

Final Assessment Report

Interactive Arts and Science Undergraduate Program Review

A. Summary

1. The Centre's Self Study was considered and approved by the Academic Review Committee of Senate on January 18, 2013.
2. The Review Committee consisted of two external reviewers: Geoffrey Shea, Ontario College of Art and Design and Stefan Sinclair, McGill University and an internal reviewer, Duncan MacDonald, School of Fine and Performing Arts.
3. The site visit occurred on February 24-26, 2013.
4. The Reviewers' Report was received on March 26, 2013.
5. The Centre's response was received on April 24, 2013.
6. The Dean of Humanities response from Douglas Kneale was received on May 2, 2013.
7. The Undergraduate Program Committee response was received on April 19, 2013.

The undergraduate programs offered by the Centre which were examined as part of the review included:

BA Pass and Honours in Interactive Arts and Science

This review was conducted under the terms and conditions of the IQAP approved by Senate on June 6, 2011.

The reviewers assigned the following outcome category:

Outcome Category 2, "Good Quality"

B. Strengths of the Program

The reviewers stated:

The program has been led by a small group of passionate and engaged faculty, from its formation to its current reconfiguration as a shared offering with Niagara College. While there has been an internal tension between the vision of digital humanities (including a broad social analysis of the impact of digital culture) and a perceived desire by students of engaging in game design, the shared offering creates the opportunity to address both: with gaming development being supported jointly with the college and digital humanities becoming the speciality within a minor program at the university. Partnerships are being developed with other areas within the university to achieve this, including Computer Science and possibly Psychology. Recent and upcoming retirements create opportunities to revitalize the teaching complement through new hires. Existing faculty strengths - independent of current teaching commitments - are strongly aligned with this digital humanities minor, including two Canada Research Chairs in directly related areas of interest.

The following summarizes some of the strengths we were able to identify through the self-study document and discussions with faculty, staff, students and administrators:

- The program is well supported by the library, academic advising and co-op placement departments.
 - the online research guides from the library are excellent
 - academic advising is clearly knowledgeable and invested in the program
 - the co-op program is world-class and represents great potential for growth
- The current cross-appointed faculty are well qualified in their fields, as evidenced by their research funding and publishing/exhibiting histories. The directors and faculty have demonstrated leadership and vision for the program.
 - there are two Canada Research Chairs in related areas
 - there is specialized expertise in pedagogy and project-based learning
- Dedicated student workspaces are addressing the needs of the program, as it currently exists.
 - there is sufficient lab space for lower-level classes
 - there are specialized labs available for upper-level students
 - there are appropriately-equipped, modular seminar-style teaching spaces
- The structure of the program as existing within the Centre for Digital Humanities is very healthy, allowing the program to leverage the infrastructure and existing three staff members.
- Student interest and admissions to the program are steady. Newer students, in particular, indicated satisfaction with the structure and offerings of the program (as it currently exists). The program is providing students with a valuable mix of conceptual understanding and technical competencies.
 - Internal analysis of the program is frank and fair, with student satisfaction surveys and statistics being used to address issues of gender balance, dedicated faculty and retention.
 - Courses developed explicitly for the program are relevant and thorough.

C. Opportunities for Improvement and Enhancement

The reviewers provided twenty-three recommendations for the program.

PERSONNEL

1. Revisit cross appointments so that faculty maintain and demonstrate a real and viable commitment to the program and its goals - they need to have a specified number of courses from their course-load dedicated to the program.

The Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation, insofar as it is possible to do so. Departmental needs and exigencies change with demand, and while one faculty member may in good faith agree to a commitment to teach, emergencies and other administrative commitments may preclude our being able to operationalize this in good faith.

The Dean responded that he:

supports the Centre's good-faith efforts in this regard, recognizing that the usual contingencies of faculty deployment are often exacerbated in the case of cross-appointments.

ARC considers this recommendation to be worthy of consideration but not accepted as it lies outside of ARC's jurisdiction.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

2. In addition to this restructuring of cross-appointments, at least one or two full-time faculty members should be hired within the program to increase cohesiveness and ensure capacity. Existing cross-appointments demonstrate strengths in more traditional disciplines (such as history), but there is an urgent need to boost expertise related specifically to game development, including programming, design, modelling, and audio. Ideal hires would come from the game industry with experience (i.e. not just an academic interest in games). Attention needs to be paid to the gender imbalance among faculty.

The Centre responded that it, “accepts the recommendation. Gender imbalance will be considered when hiring full-time faculty.”

The Dean responded that he:

agrees that the ideal would be to have a new dedicated tenure-track position to support the proposed GAME program, and has submitted a Schedule 5 budget request for such a position to begin in 2014. The Dean agrees that the Centre should strive for gender balance in its hirings.

ARC considers the recommendation regarding hiring to be not accepted as it lies outside ARC’s jurisdiction. The Committee expects that the Centre will proceed through normal channels of advocacy for faculty resources and that Human Resources will adhere to university guidelines with respect to gender imbalance.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

3. Faculty should be teaching at least one of the early core courses to ensure that the learning outcomes for the program are conveyed and understood by students.

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, understanding that with this recommendation the reviewers mean to convey that full-time tenured faculty should be teaching early core courses.

The Dean responded that he:

concur with the goal of assigning full-time faculty to the core courses at the first-year level whenever possible, as is common in all Departments in Humanities.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted while recognizing that it is consistent with existing practice.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)	
Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

4. Transition staff focus on hardware and software maintenance (which can be increasingly done by central computing services) to technical expertise with specialized hardware and software in support of courses and projects. For instance, staff might be available to help students in the labs outside of class time with software such as Maya or with the administration of web-based server applications. This shift in focus would also help to serve the needs of researchers within the Centre for Digital Humanities. Given a stronger focus on research applications, staff could assume alternative-academic appointments (i.e. not tenure-track teaching, but not strictly just support roles either).

The Centre responded that it, “accepts the recommendation, and will immediately address replacing the current Manager of CDH who will retire April 30.”

The Faculty Dean responded that he:

has already had discussions with the Centre about replacing this position—including, among various possibilities, an alternative academic appointment.

ARC considers the recommendation to be worthy of consideration but not accepted, as it lies outside of the Committee’s jurisdiction. The Committee expects that the Centre will work within established practices with regards to changes to staff resources.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

CURRICULUM

5. Find a mechanism to move current students who are interested into the proposed GAMES program if it is approved. Although this represents considerable extra effort and planning, we strongly feel that it would demonstrate that the students are the first priority and that it is the right thing to do. It may also help to address fears (particularly during the transition) that the minor would become an impoverished little sibling destined to atrophy and disappear. In a similar vein, communication with students about the proposed program needs to be greatly improved: students with whom we spoke were aware of rumours but felt anxious about their lack of knowledge of what is happening. We see no reason why students should not be informed and consulted during the GAMES proposal process.

In its response, the Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation, noting that it has explored, and will continue to explore, moving students into the GAME program. The Centre also notes that before receiving this Report, the Centre staff, with the IASC Academic Advisor, organized a “Pizza with the Director” evening event, attended by about 30 students, which addressed these concerns directly.

The Faculty Dean responded that he:

is confident that the Centre is including current students in the discussions regarding the new GAME proposal and that it will make every effort to assist the transition of current qualified IASC majors who wish to enter the new program once it is approved. The IASC Academic Advisor is best placed to determine if this transition is in the best academic interests of individual students, and will assist as necessary.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation. The Committee believes that the Centre is best positioned to find a mechanism to accommodate changes of major between programs by a student and to develop a plan for communicating information about the IASC program to students.

Implementation Plan (Second Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2014/15

6. Explore the possibility of creating a related graduate program that could encourage more academic research/creation into the digital humanities and games studies. A graduate program would raise the bar for faculty and provide them with enhanced Research Assistantships, as well as provide a model for undergraduate students who are considering continuing in academia.

The Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation in principle, but notes that establishing GAME as a robust and viable undergraduate university/college program must be a first priority and foundation upon which to prepare a graduate proposal. The Centre also notes that this recommendation is in tension with the Personnel recommendation (below) that points out that the program needs full-time tenured faculty. If there is an insufficiency of faculty to staff an undergraduate program, the Centre cannot expect to staff a graduate program of any credibility.

The Faculty Dean stated that he:

concurs with the Centre's response that the new GAME program must be established as a strong undergraduate degree before a graduate program can be seriously contemplated.

ARC considers this recommendation to be not accepted for the reasons stated above.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

7. Make a much more concerted effort to examine similarities and differences with an expanded list of comparators, both for the existing program and for the proposed GAMES program. We urge Brock to devote real resources to the comparison exercise, including possible travel funds for visits and funds to help in writing a more detailed report.

The Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation, where budgetary constraints permit. The Centre notes that its knowledge of other programs (through former Centre Director Jean Bridge’s leadership of the ONCAT College University Pathways for Games study) is comprehensive, notwithstanding the reviewers’ criticism of the Self Study. Indeed, the Centre’s knowledge of the highly variable emphases of other programs was the primary reason for the limited list of comparators.

The Faculty Dean responded that he:

feels that the Centre has produced a comprehensive proposal for the new GAME program and that sufficient examination of relevant comparators, as established through the ONCAT-funded research of Prof. Jean Bridge, is already present in the document.

ARC considers this recommendation to be not accepted as a wide-ranging and thorough comparison has been already completed.

Implementation Plan
Recommendation NOT accepted.

8. Establish stronger ties with Computer Science to facilitate exploration of overlapping interests and to explore the difficult communication issues inherent in these diverse cultures. Similarly, the links with Communication Studies seem tenuous at best and should be substantially reinforced.

The Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation. Indeed, the Centre is partnering with COSC in the proposal for the GAME program and has integrated courses from CPCF in at(sic) program.

The Faculty Dean responded that he “agrees that stronger links with both COSC and CPCF are already being forged with the new GAME program.”

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

9. Even within the context of flexibility for individual sessionals, a greater effort needs to be made to ensure consistency and cohesion across core courses. It would help to have a detailed list *across the curriculum* of which reading materials and which assignments contribute to which learning outcomes and ask sessionals to ensure that their course outlines are meeting specific criteria. Some coordination is urgent to reduce the duplication of reading materials (reported by students).

The Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation, and undertakes to revise its Departmental Procedures, requiring instructors (both full-time faculty and part-time Instructors) to: i. develop their course outlines in keeping with baseline learning outcomes and core topics; ii. forward a copy of their course outlines to the Director and Administrative Assistant (according to a predetermined schedule). The Director will review the course outlines and respond to instructors as necessary.

The Faculty Dean responded that he “agrees, and supports the Centre’s efforts to address this issue.”

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)	
Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

10. The reliance on cross-listed courses has resulted in a high incidence of content redundancy. Students reported that they took courses for one aspect of the content it covered, but had to put up with other content components that were repeated (e.g. intro to HTML). Less reliance on cross-listed courses would allow the program to better coordinate its curricular offerings.

The Centre stated that it:

accepts the recommendation, but notes that without dedicated full-time faculty, it must rely on cross-listed courses to deliver the program.

The Faculty Dean responded that he:

concur with the Centre that cross-listed courses will have to remain a large part of the curriculum, at least until a new tenure-track position is approved.

ARC considers this recommendation to be an observation. No further action is required.

Implementation Plan

No further action required.

11. Basic business awareness should be a mandatory part of the curriculum (so that students are aware of what steps would be necessary to start their own company and run it efficiently).

The Centre stated that it:

rejects the recommendation, noting that IASC 3P97, which has been offered for the last several years at the Niagara Interactive Media Generator, and which is one of the Centre's most popular courses, addresses many of these issues directly. It is a mandatory course in the Honours program.

The Dean stated that he "concur[s] with the Centre in that the Reviewers' concerns are unfounded, given the required course IASC 3P97."

ARC considers this recommendation to be consistent with existing practice and no further action is required.

Implementation Plan

No further action required.

12. The emphasis on an e-portfolio seems present at times in the IASC program, but not systematically integrated - it should be.

The Centre stated that it “accepts the recommendation.”

The Faculty Dean stated that he agrees.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation.

Implementation Plan (Second Priority)

Responsible for approving: Centre

Responsible for resources: Centre

Responsible for implementation: Centre

Timeline: Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2014/15

13. Students complained extensively about scheduling conflicts that prevented them from taking courses in their other areas of interest (such as English). This is a perennial problem of course, but given how frequently it was mentioned, any and all remedial strategies should be considered.

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, but notes that it has no power to implement this recommendation. It also notes that this problem may be exacerbated by the proposed move to downtown St. Catharines.

The Faculty Dean stated that he:

is sympathetic to the concerns of students as reported by the Reviewers, but notes that scheduling at Brock is complex; it will never be possible to accommodate all the elective credit interests of all students from year to year. The IASC Academic Advisor is familiar with the pitfalls of the scheduling system as they affect IASC majors and will continue to assist students as much as possible in finding the courses they want, and suggest alternatives as appropriate.

ARC considers this recommendation to be worthy of consideration. Although IASC has no control over the scheduling of courses homed in other units, the unit and its academic adviser are best placed to consider reasonable solutions on behalf of its majors. ARC believes that this process will continue through normal channels of advocacy.

Implementation Plan (Second Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2014/15

14. The disconnect between digital literacy and traditional humanities curricula continues to grow - there may be an opportunity to develop a large-format course to deliver some introductory concepts (possibly through a MOOC).

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, but notes again the limited full-time faculty available to lead such a course.

The Faculty Dean stated that he:

supports the recommendation in principle, pending the availability of a faculty member to teach such a course.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted. The Committee believes that the Centre is best positioned to determine strategies to move forward on this issue.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

15. The initial work on integrating internships in a more organized and sustainable way seems very promising - this needs to be a priority. Internships were a primary reason for some of the students to choose the IASC program.

The Centre responded that it concurs.

The Faculty Dean stated that he also concurs.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted but not yet implemented.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)

Responsible for approving: Centre

Responsible for resources: Centre

Responsible for implementation: Centre

Timeline: Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

16. Our assessment of the course outlines and feedback from students suggest that many of the courses were either practical or theoretical, but rarely blended, leaving a gap for students to fill. Efforts need to be made to integrate praxis into the curriculum, even when the theoretical components encounter resistance from the students. Similarly, the proposed partnership with Niagara for the GAMES program is exciting, but we anticipate the same tensions around students' desire for applied knowledge and university standards for more holistic and critical knowledge. What is planned to avoid an "us" (academic) vs. "them" (practical) dichotomy, with the resulting push-back on "us"?

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, and will address the pedagogy and teaching methodology of the program in a dedicated forum, such as a meeting or departmental retreat.

The Dean stated that he:

supports the Department's efforts to discuss the integration of praxis into the curriculum and will be interested to hear the recommendations emerging from the planned retreat.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)

Responsible for approving: Centre

Responsible for resources: Centre

Responsible for implementation: Centre

Timeline: Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

INFRASTRUCTURE

17. Consider implementing a laptop purchase program (with software licensing arrangements) to help alleviate uneven configuration of workstations within the existing labs. Licensing could also include access to a software tutorial service such as Lynda.com.

The Centre responded that it:

will consider the recommendation against the background of restrictive provincial regulations on compulsory ancillary fees.

The Dean stated that he:

is cognizant of strictures on compulsory ancillary fees, and feels that, while moderate materials fees may be appropriate for certain courses (such as are common in VISA), students should not face undue hardship by having to purchase high-end hardware, even for an elective course. The Centre will have to work within allowable equipment budgets and rely on the timely maintenance of hardware and software by ITS. Inasmuch as third-party tutorial services do not affect budgets unduly, they can of course be considered.

ARC believes this recommendation is worthy of consideration but not accepted as it lies outside of the Committee's jurisdiction.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

18. Students reported problems with concurrent use of lab licenses - these need to be addressed. In the context of learning concepts rather than specific applications (as one might in a college), the IASC program might consider making much greater use of free and open-source software.

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, noting that the problem of concurrent use of lab licenses in September to November of 2012 was investigated and resolved by Centre staff in December 2012.

The Faculty Dean stated that he “recognizes both the Reviewers’ concern and the Centre’s successful resolution to the problem.”

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and believes that the Centre is best positioned to determine strategies to move forward on this issue.

Implementation Plan (Second Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2014/15

19. Create a dedicated, shared office for departmental faculty (especially sessionals) - the current situation where students can meet sessionals at a single desk in the open administrative office is awful.

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, where possible, and will explore options for temporary office space, within the current constraints.

The Dean stated that he:

agrees that adequate office space is a constant concern on campus and will bear in mind the Centre's needs when allocating any free space that may become available in the future.

ARC believes this recommendation is worthy of consideration but not accepted as it lies outside of the Committee's jurisdiction. The Committee expects that the Centre will proceed through normal channels of advocacy for space resources.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

20. Formally expand the target digital technologies available to students and taught in courses to include physical computing (e.g. arduino, wearables, etc.), and other non-screen-based applications. This has an obvious counterpart in curriculum development.

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, noting that our program includes a physical computing course, which has not been offered due to staffing constraints. The Centre also notes that it has already taken steps to purchase tools and technologies that can be used in such a course.

The Faculty Dean stated that he “appreciates that the Centre is already moving to implement this recommendation when staffing for the course becomes available.”

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

21. The exact lines of responsibility for maintaining and ever-greening the labs were not quite clear to us, so those responsibilities should be formalized if they are not already, and as much as possible of the hardware and software maintenance should shift to central computing (for economies of scale) to ensure full attention can be given to the special needs of the program.

The Centre responded that it:

accepts the recommendation, noting that the lines of responsibility are clear to the Centre, and it will continue to shift responsibility to ITS.

The Faculty Dean stated that he “concur[s] with the Centre’s response.”

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted and in the process of implementation. The Committee believes that the Dean should establish (in conjunction with ITS) a long-term plan for the replacement of computing equipment given that IT infrastructure is essential to the delivery of this program.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)	
Responsible for approving:	Centre, Dean of Humanities, ITS
Responsible for resources:	Centre, Dean of Humanities, ITS
Responsible for implementation:	Centre, Dean of Humanities, ITS
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

Partnerships

22. Coordinate library services with Niagara College if the GAMES program proceeds.

The Centre responded that it “conditionally accepts the recommendation.”

The Dean stated that he:

agrees that the logistics of library services will be one of many necessary issues to consider with Niagara College once the GAME program is approved.

ARC considers this recommendation to be not applicable to the review of the IASC program.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation NOT accepted.

Partnerships

23. A partnership with the library to acquire and maintain digital works (e.g. notable games for historical or conceptual reasons) - the library could be a more central part of the IASC planning processes in general (invited at least annually to meetings, for instance).

The Centre responded that it “accepts the recommendation.”

The Faculty Dean wished to point out:

that the Centre has a Library Liaison and a limited budget to acquire new materials, as do all Departments and Centres in the Faculty. Inviting the Liaison to Centre committee meetings is entirely appropriate if the Centre chooses to do so.

ARC considers this recommendation to be accepted. The Committee believes that the Centre is best positioned to determine strategies to move forward on this issue.

Implementation Plan (First Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by end of academic year 2013/14

D. Recommendations to be Implemented

The IQAP requires that ARC “set out and prioritize the recommendations that are selected for implementation.” Using the specific ARC proposals enunciated above, the following priorities are proposed:

First Priority:

Recommendations 3,8,9,14,15,16,20,21,23

Second Priority:

Recommendations 5,12,18

E. Recommendations that Will Not be Implemented

Not accepted:

Recommendations: 1,2,4,6,7,13,17,19,22

No further action required:

Recommendations: 10,11