blogspot.com/](http://www.meganlaurajohns.blogspot.com/)
- Tutorial Series: <https://youtu.be/u6yW1Nm37Bc>

## Game Credits

- MentaMorph Money – Lead Developer, MentaMorph Inc
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Remastered – Scripter, Certain Affinity
- Mafia III – System Designer, Certain Affinity
- Fabulingua – Contract Game Developer, Freelance
- Virtual Amsterdam – Designer, Virtuix Omni
- Gold Rush – Developer, Virtuix Omni
- The Calm Before – Programmer, University of Texas
- Hop the Fence – Designer, Carnegie Mellon ETC
- Webz of War – Lead Designer, Carnegie Mellon ETC
- The Alice Project – 3D Art Intern, Carnegie Mellon
- PlayForward: ECS – Intern, Schell Games
- Heart Failure Coach – Design Intern, SimCoach
- Zig Zag Zombie – Designer, Part Time Evil

# Tools and Skills

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## Programming and Scripting Languages

C#, Java, JavaScript, C/C++, XML, JSON, ActionScript, HTML, CSS, Python, Kotlin

## Software / Tools

Unity, Maya, Adobe CS, MS Office, Processing, Firebase, Trello, Jira, Slack, Perforce, SVN, Figma, Android Studio

## Development Platforms

Android/iOS (tablet and phone), HTC Vive, AR Core, Oculus Quest, Google Daydream, zSpace Semi-holographic Tablet, Oculus Rift (DK1, DK2, CV1), Gear VR, Leap Motion, Kinect, Wii Fit Balance Board, Virtuix Omni, Tobii Eye Tracker, PC / Mac / Web

## General Skills

Rapid Prototyping, Design Documentation, Gameplay Scripting, AR/VR/MR, Mobile, Level Design, System Design, 2D/3D Animation, VFX, UI / UX Design, Audio Integration, Build Deployment, Game Publishing, Interactive Installations, User-Centered Design, Playtesting, Instructional Design, Product Management

# Community

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## Volunteer Work

Global Game Jam (GGJ) Austin Lead Organizer 2021-2022  
Global Game Jam (GGJ) Austin Co-Organizer 2018-present  
IndieCade Annex Volunteer 2020  
VR Austin Jam Co-Organizer 2019-present  
UT Game Jam Judge 2020  
UT Game Jam Mentor 2019  
GGJNext Austin Organizer SU 2019  
VR Austin Meetup Volunteer 2019  
SXSW Gaming Redesign Workshops FA 2019  
Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Game Jam Volunteer 2018  
UT Electronic Game Developers Society (EGaDS!) Workshops 2018-present  
International Game Developers Association (IGDA) Booth Volunteer at SXSW 2017  
Independent Games Festival (IGF) Judge 2016-Present  
IndieCade Volunteer 2015  
IndieCade Judge 2016-2017  
Indie Prize Judge 2017  
International Game Developers Association (IGDA) Volunteer at GDC 2015

## Membership in Professional Organizations

International Game Developers Association (IGDA) 2012-present  
Higher Education Video Games Alliance (HEVGA) 2019-present



VR Austin 2018-present  
Women in Games International (WIGI) Austin Chapter  
Oculus Launch Pad 2016  
Amplifying New Voices (GDC) 2017