

Dear DiGRA Board,

We are writing to you as DiGRA Diversity Officers who have recently tendered our resignations to express extreme disappointment in the board's inaction for years, followed recently by a flurry of actions that continue to ignore marginalized voices in the organization in favor of maintaining control and attempting to save reputation.

In addition to the issues laid out in Mahli-Ann Butt's resignation, we as Diversity Officers have witnessed for years an ongoing neglect of diversity issues and repeated failures to take any meaningful action to protect marginalized DiGRA members. The Diversity Working Group was formed in 2016 and the official Diversity Officer position was created in 2018 supposedly in order to help the organization take matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion more seriously, but we have all become convinced the Diversity Working Group and Diversity Officer position functions as no more than token diversity—a way the organization claims to care about diversity while not doing anything at all to meaningfully enact it.

Mahli-Ann: When I was an undergraduate student, I had a bad experience at my first DiGRA conference in 2016 at Dundee, Scotland. I've spoken about it on the "Surviving Whiteness in Game Studies" panel at DiGRA 2022, and written about it in my PhD thesis (<https://hdl.handle.net/2123/27979>; pp. 262-266). I found out that Alyea Sandovar was starting the DiGRA Diversity Working Group because she and many others had similar bad experiences at DiGRA and wanted to do the work to make things better. I volunteered for the DiGRA Diversity Working Group and nominated myself to serve on the board as DiGRA Student Officer.

Daniela De Angeli and I, as the two elected DiGRA Student Officers, with blessings from the board and President William Huber, created "[DiGRA Homestay and Couchsurfing Community](#)" and "[DiGRA CFC \(Call for Collaboration\) Group](#)" Facebook Groups as DiGRA Diversity Working Group initiatives. Daniela and I were also responsible for continuously updating the DiGRA website with any events, calls for papers, and job opportunities shared via Gamesnetwork.

As DiGRA Open Seat and Student Officer at the time, Souvik Mukherjee and I would be required to double-up on our duties to also relay notes from the Diversity Working Group meetings with the rest of the board. This dual work became untenable, and therefore the Diversity Working Group proposed to formalize a designated Diversity Officer role, which was created in 2018, but only given power to vote as a board member from 2023.

In 2017, Alyea and Rachel Kowert created and circulated the inaugural DiGRA Diversity Survey via the GameNetwork to better understand the reasons why people didn't attend DiGRA conferences and investigate ways we could make DiGRA more inclusive and accessible. As Alyea and Rachel's time and attention eventually needed to be elsewhere, I volunteered to synthesize and present the findings from the survey. The findings were presented during the inaugural DiGRA Diversity Workshop during DiGRA 2017 in Melbourne, Australia, as well as published as an article (<https://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/1758>) in the ToDiGRA

Diversity Workshop special issue edited by Sian Beavers and Darshana Jayemanne published in 2018 (<https://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/issue/view/35>).

The survey found that almost two thirds (63.8%) of respondents reported that they believed participating in DiGRA could bring the possibility of harassment, and 58.8% would not know who to speak to if they were harassed (p. 84). Nearly 20% of respondents reported non-attendance due to feeling unwelcome (p. 85). In the article I wrote (p. 86),

“When asked what would enable them to attend, respondents indicated the need for a clear support system (25%); ‘abuse, harassment and discrimination prevention and support’ (13.9%); a ‘safe space policy’ (9.7%); a clear ‘statement of accessibility’ (13.9%); and the availability of ‘childcare’ (12.5%). Many of these are policies and organization structures would incur very little economic cost, but could be significant developments for the community.”

Likewise, many viewed DiGRA to be too expensive, and 77.8% indicated that funding and scholarships would significantly help attendance (p. 85). From these findings and ongoing discussions with the DiGRA Diversity Working Group, I brought these initiatives to the board. Leadership was generally receptive to these initiatives as long as others could do the work. William regularly told us that we were “pushing on an open door.” Even if it took several years, I’m proud that we – with special thanks to Miia Siuttila – even came together to form the DiGRA Travel Bursary (formerly named “DiGRA Solidarity Fund”).

During the DiGRA Diversity Working Group lunch meeting at DiGRA 2018 in Turin, Italy, Adrienne Shaw posed the question to the group, “How do we stop reinventing the wheel?” This inspired us to seek greater ways to build institutional knowledge and solidified the need to create the DiGRA Code of Conduct to include “Conference Inclusivity Guidelines” and a “Fostering Safer Spaces” policy. However, by 2018 I was completely burnt out. I stepped down from the Diversity Officer role, and passed the torch onto Cody Mejeur. Knowing how lonely it often felt when the work of diversity often kept being passed along to me, I remained on the board as an Open Seat so that Cody wouldn’t be alone in doing the work.

While I was an Open Seat and Cody was Diversity Officer, I continued to witness little to no response from the board to Cody’s emails. I consistently had to help be a voice to remind others to respond to Cody all the time, and still only sometimes did Cody ever get an answer several months later. I’d have to directly message other board members to ask them to respond to Cody’s emails too to encourage others to try to help move things along. Even if nobody was at their best during the COVID years, matters requiring responses from DiGRA leadership often seemed more resistant.

My frustration has grown over the years as I continued to witness different iterations of the DiGRA board dismissing and failing to address most – if not all – complaints and concerns from our community. For example, the board failed to address concerns and complaints against:

1. Allowing a professor with a history of dating students to chair the DiGRA 2020 PhD Consortium.
2. A man claiming to be “President of DiGRA USA” on LinkedIn.
3. Several occurrences of harassment and bullying on GamesNetwork.
4. A member’s repeated instances of hate speech at DiGRA 2023.
5. The “digra2024.org” conference domain being co-opted and linked to a transphobic YouTube video.
6. The conference website listed incorrect information on visa requirements, resulting in a PhD student from the UK attending DiGRA 2024 being detained at the airport in a windowless room with constant lighting for 19 hours and deported.

Outside of the work of those who’ve contributed to the DiGRA Diversity Working Group, DiGRA Ombuds program, and DiGRA Travel Bursary committee, I struggle to think of examples – I can honestly only think of one – where the board as a whole has directly helped a vulnerable member when they were in need. That is to say, I cannot think of any examples where a *complaint* was addressed.

Even when I was no longer the Diversity Officer, I still frequently was asked to double-up on my roles. Even when problems were not “Diversity” matters, they were often passed along to me and the Diversity Working Group to solve.

It’s been a privilege to collaborate with dedicated colleagues like Cody, whose tireless efforts on community-building initiatives have become DiGRA’s cornerstones. Their work, along with the tireless work of many, has fostered a more diverse, inclusive, and accessible organization. We’re proud of achievements like DiGRA’s rigorous Code of Conduct, the Ombuds program, the Diversity Working Group, and the Travel Bursary, all meticulously developed with member input. I was excited to see the possibilities of setting up a new mentorship program carefully and reflexively explored.

To suggest that I and Cody – any of the Diversity Officers, the Diversity Working Group, or the Ombuds Team – have “failed the community” is beyond insulting. For all our years of work and dedication, I’m utterly dismayed that we have been so easily taken-for-granted, scapegoated, and treated so poorly.

Cody: When I took over as Diversity Officer in 2019, I immediately set about two major projects that were recommended during Mahli-Ann’s term: establishing a Code of Conduct and an organizational Ombuds Program to help meaningfully promote diversity and safety for members. Almost from the moment I became Diversity Officer, I struggled against an apparent apathy from the board on these and other matters—my recurring experience was raising issues for the board to consider and take action on, only for the board to not reply for months at a time. If replies ever came, they were almost always that the board would take no action, because the board members felt that it was not the role of the board to take any action. In particular, two major instances of exclusionary behavior on the listserv, including one where a senior game studies academic in psychology outright dismissed humanities scholarship and another where an

apparent con artist attempted to declare himself leader of game studies in the United States, were met with hand wringing, delays, and refusals to act by the board. Through my personal networks I knew there were people who felt unsafe in DiGRA and on DiGRA's listserv, and that many people left the GamesNetwork listserv over these recurring issues. When I raised this to the board, I was told that it wasn't an issue, GamesNetwork was only an unofficial DiGRA server so the board had no responsibility to do anything, and that I was making up people leaving because I shared their concerns anonymously. Dismissals, delays, and inaction were the board's go-to responses to everything I tried to do as Diversity Officer. I am convinced the only reason the board accepted the Code of Conduct, which it has since failed to enforce in any meaningful way, is because Alison Harvey and Darshana Jayemanne worked with me on it, and they were able to leverage personal connections to board members to get them to take action.

All of this became especially problematic when setting up the DiGRA Ombuds program. Throughout this process, I received no support from the board, and instead had to rely on the expert guidance of professional ombuds volunteering their time to try and set up this program for DiGRA. Initially, the Ombuds team consisted of 4 professional ombuds and 4 DiGRA members, all volunteers from countries around the world including the United States, Hungary, New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The team met regularly to establish common practices for handling cases confidentially and anonymously, including at one point a "shift" schedule that ensured there was always an ombuds ready to reply to the ombuds email within 24 hours of receiving any case. However, throughout this work, whenever the team needed information or had questions for the board, I would routinely have to wait for 3-6 months to get a reply, despite asking the questions multiple times and even reaching out to board members individually to try and spur some action. The constant delays and inaction on the part of the board led multiple ombuds to conclude that DiGRA did not actually value having this program, so they left to pursue other opportunities where their time and labor would be respected and valued. Even when it came time to announce the ombuds team and share their information on the DiGRA website, I had to do all of that website work myself. To then find when the new website launched that all of that work had been swept away and was no longer publicly available felt like a final insult to injury. Now the ombuds team is down to only three members, myself included, and after the board's handling of this most recent case all remaining members will be resigning. I'm proud of the work the team and I did on the ombuds program—to quote Adrienne Shaw's comments on the program, it was one of the most cutting edge programs and best practices to emerge in scholarly organizations, and in that regard other organizations looked to our work for guidance.

I remain deeply disappointed, frustrated, and hurt that the board failed repeatedly to support these efforts. I at times wondered if the board was deliberately sabotaging the ombuds program through delay and inaction. After I was recently informed that members of the board were blaming the outcomes of the recent case on the ombuds team and on me in particular, I knew I could no longer be a part of an organization that tokenizes, uses, and abuses its marginalized members to this degree. To then further find out that I have been singled out by some board members and called "duplicitous," which is a well-established transphobic stereotype and narrative, is entirely unacceptable for an organization that claims to value diversity and support

trans people. Let me be clear: I fully, completely, and honestly communicated on behalf of both the reporting individual and the DiGRA board in the recent case, and in no way did I attempt to bias individuals or the outcomes of that case. The reporting individual's decision to drop the case based on their belief the board would do nothing was their own decision, and I did nothing to lead them to that conclusion. If your inclination when dealing with queer and trans people is to assume they are duplicitous and are lying to, misleading, entrapping, or manipulating you, **that is homophobic/transphobic**. I gave years of work and expertise to DiGRA, and none of it has been valued or respected. Instead I'm afraid I have been used to pay lip service to diversity, even as abusive people in the organization have been allowed to flourish and even been rewarded for their behavior.

With Poonam's recent resignation from the board, all DiGRA Diversity Officers since the establishment of the position have resigned in protest of DiGRA's harmful culture, refusal to listen to or protect its marginalized members, and ongoing efforts to silence and dismiss people who attempt to hold the organization accountable.

We will no longer be tokens or shields for an organization that we believe has no interest in promoting the safety or wellbeing of marginalized scholars. We hope that DiGRA will one day live up to the values it claims to hold, but we no longer believe it does or will. We call on those who are joining us in leaving DiGRA to form other game studies communities that put diversity in action and actively support marginalized scholars. We call on those who remain with DiGRA to hold its leaders and systems accountable for harmful actions, and to be vigilant in protecting each other from harmful actors still present in the organization.

With sincere hopes that DiGRA will listen and improve,
Cody and Mahli-Ann