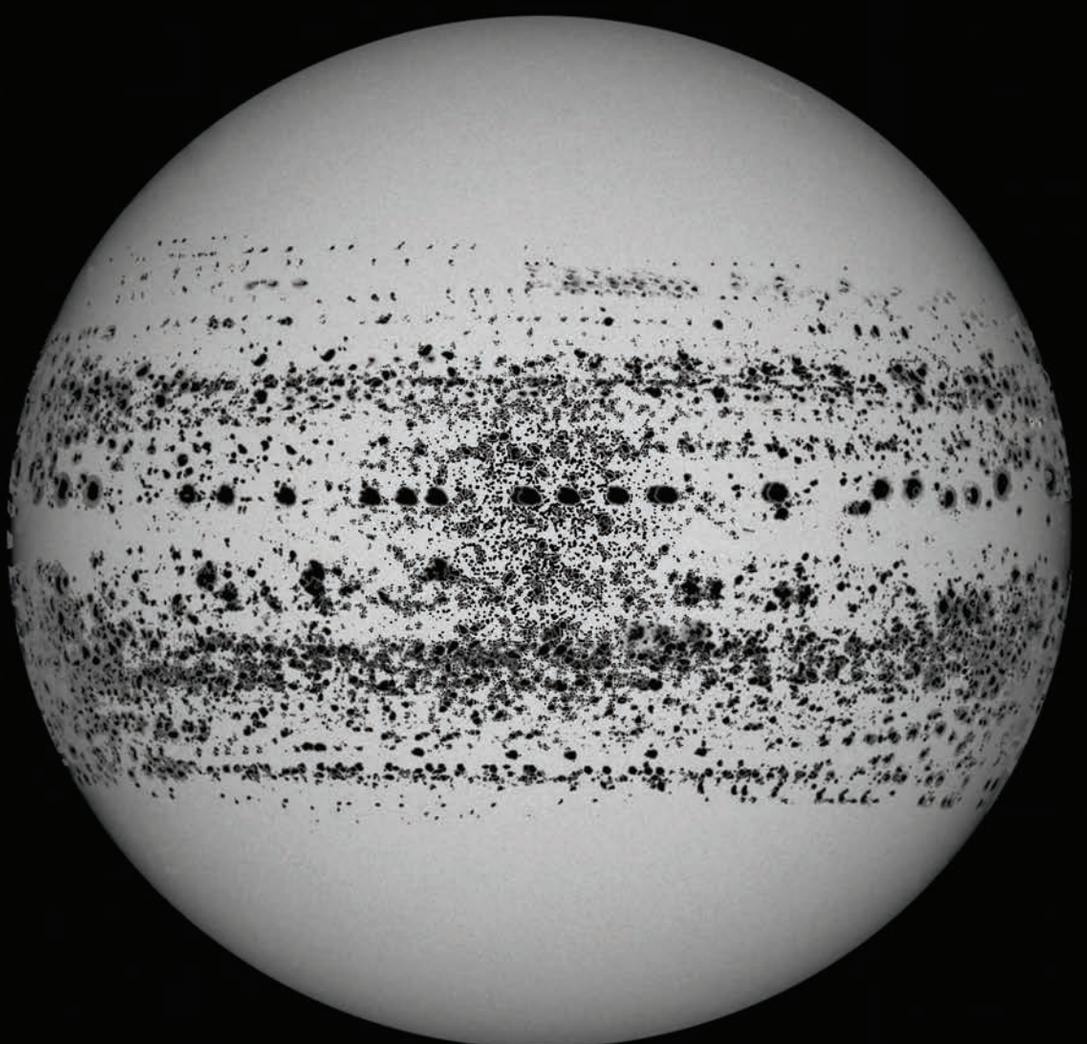
TABLEAU

THE DIVISION OF THE ARTS & HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | SPRING 2026



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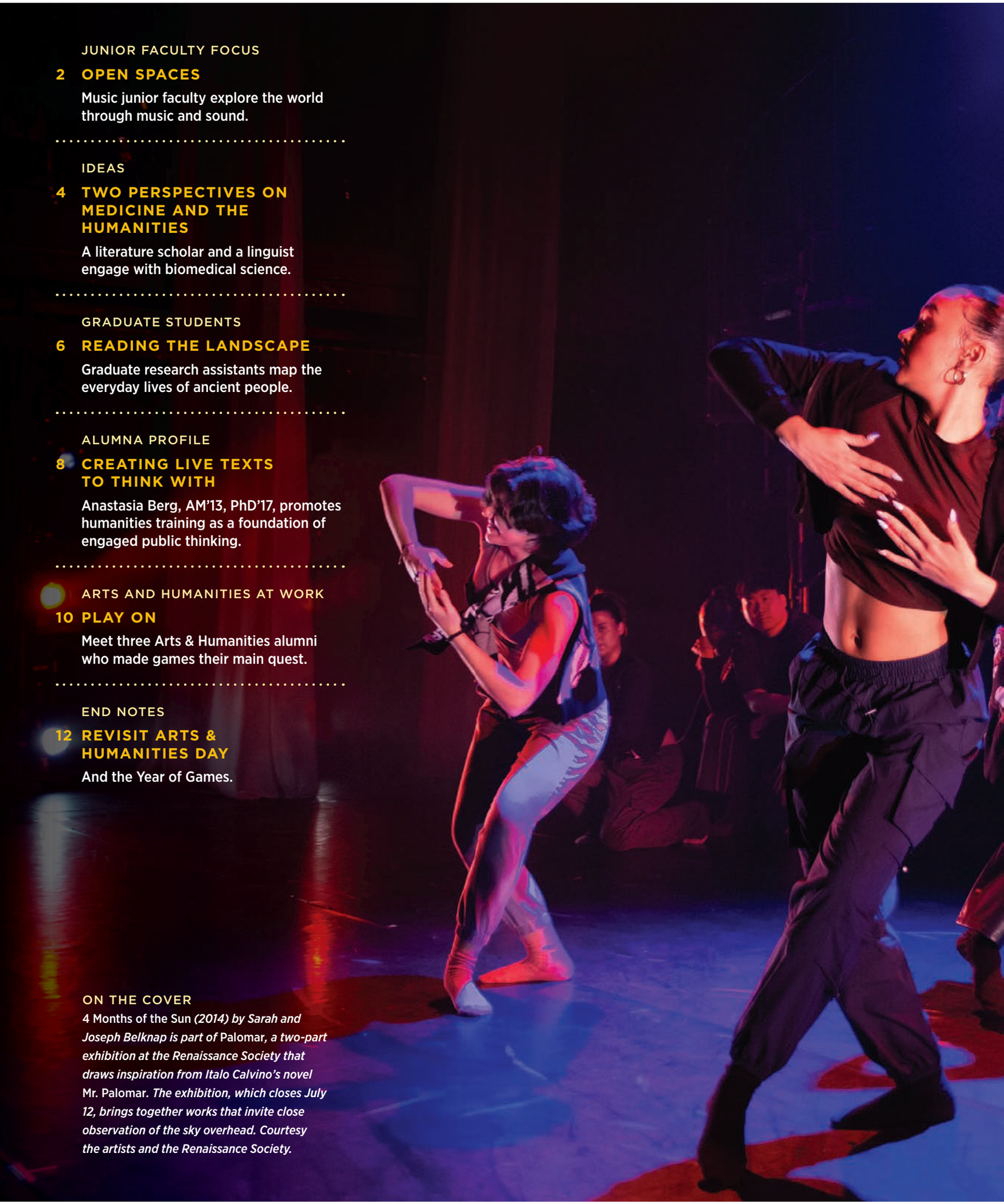

ON THE COVER

4 Months of the Sun *(2014) by Sarah and Joseph Belknap is part of* Palomar, *a two-part exhibition at the Renaissance Society that draws inspiration from Italo Calvino's novel* Mr. Palomar. *The exhibition, which closes July 12, brings together works that invite close observation of the sky overhead. Courtesy the artists and the Renaissance Society.*

Students in the Committee on Theater and Performance Studies (TAPS) bring movement, collaboration, and experimentation to the stage. TAPS supports a wide range of expressive forms, inviting students to develop their artistic voices while engaging performance as a mode of inquiry.

OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY CASSANDRA HAAS; THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ZICH

Dear Alumni and Friends,

Deborah L. Nelson

I'm excited to share with you the latest array of work from the Division of the Arts & Humanities. We renamed ourselves to encompass the breadth of thoughtful artistry and creative scholarship being produced by our students and faculty. But I like to say we've effectively been operating as an "arts and humanities" unit for the past 70 years and have finally gotten around to updating our name accordingly.

What distinguishes the arts at UChicago is not simply that we produce remarkable work but that creative practice here is inseparable from critical inquiry. Our new designation better reflects the abundance of world-class arts at UChicago, making explicit the ways these fields are—and always have been—integrated into our research and teaching. It also reflects the intellectually grounded creative work being done in programs such as the Department of Visual Arts, the Program in Creative Writing, the Committee on Theater and Performance Studies (TAPS), the Music Performance Program, and Media Arts and Design.

We recently launched a new website to go with our new name; I encourage you to visit to learn more about what we've been up to: artshumanities.uchicago.edu.

In this issue of *Tableau*, you'll find a Philosophy alumna bringing complex, provocative topics to public audiences. Professors in English Language and Literature and Linguistics discuss the role of humanities scholarship in biomedicine—how it helps us understand the challenging question of why some people enjoy better health than others, and what it means for our well-being that we exist in environments suffused with noise. You'll hear from alumni using their training to craft video games, discussing their influential coursework in Critical Videogame Studies, and suggesting games to check out even if you aren't much of a gamer (yet!). You can explore the work being done by our latest hires in Music, who develop sonic art that engages with biology and physics, examine how music has informed the troubled history of race and eugenics, and trace the internet's evolving role in popular culture.

You'll also get a glimpse into the high-tech archaeological research being undertaken by graduate students at the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL). Finally, you'll see coverage of the energizing public events we hosted this past fall: the expanded and tremendously well-attended Arts & Humanities Day and the kickoff symposium for the University's Year of Games, which celebrated the theory and practice of play in all its forms, from tabletop to console. You'll find more game recommendations to enjoy as well.

The University of Chicago has always been known for the intellectual rigor of our students and faculty, whether they are engaged in scholarship or creative practice. By bringing the arts formally into the division's name—and deepening our connections with the arts programs across campus—we acknowledge not only the exceptional artistic works being created here but also the creativity of the research. It is my honor to be dean during this exciting era, and again I encourage you to visit artshumanities.uchicago.edu so you can see what's next for us.

Deborah L. Nelson
Dean, Division of the Arts & Humanities
Helen B. and Frank L. Sulzberger Professor,
Department of English Language and Literature

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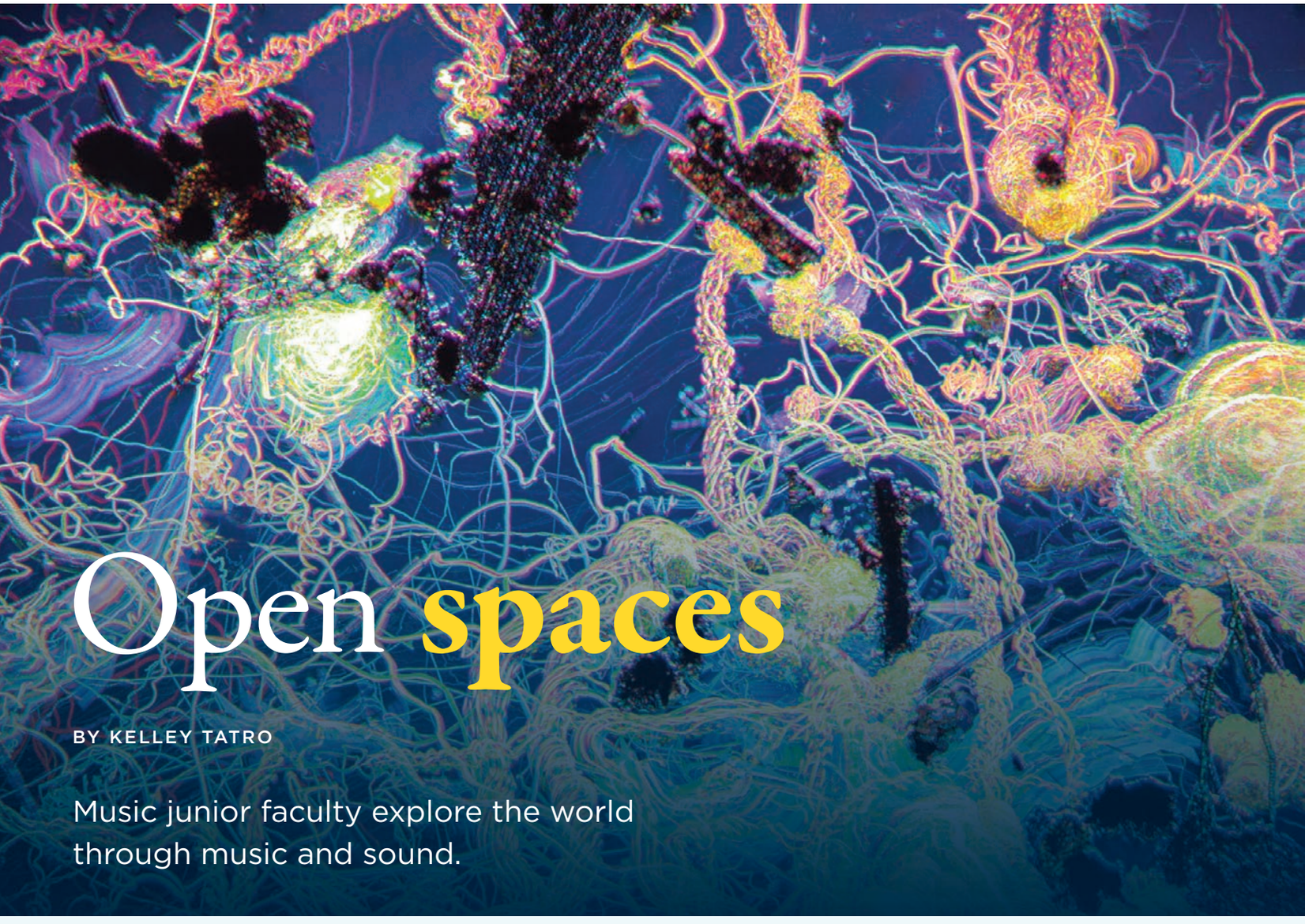

Open spaces

BY KELLEY TATRO

Music junior faculty explore the world through music and sound.

"Are music and sound just aesthetic forms, or are they actually ways to study sociopolitical issues, how spaces and cultures are constructed, or how the physics of the world works?"

For composer–sound artist **Senem Pirler**, her questions are not simply rhetorical. As she explains, "We can ask questions through sound and music. We can think about music, composition, and creating artwork that is deeply curious and not just obsessed with the idea of self-expression."

Despite their different disciplinary approaches and areas of expertise, the cohort of junior faculty in UChicago's Music Department—which also includes musicologists **Alexander Cowan** and **Paula Clare Harper**, AB'10—shares this outlook. They locate music and sound in a broad array of auditory phenomena through which they explore wide-ranging ideas and forge interdisciplinary partnerships that help them follow the trajectories of that exploration.

Pirler's compositions "challenge us to listen and look with our bodies at scales ranging from the microscopic to the planetary," says department chair **Anna Schultz**, AM'95. Plankton Performance, one of Pirler's ongoing projects, created in collaboration with artist-scientist Jess Holz, resulted in a performance at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in September 2025. Microorganisms from the Charles River and Boston Harbor appeared for the audience through the projected eyepiece view of a commonly used research microscope. Their presence transformed the human duo into part of a "multispecies collaboration" that fostered a "deeper conversation about plankton sound and the embodiment and agency of these creatures, rather than reducing them and their movements to actions of finding food and reproduction," says Pirler.

During the performance, the plankton moved in real time, their paths forming a graphic score that prompted Pirler's improvisation. In another piece in progress inspired by the natural world, she has drawn on work by physicist and feminist author Karen Barad to create an audiovisual essay that embraces the indeterminacy described by the theory of quantum entanglement.

Schultz notes that Pirler has also been expanding opportunities for students interested in "making-oriented classes" since her arrival at UChicago in fall 2024. Her brief included helping to revamp the department's composition program into the Composition and Sound Practices program. Additionally, she has reconfigured the former CHIME (Chicago Integrated Media Experimental) Studio into the Sound Practices and Intermedia Lab (SPIL). With her changes, Pirler intends to create a more inclusive environment for sound practitioners at all levels—from

In an instantiation of their ongoing project, Plankton Performance, artist-scientist Jess Holz and composer–sound artist Senem Pirler created images and sounds prompted by the movements of magnified microorganisms from Boston Harbor and the Charles River.

> There's a real celebration of people who are … thinking about the possibilities of music and its study in capacious ways.
>
> —Paula Clare Harper, AB'10

undergraduates to PhD students—who are interested in thinking critically about sound together.

Pirler says she believed in forming a "symbiotic relationship" with students "by first listening to their needs and reflecting on what needs to change" when she began to make alterations to the composition program. "They were on board," she says. "The changes are attracting a wide range of practitioners to our program" who "are thinking about composition and sound in a very expansive way."

Many students have also been attracted to the department by Paula Harper's teaching, which Schultz credits with having "bolstered the numbers and energy around the Music major." Harper's work intersects with gender and sexuality studies as well as with internet history and digital culture. She spoke with *Tableau* just a couple of days after turning in a book manuscript on virality to the University of Chicago Press, a major milestone in the evolution of one of two book projects she's undertaken since her arrival at the University in 2022. The first, *Taylor Swift: The Star, the Songs, the Fans* (Routledge, 2025), was a coedited volume of essays on a breadth of topics that engaged music and contemporary digital culture through the prism of a pop megastar.

In her forthcoming monograph, *Viral Musicking and the Rise of Noisy Platforms*, Harper analyzes the rise of internet and social media platforms such as GeoCities, webrings, and TikTok through the lens of musicologist Christopher Small's concept of "musicking"—music reconfigured from a noun into a far-reaching verb that expresses elements of sonic experience ranging from creation to listening. The concept helps her analyze the internet landscape of "noisy platforms," a heterogeneous array of social media sites, many of which began through broad sharing and engagement—the "viral participatory practices" of many digital actors. Despite the platforms' seeming messiness, Harper charts how they have been increasingly tamed and regulated by corporate interests.

"Paula is a leading musicologist of the internet," says Schultz. "Her scholarship brings systematicity and comprehensibility to sonic and visual objects that may otherwise seem unruly."

The newest hire of the three, Alexander Cowan joined UChicago in Autumn Quarter 2025. His book project, currently titled "Unsound: A Cultural History of Music and Eugenics," assesses the role of ideas about musical talent and race in the American and European eugenics movement from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

Cowan reports feeling particularly grateful for the invitation to teach a graduate seminar in his first quarter, an opportunity he calls "tremendously generative for thinking about how I frame the historical research that I've been conducting in the last few years." In this course offering, Music and the Human, advanced students tackled histories of music and evolutionary thought, the nature of musical ability, and the intersections of musical technique and technology, as well as technological interventions into musicality. Together, they explored "issues of music's place in evolutionary history with these larger histories of what it means to be considered musical and how those considerations are generated socially."

Cowan looks forward to extending the project through some future archival research that will help him gesture toward the legacy of racist ideas, "which, as we know—unfortunately—don't go away."

As Schultz says, Cowan's research "pushes us to grapple with a musicological history in which eugenics and race came to be attached to music, a history that continues to reverberate in the fraught notion of 'talent.'"

By analyzing how sound and music open up multiple spaces for artistic, humanistic, and scientific inquiry, all three scholars flourish within a department that Harper describes as particularly open to thinking broadly about how to define their object of study. "There's a real celebration of people who are making boxes bigger, or thinking outside of them, who are thinking about the possibilities of music and its study in capacious ways." ■

Paula Clare Harper, AB'10

Alexander Cowan

Senem Pirler

OPPOSITE: IMAGE BY JESS HOLZ; THIS PAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY PAULA CLARE HARPER, ALEXANDER COWAN, AND SENEM PIRLER

HEAR PAULA HARPER DISCUSS VIRALITY ON *BIG BRAINS*
at tableau.uchicago.edu/harper.

Two perspectives on medicine and the humanities

A literature scholar and a linguist engage with biomedical science.

This illustration from Guido da Vigevano's Anathomia *(ca. 1345) evokes a medical culture that, long before modern anatomy or germ theory, grappled with the question of why illness occurs—a question explored by Julie Orlemanski's work on late medieval English literature.*

Julie Orlemanski *is an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature.*

Melissa Baese-Berk *is a professor in the Department of Linguistics.*

I come to the medical humanities as someone who studies the Middle Ages, a period usually understood as just prior to the start of modernity—before the rise of Renaissance anatomy, before the centralized regulation of medical practice, and before the consolidation of scientific empiricism. Unsurprisingly, medieval health care was pretty different from what we have today. There was no germ theory of disease, and instead medieval physicians understood illness to arise from the imbalance of the body's four humors, which could be affected by factors that ranged from falling in love to the position of the planets.

Despite these differences, my interest fixed on something shared by medieval and modern patients alike—the question *why*. Why does one person fall sick when another doesn't? Why does a cure work in one situation but not another? In my monograph *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), I explore the interest that medieval men and women took in medical science. Between the arrival of the Black Death in England in 1348 and the emergence of books printed in English in 1473, thousands of different medical texts were copied, translated, and composed, largely for readers outside universities. I was curious about how these readers integrated medicine with other systems of explanation, including moral and spiritual ones, to make sense of their experiences of falling sick and getting well. In the same period, English poets were incorporating the language of medicine to create new models of narrative character and literary subjectivity. The popularization of medical knowledge, my book argues, effected a transformative encounter between ideas of causation and models of selfhood in medieval England.

Since I wrote *Symptomatic Subjects*, my research has largely shifted away from the medical humanities, but it remains one of my favorite subjects to teach. Typically, my course Literature, Medicine, and Embodiment is full of students who are thinking about careers in the health professions. Part of what makes the classroom so exciting are the experiences students bring to the poems and narratives we read—their experiences in labs, in medical internships, and at patients' bedsides, not to mention their own family histories and personal biographies. Over the quarter, we work together to track how literature and the humanities map the limits of medical science and supplement it with alternative forms of learning, invention, testimony, and speculation. We cover the literatures of AIDS, cancer, disability, scientific racism, and science fiction—all in nine weeks!

I don't always manage to include engagement with medieval sources, but the Middle Ages are always in the intellectual background, shaping my approach. The period has taught me that even when a patient, a people, or an epoch doesn't seem "rational" or "modern" by the standards of contemporary medical science, they turn out in every instance to be equipped with their own sophisticated understandings of bodily suffering, the material world, and how they interact. The medical humanities are, in part, an effort to recognize and learn from such forms of knowledge. *—by Julie Orlemanski* ■

I work on how people understand and produce language, especially across different kinds of communication barriers. So that might be differences in the accents people have, their language backgrounds, or noise. Figuring out how people do and don't understand speech in these circumstances is at the heart of most of the work I do.

In 2019 the Acoustical Society of America asked me to come and talk about how speech is understood. At the end of it, one of the acoustical engineers, Erica Ryherd of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, came up and asked what I knew about how hospitals are designed. She, my colleague Tessa Bent from Indiana University, and I became interested in medically related speech in hospitals.

The World Health Organization says hospitals are too noisy worldwide—but this is true in the US in particular. Increased noise harms your ability to rest, which impacts wound healing. We're also interested in patient-provider communication and provider-provider communication.

We have a suite of studies looking at how people perceive and understand speech in adverse listening conditions. One challenge is the vocabulary the speaker is using. Then there are the adverse conditions that result from the environment—a noise like a leaf blower going on outside your house, or a competing talker. It's uncanny how frequently hospital administrators bring up noisy floor polishers as a problem. These are problems we don't have great interventions for, other than "Go somewhere quieter."

The first hospital studies we did were similar to our typical speech-perception studies. Somebody comes into our lab, they put on fancy headphones, we play them speech that is in a quiet or noisy setting, and we ask them to transcribe what they hear. We're looking at how many words they accurately transcribe.

For older adults, we've noticed they have more challenges with hospital noise. One hypothesis is that younger adults are good at doing what we call *glimpsing*. When noise fluctuates, if you can take advantage of times when the noise is quieter, you can get a sense of what's being said and use that to guess what else might have been said. We think older adults might be less good at that kind of task.

I really love this work. It highlights how humanists can interface with other disciplines. Architectural acousticians know a ton about acoustics but nothing about how the brain handles speech, and so being able to provide them with this information feels like a real service to their field.

Gregory Norman in the Department of Psychology and I have also been plotting to look at the questions of how noise might create stress, and how stress might impact perception of speech and noise, especially medically related speech. We don't have a great sense of how stress impacts your ability to understand speech. This is in part because speech perception as a whole is a relatively new discipline, and most of our work has taken place in a lab. Our work is some of the first to step outside the laboratory and ask, How is this happening in the real world?*—as told to Lucas McGranahan* ■

LISTEN TO MELISSA BAESE-BERK DISCUSS LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM at tableau.uchicago.edu/baese-berk.

OPPOSITE: BIBLIOTHÈQUE DU CHÂTEAU DE CHANTILLY, MS 334 (569), FOLIO 269R, UNC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS; THIS PAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY JULIE ORLEMANSKI AND MELISSA BAESE-BERK

Using GIS mapping, satellite imagery, and archaeological data, graduate research assistants in UChicago's Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL) reconstruct patterns of settlement, exchange, and environmental interaction to better understand how people lived in the past.

Reading the landscape

BY CHANDLER A. CALDERON

Graduate research assistants use cutting-edge mapping technologies to understand the everyday lives of ancient people.

"I think of it as a laboratory for pedagogy as well as research," says **Mehrnoush Soroush** of the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL), which she has directed since 2022. In this role, Soroush, who is also an assistant professor in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, builds on a rich legacy of integrating advanced technology into the study of the landscape to reveal how ancient people lived. One of her main goals is to bring the lab's graduate student research assistants—who hail from programs including Middle Eastern Studies, East Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the Master of Arts Program in the Humanities—more fully into the lab's work.

Founded in 1998 by Tony Wilkinson, who worked at the University in the 1990s and early 2000s as a research associate and associate professor, CAMEL has been at the forefront of landscape archaeology research, using technology such as geographic information systems (GIS) to understand how humans interacted with their environment millennia ago. Today the lab focuses on facilitating access to its existing datasets, expanding its public resources, and developing new tool kits and platforms—especially at the intersection of digital archaeology and artificial intelligence—to expedite and scale ancient landscape studies. The lab supports academic researchers from UChicago and other institutions, as well as nonacademics, by helping them visualize and analyze their spatial data and generate maps for publication.

Graduate students have helped cultivate an environment of dynamic exchange at the center, says Soroush. "When you teach something in the classroom, you have a specific set of teaching goals." But with research, there is a "back-and-forth between me and the students," she says.

The research assistants learn new techniques and tools as they contribute to the lab's ongoing projects and pursue their own lines of inquiry. A question that unites their work is what landscape archaeology can tell us about how people lived in the past. Textual sources, which may have been written by elites with a certain agenda or by people who did not belong to the group they were describing, can lead to a limited or skewed vision of everyday lives of ordinary people. By reading the landscape, these scholars hope to gain a more nuanced sense of the past.

Xueyan Lyu, a doctoral student in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, studies a mountainous region in the Shaanxi province of northern China during the Bronze Age. Most official records from the time were written by the royal family, she says. As a result, "in previous studies, this region was just viewed as a marginal zone of a traditional dynasty." But she sees the area as "a dynamic interactional landscape." Precious objects such as bronze vessels show that, in fact, this was a crossroads linking several other regions, and that it was heavily influenced by cultural exchange.

> I want to challenge … the prioritization of textual sources, by using archaeological data from the ground.
>
> —Çağlayan Bal, AM'22

Çağlayan Bal, AM'22

Olivia Fiser

Xueyan Lyu

To better understand how these people settled and how goods moved throughout this region, she decided to use GIS software to map the sites where precious vessels have been discovered. She took Ancient Landscapes—a two-quarter course sequence taught by Soroush—to master this technology and jumped at the opportunity to further develop her skills through a research assistant position at CAMEL. In the lab, she gained experience working with declassified Cold War satellite imagery of preindustrial landscapes in Iran in a collaboration with digital humanities scholars. Lyu realized she could use other declassified aerial photography to chart preindustrial settlement patterns in northern China.

Olivia Fiser, a student in the Master of Arts Program in the Humanities, also combines landscape archaeology with close study of materials. She studies shells recovered from sites in present-day Jordan. The ways they were modified, for example through drilled holes, suggest they were used for jewelry and adornment. Fiser is interested in the clues these shells hold about how ancient people expressed their individuality. "How can we synthesize the material culture to understand them as people, rather than as a part of a larger picture?" she asks.

Fiser's work before getting involved with CAMEL had been very site specific, "but when you incorporate the landscape, you are able to visualize so much more," she says. With skills she learned in Ancient Landscapes and guidance from her mentors at CAMEL, she has used GIS technology and other resources, such as Paleolithic climatology reports, to identify the likely sources of the shells and map the least costly transportation routes, charting potential paths of exchange between historic settlement sites in the region. From two other CAMEL research assistants, **Harrison Morin**, AM'20, and **Xiayoxuan "Coco" Yang**, AM'25, she learned how she could incorporate a study of hydrological features, including qanats, an underground irrigation technology, into her research. Such features can offer a more comprehensive view of how interactions with the natural world shaped daily life in the communities she studies.

Çağlayan Bal, AM'22, a doctoral student in Middle Eastern Studies, is an expert on Iron Age Anatolia (today part of Turkey). She became skeptical of official accounts, often written by Greeks, of a unified Phrygian kingdom with a strong central state. "I want to challenge this narrative, and especially the prioritization of textual sources, by using archaeological data from the ground," she says. She is using the same GIS techniques she gained experience with at CAMEL to examine large survey datasets so she can study the spatial distribution of settlements. Settlements built around several different seats of power, for example, could serve as evidence of a more complex and distributed hierarchy than textual sources suggest.

Bal has also contributed to CAMEL's AI-Assisted Archaeological Remains Detection (A3RD) project, which uses artificial intelligence to track hydrologic features, such as qanats, which arose in the first millennium BCE and continue to sustain communities in the Middle East today. The team at CAMEL trained an AI model to more quickly and accurately process vast datasets by identifying the telltale holes used to maintain the underground tunnels that transported water. The team plans to make this AI model available to the public so others can use it and even train it for their own needs. Tracing these water systems, says Bal, can offer insights into how settlement patterns and the environment have changed through the ages.

"I do learn from them all the time," says Soroush of the research assistants, emphasizing that on "technical topics, a lot of them are way ahead of me." And with their expertise in different regions and time periods, the students have taken research collaborations in directions Soroush did not anticipate. Though Soroush notes that declining graduate admissions and the current pause in new enrollments have posed challenges to the graduate research assistant program, being part of this dynamic environment has enabled the students and Soroush herself to expand their research scope and tools, while developing resources that will allow the public and the next generation of scholars to connect with the landscape in new ways. "Even now," says Fiser, "our landscape, our surroundings—they're everything to our understanding of culture and human interaction." ■

OPPOSITE: IMAGE COURTESY THE CENTER FOR ANCIENT MIDDLE EASTERN LANDSCAPES; THIS PAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY ÇAĞLAYAN BAL, OLIVIA FISER, AND XUEYAN LYU

HEAR MEHRNOUSH SOROUSH DISCUSS ANCIENT WATER MANAGEMENT at tableau.uchicago.edu/soroush.

Creating live texts to think with

BY KELLEY TATRO

Editor and philosophy professor Anastasia Berg, AM'13, PhD'17, promotes humanities training as a foundation of engaged public thinking.

Students practice making critical judgments about art during "Live Criticism at the Smart," an October 2025 excursion to Theaster Gates's* Unto Thee *with the Program for Public Thinking, a partnership between* The Point *and UChicago's Parrhesia Program for Public Thought and Discourse.

"I always say, 'This is my last project on Kant.' And it never is." **Anastasia Berg**, AM'13, PhD'17, is an assistant professor in the philosophy department at the University of California, Irvine, where she specializes in moral philosophy and its history. She acknowledges that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose work was the subject of her dissertation, continues to loom large in her teaching and research.

But while describing her role as a writer and editor at *The Point* magazine, Berg jokes that thinking about Kant is her day job. She is also interested in applying her philosophical training to contemporary problems—and sparking thoughtful public dialogue about them. She shares this purpose with her colleagues at *The Point*, which was founded in 2008 by three doctoral students in the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought: **Jon Baskin**, AM'12, PhD'16; **Jonny Thakkar**, AM'13, PhD'13; and **Etay Zwick**, EX'14. According to the publication's website, the editors are motivated by the beliefs that "humanistic thinking has relevance for contemporary life" and that "our lives are full of experiences worth thinking about."

In its nearly two-decade run, the magazine has garnered critical accolades and a substantial following for its rigorous and sometimes surprising interventions into topics driving public conversation, such as political violence, contemporary masculinity, and the purpose of higher education. Berg joined the editorial team in 2015 and credits her colleagues there with stimulating key conversations that have shaped not only her work as an editor but also her subsequent writing, which has appeared in publications such as *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *The Cut*, as well as *The Point*.

Additionally, in 2024 Berg and her fellow *Point* editor **Rachel Wiseman**, AB'12, examined one issue at greater length, publishing *What Are Children For? On Ambivalence and Choice* (St. Martin's, 2024), a book whose central question they and other writers had explored in a themed issue of *The Point* in 2019. The question was personally resonant for the authors—highly educated professional women in their early 30s who were contemplating whether they wanted to become parents. Looking for resources to help them think through the issue, they were dissatisfied by the discourse they encountered in print media, social media, and other sources of public dialogue.

Their discontent with the public conversation motivated their research on the issues and anxieties people face when trying to think about having children, including material worries, feminist concerns about reconciling women's liberation with motherhood, and antinatalist arguments that question the legitimacy of having chil-

> Our ambition … is to bring the best of the university to the public, but also the best of the public—its concerns and insights—back to academics and back into academic life.
>
> —Anastasia Berg, AM'13, PhD'17

dren at all. Both authors included personal essays that bookend their critical intervention into the discussion: Wiseman writes about overcoming her ambivalence about having children, and Berg explores how having a child taught her to resist the narrative that having a baby must radically transform a woman's identity.

The most gratifying reactions to the book, Berg recounts, came from people who credited her and Wiseman with helping them overcome "hindrances to thinking clearly and freely about the issue" of whether to choose parenthood, "giving them tools to approach the question differently" through writing that "we hope is engaging and a kind of a live text for people to think with and through." Since the book's publication, Berg has continued to identify new writing projects "when I feel like there is a dissatisfaction and I can give words to it," such as her observations on the use of artificial intelligence in higher education, which she believes will impair students' cognitive competence, as she recently wrote in an op-ed in *The New York Times*.

Berg's role as an editor at *The Point* gives her the opportunity to work with authors she identifies as similarly positioned to provide fresh perspectives on contentious topics. She enjoys the opportunity to expand her thinking alongside writers who are uniquely suited to address complex problems catalyzing public conversation. From its earliest issues, the publication has partnered with up-and-coming writers. These partnerships have also provided Berg with a valuable chance to nurture writers by "taking them through the steps of writing a truly compelling, beautiful, stylish essay with a voice that's making a fresh point." Like Berg and Wiseman, some of the authors who honed their craft through collaborations at *The Point* have gone on to publish books and articles in high-profile legacy media outlets, including UChicago Humanities alumni **Jake Bittle**, AB'17; **Megan Buskey**, AB'04; **Lauren Michele Jackson**, PhD'19; **Antón Barba-Kay**, AM'09, PhD'13; and **James Duesterberg**, AM'11, PhD'16, who is a lecturer in the College.

While growing its stable of authors over the years, the magazine has also earned a dedicated following among a "public that's curious, that's intellectually motivated," says Berg. So she and her colleagues began to think about making a greater impact. In 2023 they found an opportunity: *The Point* began the Program for Public Thinking, a partnership with UChicago's Parrhesia Public Thought and Discourse program, expanding its reach by cocreating events at the University, including a summer workshop for undergraduates across the country and year-round classes in the College.

Berg emphasizes that training students to engage in public dialogue is not part of her usual work as a university professor. "I can have students who want to study philosophy and have nothing to do with becoming public thinkers or writers, and that's great," she says, "but what about those who do?" For the 2026 summer workshop, she will colead a session titled "The Good Life," which aims to help students investigate "what it means to live meaningfully today and what kinds of communities and commitments such a life entails."

At a time of intense debate about the benefits of a university education—and particularly a humanistic education—Berg characterizes *The Point*'s collaboration with the Parrhesia program as modeling an important relationship between universities and the public. "Our ambition, with both the magazine and the program, is to bring the best of the university to the public, but also the best of the public—its concerns and insights—back to academics and back into academic life."

She's proud of how she and her colleagues try to create their ideal public-university conversation by building diverse groups of student thinkers at the program's summer workshops. "We place a great emphasis on having people come from very different educational institutions: Alongside students from elite universities, we have people coming from state schools, community colleges, Christian colleges, HBCUs." Together they tackle issues in the public eye that most compel the students' interest.

"We think the program for public thinking is going to allow, to formalize, and institutionalize the possibility of doing something that's very exciting when you're within a university," Berg says, "which is to ask yourself: 'How are these texts I'm reading and these questions I'm asking going to help me think through some of the most important things in my own life, be they personal, romantic, social, or political?'" ■

PHOTOS COURTESY ANASTASIA BERG

LEARN ABOUT A CAMPUS EVENT COSPONSORED BY PARRHESIA AND *THE POINT* at tableau.uchicago.edu/parrhesia.

UChicago alumna Noor Amin works on League of Legends*, a globally popular online game, as a designer. Alumni in the games industry draw on humanistic training to shape immersive worlds, craft player experiences, and think critically about how games are made and played.*

Play on

BY SUSIE ALLEN, AB'09

Meet three Arts & Humanities alumni who made games their main quest.

For a growing number of UChicago alumni, video games aren't just a pastime—they're a profession.

Tableau spoke with three Humanities alumni about their work in the games industry. **Noor Amin**, SB'23 (Media Arts and Design, Neuroscience), is a game designer at Riot Games, where she works on the online battle arena game *League of Legends*. **Kellie Lu**, LAB'16, AB'20 (Psychology and Creative Writing), AM'21 (Master of Arts Program in the Humanities), is a game developer at the education-focused studio Filament Games. **Eren Slifker**, AB'24 (Media Arts and Design, Music), is a software engineer at Ares Interactive, whose titles include *Heroes vs Hordes*, an app-based role-playing game.

What was the first game you played growing up that made a strong impression on you?

Slifker: I'm not sure I can limit it to just one game. The game system, certainly, that had the biggest impression on me was the Wii. It was a huge part of my childhood. I have so many fond memories of coming home from school, and the first thing I wanted to do was to play tennis in *Wii Sports* or fly around an island in *Wii Sports Resort* or explore a galaxy in *Super Mario Galaxy*. I think about the experience of that console over any one game.

Lu: I loved diving deep into *The Elder Scrolls III:*

Noor Amin, SB'23

Kellie Lu, LAB'16, AB'20, AM'21

Make more things. Seriously.

—Eren Slifker, AB'24

Morrowind. That game was unafraid to be totally weird, with unreliable quest givers who would lie to you and naked axmen looking for humiliated revenge. It was deep enough to compare notes with my best friend and play alongside each other. Nowadays, I still enjoy playing single-player games sitting beside someone else.

When did you start to realize you could make a career in games?

Slifker: It came in stages. I remember designing a really weird, inside joke-y board game with a friend of mine in fifth grade. The desire has been there for as long as I can remember.

At UChicago it started solidifying for me that it was something I could turn into a career. In the summer of 2023, I got a Metcalf grant to hire other students as interns and create a game studio, where, over the course of 10 weeks, we all worked together and created a game that was released on Steam. Through that, I realized, maybe I can actually do this for real.

Amin: It was [William Rainey Harper Professor] **Patrick Jagoda**'s Critical Videogame Studies class, which I took in the first quarter of my first year of college. The hyperanalytical lens Patrick applies to creative thought, not just to games—it felt like he was speaking my language. I studied neuroscience, along with media arts and design, and the way he thinks through problems felt really native to me. It made me realize I could merge the creative side of me with the analytical side.

Lu: I also took Critical Videogame Studies. It was toward the end of my time in undergrad, and I hadn't found a career path that satisfied me. The premise of the class was to read video games like they were books. That was the first time I realized games could be taken seriously. The design exercises let me express my creativity, and I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the analysis.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

Amin: *League of Legends*, the game I work on, is played by a hundred million people. Being able to think through an audience that big and that diverse is exciting to me. There's an aspect of developing my own intuition about the audience and an aspect of looking at data to understand player behaviors. It's almost like looking at a large-scale human psychology experiment, and that's really rewarding, especially as someone with a neuroscience background.

Lu: Because my studio does educational games, I learn something new with every game. I also build different skills—one game might need 3D level design, another might need a Japanese role-playing game design skill set. The people I work with and the supportive environment have also helped me grow my skills in an environment that is open to mistakes.

What's something about working in games that tends to surprise people outside the industry?

Lu: At my studio, I do almost no coding or technical work.

I narrow uncertainty for people very often. There are many instances where I have to say, well, we can't have 20 choices, but we need more than 5—how's 15?

Also, since almost everyone has design opinions, part of my job as the primary or sole designer on each team is to manage people's opinions. It's a balance to cultivate good ideas and figure out which not to keep.

Amin: When I tell people I'm a designer, they think I, like, sit around and smoke a cigarette and say words in French, and then a game comes out of my brilliant artiste mind. That's really not it. It's very close to the scientific process—we have a hypothesis and then test it against our audience and then revisit the hypothesis.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to work in games?

Slifker: Make more things. Seriously. I think the biggest thing that led to me finding a place in this industry was just making stuff. And you have to not just start a million things but finish them as well. The act of going through the creative motions of starting and finishing something is such a big deal, because you learn not to be precious about it being perfect. You learn so much about your own creative proclivities, what you're good at, what you're not good at, and how you can structure things to facilitate your own ability to continue and finish projects. Putting in the reps and understanding yourself as a creative who is finishing stuff—I think that's the biggest thing. ■

OPPOSITE: IMAGE COURTESY RIOT GAMES; THIS PAGE: PHOTOS COURTESY NOOR AMIN, EREN SLIFKER, AND KELLIE LU

SEE WHAT GAMES THESE ALUMNI RECOMMEND FOR BEGINNERS at tableau.uchicago.edu/beginners.

ARTS & HUMANITIES DAY

In the fall, Humanities Day, a long-standing UChicago tradition, took on a new form. The first Arts & Humanities Day—copresented by the University of Chicago and Chicago Humanities—expanded the event into a citywide celebration of scholarship, art, and public conversation.

Across campus and beyond, the day brought together faculty, students, artists, and members of the public for a wide-ranging program of keynote dialogues, performances, screenings, exhibitions, and hands-on workshops. From conversations with leading writers and thinkers to experimental performances and interdisciplinary panels, Arts & Humanities Day showcased the many ways humanistic inquiry and creative practice intersect—and how they take shape in the world beyond the University.

The event also highlighted new collaborations across institutions and communities, inviting audiences to engage directly with the work of scholars and artists and to participate in ongoing conversations about culture, history, and contemporary life.

The program sparked lively discussions across Chicago and reaffirmed the role of the arts and humanities in fostering critical thought, creative expression, and public engagement. Keep the conversation going at the next Arts & Humanities Day on November 7, 2026.

Actor Nick Offerman (right) and woodworker Lee Buchanan interact with a young audience member in Rockefeller Memorial Chapel. Elsewhere, performances, screenings, and conversations brought a range of artistic and humanistic work into public view.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE INAUGURAL ARTS & HUMANITIES DAY at tableau.uchicago.edu/ahday.

Sally Mann

Steven Pinker

Christopher Eisgruber, JD'88

Roxane Gay

Players test strategies during a tabletop gaming session, one of many hands-on events that animated the Year of Games in the 2025–26 academic year.

UCHICAGO'S YEAR OF GAMES

The same weekend as Arts & Humanities Day, the Year of Games hosted its opening symposium at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts. The Year of Games is a celebration of play and creativity spearheaded by the University of Chicago Library. Throughout the 2025–26 academic year, game enthusiasts on campus have taken part in academic conferences related to game design and game preservation, *Minecraft* and mahjong tournaments, a weekend-long game jam for student game designers, a series of game- and sports-related films at Doc Films, a Special Collections exhibit about world-building, and much more.

The kickoff symposium opened with a conversation about the outsize role Chicago has played in game design, manufacturing, and playtesting. Over the next three days, game industry veterans, academics, and students delved into a range of topics related to how games are made, enjoyed, and preserved over time. A panel on sound design even included a live demonstration of Foley art, the practice of creating sound effects to enhance media in postproduction.

In lieu of a traditional keynote address, the keynote speakers—**Alex Seropian**, SB'91, a UChicago Alumni Award winner and designer of video games including *Halo*, and Evan Narcisse, a comic book writer, journalist, and game designer—were interviewed by journalist Simon Parkin in live recordings of the podcast *My Perfect Console*. On this podcast, big names in the game industry share their personal stories through the five games they would include on their perfect imaginary game machine.—*Chandler A. Calderon*

Two perfect consoles

Evan Narcisse's perfect console:

- *Yars' Revenge* (1982) "It's just, like, borderline hallucinogenic. … You really are entranced by the mode of interactivity."
- *Rez* (2001) "Really it's about, what does it do to your senses?"
- *Alan Wake* (2010) "What I love about this game is how it centers the creative act."
- *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag—Freedom Cry* (2014) "They speak Antillean Creole in this game, which is the Haitian Creole that I grew up hearing and speaking. And I never ever thought I would hear it in a video game."
- *Wu-Tang: Rise of the Deceiver* (forthcoming) "We're really trying to honor and pay homage to the kinds of places that hip-hop was born."

Alex Seropian's perfect console:

- *Tetris* (1984) "It's so simple, and it stimulates so much of the brain to play."
- *Minotaur: The Labyrinths of Crete* (1992) "It makes you feel smart if it works."
- *ICO* (2001) "It broadened my view of what this craft of video games could be."
- *Plants vs. Zombies* (2009) "It has the soul in spades, and it's also just an incredibly designed system."
- *Fortnite* (2017) "There's a whole community of not just players but player-creators. The game's being built by the people that are playing it." ■

FROM LEFT: LEFTMOST HEADSHOT AND CARVING DETAIL PHOTOS BY ELISABETH OSTER; OFFERMAN AND SPEAKER PHOTOS BY DAVID T. KINDLER / CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL; YEAR OF GAMES PHOTO BY NANCY WONG; NARCISSE PHOTO BY JASON SMITH; SEROPIAN PHOTO BY SARAH LARSON

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST EPISODE RECORDED **LIVE ON CAMPUS** at tableau.uchicago.edu/console.

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Berlin Family Lectures

The Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Family Lectures bring to campus individuals who are making fundamental contributions to the arts, humanities, and humanistic social sciences for an extended series of annual lectures and development of a book for publication with the University of Chicago Press. The 2026 Berlin Family Lecture speaker was the internationally acclaimed writer Yiyun Li, who is the author of 12 books that have been translated into more than 20 languages and a recipient of the PEN/Malamud Award, the Windham Campbell Prize in Fiction, and a MacArthur Fellowship. A professor of creative writing at Princeton University and a contributor to *The New Yorker*, Li is known for her psychologically nuanced fiction and essays that explore memory, solitude, and the emotional landscape of everyday life.

To view this year's lectures or past events, visit **berlinfamilylectures.uchicago.edu**.

ARTS & HUMANITIES DAY

Save the date: November 7, 2026

Last fall, the University of Chicago Division of the Arts & Humanities launched Arts & Humanities Day, a citywide celebration of creative practice and humanistic inquiry, in partnership with Chicago Humanities. The inaugural event brought together faculty, artists, students, and members of the public for a day of dynamic talks, performances, exhibitions, and conversations across campus.

The celebration returns November 7 with a new lineup of programs highlighting the many ways the arts and humanities shape how we understand culture, history, and contemporary life.

For program updates, visit **humanitiesday.uchicago.edu**.

Read more about the inaugural Arts & Humanities Day at **tableau.uchicago.edu/ahday**.