

a playable digital Young Adult novel
by Fast Familiar

Nat

Jennings-Lee

Age:

16 *since last week*

Pronouns:

they/ them

Lives with:

Dad *Stephen*

Likes:

"Stories, animals, Oreos"

Worries about:

"Not knowing what I want to do with my life, being a bad vegan (I like ice-cream), my hair"

Good times with Jamie include:

"When he put peanut butter on a pepperoni pizza and then ate it all so he wouldn't have to admit it was disgusting!"



If I Were You is a playable digital story, somewhere between an interactive film and a Young Adult novel.

It's about friendship, decisions - and trying to figure out the right thing to do in a fast-moving, often confusing world.

Told through POV video, social media and evidence documents, **If I Were You** is an immersive story for up to 30 people, aged 14+.

Two groups play in different rooms, each following the story unfold from 'their' character's point of view.

They need to work like detectives, piecing a story together to help their character make choices about what to do.

Messages sent between the two rooms also affect how the story develops.

~~JAMIE~~ James

Stickson

Age:

16 *just*

Pronouns:

he/him

Lives with:

Mum and sister Ashleigh
Jenni

Likes:

"Rock climbing, cadets, Oreos"

Worries about:

"Money, Ashleigh (she's autistic and sometimes people stare at her), looking really young"

Good times with Nat include:

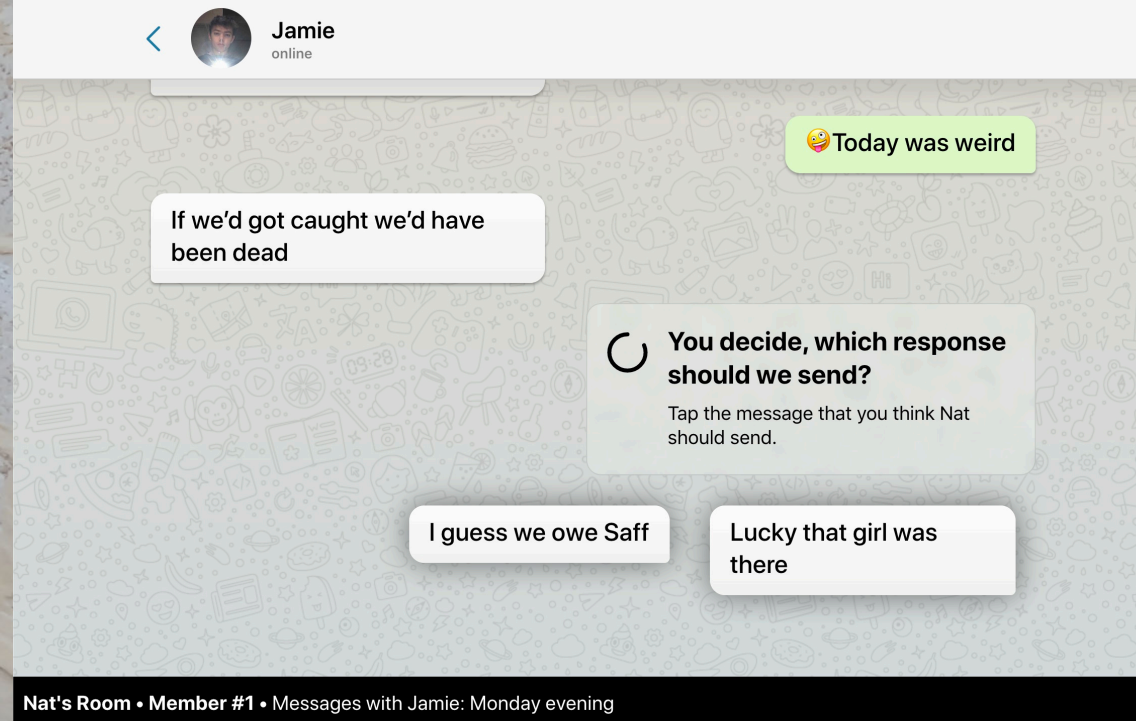
"When we looked after their aunt's dog (Shep) for a week, built an assault course for him in Nat's garden AND got paid for it!"



Nat and Jamie share a birthday, sixteen years of friendship and a love of Oreos.

But something is about to happen that will turn their lives upside down and force them to decide what they're prepared to fight for.

And that might not be something they can agree on...



If I Were You is a gripping contemporary story set against a background of climate emergency – but also it is an exercise in perspective-taking and encouraging empathy, exploring how humans and machines can work together constructively to solve problems. Within the game, a bespoke control system delivers media content to each player's iPad, and allows players to vote on what actions their character should take; a debrief allows players to find out what was going on in the other room and what other decisions they might have made.

The project was developed with Seven Stories (the national centre for children's books) where Fast Familiar worked with a group of young people, the Young Producers, to co-create the storyline. It was piloted with schools and youth theatre groups in the North East in November 2019. **If I Were You** is a collaboration between Fast Familiar, who create artworks that are playful, participatory and political, often using elements of 'digital technology'; and neuroscientist Dr Kris De Meyer. The team previously created The Justice Syndicate (Aesthetica Art Prize Anthology: Future Now; Lumen Prize longlist).

Young Adult novels which particularly influenced the development of *If I Were You*

Noughts and Crosses – Malorie Blackman
 One – Sarah Crossan
 Skinful of Shadows – Frances Hardinge
 High Rise Mystery – Sharna Jackson
 Buffalo Soldier – Tanya Landman
 Indigo Donut – Patrice Lawrence
 Killer T – Robert Muchamore

Truth or Dare – Non Pratt
 I was born for this – Alice Oseman
 Rooftoppers – Katherine Rundell
 Scrawl – Mark Shulman
 The Wall – William Sutcliffe
 The Machine Gunners – Robert Westall
 Terror Kid – Benjamin Zephaniah

Anybody who has tried to impress a 14 year old knows how hard that is, but the students quickly became immersed in the experience – it was amazing. Every 'ding' brought instant silence and fierce concentration as they took in the latest twist in the tale. At the end of the session the students applauded and one boy exclaimed that it was "100% the best thing ever". They continued to exchange opinions and discuss the characters long after the session ended. A fantastic experience all round.

Helen Thompson, Librarian, North Durham Academy



background

As well as being an artwork, **If I Were You** was an experiment for NESTA's Collective Intelligence Centre. Collective Intelligence is the ability for humans and machines to work together to solve problems; this requires humans to have the ability to productively think together and make decisions in diverse groups of people with different values, perspectives, and experiences. However, complex societal problems frequently fuel opinion polarisation. The prerequisites for the human side of Collective Intelligence to work well are thus an improved ability to understand and be comfortable with complexity and multiple perspectives, as well as an improved ability to disagree civilly.

In recent years, scholars in history, linguistics and psychology have argued that the emergence of novels and fictional stories - allowing people to immerse themselves into the inner lives of others - played a crucial role in transforming people's ability to take the perspective of others, as well as to understand social and ethical complexity (Hunt, 2007; Pinker 2011). It has also been argued that the advent of "skim reading" - fast, superficial reading - in the digital age is threatening to reverse the beneficial effects of the deep immersion into stories which accompanies the reading of novels (Wolf, 2018). In an age when we all read more digitally, we could be reducing our capacity to see the world from someone else's perspective.

We wanted to test if digital technology - one of the drivers of the problem - could also be used differently to fill the void left by the loss of deep reading in the digital age: **could digital storytelling be employed to engage participants in perspective taking and understanding of ethical complexity?**

We wanted to create an experience with and for young people. The brain areas thought to be responsible for complex social and moral thinking undergo a critical development in early adolescence. We also felt that young people are increasingly being asked to make important decisions about their futures, having been subject to an education system that doesn't necessarily equip them with the critical reasoning skills that they need to negotiate our current confusing, fractured and often frightening socio-political context. Anyone who works with children and young people will attest to the epidemic of mental health problems affecting this generation. Our young people are anxious, stressed and depressed. Developing new tools to help young adults build their capacity for perspective taking and complexity understanding at this critical stage can thus generate a long-term positive impact.

Adults can be bribed to take part in experiments - with professional credit, vouchers or hard cash. While adolescents have a relationship to money, it generally isn't the same need that adults have. In designing an experiment for adolescents, it was necessary to give a high degree of thought to making the experience fun, engaging and/ or compelling. Perhaps this should always be a consideration in experiment design but in any case, adolescents will show the boredom and disaffection that adults have learned to hide. In order for our experiment to work, we had to create an engaging experience to 'house' it. The project would have a dual development journey, with experiment needs informing experience design and vice versa. We also knew we would need to **engage with our user group from the outset**.

Over three months we worked with Seven Stories' Young Producers group - a group of young people interested in different sorts of creative expression. In these workshops we learned more about what the world looks like from the perspective of a 14 year old in the North East. We observed the following:

- family -whatever form it takes- is important
- friendships take up a lot of headspace
- animals should not be hurt
- there are things that are wrong in the wider world but they're not always the most important thing: political views are often rooted in a very personal experience
- people expect you, an adolescent, to have opinions about things and sometimes you just don't know, which can make you feel confused and like you're not measuring up

Alongside reading over 25 Young Adult novels, we workshoped ideas with the young people - for characters, situations, dilemmas, ways of telling a story, what they found funny, what they hated, what they'd changed their minds about, what they'd fight for. At the end of our workshop period, we took everything we'd learned and shaped it into the first draft of *If I Were You*. The **iterative development process** from this point is documented overleaf - including changes that we made during our week of experiments. Even with our co-creation process, it took us a long time to fine-tune the experience to really engage participants. For future projects with this age group we will not underestimate the time -and therefore resources- needed to work effectively with and for adolescents.

development journey

	May 2019 to Aug 2019 development phase 1, culminating in paper prototype session with university students	Aug 2019 - September 2019 development phase 2, culminating in paper prototype session with young people	September 2019 - November 2019 development phase 3	18 - 25 November 2019 delivery phase: 8 sessions in schools and youth groups, plus continued iteration
CREATION OF EXPERIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> workshops with young people at Seven Stories orientation with Young Adult literature creation of characters and story learning how to tell this story in this form change project name from <i>The Intelligence Collective</i> to <i>If I Were You</i> - in response to feedback from the young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> clarification of some plot points create "scratch" version to replicate the nature of the experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> rough films WhatsApp-esque conversations on coloured record cards to enable a 'dealer' to create the effect of messages arriving formatted news articles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> simplify language - both in reading material and in choice options change names of characters to make them more different, to avoid confusion add opening sequence to locate the events clearly in the future add multiple choice elements (e.g. what scenario is most likely if character X does Y?) to encourage participants to consider more options before a discussion begins casting and rehearsal filming and editing create media elements caption all video and audio elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> change first discussion to give piece an ethical dilemma framing, allowing participants to check in with themselves before getting engrossed in the story break discussions up into shorter sections, each with a different prompt, as longer and more open discussions did not work with our target age group increase threshold for decisions, to mitigate against pressure to 'follow the rules' that a school environment engenders and keep the story going for longer shorten articles and add more (and cuter) pictures
DEVELOPING EXPERIMENT & DEBRIEF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reading psychology literature around perspective-taking research into measures of perspective-taking and how they might need adapting for young people drafting experiment design framing survey questions designing first draft of post-experience debrief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> analyse results from paper prototype streamline debrief to fit into time available in schools develop debrief to include a range of activities (solitary, pair, group; reading, looking, talking) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> embed more of the experiment within the experience rather than depending on before/after surveys, particularly given the time constraints of working in schools introduce the idea of 'perspective-taking' through something the participants can relate to on a personal level: being misunderstood adapt language of debrief to be more easily understandable by young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> adapt debrief to be more fast-moving to avoid young people becoming disengaged experiment with use of debrief worksheets add new ending to debrief to give more of a sense of closure adapt debrief to include more of what the young people were most interested in: what happened differently in the different rooms and why
CREATING TECHNOLOGY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> modify existing SyndicateOS platform to allow running multiple simultaneous shows develop new "text messaging" and "word selection" stages build binary "room states" allowing one room to view a different stage of the experience to the other room 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> create an internal api to allow cross-show communication develop new "conditional voting" and "simultaneous reveal" stages adapt on-screen instructions for age-range comprehension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> remove macOS specific dependencies undertake structural changes to allow for high-latency, low-quality internet connection as the primary connection to the 'host' create a backup version of the platform that does not require WIFI undertake multiple system tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> implement the changes made to content adjust timings allow manual override of voting mechanisms as a fail-safe refine on-screen instructions

what we found out

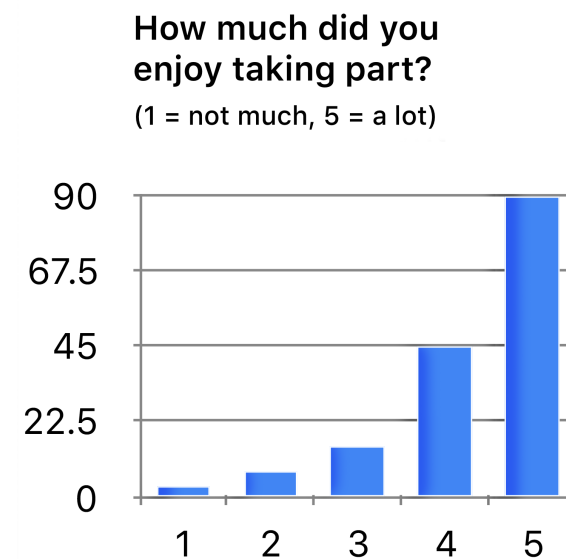
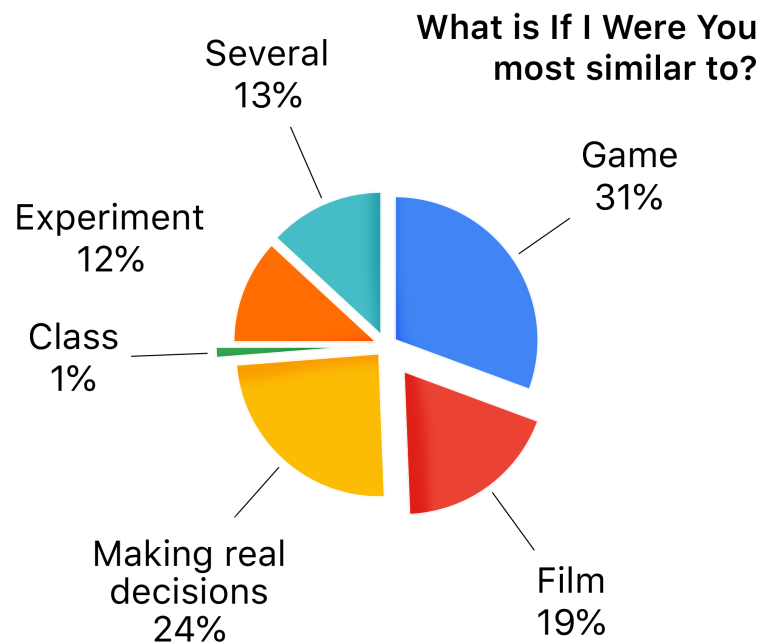
We gathered data about participants' experience of taking part in **If I Were You**. We were interested in how engaged they were by the experience, and by how it allowed them to practise different types of perspective taking, which can be linked to developing emotional resilience.

- Our **bespoke technological platform collected anonymised data** about the choices participants made on their iPads during the story - about what their character should do, and how they perceived their character and others. The experience was carefully crafted to enable us to measure if/ how perspective taking and metacognitive awareness played out.
- The **debrief**, during which the groups from the two rooms were brought together and compared experiences, was audio-recorded.
- Participants completed a **paper questionnaire** after the debrief.

The data we collected is extremely rich: we are currently conducting in-depth analysis. These are some initial observations.

It was important that the young people enjoyed taking part in If I Were You for two reasons: firstly, we wanted to test if digital storytelling can build the capacity for empathy that has in the past been fuelled by "deep reading" of novels - and enjoyment is a prerequisite for that to happen. Secondly, engagement is an important factor to facilitate experiential learning. The graphs below show the young people's responses to two questions on the questionnaire.

One of our aims was to create an intervention that was at the same time an experiment and an experiential learning tool, but does not feel like one. For roughly half of the participants, taking part felt like watching a film or playing a game - implying a sense of doing something for fun and entertainment. For about a quarter, it felt like making real life decisions. This latter group provides an interesting confirmation that the intervention succeeded in constructing a naturalistic setting to study group reasoning and decision making.



Several comments in the debrief and on feedback forms related to the feeling of "control" participants had - the fact that they themselves decided what would happen at crucial moments, without any adults telling them what to do.

Some of the positive comments related enjoyment to how relevant the story felt to the young people's own lives. While co-creation processes like the one we followed are demanding in terms of time and cost, this confirms that the approach results in accessible and relatable work.

I loved the discussions it stimulated and the different perspectives we shifted. The story itself was interesting but with the added perspective of our decision making and working with the other group, it was AWESOME! I particularly enjoyed the votes and the different ways of telling the story.

It makes me understand that everyone thinks differently and that it's OK if you do. I wish there was more stuff like this out there! Please do more!

I found it really fun. It was a mix between a movie and a game. It was the same sort of experience as a book where you follow a character and it really makes it interesting to know that your options affect the story. I would love to do more, I feel this is an experience other young people would enjoy also!

What did you find the most fun, interesting or surprising?

How much this story relates to our personal lives and their personalities are close to mine.



perspective taking

During the experience, participants were asked questions to trigger different forms of perspective taking. These were designed to get them to consider the characters' situations before making decisions for them. Participants' answers were also used in the debrief sessions to prompt self-reflection.

Cognitive perspective taking

(understanding another person's thoughts)

On day 3 of the story, Nat has just had a positive interaction with Saff, while Jamie has had a negative interaction. Neither rooms are aware of what happened to the other rooms' protagonist. At that moment, Nat's group is asked the question "How would Nat describe Saff?"; in Jamie's room, "How would Jamie describe Saff?". Each participant then selects 3 words out of a list of 12 on their iPad (the same list of words was used in the two rooms).

The word selection is aimed at triggering cognitive perspective taking as well as second-order theory-of-mind (i.e. trying to understand what person X thinks about person Y). To deepen the perspective taking, students are then prompted to discuss two further questions in their groups: "Why is Saff doing what she's doing?" and "In Saff's situation, what would you do? Would you do the same?"

Half of the words in the selection exercise are positive (e.g. "brave", "fighter", "inspiring"), and half have a negative connotation (e.g., "manipulative", "extremist", "full of hate"). As the two rooms have access to asymmetric information about Saff, the two groups choose different words. In the debrief, we show the combined groups the two sets of words and asked them to reflect on why they were different. Comments included "We had different angles on her life" and "Jamie's team had more information about Saff and her past compared to Nat's team." These comments reflect a sensible understanding of why different perspectives on Saff emerged across the two rooms.



Emotional perspective taking

(understanding what another person is feeling)

At the end of day 4, participants are asked how 'their' character is feeling, and also how the other character is feeling: they have to select 3 words out of a list of 12 emotions (e.g., sad, afraid, angry, irritated, surprised, calm, happy) for each character.

Typical results of this word selection task can be seen in the word clouds below. These different outcomes were used in the debrief as a source of reflection, by asking the students "Why do you think the other team misunderstood how your character was feeling?" The groups would respond with two main ideas: "We didn't know the other character's situation" and "Because they were miscommunicating." With the careful guidance and scaffolding of the discussion by the debrief facilitator, all groups came to understand why different decisions had been made across the two rooms.

In addition to the sessions with young people, we also ran one session with adults - who, in contrast to the young people, accurately identified how the character in the other room felt. Although it would be unwise to draw strong conclusions from the limited number of sessions we ran, it does suggest that emotional perspective taking is under critical development in early adolescence, and, when matured, allows us much more accurate judgements of how other people feel. This also serves as an argument for this kind of intervention with young people.



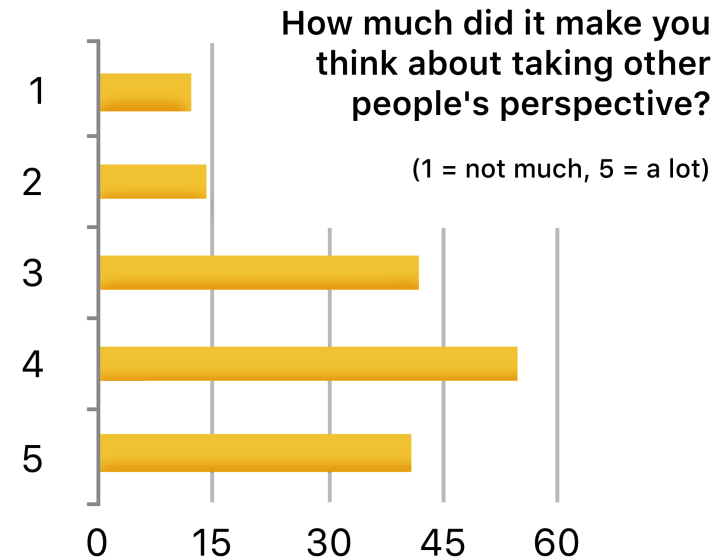
In the questionnaire, which was given to the young people after the story experience and debrief, we asked "How much did it make you think about taking other people's perspectives?" The results are shown in the graph.

A large majority of students report high levels of perspective taking. This was mirrored in the written answers they gave. Although the written questions were formulated in an open-ended way ("What did you find the most fun, interesting or surprising?"), several answers explicitly mentioned perspective taking.

It was very fun as you got to take the perspective of someone else.

How many different perspectives there could be to a story.

I found it interesting to see different people's points of views.



Taking an experiential learning approach - immersion in a compelling story followed by structured reflection in the debrief - allowed the young people to exercise nuanced and sophisticated perspective taking. The **debrief** was essential to this: earlier group discussions during the experience showed large variability in individual expressions of perspective taking. The **personalisation** of the debrief, where the young people were reflecting on their own choices, kept it **relevant** and allowed them to apply big complex ideas to things they themselves had done.

An amazing experience, we all got so immersed in the experience it was amazing. It opened up a fierce and lively debate among the group and ultimately, it was such good fun. Totally amazing, would recommend.

Eddie, 17, Mortal Fools Youth Theatre Ensemble Member



what next?

The process of making and delivering If I Were You was extremely interesting, and provoked us to ask many more questions. As well as conducting a more detailed analysis of the data we have, we hope to secure the resources to continue this fascinating exploration, starting with the following questions:

How can we best **prepare** or equip participants for the experience we have created?

How can we best **consolidate** the experience that participants have? What could happen afterwards?

How does the experience and its wraparound **fit within the education curriculum**?

The majority of students who played during this pilot phase were Year 9 (aged 13 to 14). Above this age, students are studying for GCSEs and A-levels: it is harder to make the case for activities not directly related to their exam subjects. But is this the right age? Some pupils struggled but this could be mitigated by scaffolding the experience with other activities.

While taking the experience into schools ensures reaching a more diverse range of students, school is a very particular environment. There can be a tension between this atmosphere and an activity that includes asking participants when it is morally right to break the law. **Is this an activity for schools? What are the other possibilities?**

We played the experience with a youth theatre group; they were older (16 to 17), attending voluntarily rather than as a lesson at school, and had a clearer group identity, as 'ensemble' was a principle of their work. Of all the participants, they seemed to get the most from the experience, engaging passionately in discussions, alert to the nuances of the plot and quicker to empathise with the characters. What can we learn from this about how we present the activity in schools?

How can participating in the activity be a creative springboard for young people to create stories which give voice to their own dilemmas?

company information

overview

Fast Familiar make artworks which are **participatory**, **playful** and **political**. We're a group of artists from different backgrounds who design audience-centric experiences which often utilise '**digital technology**'. We're fascinated by **human psychology in a rapidly changing world**. For us, **art is a space to explore questions** which are too complex for daily life. We think art can be experimental and ambitious without being elitist.

We split our time between realising ideas we have originated, and using the tools we've created to make experiences which will serve an educative or engagement function for other people whose values resonate with our own. In 2020 we will be working on projects for organisations as diverse as Alzheimer's Research UK, the Scottish Government, the Wellcome/ EPSRC Centre for Interventional and Surgical Sciences and NESTA, as well as arts organisations like BAC and South Street.

We try to work in a way that is **kind and responsible**, both to **collaborators** and to our **environment**. We are part of the current cohort of Julie's Bicycle/ Arts Council England Accelerator programme, working with AND and Arts Catalyst to explore how digital arts can respond to our current climate emergency.

people

Dan Barnard is a theatre director and Senior Lecturer at London South Bank University, where he leads the Digital Performance Research group. He won Best Short Paper at the International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling 2018, for a presentation on fanSHEN's Looking for Love.

Joe McAlister is a computational artist and lecturer at Goldsmiths. His work explores metadata, security and embodied interaction, taking a particular interest in how technology can be used to aid progressive discussion.

Rachel Briscoe is a producer and writer, with work performed at the Royal Court and Soho theatres. She also works as a creative consultant, helping organisations like the National Trust and Tyne and Wear Museums create more playful environments.

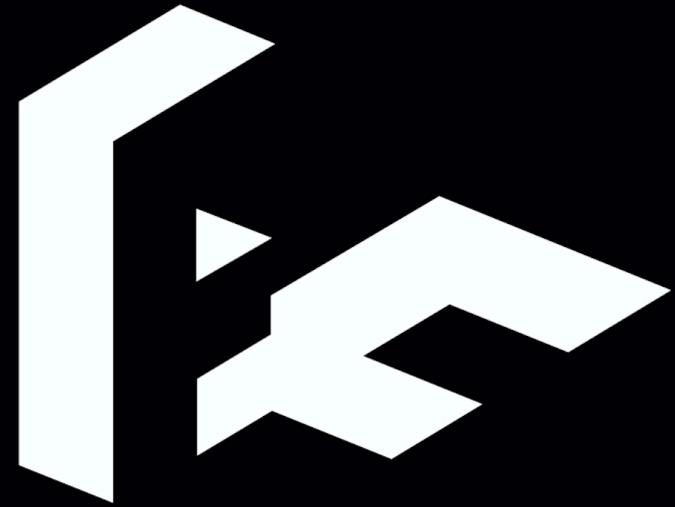
recent/ current works

The Justice Syndicate - presentation at York Mediale, Sheffield Doc/Fest, Dublin Fringe and Edinburgh Science Festival; reviews can be seen on our [website](#). An audience-centric experience drawing on a jury format, exploring how taken-for-granted assumptions, intuitions and emotions influence decision-making.

Smoking Gun - selected for a STARTS VERTIGO EU residency with Data Stories, University of Southampton; premiere at CENTQUATRE, Paris, March 2020. A piece of interactive fiction played on your phone over the course of a week, taking a playful approach to exploring the power of data in the age of disinformation.

Looking for Love - support from Arts Council England; selected for Sheffield Doc/ Fest's AR MeetMarket. In development. Part modern-day tamagotchi, part artwork, part experiment, asking questions about personalisation, artificial intelligence, control and the nature of being human.

The Evidence Chamber - commissioned by the Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science, University of Dundee; premiere at Festival of the Future 2019. An invitation to audiences to play detective, ideal for fans of crime fiction, true crime like Making a Murderer, or CSI - how much evidence is enough evidence?



If I Were You | created by Fast Familiar, in association with Seven Stories

writer Rachel Briscoe | **director** Dan Barnard | **media content and tech platform** Joe McAlister

associate neuroscientist Kris De Meyer | **creative associate** Laura Bridges

young producers including Anna, Dalthwaite, Caitlin, Isabella, Rosie & Theo

Jamie Milo Quinton | **Nat** Zachary Hing | **Saff** Sophie Galustian

Anna Luca Rutherford | **Stephen** Jamie Zubairi | **Jenni** Rachel Donovan | **DI Brophy** Rebecca Atkinson-Lord

Assistant Director Jane Ryan | **Cover image design** Dan Ioannou

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