

Kia ora! Simulation Gaming at the other end of the world –

A travel report on the ISAGA Conference 2024 in Christchurch

After the wonderful experience of last year's ISAGA conference with the Simulation and Gaming community in La Rochelle, France, this year's 55th ISAGA conference was held at the University of Canterbury in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. The conference was chaired by Heide Lukosch, who works as an Associate Professor at the HIT Lab NZ (more on this later), and Maria Freese, who works at the Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg, Germany, but was in Christchurch as part of a three-month fellowship. With more than 60 people, the number of participants was impressive, considering that Germany and New Zealand are more than 18.000 km apart.



Approaching Christchurch in July (Photo: Maria Freese)

The theme of this year's conference was "Simulation Gaming Across Borders", with the theme covering scientific, social, technological, physical or contextual borders. The programme consisted of a diverse mix of paper sessions, workshops and thematic sessions, and each day began with a keynote. The conference began with a traditional Maori welcome and singing - very impressive! And after the initial welcome speeches, Maria Freese, Heide Lukosch and a fantastic team of volunteers had come up with something very special for the first day's keynote action, involving our new ISAGA mascot: Dr Octoludus! In seven small groups we played "Happy Dr Octoludus" - a fast-paced interactive game where the aim was to get rid of your cards as quickly as possible by finding partners for different actions. The game was very loud and cheerful and there was also a final with the group winners. The winner was nine-year-old Angelica, the youngest participant at this year's conference.



Impressions of the keynote action (Photo: Shunsuke Fukuden)

All participants found the game to be a wonderful opportunity for personal dialogue. The spirit of the game also characterised the conference.



Impression of the opening of the conference (Photo: Yasas Sri Wickramasinghe)

The keynote speeches on the following days were all given by speakers from New Zealand who brought new ideas and impulses to ISAGA. Lively discussions followed. The focus was on the New Zealand gaming and design scene.



Impression of the keynote speech by Melanie Langlotz - Geo AR Games (Photo: Yasas Sri Wickramasinghe)

The workshops and paper sessions also provided creative and new impulses. For example, a panel discussion explored the extent to which entertaining video games can make an impact. Willy Kriz, Mieko Nakamura and Toshiko Kikkawa presented their paper "Crossing Borders by Revisiting Ethical Issues of Simulation and Gaming", which won the Best Paper Award. This presentation also led to the idea of forming a group to develop an ethical policy for ISAGA. The Student Best Paper Award went to Éléonore Sas and Nicolas Becu for "Analysing relationship to nature within a game frame: proposal and application of a conceptual framework and its evaluation method".

The poster presenters had prepared short pitches to encourage participants to chat with them during the poster session. The Best Poster Award went to Junkichi Sugiura and Franz Renz for their poster on "Gaming chemical reactions as metaphors to enhance understanding of interpersonal relationships and group dynamics".

The prize for the Best Workshop went to Weronika Szatkowska and Małgorzata Cwil for "Exploring cultural identity through an educational escape room". The participants took on the role of new employees of the Unsolved Cases Agency and tried to find out if there was a living heir of their very wealthy client. We discussed, played and reflected on serious games about refugees, climate change, land-use planning, resilience planning, sustainable chain production and indigenous perspectives (and much more) to address our pressing challenges.

Lots of exciting, well-attended and very well-received sessions! See the full [programme](#) here.

What else was there?

On Tuesday there was a welcome reception at the Mr Brightside Rooftop Bar. The social programme traditionally took place on Wednesday. There was a choice of a guided tour of the Art Gallery or an e-shuttle through the Botanical Gardens, which are beautiful even in winter and home to many special tree species. Everyone then met for a guided tour on Christchurch's Tram. The historic tram took us through the city centre and past many points of interest. The afternoon ended with a cosy get-together at Kaiser Brew Garden & Bar.

Thursday also had something special to offer: We were able to see the different activities, technologies and research projects of the HIT Lab NZ at the University of Canterbury and try out many of the technologies ourselves: Skiing in VR, taking care of a VR baby, dancing and even flying through Harry Potter's world on a broomstick - very exciting and fascinating!



Flying Broomstick (Photo: Helmut Wittenzellner)

The gala dinner, awards ceremony and handover of the presidencies took place at the beautiful historic Takahe Restaurant in the mountains around Christchurch. There were even knight's robes, swords etc, which we had a lot of fun with. There was also a delicious 3-course meal. In between the awards were presented as well as a preview of the 2025 conference in Stuttgart. In keeping with tradition, the ISAGA mascot - Dr Octoludus - was handed over to Birgit Zürn and Friedrich Trautwein (chairs of next year's conference).



View of Christchurch from the Sign of the Takahe (Photo: Maria Freese)



Ambience at the Sign of the Takahe (Photo: Maria Freese)

And as with every ISAGA conference, THE ISAGA tradition was not to be missed. On the last day and as a crowning finale, the "Tree Planting Ceremony" took place. We planted a New Zealand Tōtara (*Podocarpus totara*) just outside the entrance to the conference building.

Our conclusion? The fact that the conference was held at a distant location in no way detracted from the quality and family spirit (in Maori: *whānau*) of the event. On the contrary, we had many good conversations with participants from New Zealand and Australia who were previously unknown to us, and warm friendships quickly formed! We are sure to see some of them in Stuttgart next year - Kia ora! We have learnt a lot from the Kiwi culture and are taking home many playful ideas. We would like to thank everyone who helped make the week in Christchurch so great - especially Heide Lukosch and Maria Freese for their great and tireless efforts! We are already looking forward to the next ISAGA conference, 15-18 July 2025 in Stuttgart, when we say "Gieß Gottle in the Schwobaländle"!



Tree planting ceremony (Photo: Yasas Sri Wickramasinghe)



Announcement of the next conference (Photo: Yasas Sri Wickramasinghe)