

Leveling Up Leadership: Emerging Voices and Evolving Practices in the Games & Play Community

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Abstract

This workshop brings together emerging and established leaders in the Games & Play research community to reflect on their leadership journeys, exchange best practices, and collectively envision the future of leadership in the field. As the community continues to expand across disciplines, geographies, and cultures, there is a growing need for dialogue around how we lead, support, and sustain playful, inclusive, and forward-thinking research groups. Through a series of interactive sessions—including show-and-tell reflections, group discussions, campus walks, and co-creative mapping—we aim to surface key challenges, playful practices, and shared needs among leaders. The outcomes of the workshop will include a collaboratively generated Playful Leadership Map, a community reading list, and the foundation for an open-source *Handbook of Playful Leadership*. This gathering marks the beginning of an ongoing network committed to shaping the next generation of leadership in Games & Play.

CCS Concepts

• **Social and professional topics** → **Employment issues; Computing organizations; Project and people management.**

Keywords

Leadership, games & play

ACM Reference Format:

Oğuz ‘Oz’ Buruk, Max V. Birk, Ferran Altarriba Bertran, Alena Denisova, Aakash Johry, Rakesh Patibanda, Velvet Spors, Xin Tong, and Rina R. Wehbe. 2025. Leveling Up Leadership: Emerging Voices and Evolving Practices in the Games & Play Community. In *Companion Proceedings Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play (CHI PLAY Companion ’25)*, October 13–16, 2025, Pittsburgh, PA, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 5 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3744736.3749322>

1 Introduction

The Games & Play community has steadily become a critical pillar of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), yet it remains a relatively young and evolving field. While the early days of Games & Play community has been shaped by specific academic and cultural contexts, the community is now experiencing significant growth and diversification. New voices from a wide range of disciplines, geographies, cultures, and practices are entering leadership roles, bringing fresh perspectives and reshaping the field’s trajectory.

As a result, we are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of leaders, actively building their own research groups and leadership philosophies. These early-stage leadership efforts are not only shaping the future of Games & Play research but also

setting precedents for how the community evolves, collaborates, and sustains itself.

This moment of transition and growth creates a pressing need for stronger connections among emerging leaders in Games & Play. Such connections are essential for:

- Exchanging knowledge around leadership practices rooted in diverse lab cultures, disciplines, and personal experiences;
- Identifying common challenges encountered while building and leading research groups in this space;
- Developing shared strategies to overcome these challenges and collectively support the growth of the field;
- And, more broadly, exploring leadership models that are informed by the epistemologies, values, and practices unique to Games & Play.

To address these needs, we propose a full-day workshop that brings together leaders in the Games & Play community. Participants will be invited to submit a 1-page reflection on their leadership practices. Based on these submissions, we will curate a diverse cohort representing varying levels of experience and leadership styles. The workshop will include collaborative activities aimed at co-creating a Games & Play Leadership Handbook that will:

- Articulate key leadership challenges in the field;
- Share best practices and insights;
- Identify effective group-level leadership activities;
- And define what makes leadership in Games & Play distinct.

This workshop aims, along with supporting current leaders, to serve as a foundational step in establishing a sustainable leaders' network, preserving collective knowledge, supports new voices, and guides the community toward its future.

2 Background

As the Games & Play community within HCI continues to grow and diversify, a new generation of researchers is stepping into leadership roles – often for the first time. Besides advancing novel research agendas, these leaders are also tasked with building, managing, and sustaining research groups, often without formal training in leadership or organizational development. Academic career pathways tend to emphasize research outputs and key performance indicators (KPIs) during PhD and postdoctoral stages, offering little space or support for developing leadership skills [6].

While some institutions provide workshops or coaching, there is no widely adopted or systematic approach to leadership development in academia [3]. As a result, many researchers rely on informal learning, trial-and-error, and peer support to navigate the complexities of academic leadership. Practices borrowed from other fields, such as agile workflows, Scrum [7], or playful productivity methods [8], are occasionally adapted, but their uptake is inconsistent due to the diverse and context-specific nature of academic work.

This situation calls for collective reflection and mutual support. Especially in interdisciplinary and experimental fields like Games & Play, there is a need to recognize and share the varied ways researchers build inclusive, sustainable, and playful leadership cultures. Peer networks, informal exchanges, and co-created resources can serve as crucial infrastructures for learning and resilience. Our workshop responds to this need by creating a dedicated space for early-career leaders to reflect on their experiences, share practices,

and collaboratively imagine the future of leadership in the Games & Play community.

3 Agenda

This hybrid workshop is structured to combine formal presentations, small group discussions, and embodied outdoor engagement to support peer learning, community building, creative engagement, and playful low threshold atmosphere. The workshop is planned as a full-day activity. The current plan is for 8 hours; however modifications can be made to the agenda to fit it to the conference program.

Activities planned in the workshop draw on pedagogies related to community building, creative engagement and playful conversations.

3.1 Playful Approaches

A defining feature of this workshop is its grounding in the Games and Play community. As such, we not only reflect on how playfulness manifests in leadership practices, but also actively incorporate it into the structure of the workshop itself. Playful methods can lower barriers to engagement, foster psychological safety, and stimulate exploratory thinking—especially when organizers provide appropriate social alibis and context [2]. To support this, participants will create personalized “introduction game cards” as an opening activity. These cards will serve both as ice-breakers and as tools for surfacing participants’ own playful habits, values, and approaches to leadership.

3.2 Shuffled Group Discussion for Community Building

A central component of the workshop is a series of intentionally structured, rotating group discussions. These sessions are designed to promote community building through the sharing of experiences, strategies, and reflections across diverse leadership contexts. Participants will cycle through multiple small-group conversations before coming together in plenary sessions to synthesize insights. This dynamic structure has been commonly used in generative and participatory design practices and shown to encourage more open dialogue and contribution, particularly by reducing the pressure associated with speaking in front of larger audiences [4, 5]. It ensures that all voices are heard, promotes cross-pollination of ideas, and helps build a stronger, more connected leadership network within the CHI PLAY community.

3.3 Walkshops and Embodying the Discussion

To create a refreshing environment that encourages reflection and informal thinking, we will invite in-person participants to take part in a campus walk during the workshop. This walk will serve as a break from structured indoor activities and provide space for embodied dialogue and cognitive renewal. For online participants, we will suggest parallel activities such as stepping outside for fresh air, grabbing a drink, or co-listening to a shared Spotify playlist – fostering a sense of unity and participation across formats. Such practices align with the concept of “walkshops” [9], integrating movement-based activity for allowing participants to process ideas

in a more relaxed and open-ended way, while continuing to engage in meaningful conversations.

4 Recruitment

Participant recruitment will be conducted through a dedicated workshop website providing key information about the event, goals, and submission process. We will request a low-threshold submission in the form of a 1-page statement summarizing the participant’s current leadership context, outline challenges they believe should be discussed during the workshop, and highlight any unique or playful practices they have employed in their leadership approach.

The workshop is open to a broad range of participants, including: 1) individuals transitioning into leadership roles; 2) early-career researchers who have recently founded a research group; 3) current leaders of growing or evolving teams; and 4) established leaders within the Games & Play community.

Our aim is to curate a diverse and balanced cohort with varying levels of experience and backgrounds, fostering rich dialogue and peer learning across different leadership trajectories.

Expected Outcomes

The workshop will result in a set of collaboratively generated resources designed to support current and future leaders in the Games and Play research community. These include:

- **Playful Leadership Map:** A shared map documenting leadership practices, recurring challenges, strategies for overcoming those challenges, support needs, and examples of playful approaches to leadership. This will act as both a reflective and strategic tool for the community.
- **Glossary of Playful Leadership:** A co-created glossary that consolidates terminology and conceptual framings of leadership styles within the Games and Play field. This glossary will serve as a reference point for both emerging and experienced leaders.
- **Curated Reading List:** A collaboratively compiled list of readings, handbooks, and other inspirational resources that participants have found valuable in shaping their leadership practices.
- **Communication Document:** A networking document including participant profiles, leadership contexts, research areas, and interests—designed to facilitate continued dialogue, joint projects, and future community activities such as SIGs.

5 Further Dissemination and Long-Term Vision

This workshop serves as a starting point for building stronger connections among emerging leaders in the Games & Play research community. Our intention is to sustain and grow this network through ongoing initiatives such as Special Interest Groups (SIGs), follow-up workshops at other conferences, and collaborative networking projects.

Through this continuous engagement, our ultimate goal is to co-create a *Handbook of Playful Leadership* – an open-source, living document that consolidates collective insights, strategies, and practices. This handbook will serve as a guiding resource for future generations of leaders in the field, helping to cultivate inclusive,

Table 1: Proposed Agenda of the Workshop

Time	Activity Description
45 min	Welcome and Introductions Participants are welcomed and introduced to the goals of the workshop. Organizers will outline the motivation behind the session, and participants will briefly introduce their leadership contexts through a playful activity of card-making.
45 min	Show & Tell: Leadership in Context Participants will present their leadership journeys, share highlights of their research groups, and discuss key challenges and expectations for the workshop.
30 min	Break Time for informal conversations, refreshments, and reflection.
45 min	Small Group Discussions: Cross-Cultural Challenges In geographically diverse small groups, participants will share the challenges they face in leadership and the strategies they’ve developed to address them. We also will curate the groups by combining different leadership experience levels and expertise.
90 min	Lunch Break An extended break to allow for informal conversations and deeper networking.
45 min	Mapping Challenges and Support Needs Participants will reconvene to identify shared leadership challenges and collaboratively map potential strategies and support structures.
90 min	Walkshop and Alternative Ways of Engagement: Playful Community Building Participants form new groups and take a reflective walk through the Carnegie Mellon campus, discussing best practices for fostering sustainable and playful research cultures. We will encourage online participants to have a change of mind through going to a different location, grabbing a drink or listening to a mutual Spotify list.
45 min	Sharing Playful Practices Groups return to share playful or unique practices used to build and sustain group culture within their research environments.
30 min	Reflections and Next Steps The day concludes with group reflections and planning for future collaboration, including co-creating a leadership handbook and forming an ongoing network of CHI PLAY leaders.

sustainable, and playful leadership cultures across diverse research contexts.

6 Organizers

The organizing team consists of early-career researchers positioned at different stages of the spectrum—from those transitioning into leadership roles to those who have recently founded their research

groups. The team reflects a diverse range of countries, cultural backgrounds, and disciplinary perspectives. This diversity is intentional and essential bringing multiple lived leadership experiences and facilitate inclusive, pluralistic, and globally informed discussions.

Oğuz 'Oz' Buruk. Dr. Buruk is an Assistant Professor of Gameful Experience at the Research Centre of Gameful Realities, Tampere University. He leads the Gameful Futures Lab (GFL), a research group of 17 members focused on designing and developing playful sites of inquiry for exploring futures through speculative, fictional, and critical design approaches.

Max Birk. Dr. Birk is an Associate Professor in the Human-Technology Interaction group at Eindhoven University of Technology (NL). Embedded in a diverse interdisciplinary group, he researches cognition in games, the effects of game design on experience and behaviour, and its implications for society. His leadership experience spans group leadership, diverse roles in the international HCI community, and local and national leadership as a member of "De Jonge Akademie" and the Eindhoven Young Academy of Engineering.

Ferran Altarriba Bertran. Ferran is an interaction design researcher, currently affiliated with Escola Universitària ERAM (Girona, Catalonia) as an Associate Professor. He leads the Playful Living Lab (playful.eram.cat), where he brings together researchers, students, and other stakeholders to investigate how to design technology that supports ways of living that are joyful and project a sense of care.

Alena Denisova. Alena is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) within the Human-Computer Interaction Research Group at the University of York, UK. Her research focuses on understanding and improving player experience of video games (e.g., perceived challenge) and developing and evaluating tools and methods for researching interactive experiences.

Aakash Johry. Aakash Johry is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Design at Indian Institute of Technology Delhi where he leads the GAMES (Gaming, Augmented & Mixed-reality Experiences and Simulations) lab. His work focuses on designing serious games and playful technologies to study the affective and experiential layers of user experience in the context of play, learning, health and inclusion.

Rakesh Patibanda. Dr Patibanda's vision is to expand playful interaction by integrating human augmentation and bodily games, bridging HCI, somatic design, and public health. His leadership focuses on collaborative, curiosity-driven research that centres the body's role in digital experiences, creating vibrant, cross-disciplinary communities that champion diverse ways of engaging with emerging technologies.

Velvet Spors. (they/them) is a creative technologist and lecturer of interaction design at the Institute of Computer Science, University of Tartu, Estonia. They previously worked as a post-doctoral researcher at the Research Center of Gameful Realities, at Tampere University, Finland. Their research centers speculative and Feminist notions of care.

Xin Tong. Dr Xin Tong is an Assistant Professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou). Her research

studies how intelligent and interactive interfaces, interactions, and games can support social good, with a focus on health, accessibility, and cultural heritage.

Rina Wehbe. Dr Rina R. Wehbe (she/her) Ph.D., M.Sc., B.Sc. is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Computer Science (FCS), Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. She directs the HCI4Good research group. Wehbe's research is driven by the desire to drive social change for the good of all humans. Research directions include the education of individuals, promotion of equitable thought, and pro-social persuasive methods. Her work explores the boundaries of collaboration over large interactive displays in playful and serious settings. She is interested in augmenting public space using technology to promote community education and collaboration.

7 Conclusion

The proposed workshop addresses a timely and growing need within the CHI PLAY community: to support the diverse, emerging cohort of research leaders who are shaping the future of Games & Play. By creating space for reflection, playful engagement, and knowledge exchange, this workshop not only acknowledges the challenges of academic leadership, but also frames it as a site of creativity and community-making. Our goal is to initiate a sustained conversation that continues beyond the event—through networks, shared resources, and future collaborations. With the creation of an open, evolving *Handbook of Playful Leadership*, we aim to leave a lasting contribution to the field, providing guidance and inspiration for current and future leaders alike.

Acknowledgments

ChatGPT 4o was used in the writing of this paper. We utilized the methods of "Research Buddy," and "Chunk Stylist." Chunk Stylist method (styling quickly written chunks of text) used to craft most of the sections while we resorted to Research Buddy (getting ideas from AI) for generating Abstract and Conclusion. Additionally, we employed ChatGPT as a "Polisher" to ensure the text's tone was consistent and for proofreading. These methods are based on [1].

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