Not just a game – the Being Human 2021 humanities festival clicks into technology

As technology continues its rampant advances, it clearly justifies its role as a sub-theme, with gaming, in this year's Being Human festival of the humanities with a wealth of innovative activities.

In 2020, the year of lockdowns, it became an essential part of the UK-wide festival – and is still essential even though Being Human 2021 (11– 20 November) is, thankfully, bringing back many more face-to-face activities to demonstrate the value of humanities research.

Technology's impact has been inescapable. Home working as an alternative to shuttered workplaces? Hello Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Combatting infection by track and trace? Pick your app. And films are increasingly designed as computer games – and vice versa. Stars now feature in both film and game.

Being Human, led by University of London's School of Advanced Study in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy, has proved itself an event that Covid-19 simply couldn't cancel. A largely digital festival in 2020, with online audiences exceeding 30,000, it is now moving towards a 'new normal', justifying its overall theme of 'Renewal'.

"What it means to be human in a digital age is at the heart of the Being Human festival's identity. Many humanities researchers are embracing new technologies and working across disciplines to enable us to understand the past and anticipate the future in new ways, from how gaming changes our ideas about storytelling and the development of the imagination, to how AI is challenging time-honoured beliefs that intelligence is central to what makes us human." said Professor Sarah Churchwell, the festival's director

A regular source of thought-provoking and innovative Being Human events, the University of Dundee excels again with Is it plausible? Leading experts from the arts and sciences come together for this lively debate exploring just how realistic the science is in science fiction early pioneer Robert Duncan Milne's stories. A 'courtroom' setting with plenty of gavel-banging, this is a no-holds barred debate where the audience will be the ultimate judge and jury.

The feedback from the evening will help form the ultimate anthology of Milne's works, free copies of which will be distributed to participants. A Victorian ahead of his time who also foresaw television, remote surveillance, mobile phones and worldwide satellite communications – not to mention climate change, scientific terrorism and drone warfare, cryogenics and molecular re-engineering of the body, the man from Fife has much to teach us and this event will hopefully bring him to wider attention.

Online dating is now passé, but it wasn't always thus. Computer Cupid: looking for love in pre-internet Britain (organised by the British Academy) is based on research into the 1970s divorce laws. It will review Dateline, the first computer dating service, explore first-person accounts and flirtatious ads from the time, and show what dating

looked like 1970s-style. After the talk, have a go at creating the perfect Dateline ad to see if you too can find love.

Artificial intelligence (AI) can take us backwards as well as forwards. Come along to the University of Leicester's [Artificial intelligence and Roman pottery](#) event and join the [Arch-I-Scan Project](#) research team to learn how cutting-edge technology can be used to shed new light on eating and drinking in the Roman world.
Supervised by project members, visitors will use their own mobile phones to record Roman pottery fragments and will learn about how this project is using AI to identify the remains of Roman pots.

If you could redesign your body, would you do it? And how? [Body hack: biohacking, enhancement and videogames](#) (organised by the Centre for Biomedicine, Self and Society at the University of Edinburgh) offers fascinating insights. New biotechnologies such as gene editing, sophisticated prosthetics and implants may soon enable us to alter our bodies in ways that enhance our physical and mental skills. What might these technologies look like in the future, and how might they change our understanding of what it means to be human?

An evening with experts in bioethics and interdisciplinary science and technology studies, will explore the dystopian world of the *Cyberpunk 2077* video game, where cybernetic and body modification technologies are commonplace.

Other 'Technology and gaming' highlights include:

- [Dancing in the Metaverse](#). This immersive showcase performance (part of a series of events from Goldsmiths, University of London with partners Akram Khan Company and Alexander Whitley Dance Company) shares a form of digital-dance installation that sees three dancers move together in real-time through remote connection. The intimate interaction between distant dancers occurs within a computer-generated, virtual landscape, with their avatars spinning out shapes, light, and particles that weave and intertwine to give a feeling of virtual touch and embodied connection.

- [Power and protection](#) (organised by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine), an interactive online film screening, follows the real case of a woman in the 1930's who was said to be legally incapable of managing her own affairs, thanks to her 'mental infirmity.' Discover what the 'Court of Protection' meant back then and decide for yourself whether you think those in charge cared more about 'protection' or 'power'.

- [Greener gaming hackathon](#) (organised by University of Glasgow). How do we make gaming a greener industry? This boundary-busting, creative hackathon will have participants brainstorming new strategies for making board and video games more environmentally conscious.

- [Unopened!](#) (organised by Queen Mary University of London and King's College London). How were letters sent before envelopes existed? What happened to them if they couldn't be delivered? Join this online event to learn how researchers can see inside historic letters from the 17th and 18th

centuries without breaking their seals. Watch and fold-along to a simple letter-locking example and submit a letter to the team's time capsule archive to be opened many years from now.

These are just samples of more than 200 free public activities taking place across the UK from 11–20 November.

The full Being Human 2021 festival programme is available at https://beinghumanfestival.org/events

Find out more about the festival at https://beinghumanfestival.org/ and follow the latest news on Twitter at @BeingHumanFest.

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Notes to Editors

1. **Being Human: a festival of the humanities, 11–20 November 2021**
   Led by the School of Advanced Study, University of London, in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy, Being Human is a national forum for public engagement with humanities research. The festival highlights the ways in which the humanities can inspire and enrich our everyday lives. For more information, please visit www.beinghumanfestival.org or follow the festival on social media at @BeingHumanFest.

2. **The School of Advanced Study (SAS)**, University of London, is the UK's national centre for the promotion and support of research in the humanities. SAS and its member institutes offer unparalleled resources, facilities and academic opportunities across a wide range of subject areas for the benefit of the national and international scholarly community. Last year SAS welcomed 996 research fellows and associates, held 1,500 events highlighting the latest research in the humanities, received 31.6 million online visits to its research resources and platforms, and hosted 100,119 visits to its specialist libraries and collections. The School also leads Being Human, the UK's only nationwide festival of the humanities. Find out more at www.sas.ac.uk or follow SAS on Twitter at @SASNews.

3. **The Arts and Humanities Research Council** is part of UK Research and Innovation. We're the UK's largest funder of arts and humanities research and training, investing over £100 million every year. We fund independent researchers in a wide range of subjects, including history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and many more. The research we fund provides social and cultural benefits that contribute to the economic success of the UK, as well as to the culture and welfare of societies around the world. Find out more about us at ahrc.ukri.org, or on Twitter at @ahrcpress.

4. **The British Academy** is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone. www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk @BritishAcademy_ . For further information please contact Sean Canty at the British Academy Press Office on s.canty@thebritishacademy.ac.uk or +44 (0)20 7969 5273.