

**Now Play This CIC: Activity and Impact Report  
2015-2022**



## Why games?

Play is a tool for empathy, for connectedness, and for understanding complex systems and how they shape our choices and those of others.

Games are the best framework we have for inviting and directing play, but they're often still dismissed as only for children, discussed mainly in terms of addiction and violence, or only around the money blockbuster games can make.

Now Play This Festival was set up to explore and showcase the wider possibilities of games and game design - games as empathy makers, as exposers of systemic injustice, as joyful ways to bring people together around ideas or actions.

We work with practitioners of every medium that involves play, and connect stakeholders in the games industry, in arts

and culture, and social enterprises. Together we explore what games can do, and to build a community that experiments with how to apply these insights in the wider world.

Now Play this has become a vital hub for developing new knowledge and partnerships in the national and international games ecology. We bring new play experiences to audiences and turn players into game-makers.

This report looks at the impacts and successes of the last seven years, and looks forward to our ambitions for the future, as we look to expand our work with practitioners and audiences to build a strong place for games and play as part of cultural innovation.



“When played in an environment of openness, care, and critical thinking, games allow us to touch the very fabric of our social existence – experiencing its composition, discovering how we want it to change, and understanding how it can be damaged.”

**Sebastian Quack,  
Festival Director**

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## **NPT in numbers:**

**More than 400 games  
shown from 28 countries**

**16,000+ tickets sold**

**150,000+ people engaging  
with free games and  
activities**

**750+ new games made at  
the festival**

**95% average audience  
satisfaction rating**

**30 million + press reach**

# What we do

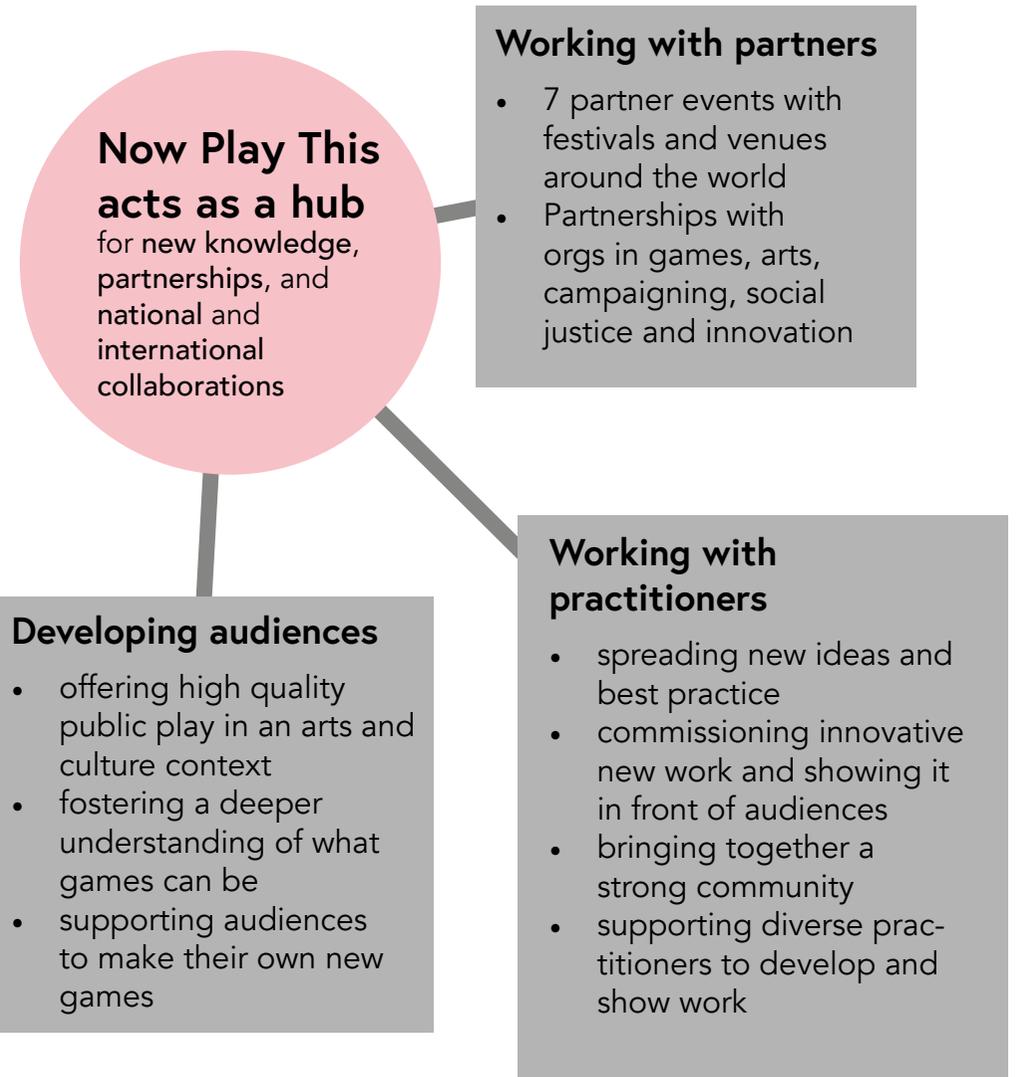
Now Play This is a highly curated annual festival at Somerset House in London, put on as part of the London Games Festival. Each year we explore a new, urgent theme, and test out novel ways games can impact our ideas and the actions we take as citizens.

The festival is a crucible of new ideas and new approaches to game making, and festival alumni have gone on to global commercial success, had their work acquired by museums, and brought fresh ways of thinking back to both the games industry and cultural conversation.

Outside the festival our wider programme supports practitioners to build new skills, spreads new ideas and brings game design thinking to a wider community where it can take root in fertile cross-disciplinary practices.

As a result of Now Play This's work since 2015, over 150,000 people have learned about and played experimental games, both digital and analogue. Hundreds of people have been supported to start making games and take further steps to pursue careers in games and interactive art-related fields.

We've inspired nuanced coverage of new game forms in broadsheets and on TV news, and brought practitioners together from across the world to share ideas and build new collaborations.



## How do we do this?

Now Play This activity each April includes a ticketed exhibition and free festival activity at Somerset House and elsewhere, talks, workshops, and streamed content. Our commission and workshop programme run throughout the year.

We offer opportunities for high quality public play, surface the ideas explored in the games we show, and give people the tools and skills to make their own games and experiment with creative play. We bring new, diverse audiences to arts venues and support learning and experimentation. We foster a deeper understanding of what games can be.

For practitioners across the games industry, arts and culture and related fields, we bring people together across silos of design, art and business, fostering new understanding

and community exchange. We commission innovative work and support new modes of creating, making a space for radically new R&D that is still rare in games, and we put the results in front of the public so that new work can start to find its audience.

We work towards equality, diversity and inclusion; support new and emerging artists, particularly those underrepresented in the games industry; and help people develop new skills and new collaborations.

We foster international exchange with individuals and partner organisations around the world, and open up pathways for designers and artists to use their skills to help make the world a better place for all of us to live.



## Working with Practitioners - commissions, talent development, community building

Innovation, risk taking and talent development have always been key to our programme of commissions and professional development opportunities. We identify and incubate new artists and game designers, helping to build their capacity to bring new work to the world, either via the arts route or industry route.

We also support experienced practitioners to explore new ideas and find new collaborations. Often Now Play This will be a first public commission, or support a step into a new field for established designers and artists.

Our design labs and paired commissions programme bring together new talent with established artists and designers. Together they make genuinely new things and test them in front of audiences.

Our longer term commissions support the development of ideas into prototypes that can go on to find life elsewhere. The commission programme, inspiration from the festival, and the wider community we've built who use play in their work, have helped people launch careers and experiment with new ideas. They then go on to build successful businesses and take games to fresh places.



## Why is this important?

This area of new development focusing on the place of games in wider culture is currently underfunded. Games are fertile ground for new forms of interaction, entertainment and cultural understanding, but without funding their development this type of pipeline becomes incredibly fragile and intermittent.

A robust programme that encompasses the knowledge of both games industry professionals and arts and culture brings new ideas, talent and energy to both. Like short film programmes do for film, and local teams and grassroots leagues do for professional sport, a strong flow of new practitioners and new ideas into games and interactive benefits everyone.

**For the future, our ambition is to be able to undertake more sustained talent development throughout the year. We'd like to build on the design lab and commission formats we've been trialling over the last couple of years to reach more practitioners, and help make development in this area more sustainable for the designers, developers and artists interested in using games and play in their practice.**



"It was the exposure to new ideas and new energy I needed"

**Kenechukwu Ogbuagu, Nibcard Games**

"The commission came at an important time and meant that we didn't have to take the risk (huge for a small studio) of plunging all our time and money into something that might not reach an audience. NPT gave us a venue, a sense of confidence, and evidence that this new direction might work."

**We Throw Switches**

"NPT allowed me to think of myself outside the limited scope of disability arts and think of myself as a practitioner with a wide range of applications, particularly within the exploration of play and interaction. I have been offered multiple curatorial and exhibition opportunities ... was interviewed several times throughout the festival and my work has had a higher level of exposure and interest since."

**Abi Palmer**

## Working with Partners: International and Cross-industry Co-operation

Cross-disciplinary and international links have always been important to us. We've showed work from 28 countries, and run simultaneous exhibitions co-commissions and design camps with partners across the world.

Over time we've made an international community of makers which crosses silos and boundaries, facilitating the exchange of ideas and inspiration between everyone who is interested in making work with games and play at its heart.

We've co-commissioned with international festivals including A MAZE and Next Level in Germany, supported the development of a design camp and playtesting festival in Nigeria, had satellite exhibitions in Australia and supported work made originally for Now Play This to reach a wide international audience. Pieces and workshops we've commissioned

have toured across the world.

We are currently building capacity for collaboration between game makers and those working on urgent social issues, as evidenced by the 2021 commission programme and the 2022 Design Camp, which brought makers together with activists, experts and NGOs in the field of participatory democracy.

How effective is this for those partners? Jez Hall of Shared Future CIC, who partnered with us in 2022 said:

*"It was great to run a session where, perhaps because people were gamers, they really embraced participatory budgeting, and I came away stimulated and with new ideas to play with. I'm talking to one of the designers about potential future collaborations, and we've talked about how to bring the language of games into our core work"*



## Public Feedback

For the public, this is an effective way into potentially dry and complex issues.

Audience feedback from the most recent Now Play This, examining Games and Democracy, included:

*"I learned about Gerrymandering today! I didn't know anything about it before"*

*"I thought it was going to be a stretch to find a connection between games and democracy, but I played the pong game and got it instantly"*

*"[Gathering Storm] really shaped how I am thinking about democracy - it showed me clearly that the more people are removed/distanced from the decision making process, the more disengaged they become"*

**For the future, our ambition is to expand our programme of working with partners. We'd like to bring game design thinking into new areas, to incubate new collaborations, to show UK work abroad and bring the work of international practitioners to the UK. We're evolving our design camp, workshop programme and co-making activities both during the festival and across the year.**



## Developing Audiences

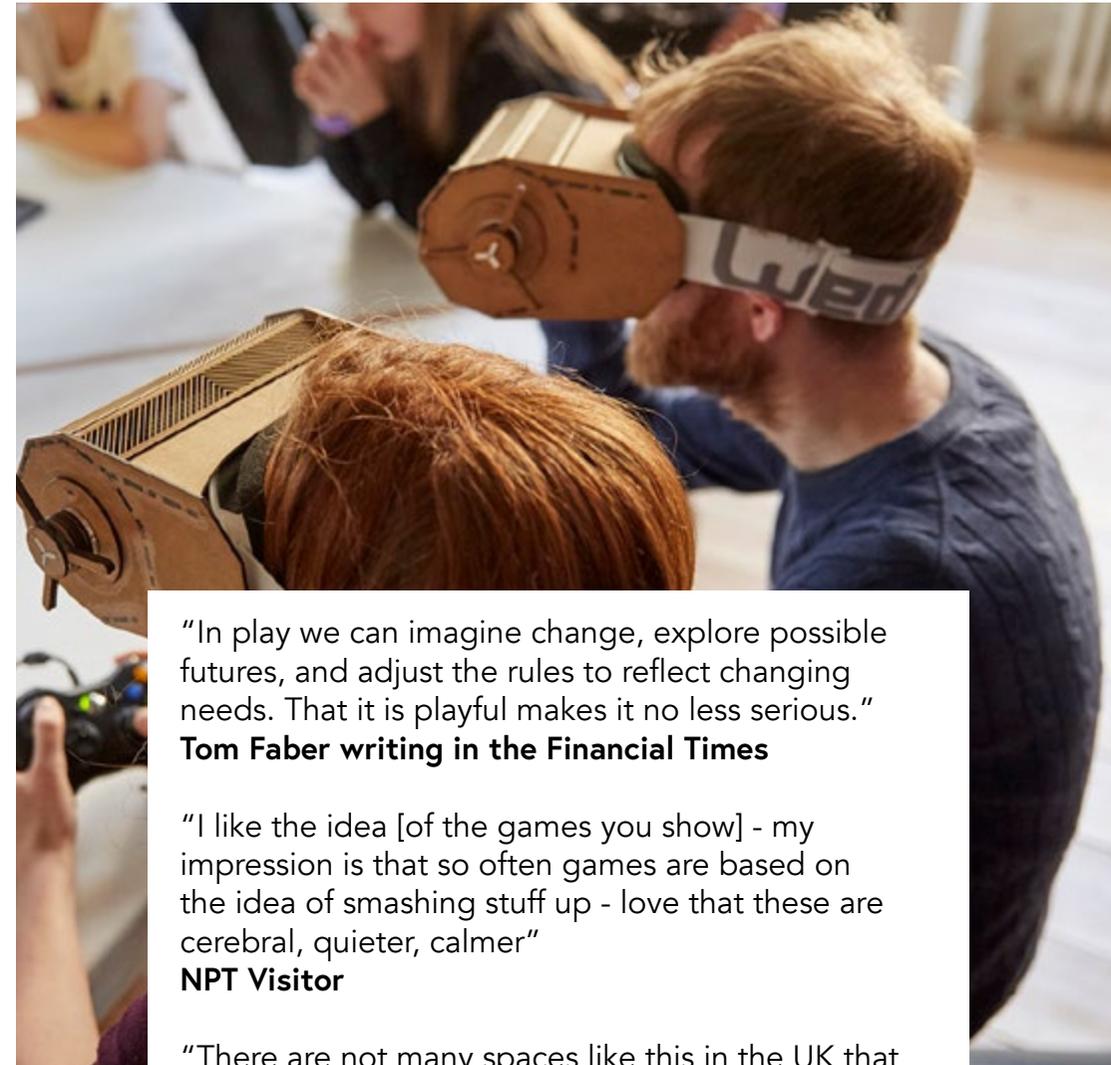
### Our Audience

Our ticket-buying audience is primarily composed of young people - especially those 18-34 - and families.

Composition varies by year but consistently about 50% are there because they already care about games, and 50% are culturally curious visitors coming to find out more about the subject. The gender balance is generally even, and 20%-40% will be visiting Somerset House for the first time.

Outside the ticketed activity Now Play This has always had large-scale outdoor installations which are free to visit, and since 2020 an online streaming component which is free to access from anywhere in the world.

Alongside the part of the festival aimed at the general public we also run a practitioner track aimed at building community, sparking new collaboration and spreading new ideas and best practice to those using games and play in their work. This attracts practitioners from around the UK and across the world.



"In play we can imagine change, explore possible futures, and adjust the rules to reflect changing needs. That it is playful makes it no less serious."

**Tom Faber writing in the Financial Times**

"I like the idea [of the games you show] - my impression is that so often games are based on the idea of smashing stuff up - love that these are cerebral, quieter, calmer"

**NPT Visitor**

"There are not many spaces like this in the UK that showcase game culture in this way"

**NPT Visitor**

## Working with Audiences: Sparking New Perceptions of games and play

Now Play This is a primary space for a non-commercial discourse around games, bringing attention to new ideas and surfacing positive and nuanced ways of thinking about games and play. We ask young people and families to play together as a way of exploring new subjects, and to make games together as a way in to understanding the form and being creative together.

We commission practitioners to make new work for new audiences outside those currently served by AAA games. We ask those audiences to engage with games and playful interactive activity from around the world, and to look at a wide range of subjects through the lens of games and play.

Exposing a wide audience to new and experimental ideas,

and asking them to try making their own games, is vital to develop public taste. We are in the process of shifting ideas of where games belong beyond the still-widely-held assumptions that they're only for kids, or that there is no games culture outside commercial blockbusters, much as they have their place.

Holding events in cultural spaces like Somerset House and Goethe Institute brings us to new audiences and new avenues for thoughtful conversation. Coverage in places like the Financial Times and BBC Breakfast News supports our view that there's a hunger for new ideas about games and play.

Close to 100% of young people have grown up playing games, and it's a form of thinking about

the world which absolutely makes sense to them. When done well, games can be a vital way of understanding structural inequalities and power imbalances. They can be a route to finding common ground with people whose lives are very different.

Games deserve serious consideration by organisations who are involved in these issues, and Now Play This is at the forefront of connecting those organisations with ideas and individuals who can help them navigate doing this well.

**Our ambition is to continue to use the festival and public events to deepen public ideas about games as a cultural form, and develop the public appetite for using them to help understand the world.**



## Working with Audiences: Public Making & Public Wellbeing

There is no doubt that creative making and play have positive outcomes on wellbeing. Giving people easy ways to make playful interactive pieces opens up new ways to share their own stories and find empathy for the difficult choices of others. Doing this widely leads to a great variety of stories and experiences available to be shared that goes far beyond those traditionally put on screen or in writing.

Games and play have the potential to be an easy and empathetic way to cross cultural divides and make tangible the different constraints others are operating under.

In challenging times for society, this can be an important route for finding ways to understand and make explicit difficult circumstances and discuss the interplay of new approaches

to social structures which may seem abstract from outside.

Since we first supported the public to make their own games in 2017 this has been an important part of our activity each year. The public have made more than 750 games at the festival with various easy-to-use tools, some newly commissioned by Now Play This.

Tools we have supported such as Sok Stories have gone on to have a wide release and are being used by large numbers of people to easily make games.

We support deeper engagement with making with talks and workshops involving both physical and digital making. For the first time in 2022, in parallel with our partners in Abuja, we ran an eight day Design Camp which brought together experi-

enced practitioners with those just starting out. They worked with democracy campaigners on game design thinking about urgent social issues.

**Our ambition is to widen our support for gamemaking by both the public and practitioners throughout the year by expanding our programme of workshops with partners in the UK and internationally.**



## In conclusion

Now Play This is consistently reaching wide audiences, supporting the development of practitioners and bringing new ideas to audiences to test how they land. We have proved that games and play, thoughtfully handled, are an important cultural form, and that audiences are hungry to use games to examine the world and explore ideas.

We've tested and developed a proven structure for supporting new interactive work, and built a strong community of practitioners who are using these ideas to make new games and work with people using interaction and play in a very wide variety of contexts.

We'd like to expand on our programme. We're looking to be able to support practitioners' development and

commission genuinely new work more consistently throughout the year.

We'd love to expand our UK and international partnerships with games, arts and cultural organisations to widen the reach and deepen the impact of the work we are already doing, and we're keen to work with those working on urgent social issues to explore the impact game design thinking can have on their activity and research.



## About us

Now Play This is a Community Interest Company, run by a small core team, supported by a board of directors and a range of public and industry funders.

Festival Director: Sebastian Quack  
Lead Producer: Nick Murray

Contact us at [hello@nowplaythis.net](mailto:hello@nowplaythis.net)  
Find out more at <http://nowplaythis.net>  
Find us on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#)

Report prepared by Sophie Sampson



## Appendix: Practitioner Case Studies

### **Sindi Breshani** **Founder of Episod Studio** **London UK**

When I was a kid in Albania I used to play a lot of videogames with my younger brother, but as I grew up it became secondary - it felt like it was a childish hobby, only useful for numbing the brain. I moved to London to study design at Goldsmiths in 2017, and went to Now Play This just as a fun event, but I was really surprised by what I experienced there. I played Dan Hett's game The Loss Levels [about the aftermath of losing his brother in the Manchester bombings] and I was shocked. How he was telling the story was so intimate and so powerful. It was the first time I thought that games were not just about entertainment and having fun, but they can really move you. The whole experience of Now Play This

left me really really inspired. A year later when I was doing my final project at Goldsmiths I was researching about truth and reality, and running a series of interactive workshops. I wanted to make something that could have a life on its own, without me there running a workshop. Remembering what I'd seen at Now Play This I turned what had been a workshop into a game.

I put it into my degree show, and the Head of Experience Design at the Royal College of Arts invited me to apply for his programme, which looks at how to turn information into experiences - for me that's games. That's what games can do so well. During that time I contacted Now Play This and was told to apply to the open call, which I did and Propaganda was shown at the 2019 festival. Showing at Now Play This was the first time I had

contact with the games industry, and I felt so welcomed by the industry, it felt like people were so ready to help each other. It was the first time I met a community around game making - now I go back every year.

At the RCA I started Games Club with students who loved playing games and loved narrative, to look at how games can tell stories. The students that joined Games Club are now the core team of my startup, Episod studio, and that's where we started Race for The Arctic, a game about climate change in the arctic, which we're building now with scientists and indigenous communities.

We got some initial funding and mentoring via the UK Games Fund's Tranzuser programme, and that has allowed us to test the idea, grow the team and learn. We're

now looking for publishing deals for that and Propaganda. Our ambition is to keep making large-scale projects that can have a wide impact. I really want to grow this space between films and games and push the boundaries of the interactive technologies, eventually fund others to do this kind of work too. There is so much more to do.

### **Tomo Kihara** **Digital Artist** **Tokyo Japan**

I was always passionate about creating art with technology, and did my undergraduate studies in Tokyo with a focus on computer science and design.

During this I visited London and was struck by how much design work embodying a critical perspective I saw. I came to do a Masters in the

Netherlands, and at the Playful Arts festival started to meet a community of people bringing together games, art and technology. Through this I found Now Play This, where I ran a workshop with my game *Is This Violence Am I too Sexy?* (a game that questions the implicit biases when using AI to quantify such subjective notions) in 2019. I loved the community I found there, and got more and more involved, including working with Seb Quack, now NPT Director, on his previous project *Trust in Play*.

In 2021 Now Play This paired me with poet and web artist JR Carpenter to make a commission together - the project that came out of it was *This Is Not A Good Sign*, an AR poetry piece that poses questions about past and future climate conditions.

I didn't consider myself an artist when I went into it, I

was the weird one in my design engineering masters, but working closely with JR was an education. She introduced me to Art Historical precedents for the kind of work I'm interested in doing, and also had the kind of practical advice about working in the context of the arts that is impossible to come by if you haven't studied in an art college with all the connections, networks and ways of doing things that implies. The piece premiered in Germany, appeared at the V&A Digital Design Weekend, and is in talks to be exhibited elsewhere in 2023.

This year I've been doing another AR sign project called *Future Collider* that invites people to create speculative signs to explore the future of their city, and I've been running it as a workshop internationally in places like 21\_21 DESIGN SIGHT in Tokyo and WAAG

Amsterdam. I attended the Design Camp at this year's Now Play This, and loved that sense of the fertility of game jam culture being present at an arts festival. I'm still in touch with the people I met there, and have started a project with one of them.

For the future, I'm still interested in merging the art world and the game world. For my next project I'm asking myself whether you can make a game for the Nintendo Switch that could also feel comfortable in Tate Modern. The ways in which games and the arts world might sit together are only just starting to be explored.

### **Andrew Dyce and Craig Fairweather We Throw Switches, Edinburgh UK**

*Andrew from We Throw Switches heard a talk about Now Play This 2016, which was "an eye-opening moment". He was looking around for a new career after being made redundant from a job in politics and had become interested in the potential of digital culture to bring people together in public spaces, noticing that most videogames culture was private and at home. Gameplaying in public was then limited to very commercial spaces only. Andrew met Craig who was running events in bars and things snowballed from there.*

*"We Throw Switches started running successful events showing other people's games, often building custom controllers to make the games*

more approachable for a general audience. When Flux was commissioned by NPT that was the first thing of our own we'd made, and the commission allowed us to work with a fabricator and make something beautiful and robust that could then go on and be shown elsewhere.

The commission came at an important time and meant that we didn't have to take the risk (huge for a small studio) of plunging all our time and money into something that might not reach an audience. NPT gave us a venue, a sense of confidence, and evidence that this new direction might work. Showing at Somerset House gave us entry to spaces that might not have looked at us otherwise. We now had a work we could show as a calling card, and it has travelled to Scotland House for an international

innovation showcase, Coutts Bank for an LGF showcase and the Edinburgh Fringe, as well as many public and private events. Showing it has become an important income stream for the company. We feel like no one else would have paid us to make a new thing if it wasn't primarily commercial.

That first commission has led to the studio developing two more games for public space, Tie Your Laces and Political Party, which was also a Now Play This commission in 2022.

Political Party learned from Flux and has specifically been designed to travel. In the three months since the festival it has already been shown in another UK festival and in Madrid, and is shaping up to be even more successful than Flux.

The community that has formed around Now Play This has always been really useful

for us, and this year we used attending the festival as a base for all kinds of meetings. We get the kind of overlap of interests there that doesn't happen at GDC or commercial games events - for example this year we met a laser artist we're talking to about a collaboration.

### **Kenechukwu Ogbuagu Nibcard Games Abuja Nigeria**

I designed my first game in 2013 simply because there was a University strike that lasted six months, and we were all bored at our off-campus lodge. A couple of years later I met some people interested in playing new games, and we played different games including my game from years ago. With this encouragement I designed another game. It was

the beginning of my conscious interest in the process of game design and I went online and found this huge world.

Later that year, I decided to try and find a manufacturer to fabricate my newly designed games, and trekked all over Lagos looking for someone who could help us but shockingly, there wasn't anyone, and so I researching and trying at home. My room was constantly covered in paper, strawboards and game pieces. I started joining online communities, picked up interest, and learned a lot by practicing and failing. This was how we founded NIBCARD Games; at first, it was to solve my own problem and then I noticed other people needed my help too.

In 2016, I was faced with a new challenge; 'how do I get people to know about the new games and play them?' We

were going around Abuja – my new home – trying to persuade people to play our new games, and it was exhausting. We needed a concentrated environment with less distractions to boardgaming. We decided to open a board game cafe, and started a successful crowd-funder on Indiegogo for rent, furniture and games (which are enormously expensive to import to Nigeria because shipping costs twice as much as the game itself). Today, the café is almost 4 years old.

As we were preparing that campaign I got the email from NPT inviting me to London to showcase some of my games and also participate in a panel discussion, it was a crazy in a good way. That trip kicked things up to a new gear and helped convinced more people in my country – in my community – that the Tabletop games community was worth joining.

I came over and met all sorts of people passionate about board games, visited board game cafes across London and got a lot of game donations. It was the exposure to new ideas and new energy I needed at that time, and since then we've been trying to grow the Nigerian board game industry on three fronts;

1. Designing home grown games that tell the African story. NIBCARD Games have directly mentored 14 designers from within 4 African countries.
2. Building local production capacity so we can make much-needed jobs locally. Since 2016, NIBCARD Games have manufactured more than 60 games for Nigerian designers.
3. On the promotion side, we started the African Board-games Convention – AB Con in

2016 which has been hosting yearly except in 2020. We are supporting Tabletop Games content creators set up as Youtubers, and supporting others who want to set up board game cafes all over the continent – so far we're aware of 7 café setups as a result of inspiration from our café.

In 2022, with NPT and British Council, we developed an eight day Design Camp together, sharing facilitators back and forth with London, and that has been hugely beneficial as a process for developing new designers, both game designers and graphic designers and potential promotions people. Many have gone on to apply for mentorship from international designers and are working on their own personal game projects. We set up a playtesting festival as part of the programme which we plan to do annually, and

we've engaged some of the workshop participants in paid works in NIBCARD. These have given us lots to build on as we develop the local industry.

Our ambitions for the future are to continue to support the development of Design, Production and Promotion capacity, in Nigeria and all over Africa. The Design Camp has helped us find and train new designers and network with industry professionals in UK, and we'll be doing more to help grow an active African Tabletop gaming industry.