

Final Assessment Report

Interactive Arts and Science (IASC)

Undergraduate Program (reviewed 2020-21)

A. Summary

1. The Centre's Self Study was considered and approved by the Senate Academic Review Committee on November 18, 2020.
2. The Review Committee consisted of two external reviewers: William Turkel (University of Western Ontario) and Cindy Poremba (OCAD University) and internal reviewer, Nancy Taber (Brock University).
3. The review occurred February 22, 25 and 26, 2021 via video-conference.
4. The Reviewers' Report was received on March 26, 2021.
5. The Senate Undergraduate Program Committee response was received on April 8, 2021.
6. The Program response from the Centre for Digital Humanities was received on April 30, 2021.
7. The Dean of Humanities response was received on May 10, 2021.
8. A revised Program response from the Centre for Digital Humanities was received September 23, 2021.

This review was conducted under the terms and conditions of the IQAP approved by Senate on May 25, 2016.

Program Outcome Categories:

Based on their knowledge of the discipline, the content of the Self-Study and the interviews conducted during the site visit, the Review Committee gave the programs the following Outcome Categories:

Program(s)	Excellent Quality	Good Quality	Good Quality with Concerns	Non-Viable
BA (Honours)			X	
BA (Pass)			x	

Executive Summary:

The Reviewers wrote:

IASC is a small but active program--and an actively growing one--with highly dedicated and enthusiastic full- and part-time faculty, staff, and students. Teamwork and collaboration are prized by everyone with whom we spoke. For historical reasons, the program has veered between a broad interdisciplinary vision of interactive digital media (IDM) and a more narrow focus on game design and development. In its most recent incarnation, the GAME [BA Game Design/BSc Game Programming] program has branched off, leaving IASC once again as a broad interdisciplinary IDM program that gives students the flexibility to find a perfect career niche for themselves. It tries to balance training in the theoretical foundations of the humanities, particularly the digital humanities, with the requirement for students to learn and apply a variety of typically unfamiliar technical skills that they need to complete one or more substantial projects. When GAME was created, external reviewers feared that IASC might “become an impoverished little sibling destined to atrophy and disappear.” That certainly has not happened; in fact, the program seems to have expanded quickly and to have significant potential for more growth.

[Concerns:]

But that growth has been accompanied by increasing overload teaching for a small cadre of appointed faculty, increasing dependence on the precarious labour of part-time instructors, and decreasing availability of space for operations. The previous external review noted a lack of gender diversity in the program faculty. Not only has this problem persisted, but the lack of diversity and inclusivity is acute, particularly in an institution that has made commitment to EDI [equity, diversity and inclusion], decolonization, and reconciliation one of its four strategic priorities.

B. Strengths of the Program

The reviewers noted the following strengths:

The most obvious strength of the IASC program is people. Everyone with whom we spoke was clearly passionate about IASC and its success; their care and hard work was evident everywhere we looked.

Since the democratization of media, digital literacy is one of the most important basic literacies that the university provides and the IASC program plays a key role in that mission. The IASC program provides a broad interactive digital media (IDM) curriculum with a great degree of flexibility to support diverse student interests. There is strength in the core experience, second year courses that focus on concentrations, and a wide range of options (in part delivered by other units). Some learning takes place through externally-led workshops. The focus on scaffolded project management throughout the program helps to create students who collaborate well in teams and are forward looking. The students anticipate the jobs of the future and their voice is prominent in decision making at various levels. For example, CDH [Centre for Digital Humanities] staff told us that they keep track of student questions to anticipate areas of the curriculum that might be developed.

IASC is critical and reflective by design. Students in the program are taught to frame technological expertise as an act of critical thinking and explore the failure cases of tools. Challenges from upper level course projects are first addressed in early years of the program. In the process, digital scholarship expands beyond reading and writing to integrate coding. The student's commit history becomes a reflective prompt for writing. The focus is often on problems they may have to solve one day. The collaborative interface design tool Figma is used to redesign a product or service that the students like, or dislike. They reflect on accessibility and accessible design and this can be used to pivot into disability studies or other humanistic approaches. The model of social entrepreneurship, of making the world a better place, also finds a home here. Alums of the program have a reputation for being well trained with digital tools and savvy about media, and are healthily skeptical about what they are told.

The program has deep roots in the local community and IASC has been built on the quality of professional relationships outside the academy. Students are connected to the digital economy via faculty and alums. Some students are employed by the university and a social media internship is offered by Brock every year. Students volunteer in community events and create exhibits; they are engaged and passionate about these opportunities for experiential learning. There are ties with Innovate Niagara, mash-ups, and alumni returning to teach or provide feedback or job opportunities. A certificate in digital media is on track and will be online in the Fall, allowing people in the community to upgrade skills and knowledge. This microcredential will increase revenue and make university more accessible to non-traditional students.

The strength of linkages among people in the program and between people in the program and people in the community is also evident. We were impressed by the students' ability to cooperate and coordinate with one another in our discussion with them. The students' proximity to staff support as well as their access to the facilities has been good for building a culture of empathy and mutual support. Upper year students mentor the lower year ones. The students are also able to drop into IT / support staff offices, and both students and staff told us that their relationships are fairly close. The staff offer workshops in response to student questions (e.g., getting up to speed on best practices, how to use certain tools), as well as providing technical troubleshooting and teaching students how to solve problems themselves. Faculty and staff also spoke highly of working with one another, describing their relationship in terms such as "generative, collaborative, co-creating." One sessional instructor described his relationship with the program as "all the support without interference," as being trusted to develop suitable courses and listened to when he provided feedback. Sessional instructors have representation on both the highest (governance) and lowest (executive) committees, and are often informally polled about directions the program might take. Digital humanities requires a cross-section of expertise, and much of that is provided in IASC by part-time instructors.

There is student demand for IASC and opportunities to grow. The faculty and staff are few, but highly motivated, and they want to continue to support the program. Program expenses are reasonable. There are equipment costs and special costs associated with running IASC, but increasing enrollments generate revenue. Projects in the program mesh nicely with the capabilities of the Makerspace in the library, and the program has a good relationship with the library which provides resources, meets instructional requests, and supports student research. IASC has an internal collection of games for study, and there has been discussion of creating a special collection for digital media in the library (this was suggested in the last external review). The makerspace and digital scholarship lab represent new expertise for IASC.

C. Opportunities for Improvement and Enhancement

Recommendation #1

BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of Colour] open-rank or cluster hire

The Unit responded:

While recognizing that resource issues fall outside of ARC's purview, the CDH [Centre for Digital Humanities] wholeheartedly accepts this recommendation. The lack of diversity among full-time faculty is a serious concern and should not be permitted to persist for the reasons outlined by the reviewers. It is imperative that the University commit the necessary resources to ensure that the Centre for Digital Humanities is empowered to correct this problem. We especially appreciate the reviewers' suggestion for an open-rank hire, and possibly a cluster-hire, for the reasons outlined in the recommendation.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

This recommendation falls outside the purview of the current process. That said, The Centre takes seriously the need for increased diversity within its ranks, and the Dean supports their efforts.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

ARC considers the recommendation to be not accepted as hiring initiatives lie outside of its jurisdiction. The Committee recognizes that the Centre and Dean indicate their support of the recommendation and that principles of equity, diversity and inclusion are strongly endorsed by the University through the Brock Institutional Strategic Plan.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation not accepted.

Recommendation #2

Advocate for targeted hires

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. We echo Brock's institutional commitment to "foster a culture of inclusivity, accessibility, reconciliation and decolonization" as one of its core strategic pillars. As noted in our response to Recommendation #1, this will require an investment from the University.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

This recommendation falls outside the purview of the current process. That said, The Centre takes seriously the need for increased diversity within its ranks, and the Dean supports their efforts.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

ARC considers the recommendation to be not accepted as hiring initiatives lie outside of its jurisdiction. The Committee recognizes that the Centre and Dean indicate their support of the recommendation and that principles of equity, diversity and inclusion are strongly endorsed by the University through the Brock Institutional Strategic Plan.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation not accepted.

Recommendation #3

Troubleshoot EDI [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion] recruiting

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. The program will work with Human Resources, the Human Rights and Equity [HRE] Office, and the office of the Vice-Provost, Indigenous Engagement to ensure that every step of the recruitment process for new CDH faculty members prioritizes the need to diversify the faculty complement. Measures may include equity and unconscious bias training for all members of the hiring committee, and the advertisement of positions which focus on equity and diversity in games/interactive media as research specialties.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean's Office will support the unit in their consultations with HR, the HRE Office, and with the VP, Indigenous Engagement.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

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

Implementation Plan (1st Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2021-22.

Recommendation #4

Establish program advisory committee (PAC) with explicit diversity targets

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. We will work with Human Resources, the Human Rights and Equity Office, the office of the Vice-Provost, Indigenous Engagement, as well as organizations external to Brock (e.g., industry and community organizations) to form a PAC which will seek ways to both improve the IASC's EDI profile, and to devise strategies for fostering a culture of equity, diversity and inclusion within the program.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean's Office will do what it can to support and participate in the unit's efforts to form a PAC focused on improving IASC's EDI profile.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

ARC considers the recommendation to establish mechanisms to work towards diversity targets to be accepted for consideration. The Committee understands that hiring initiatives lie outside of its jurisdiction and expects that the Centre is best-positioned to determine appropriate strategies to move forward on this issue.

Implementation Plan (1st Priority)
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Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2021/22.

Recommendation #5

Introduce a course in EDI for IDM [Interactive Digital Media]

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation and will create a dedicated course which focuses on EDI in the context of interactive digital media. In addition to the course, the CDH will endeavor to integrate EDI throughout the IASC program more broadly. To this end, the CDH will form a sub-committee (possibly with members of the PAC noted in Recommendation #4) to conduct a systematic review of how EDI is being addressed across the IASC program. After the review has been conducted, the sub-committee will make a series of recommendations to the CDH Governance Committee.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean’s Office supports the unit’s efforts to more explicitly embed EDI matters into its curriculum, both through a dedicated course and through other means suggested by a sub-committee dedicated to this discussion.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

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

Implementation Plan (1st Priority)	
Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2021/22.

Recommendation #6

Leverage Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) opportunities

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. We will conduct a scan of similar programs in other countries and explore ways to connect with other institutions that have interactive media programs. Furthermore, we will explore how to leverage existing courses to better align with the spirit of this recommendation. Our workshop course (IASC 2P08) has students attend workshops and events for course credit. We could have an inter-cultural requirement where a certain number of hours must be devoted to attending a workshop or other learning opportunity delivered by someone from another culture or country. We are also exploring cross-listing additional courses with Geography and Tourism Studies, who offer study abroad options.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean's Office supports the unit's plan to explore assignments or learning opportunities that include intercultural and/or international collaboration.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

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

Implementation Plan (1st Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2021/22.

Recommendation #7

Bolster BIPOC networking

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. The CDH has an existing speakers’ series which is largely comprised of industry professionals and educators in the interactive digital media domain. We have made it a priority to ensure we have a diverse pool of guest speakers, and we have been largely successful, but we can do more. We will continue to explore ways to bring in a more diverse group of speakers and workshop leaders.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean’s Office supports the unit’s commitment to bolster its BIPOC networking via its existing speakers’ series.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

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

Implementation Plan (1st Priority)	
Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2021/22.

Recommendation #8

Continue to disentangle IASC [BA Interactive Arts and Science] identity from GAME [BA Game Design/BSc Game Programming]

Supporting/Clarifying Text from Reviewer Report:

We recommend that IASC discontinue the practice of automatically offering admission to students who fail to obtain a position in the GAME program, as this does not appear necessary and has negative repercussions on the culture of the IASC program. The IASC handbook does a good job of providing example topics that are not specifically related to game design and development (p.8) and tap into students' other interests and passions. These could be expanded to include other examples like escape rooms and historical reenactment (perhaps in collaboration with Brock's theatre program), the social implications and ethics of technology, interactive sound, interdisciplinary sculpture, etc. These example topics could also be aligned with the written option for a thesis.

The Unit responded:

There are two parts to this recommendation and so we have divided our response into two parts.

- a) Regarding offers of admission into IASC for applicants not accepted into GAME: We do not accept this recommendation. The matter of offering IASC to unsuccessful applicants of GAME is partly within the purview of the Registrar's Office, who have consulted with us about this practice. While some unsuccessful GAME applicants are initially disappointed by not receiving their first choice placement, many over time come to value the flexibility and breadth of the IASC program. We do not see an issue with this practice in principle and note that this practice is consistent with the goal of attracting potential students to Brock's programs more broadly by encouraging applicants to explore alternatives at Brock.
- b) Moving IASC students away from videogames is current practice to some extent, but we accept this part of the recommendation and will explore additional ways to get students interested in interactive media artifacts that are not videogames.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

Likewise, this response is divided into two parts:

- a) The Dean's Office agrees with the unit that it should not accept the recommendation to discontinue offering unsuccessful GAME students a spot in the IASC program, as students still are still given a choice whether to accept their offer.
- b) The Dean's Office supports the unit's commitment to make explicit the program's focus on a wide variety of interactive media artifacts.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

ARC considers the recommendation to discontinue offering IASC admission to unsuccessful GAME applicants (Part a) to be not accepted. The Reviewers do not provide a substantive argument for a link between admissions practices and a negative impact on the culture of the IASC program. ARC considers the Unit to be best-positioned to assess admissions requirements for the program, in consultation with GAME, and within the context of university-wide policies and practices of recruitment.

ARC considers the recommendation to provide students with options that are not specifically related to game design and development (Part b) to be accepted and in the process of implementation.

Recommendation Part a)

Implementation Plan

Recommendation not accepted.

Recommendation Part b)

Implementation Plan (1st Priority)

Responsible for approving: Centre

Responsible for resources: Centre

Responsible for implementation: Centre

Timeline: Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2021/22.

Recommendation #9

Consider IASC courses GAME students have to take or want to take

The Unit responded:

The unit does not accept this recommendation as it is already largely implemented. It is current practice that GAME BA students can take a number of IASC courses as electives, mostly in 3rd and 4th year. These include IASC 3F91 (Innovations in Advanced Digital Media), IASC 3F93 (Project Collaborations Across Diverse Programs), IASC 3P11 (Motion Capture Studio), IASC 3P95 (Internship in Interactive Media), IASC 3P97 (Interactive Media Portfolio), and the directed courses, IASC 3P98, and IASC 3P99, all of which often have students from both programs working together. Additionally, starting in the 2021-2022 academic year, GAME students will be permitted to take IASC 1P30 (Programming for Interactive Media), which is a required course in the IASC program.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean's Office concurs with the unit that this recommendation need not be accepted because it describes existing programming practice.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

ARC considers the recommendation to be already current practice. No further action is required.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation not accepted.

Recommendation #10

Investigate hybrid delivery models to reduce computer lab dependency

The Unit responded:

The unit does not accept this recommendation as it is existing practice. As a result of COVID-19, physical workstations have been available to students via remote access. Online teaching during the pandemic saw an increase in web-based technologies. Free licenses for all software used in the CDH (with the exception of Adobe Creative Cloud) were made available through vendors (and could not be provided by the University). Software and Operating System licensing on purely Virtual Machines, Docker, and “cloud-streaming” have been determined to be cost prohibitive and provide a poor user experience for large software suites (Autodesk, Adobe, Visual Studio). Licensing such as Adobe Named User License Student Packs cannot be solely utilized due to the GAME program sharing resources with the Niagara College Game Development Diploma program and IASC. This would effectively double the cost of ownership and we are reluctant to pass those costs on to the students until a volume license can be reached (as is common practice at other institutions). Additionally, we have explored a laptop program in the past. Not only does it pass a financial burden on to students, there are significant impediments to the student experience (e.g., problems associated with making sure everyone has the same software and version of that software). Finally, the CDH already offers a full suite of F/OSS alternatives in its labs (e.g., GIMP for Photoshop, Blender for Autodesk Maya, etc.).

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean’s Office concurs with the unit that this recommendation should not be accepted, first, because the remote access learning has already been made available to students in ways that are not cost-prohibitive to students and, second, because a few of the suggestions made by reviewers (for example, the laptop sharing program, have already been tried and proven ineffective). The Dean’s Office is especially confident about the unit’s ability to offer rigorous and pedagogically effective remote access learning, given their success over the past year.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

ARC considers the recommendation to be already current practice. No further action is required.

Implementation Plan

Recommendation not accepted.

Recommendation #11

Explore (or create) a broader range of opportunities for IASC graduating students

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. In addition to the academic conferences the reviewers listed, there are also non-gaming focused student showcase events, such as DigiFest. IASC currently draws on an array of industry mentors to provide feedback on student projects, advise on their portfolios, etc., and we will continue to seek ways to expand this practice.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean's Office supports the unit's commitment to explore a wider range of capstone experiences for students.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

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

Implementation Plan (2nd Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2022/23.

Recommendation #12

Refine concentrations

The Unit responded:

The unit accepts this recommendation. We will hold a unit retreat and form a subcommittee to explore alternative labels for our concentrations. We will also poll students and industry professionals to get a wide range of perspectives on recognizability and marketability, etc.

The Dean of Humanities responded:

The Dean's Office supports the unit's commitment to explore alternative labels for their concentrations.

ARC Disposition of the Recommendation

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

Implementation Plan (2nd Priority)

Responsible for approving:	Centre
Responsible for resources:	Centre
Responsible for implementation:	Centre
Timeline:	Dean of Humanities to report by the end of academic year 2022/23.

D. Summary of Recommendations:

First Priority:

Recommendations 3,4,5,6,7,8b

Second Priority:

Recommendations 11,12

Not Accepted:

Recommendations 1,2,8a

No Action Required (Current Practice):

Recommendations 9,10