



University of
South Australia

UniSA HIGHER

Healthy Inclusive Gaming,
Hobby & Esports Research

1. Context

Every year video gaming becomes more mainstream ([Engelstätter & Ward, 2022](#)) and our *Healthy Inclusive Gaming, Hobby & Esports Research* (HIGHER) group is at the forefront of understanding the evolving industry and how gaming fits into everyday lives. Games have become increasingly popular among all demographics, evolving beyond the iconic adolescent boys playing on their computers and now encompassing families, parents, collegiate clubs, and older women playing on mobile devices ([Newzoo, 2023](#)). In Australia the average age of people who play games is 35 ([IGEA 2023](#)), and there is burgeoning infrastructure that extends beyond just consumers; elite teams are paid to compete in Esports (electronic sports) stadiums for international audiences. When Esports entered its modern era and began global streaming in the early 2010's it grew exponentially into a US \$1bil. industry ([VentureBeat, 2020](#)) within only a decade. However empirical research has failed to keep pace with this meteoric rise. Competitors, coaches, educators, sports psychologists, legal and other professionals working in the digital game industry along with parents and guardians of young players are calling for data to fuel evidence-based practices, and there is a desperate need to steer research away from outdated preconceptions around 'gamers'. Contemporary research must move toward inquiries that better reflect the diverse identities in the industry: both the consumers and the workers who produce, design, train, and support recreational and competitive gaming. Historically, research and the media have focussed on addiction and other perils from over-gaming, but new evidence clearly demonstrates the extensive health, social, psychological, and broader community benefits of being involved in games. At UniSA *Healthy Inclusive Gaming, Hobby & Esports Research* (HIGHER) we aim to be the research leaders on both human and technological infrastructure in Esports; we pioneer the expedition to understand the people, culture, performance, opportunities and challenges, and the power of games in modern life.

2. About us

In this section we go into detail about the vision, mission statement, research themes, and future directions of our research group. You can consult the list of outputs at the end of this document as examples of the high-quality publications and presentations that UniSA HIGHER have produced.

2.1 Our Vision

Our aim to chart the course of applied interdisciplinary research in the new era of gaming to better understand players, performance, and culture for both workers and hobbyists in the burgeoning Esports industry.

2.2 Mission Statement

We strive to better understand systems and the environment surrounding the modern game player so that we can lead interdisciplinary research and develop innovative approaches to better support health, wellbeing and make gaming a safe and inclusive space for everyone.

2.3 Research thematic groupings

Our current research encompasses six core themes, underpinned by a framework of interconnected theory, including but not limited to sociotechnical (within social-ecological-technological systems; SETS) for consumers, and for gaming workers the extended job-demand-resources model (JDR). Consequently, our research often revolves around the understanding of biopsychosocial phenomena and the systems/environment surrounding Esports and healthy gaming. Once our team is officially recognised at UniSA we intend to engage stakeholders in a codesign process to evolve these and formally establish our applied research thematic groupings. At present, our themes seek to understand gaming as it relates to:

1. **Esports** – including aspects of competition, elite performance, team dynamics, and inclusivity in both recreational (hobby) and elite (professional) gaming spaces;
2. **Mental health and wellbeing** – consequences of gaming/Esports work vs. benefits of healthy gaming; primary prevention, and social factors around mental health protection;
3. **Education, community social and technical systems** – including Esports and games as a component of high school, university, and local council hobby clubs, child protections, cyberbullying prevention and online safety;
4. **Identity** – gender, sexuality, in-game/online personas, and how to build inclusive gaming-environments, positive social networks, and enfranchisement vs. gatekeeping culture;
5. **Work and family** – the role of gaming in work-life balance, OHS for gaming workers, the interaction of gaming with parenting and flexible working arrangements, positive and negative impacts on children, as well as the dynamics between family members.
6. **Innovation and ethics** – how emerging technology such as AI impacts on workers in game design; celebrity role models and their duty of care to viewers, and other ethical responsibilities facing the burgeoning Esports industry.

3. Where we fit in *Enterprise25*

Despite being a billion-dollar industry Esports is largely untapped in Australian research. With our research group at HIGHER, UniSA now includes Esports as an active research area and our staff are already thought leaders with multiple publications on the topic, demonstrating excellence and potential for growth (as per #4 of the *Enterprise25* ambitions). Currently in the industry coaches, competitors, and their teams have to rely on research from conventional sports to drive their programs. Our research group have recognised the importance of being agile and ensuring that we pivot our research to meet the demands of industry and gaps in provision of good EBP research. As per Strategic Priority 3 (Enterprising Engagement) of the Academic Enterprise Plan (2021-2025), it is important that UniSA have an avenue to engage with the burgeoning Esports industry.

In line with Strategic Priority 5 (Accelerating Innovation through Shared Practices) UniSA already has avenues for students entering future careers in conventional sport, game design and other aspects of computing. Now, the HIGHER group seeks to further align our systems with the contemporary workplace which has now extended to previously uncharted areas such as Esport elite competition, Esport coaching, psychology and other expert supports, online content development,

live streaming, tournament and convention organisation, and many more. UniSA HIGHER recognizes an avenue toward creating better supports for students graduating and entering the Esports industry that effectively did not exist on a global scale a decade ago, which is an important step in building UniSA systems to prepare for future work environments (as well as secure ongoing partnerships with such alumni who enter the Esports industry after graduating).

4. Our People

4.1 Director

[Dr Sarven S. McLinton](#)

Senior Lecturer in Justice & Society (Psychology)

In HIGHER Sarven's research primarily revolves around occupational health and safety of esports players who have to make a living in precarious employment and need to manage both psychological and physical risks of injury without the aid of formalised OHS supports.



4.2 Members

[Dr Susannah Emery](#)

Lecturer in Creative (Game Design & Digital Media)

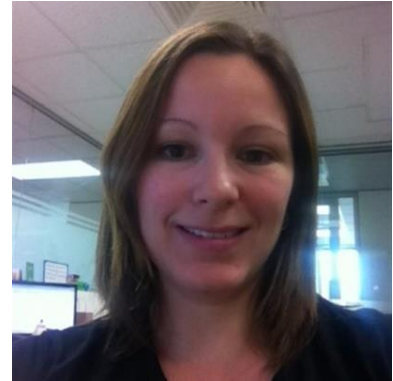
Susannah advocates for diversity and inclusion in the games industry, emphasising the importance of promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion while also fostering awareness of neurodivergence and disability within the context of cultivating a balanced and health-conscious approach to gaming.



[Dr Ashlee Borgkvist](#)

Research Associate in Justice & Society (SRC)

Ashlee is interested in exploring gaming within the context of families and parenting. In particular, Ashlee has a focus on the use of digital games and decisions made in relation to digital gaming by fathers, and the role digital games play in their relationships with their children.



[Dr Fae Heaselgrave](#)

Lecturer in Communication and Media

Fae's research focuses on the impact that digital media have on family life and, specifically, how mothers negotiate and incorporate the use of media technologies in the home. Fae's interest in gaming centres around the different gameplay practices of parents compared to other gaming communities.



[Dr Carmel Taddeo](#)

Senior Lecturer: UniSA Education Futures

Carmel applies her experience as a change analyst to the new context of Esports teams in high schools, including measuring behaviour and attitudinal change and also has expertise in the ethical use of technology to achieve positive learning outcomes and to promote youth health and wellbeing.



4.3 PhD Candidates

The first higher degree by research to arise from the activities of the UniSA HIGHER group has commenced a project exploring the job characteristics and career trajectories for gaming workers, with candidature officially confirmed in Dec 2023.

[Louise Trudgett-Klose](#)

Project Title: Professional gameplay entertainment: An emerging career and work industry.

Principal Supervisor: Dr Sarven McLinton

Co-supervisors: Dr Susannah Emery; Prof David Gleaves



Dr Susannah Emery's recently commenced student Alaa Aljurais also intends to explore a HIGHER topic revolving around *the impact of the use of interactive design on the cultural heritage of children in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Confirmation of PhD candidature is planned for Q3 2024.

In addition to higher degrees by research, Dr Sarven McLinton has also led the supervision of six Psychology Honours student research projects. Most of their proposals were examined by the other members of our HIGHER group in order to promote multi-disciplinary research:

- Kerry Todd (2024) *Parental attitudes toward adolescents planning an Esports career*
- William Daniel (2024) *Psychological factors in Esports athletes: A systematic review of predictors and outcomes*
- Sarah Menz (2023) *Exploring the experiences of women working in the video game industry*
- Thai McGill (2023) *Investigating health behaviours in professional and recreational video gamers: The impact of role-modelling in the video game industry*
- Louise Trudgett-Klose (2022) *Professional gamers and cyberbullying: Workplace bullying and sexual harassment in professional video gaming*
- Stefan Pascale (2021) *Understanding "tilt" in Esports, and its impact on decision making*

5. Outputs

This section demonstrates the key outputs from the HIGHER group to date.

5.1 List of publications and conference presentations

As an emerging area, some of our publications are still in-review at various journals. Others are published Open Access and you can follow the link via their DOI below:

McLinton, S. S., & Pascale, S. J. (2024). Tilt in esports: Understanding the phenomenon in new digital contexts. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* (IF 3.1). DOI: [10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100425](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100425),

Trudgett-Klose, L. H., & McLinton, S. S. (2024). "Pro Gamers" and cyberbullying: Workplace bullying and sexual harassment in professional video gaming. *Entertainment Computing* (IF 2.8), DOI: [10.1016/j.entcom.2024.100702](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2024.100702)

Menz, S. N., & McLinton, S. S. (2024, in press). Exploring the experiences of women working in the video game industry. In M. Monga (Ed), *Gendered Marginalities*, in press for late 2024. Springer: New York.

McGill, T., McLinton, S. S., & Trudgett-Klose, L. H. (submitted Feb 2024). Investigating health behaviours in professional and recreational video gamers: The impact of role-modelling in the video game industry. *International Journal of Esports*, in peer review.

Heaselgrave, F., & Borgkvist, A. (2023, 19-23 June). "I prefer to play alone to recharge my social battery": Parent gamer identities in Australia [[Conference presentation](#)]. *International Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA)* Sevilla, Spain.

Heaselgrave, F., Borgkvist, A., McLinton, S. S., & Emery, S. (2022, 22-25 November). 'Play & Pause: Supporting the parent gamer community in Australia', [[Conference presentation](#)]. *Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA): Communicating through Chaos*. University of Wollongong, NSW.

Taddeo, C. M., Mills-Bayne, M., Barnes, A., Taddeo, V. L., & Spears, B. A. (2021). *Facilitators of, and barriers to, positive esports behaviours: A pilot study*. Industry report for the Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP) and the SA Dept Education.

5.2 Current and future projects

We are working with multiple industry partners on studies still ongoing, as well as conducting funded research projects. If you are interested in collaborating with UniSA HIGHER on a project aligned with our research thematic groupings (2.3), or if you want to become a member of the research group, then feel free to reach out to any of our team via our Staff profiles. We look forward to collaborating!



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