

“The Process of Doing a PhD Isn’t About the Outcome of the Research or Getting the Qualification – It’s About Developing Yourself”



Jade Pickering



Jade Pickering

Abstract In our interview with Jade Pickering, she shares her journey from studying impulsivity in Parkinson’s to heading the product team at an online experiment platform. Realising an academic position was not her lifelong passion; Jade explored alternative roles through networking. She values autonomy, trusting relationships, and promoting open science. Jade continues applying user experience (UX) knowledge, research skills, and analytical abilities honed during her PhD. Though sometimes still perfectionistic, she focuses on impact and productivity. Jade encourages getting involved in your field of interest and building an industry-focused network. Jade advises considering the PhD as a time to develop yourself.

Contents

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?.....	100
What was the focus of your PhD?.....	100
As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?.....	101
How have your career plans changed as you’ve continued on to your current position?.....	102
Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?.....	103
What do you like most about your work?.....	103
And what do you like least about your work?.....	105
How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?.....	105
If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?.....	106

J. Pickering (✉)
Head of Product (UX Lead), Gorilla Experiment Builder, Cauldron Science Ltd,
Manchester, UK

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?.....	106
A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?.....	107
Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?.....	108
Have you thought about returning to academia?.....	109
Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?.....	109
Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?.....	110

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Jade: I'm Jade and I'm currently Head of Product at Gorilla Experiment Builder (Cauldron Science Ltd). Gorilla is a platform for behavioural scientists to create surveys, reaction time tasks, gamified tasks, simulated shops, multiplayer social experiments, and more – all in the browser!

In reality my role is very fluid and I choose a lot of my own projects – we're a startup and so there's a lot of room for getting stuck into all aspects of the company! Ultimately my job involves talking to users (researchers both in and out of academia) and finding out where they get stuck with our platform. I then use those insights to make the platform easier for them to use.

I do a bit of work on our support desk (how many other support desks can say they're staffed entirely by behavioural scientists and engineers?). If a researcher is struggling to figure out how to make their vision happen on Gorilla, my colleagues and I will help them implement it. It's like collaborating on hundreds of different research projects, but much less stressful than doing it as an academic!

I also established our user experience (UX) research team. It's fun and exciting to use my research skills in a setting where I can create impact instantly. It's much more collaborative and fast paced than I was used to from academia, and I've learned a lot of new research methods.

I also do a variety of other things: data analysis, writing support documentation, and line management. I have my fingers in many pies at Gorilla, and I do whatever I feel needs doing. Every day is different!

What was the focus of your PhD?

I did my PhD in Psychology in the Division of Neuroscience and Experimental Psychology at the University of Manchester, starting in 2016 and finishing in 2020. My supervisors – Dr Ellen Poliakoff, Dr Jennifer McBride, and Dr Iracema

Leroi – were absolutely fantastic and really made me feel supported for the entire journey. I focused on impulsive behaviour and inhibitory control in people with Parkinson’s, particularly those who experienced “Impulse Control Behaviours” as a side effect of dopamine agonist medication. Impulsivity is such a broad and multi-faceted construct – I was breaking it down and looking at whether Parkinson’s itself or the dopamine agonists were affecting behaviour, or an interaction between the two.

The end goal was a mobile app where people with Parkinson’s could practise inhibitory motor control and see if any practice effects generalised to a reduction in their experiences of Impulse Control Behaviours. Covid-19 arrived near the end of the PhD, and so I didn’t quite get to do everything I’d wanted but that’s okay. My PhD in general was great and I’m grateful to have had such a positive experience.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

I knew I would only go so far on the academic journey. There was no appeal for me in reaching any seniority beyond a postdoc or having the responsibility of starting and growing a lab group, applying for funding, teaching, or working within the current academic incentive system.

Importantly, I also struggled to find a line of enquiry to stick to in my research. I’m too interested in multiple topics to focus and drill down into a select few topics – I’m happier taking a step back and being more involved in the technical aspects of research such as planning, designing, coding, running experiments, and analysing the data.

I had a great first postdoc experience; there was a small bit of funding available at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic that came at a perfect time for me. I had a lot of fun working with my PI (Dr Aidan Horner, University of York) on a Registered Report looking at transfer effects in episodic memory retrieval and I’m proud of the work we managed to complete. I’m sure Aidan thought I was mad for trying to do a Registered Report in such a short space of time (4–5 months, I think!) but he trusted me to pull it off. I enjoyed the environment – the lab group was just so comfortable to be a part of.

When the funding ended, I moved on to a second postdoc but that’s when I started getting tired. Academia and research didn’t feel so fun anymore, and I wanted to do something that aligned my interests more closely with my skills. I wanted to spend more of my days doing work that I was good at and which I enjoyed. I wanted to be in the kind of environment I’d experienced before where I felt I was contributing value. So I ended up transitioning onto a new path earlier than I’d originally planned to.

I was keeping a casual eye on jobs as a psychology technician, in UX research, data analysis, etc. and keeping an open mind. When a job came up at Gorilla (I was

originally a Customer Success and Support Officer), I went for it. It seemed perfect! I'd used Gorilla in my own research, I believed in what they were trying to achieve, and (importantly for me!) I knew they aligned on my ongoing mission to make science open and reproducible. I jumped, and they hired me! It's been just over a year and a half and I can't imagine being anywhere else now.

How have your career plans changed as you've continued on to your current position?

They haven't changed much, really. I think it's more the case that I've solidified my plans in my head because I'm finally doing the work that I'd first read about before I even started my undergraduate degree. About 12 years ago, I first came across the role "User Experience Researcher" when looking at career options at games studios, thought it sounded really cool, and in this context, it blended two of my biggest interests: psychology and video games. The ability to shape a product through research so that it was based on the needs of the end users was a new concept to me at the time. I discovered that the role of UX research exists in many companies and many products, both physical and digital, and I never lost my interest in it.

I was definitely focusing on the idea of being a UX researcher in a games company for a long time during my degrees, but I decided against it because I didn't want to get spoilers for games while working on them! I slowly started to drift away from the idea of working in a games studio, and during my PhD, I started seeing parallels between the work I was already doing and the work I wanted to do. Part of my work with people with Parkinson's focused heavily on Patient and Public Involvement – I involved people with Parkinson's at every stage of my research, from shaping research questions to deciding methodology, to piloting my experiments, to the analysis, and to lay summaries. I was already shaping what I did to the needs of the end users and knew that I enjoyed that aspect of my work.

Funnily enough, my role at Gorilla didn't involve UX research originally, and there was no established UX research pipeline for product development. I mentioned my interest in UX research on my job application though and my now bosses had spotted it and, I think, saw potential for me to initiate this work at Gorilla. I wasn't hired as a UX researcher though – as we're a small start-up with flexibility in our work week, I used my initiative and started training myself up. Little by little I've established the UX team and incorporated new research methodology into the development of Gorilla. I'm really proud of that! It was something they had wanted to do for a while, and it was a great feeling to join the company and get it kick started. Now that I do UX research as part of my job, but with flexibility for being involved in lots of things in the company – I'm living my dream! My problem in academia was that I couldn't stick to one thing. Here I get to do the thing I've always wanted (UX research) *plus* a little bit of everything else!

So my plans haven't changed, I've just become extra committed to the work I love!

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

I work from home, so I control my schedule. I’m an early riser so I often start work at about 7am and deal with any emails or anything that needs my attention first over my morning cup of tea! Sometimes there will be a support ticket that I need to reply to, or a really important string of cat gifs or something in our general company chat that I need to catch up on. Then, with those tasks out of my headspace and while things are quiet, I’ll get stuck into a project. My projects can vary but I usually have some of the following types of projects on the go: writing/editing support documentation, designing a new feature or tool, some data to analyse in R, some research planning or synthesis, training, etc. We tend to have a few meetings in the mornings, especially in the first half of the week so that we get dedicated project time later in the week, but I always make time for a break away from my PC around mid-morning.

At 11am, we have the daily team stand-up which is a chance to all be on a call together, see each other’s faces, have a chat, go over our current plans and goals, ask questions about anything we’re stuck on, etc. It’s really lovely to have this when you work remotely. We’re a close team, and it’s nice to just have the dedicated time to spend together each day. After that I’ll usually do a couple of smaller bits of work – by this time there’s usually team chatter that requires my attention (help with support tickets, getting each other unstuck with tasks, some new emails). After lunch, and sometimes an extended break if I fancy it because I start so early, I’ll then get stuck into another big piece of work. For example, currently my big piece of work is to go over all of our newest tooling (Questionnaire Builder 2, Task Builder 2) and turn the functionality from just powerful, to powerful *and* easier to use. So I’m looking at interview data, performing heuristic evaluations, and wireframing new designs to improve usability. Next I’ll spend more time talking to users about the changes and making further improvements based on that.

I finish my day when I feel I’m soon to lose concentration. I don’t really pay attention to the time or the hours – I’ve learned to listen to my body and make use of productive time (like starting early in the morning!) and to quit while I’m ahead. I find mid-afternoon is when I start to slow down, so I’ll usually finish the day wrapping up small tasks and writing down what I need to do the next day. I usually choose what I do when, and there’s a lot of flexibility to structure my day around what works best for me.

What do you like most about your work?

Pretty much everything! The overall goal is to make Gorilla the best it can be, and so I use my initiative to get that job done. It means I have a lot of flexibility and space to try out ideas that I think would work well towards that goal. Our brilliant

CEO Jo Evershed and CTO Nick Hodges put a lot of trust in me to see that through, and early on in my time working for Gorilla, they instilled the idea in me to “ask for forgiveness, not permission” and to just do what I think is best. I ran wild with that trust and ultimately it’s given me the space to really drive things forward. In academia I learned to be an independent researcher, and here they trust my independence to use my time wisely and to have the autonomy to dictate my own time and projects. I’ll check in with them on my ideas and I know they’ll tell me if I’m ever on the wrong track, but so far this has meant that I spend a lot of time with so much freedom. It feels great to have a shared vision with the team and always be working towards that goal in the best way we see fit. It’s awesome to feel valued and trusted.

I like working in the support team. One of the really unique things at Gorilla that we’re very proud of is our specialised support desk – most of the company is involved in the support desk in one way or another. Other software like ours have forums and community support – which is great – but often you can be waiting a while for a reply or it relies on a few external champions of that software giving up their free time to provide answers. While we do have community support, we also provide an avenue for researchers to get access to direct support from experts in behavioural science who know Gorilla like the back of their hand. The support team at Gorilla are a mix of psychology graduates, PhDs, ex-academics, and engineers. I love being part of that team! We get all sorts of requests from basic technical queries to advanced methodological queries, and the questions come from students all the way up to professors. All of us on the support desk love getting to put our education and experience into practice and solving our users’ issues within a matter of hours. We get overwhelmingly positive feedback about the level and speed of support we offer – and every week we review the praise we’ve gotten at a team meeting. We help so many people move their research forward, and it feels really good to do it and to hear from researchers how much we’ve helped. I get to be involved in research and I really believe in the value that we bring to universities all over the globe through the support desk.

I’m always using the knowledge I gained from my decade spent on my psychology degrees and working in academia. One of the biggest things I first became passionate about during the first year of my undergraduate degree was the issue of open science. A lot of my PhD time was spent working on issues and projects related to replicability, reproducibility, and transparency. I am extraordinarily lucky to now work in a company that values open science, and so I get to continue championing open science even now but from a different perspective! In academia, I was focused on improving the research landscape through methodology such as pre-registration and evidence synthesis and structurally in institutions in terms of thinking about incentives. While these things are still extremely important to me, I also now get to incorporate my passion for open science from an infrastructure perspective – making sure that Gorilla becomes a central part of supporting open science.

And what do you like least about your work?

There’s very little that I don’t like. I get to dictate what my job involves – we review our work and we make sure to keep a good balance of work that ranges from easy to difficult with most of the workload being in the middle category of “good use of my skills” so that we’re challenged in a way that feels satisfying. If we don’t enjoy something, we hand it over to someone that does. If we do enjoy something, we keep those tasks. In between those reviews, we work as a team so that the best person for the job is usually the one doing it anyway.

I do spend a lot more time in meetings than I used to as a postdoc, which can sometimes feel a bit frustrating when I want to sink my teeth into some “proper” work, but even that process we’ve worked to change and improve as a company. We’ve changed our working pattern so that we now have shorter meetings for concise check-ins and bigger meetings for collaborative working on projects. Basically, less time is spent talking about doing things and more time actually doing things! It’s what I love the most about this environment – we’re all working together towards the same goal which is to make Gorilla the best it can be, and so we’re all aligned on making our work life focused on that goal.

Sometimes it can be frustrating if a project doesn’t go according to plan, or takes longer than envisioned. But I think this is true of any project anywhere. One thing I’ve found difficult to let go of is my idea of perfection. In a business, it doesn’t make sense to do everything to perfection because you’re just wasting company time. Spending 80% of my time on the last 20% of a project isn’t the way to go! But I’m learning to let go, slowly but surely, so that I concentrate on productivity with impact rather than getting bogged down in the unnecessary finishing touches.

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

The process of doing a PhD isn’t about the outcome of the research or getting the qualification, it’s about developing yourself. The journey to being an independent researcher has taught me so much. I don’t think much of my PhD research per se is what made me the person I am today, it’s all the stuff that went on around it: the relationships I built, the Patient and Public Involvement work, championing the open science agenda, the networks and organisations (such as academic/open science Twitter, ReproducibiliTea, the UK Reproducibility Network, the Centre for Open Science, and the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science), and much more.

Working with people with Parkinson’s was also so rewarding because it broadened my understanding of science and constantly reminded me that science is for the public and not for me. There are real stakeholders in my work, and they are the people I need to be constantly thinking about and working for. In UX research, we

have a concept called a persona, which is a description of an imaginary user that is supposed to represent your user-base or a subset of your user base that you're building a product or feature for. Without realising it, I was creating personas in my head during my PhD. I was working for people with Parkinson's and always making sure my experiments were suitable for an imaginary person with Parkinson's. So I was already starting to implement some of the principles of UX work in my everyday research.

Through my dedication to improving psychological research and science as a whole, I learned the skill to advocate for what I believe in. As a PhD researcher, I learned to be independent and to take the initiative to get things done. I learned management skills when supervising project students. I learned to listen when I worked with my Patient and Public Involvement team. I learned how to learn and figured out the best way to develop new skills to develop myself even further.

There's no end to the things I learned during my PhD that I now put into practice every single day.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

Get involved in the field now and find out – don't wait. There are plenty of free online webinars, conferences, blogs, vlogs, Facebook groups, LinkedIn networking opportunities, etc. There are also organisations such as ADPList where you can access free mentors in your chosen field. These fields mostly operate on LinkedIn so make sure you have a presence there and read the resources posted by the people that are already working in that field. Do you enjoy reading them, and do you like the vibe? Then it might be a good fit!

Facebook groups are particularly good if you belong to a historically underserved group, e.g. there are UX groups specifically for women generally, Black women, caregivers, neurodivergent researchers, etc. You'll know if this position is something you want to do once you start to consume the information and get a sense of what the day to day involves and how that might fit into the way you live your life – or the way you *want* to live your life.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

Just like in academia, there's a hidden curriculum. I still don't know how much I don't yet know, but there are a few things I've picked up. The first is that the way you market yourself is *really* important – you need to forget about all the metrics

that mattered in academia and start thinking in terms of transferable skills and your value. Look at your CV/resume and scrap the grants, the published papers, the modules you taught, and the conferences you went to – none of it matters for these types of job applications. Those in charge of hiring care that you’re independent, skilled, and can easily adapt to new environments and learn new skills. They want to know what you can do and what impact you’ve had – or could have – on the world around you. It’s really hard writing a non-academic CV after spending so long with the academic mindset, but a mentor can really help you here.

LinkedIn is really important – get a presence and start networking with people with similar job titles to the one that you want, particularly in fields that you’re interested in. Make sure that you add a message to say why you’d like to connect. Start absorbing the content that others provide and start tweaking your profile for the job you want and not the job you currently have.

Many jobs in UX research and design, especially in the larger companies, are influenced by internal referrals. Network at an organisation you want to join, find someone who already works in the department, and message them (yes, out of the blue!) to tell them briefly about yourself and ask if they do referrals and whether they would be willing to refer you. People are often happy to do this because if you’re hired they might get a bonus for bringing in good talent! It really depends on the organisation. Your application would likely be given more weight if you go this route.

For a lot of these jobs, you’ll need a portfolio of your previous work, and your PhD research does count. There’s loads of advice online about how to create them, but the most specific thing you’d need to learn is how to market your academic work. Focus on general methods (i.e. the skills) plus outcomes, insights, and impacts.

Finally, learn the lingo and gain new skills. Learn to talk in their terms, rather than the terms you’re used to. For example, a between-subjects study with participants randomised to two different groups is the equivalent of an A/B test in UX research. There are plenty of online courses in UX design and research and loads of YouTube tutorials. You can familiarise yourself with the industry standard software this way too.

There are loads of resources out there!

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Definitely! I work for a company who are experts in behavioural research methods so I’m already working really closely on a topic I care about. But the actual day-to-day work I do could equally be done in many other different companies. Essentially, finding the right fit is about looking at two aspects: (1) What are you passionate

about? and (2) Which of your skills do you enjoy using? Once you have those answers, you find the jobs at the intersection of those two things. For example, (1) I really care about animals. (2) I also like looking at and analysing data to answer research questions. Therefore, I could seek jobs in animal-related non-profits as a data analyst or researcher.

You're less likely to go into as much depth as you might in an academic research topic, but you'll definitely cover some breadth! I find that more rewarding, actually. I now do fast-paced projects that deliver something actionable, and it enables me to create change, which is something I never felt I could really achieve in academia. Right now in my current job we're a significant way in to a project that started 3 months ago and will result in a brand-new tool for our platform. We've done the initial user research, the UI and UX design work, and we're now in the final iterative prototyping stage and handing off to the development team ready for release in 3 more months.

I love seeing the outcomes of my work and knowing that I'll see real-world changes sooner rather than later. It's a huge bonus for me that it's all in the name of helping to improve science which is one of the things I care most about in this world.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

I used to feel like that! I thought academia would give me all the freedom I needed to pursue what I was really interested in, and I thought that in industry I'd just be a meaningless cog in a business that only cared about profit. I was wrong! Academia left me feeling like I had very little time to do the things I wanted to do, and it was hard to find those moments where what I was doing felt valuable. I could work on the same project for a long time and never feel like I was having any impact or contributing to the world.

Instead I've found a company that aligns with my goals and values with much easier access to budget to pursue my aims because they align with the company aims. I now have a lot more freedom than I had in academia. In academia there are so many extra things you have to do all the time even if you just want to do research – applying for grants, an ever-increasing amount of admin, teaching classes, supervising students, being on various committees, and preparing yourself to be assessed on various outdated metrics. I very rarely see research academics with *time* to do the things they enjoy. Research projects seem to end up being pushed forwards by their students while they compete for grants that they, sadly, struggle to get.

I have none of these concerns anymore. My time is precious, both to me and the business – so we're all invested in making the most of it. If I'm wasting my time on things that don't push my projects forward, then that's bad for me and bad for the

company. If I’m dragging my heels on a project that I am struggling to maintain an interest in, then that’s bad too – so someone better suited will take on the work instead. I’ll then take on things I enjoy that other people are struggling with. It’s a much better system. I can propose projects and have the project start within a day if it’s a good idea.

As I said, it has to be within the best interests of the company, but because the goals of the company aligns with my own beliefs and passions, this isn’t difficult to achieve! I can’t spend my work time doing unrelated projects, but because I have the freedom to work flexibly, I can still keep one foot (perhaps just a couple of toes) in the academic world and be involved with initiatives that I’m passionate about like the projects that arise from the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science conference and other collaborative work. I ring-fence my work time and use some spare time for the other things I’m interested in.

Have you thought about returning to academia?

Yes, I’ve thought about it but I decided against it. I really enjoyed my PhD and some of my postdoc life and I wouldn’t trade those experiences, but that’s where my journey on the academic pathway ends. I enjoyed so many aspects of being an early career researcher, but I don’t want to be an academic going forward. I would only enjoy some aspects of the job, probably the minority of the job the longer I worked as an academic, and I want to enjoy all of my job or as much of it as I can. Being in academia was the right place for me at the time, but not forever. No one knows what the future holds, but as things stand, I wouldn’t go down that career pathway again. I’ll go or stay where my enjoyment of life takes me!

Having said that, talking of “returning” sounds as though I’ve left and closed the door. I haven’t – I’m still involved in communities and projects and I give as little or as much as I like to them. If I did want to return to an academic career in the future, there is very little stopping me.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who’s currently finishing their PhD?

Even though it might not feel like it right now, the thesis isn’t the end product of your PhD – *you are*. Don’t lose sight of developing yourself while you work to bring together the last few years of your research. Your research may not have been perfect – in fact, I’d wager it wasn’t perfect at all – but that’s okay because you don’t need to be perfect. You just need to have learned and to have gained faith in your

skills and to believe in what you can achieve. If you're finishing your PhD right now, you've already won.

The thesis and the viva (or defence, depending on which country you're from!) is a milestone you need to reach before you can finish, of course, but you have already got the value from your PhD. You are already valuable.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

When you're doing a PhD, it can be really easy to feel that you don't have any special skills because everyone around you is also ridiculously talented and super smart. But the real world is much more varied than the academic world, and your skills are actually quite rare – most of the population don't have what you have or think the way you do. We normalise the level of talent that we have until we no longer believe we're exceptional. But people with PhDs have a lot of value on the job market – we've proven that we can do a huge and solid piece of work independently, and there are so many skills that come alongside it, for example technical, methodical, interpersonal, and thinking skills.

Thank you for sharing your advice with us, Jade!