

CURATING THE ARCADE: STRATEGIES FOR THE EXHIBITION OF VIDEOGAMES

SOFIA ROMUALDO

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER, UNITED KINGDOM

Abstract

Videogames can be found in a diversity of museums as tools for engagement, mediation, and interpretation, but their relatively recent inclusion as collection objects in institutions such as the moma and the v&a raises tensions between the medium and the exhibition spaces. This paper aims to present an overview of the strategies employed in the exhibition of videogames, and to suggest curatorial methodologies that can be adapted in order to effectively introduce videogames into spaces dedicated to the exhibition of art. Curators are currently at a stage of experimentation in the field of videogames in museums, a time of both challenges and opportunities to study, develop and test new practices. More than providing a comprehensive guide to the history of videogames exhibitions, the intention of this paper is to devise suggestions for curatorial strategies and models for consideration and testing, and future work will determine their potential advantages and disadvantages.

Keywords: Videogames; exhibition; museum; art history; curatorial

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, videogames have entered the world of museums and other cultural institutions in force. We see them as interpretation and digital engagement tools for visitors of the Science Museum in London, as examples of design in the Department of Design and Architecture of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as collectable works made on a thematic thread such as the ones in the collection of the Museum of London, and as the subject of major exhibitions, such as the September 2018 videogames exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, to name a few examples. While games have been recognised as valuable cultural artefacts for millennia, videogames, a more recent iteration of playfulness constrained by rules, have steadily increased in cultural, economic, technological and artistic importance in the last decades. However, despite this growing awareness and recognition of the importance of videogames, these artefacts still have an uneasy relationship to the art world. To some, especially within the commercial industry of videogames, this matter may be of little to no consequence; it might be said that videogames do not need to be considered art in order to be respected, and do not need institutional legitimisation in order to thrive. Their status at the crossroads of entertainment, popular culture and fine art has so far been developed

largely outside the legitimisation processes afforded to other forms of contemporary art. Moreover, with most games now distributed digitally, and available for acquiring, downloading and playing at home, in consoles or mobile phones, why should we bother exhibiting them in museums and other cultural institutions, spaces which are not traditionally associated with gaming?

The intention here is not to argue the definition of art, or of videogames as art, but their incorporation into cultural institutions on the same level as other media. While it can indeed be argued that videogames do not need to be legitimised by the art world, it can also be argued that there is potential benefit from that process. The unfair reputation for 'mindless entertainment', or worse,¹ that has been associated with popular videogames in the past has largely been dispelled with the increasing sophistication of the medium, which has resulted in works of considerable authorial, thematic, political and social importance.² Videogame culture now has well-developed cultural and critical environments, with several channels of commentary, criticism, and study, including, but not limited to, print and online magazines, academic courses, journals and conferences, diverse amateur and professional YouTube and Twitch channels, eSports events, industry organisations, and awards bodies. Moreover, there are now established events, collectives

and institutions that celebrate and showcase videogames, including festivals such as Indiecade or the London Games Festival, dedicated galleries such as Babycastles in New York, and variety events such as Wild Rumpus in London. According to theorist Bruce Altshuler, exhibitions, especially temporary exhibitions, are one of the main routes into the history of art (Altshuler, 2008), a field from which videogames have long been excluded. Museums offer a specific context and space for people who want to encounter art, and their exhibitions, events, collections, research and publications provide a context for objects to develop meanings "above and beyond any significance they may already possess, whether as cultural artefacts or artworks" (Dziekan, 2012). The incorporation of videogames into the collections and exhibitions of established cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and their subsequent presentation as part of larger cultural, conceptual and artistic contexts alongside works of art in more traditional media, can not only enhance the criticism and interpretation around videogames, which can then feed back into their practice and development, but may also enrich the contexts around other artworks and media. When exhibiting videogames, cultural institutions can decide whether to present them with curatorial strategies that stay true to their original contexts, or, on the other hand,

decontextualize them, playing up the tensions between the popular culture nature of games and the 'white cube' background of institutions. Both strategies can be productive, while presenting potential downfalls.

This exploratory paper aims to present an overview of the strategies employed in exhibiting videogames in cultural institutions such as museums, in order to identify a set of curatorial models and methodologies that can be adapted by curators in order to effectively introduce videogames into the art world. There is a gap in curatorial knowledge when it comes to videogames: at the moment, we still do not have established methodologies for the collection, archive, preservation, and exhibition of videogames in museums. We are currently at a stage of experimentation, a time of both challenges and opportunities, so now is the time to study, develop and test new practices. Methodologies for the collection, preservation and archive of videogames, while tangentially mentioned, will not be discussed at length in this paper, as they bring their own unique and considerable challenges.³ Suffice to say that another advantage of bringing videogames into museums is the fact that they can then become part of their collections, and hence more attention is paid to the preservation and protection of those games and any associated artefacts (Grace, 2017). Instead, this paper will focus on exhibition

and curatorial strategies. We will begin by analysing the various forms in which videogames have found their way into museums, as technologies for digital engagement and tools for interpretation, as design artefacts, and finally, as examples of new media art. We will then look at a historical overview of exhibitions of videogames in museums, drawing from those case studies strategies and patterns that can be critically considered and built upon to create new typologies for the exhibition of videogames. The intention is not to create a thoroughly comprehensive guide to the history and current state of videogames exhibitions; instead, the preliminary suggestions for curatorial strategies and models will be put forth for consideration and testing, and future work will determine their potential advantages and disadvantages.

VIDEOGAMES IN MUSEUMS: TECHNOLOGY, DESIGN, ART

Games, and more recently videogames, have long been present in different museums as engagement, mediation, and interpretation tools. The increasing popularity and ubiquity of videogames, namely with their introduction to mobile phones and tablets, means that they have become an important resource in creating compelling educational and digital engagement tools for museums, which themselves have followed a trend to become more participatory and interactive (Simon, 2010). Institutions such

as the Science Museum and the Tate in London have created various videogames based on exhibition themes and collection objects.⁴ Besides making them available online in the museum's website, some of these institutions, of which the Science Museum is a prime example, also incorporate videogames into their physical gallery spaces, effectively creating gameful exhibits that playfully illustrate the concepts on show and immerse the audience in them. Besides creating their own videogames, cultural institutions can also adopt existing commercial videogames in order to generate interest and engagement, particularly from the younger members of their communities. An example of a popular videogame that has become a regular presence in museums is *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), a sandbox game with a creative mode which allows players to build their own creations inside the game world. *Minecraft's* flexibility has allowed it to be used in a myriad of projects by various museums. For example, in the project *Tate Worlds*,⁵ Tate commissioned Blockworks, an international team of *Minecraft* builders, to create virtual environments inspired by artworks from the museum's collection, which could then be downloaded and visited by the online community. The Museum of London commissioned the same team to recreate the 1666 Great Fire of London inside the game.⁶ Other institutions crowdsource to their communities the creation of virtual

constructions inspired by artworks or events, taking advantage of games' potential to turn players into content creators, who contribute with new game assets. This was the case of the Minecraft Infinity Project developed by the Liverpool Biennial, in which players collaborated in the creation of a digital sculpture that incorporated artworks on show at the 2016 event.⁷ These activities, which involve players engaging with games in a productive and creative way, rather than just playing them, have the added advantage of developing gaming literacy, which can be considered of growing importance for twenty-first century audiences, for whom videogames are a significant source of entertainment and learning.

The use of videogames as engagement tools in established museums such as the ones mentioned is useful for the normalisation of their presence within those institutions; however, it does not contribute to the incorporation of videogames into the art world in the same way as the acts of collecting, archiving and exhibiting do. In order to study this, we need to turn to institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, one of the first major cultural institutions to acquire videogames for their permanent collection. It should be noted, however, that these videogames – which include, among many others, *Pong* (Atari, 1972), *Eve Online* (CCP Games, 2003), *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004), *Portal*

(Valve Corporation, 2007) and *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2008) – were acquired by the Department of Architecture and Design as artefacts to showcase design elements, and not as works of art. While this acquisition was a ground-breaking moment for the medium's potential legitimisation within cultural institutions, it highlighted the 'ghettoization' that new media is often subjected to. It was made more confusing considering that the same institution had acquired, a few years prior, the work *Long March: Restart* (2008), a side-scrolling videogame created by artist Feng Mengbo, to the Department of Media and Performance.⁸ We can speculate that the choice of department collections into which the videogames get incorporated at MoMA depends on whether their creators identify themselves as game developers or media artists. The focus on videogames as design and technology artefacts seems to also be at the forefront of the upcoming exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, together with an exploration of the political and social contexts they depict, according to the museum's director, Tristram Hunt (Sawer, 2017). Even though Hunt mentions that they are "very happy to have [videogames] in the same building as Donatello, Botticelli, Constable and Turner" (ibid.), the discourse around the exhibition has, so far, not deviated from the ghettoization of videogames as objects of design, not art. Nevertheless, for curators, whose work includes the

selection and positioning of artworks relative to each other, "proximity has meaning" (Grace, 2017). Moreover, the work that the V&A has been developing around videogames, including several V&A Friday Late events which have seen location-based games, installations, arcades and other game-related activities 'invade' the galleries of the museum, and Parallel Worlds, a conference, now in its second year, dedicated to the study, design and culture of videogames, as well as the hiring of dedicated curators of videogames by the institution, signals a deeper commitment to the medium than most major international museums have showcased so far. One last example of a major museum that has acquired videogames for its collection is the Museum of London. In this case, more than a focus on the design or technology, the aim is to collect artefacts that represent the city from diverse perspectives, both as a background for the game's narrative or as examples of work developed in London.⁹

Besides their acquisition by major museums due to their importance as design or thematic objects, videogames have also been collected and exhibited by cultural institutions dedicated to new media or digital art, such as the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, and they are also the subject of dedicated cultural institutions, such as the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin and the National Videogame Arcade in

Nottingham. This follows the case of other relatively recent media in art history, such as photography or new media art (Graham & Cook, 2010). It is possible to argue that museums specifically built for videogames, such as these, may be the best places for exhibiting them, since by their very nature they are more experimental and are able to create environments ideally suited to the medium. At the same time, however, they contribute to the continued marginalisation of the medium.

All in all, specialized institutions, including science and media museums, which are traditionally more at ease with concepts such as audience interactivity, and museums dedicated to one medium, may be more adapted to receive and exhibit videogames than more traditional white cube art museums (Graham & Cook, 2010). However, the inclusion of videogames in these, and not just as design objects, is of importance to the aforementioned legitimization of games as part of culture and art history. Perhaps more traditional museums can look to specialized institutions to develop new ways of production and curatorial strategies that can be adopted to productively incorporate videogames into white cube spaces, as was largely the case with other media, such as new media art.

Despite their differences, it is possible to identify parallels between the challenges facing curators of videogames

exhibitions and curators of new media art. New media – itself a problematic concept, the definition of which goes beyond the scope of this paper – presents curators with several characteristics that deviate from the ones found in more traditional art forms. These characteristics include increased audience interactivity, heavy reliance on technologies prone to malfunctions or which mystify less technologically-savvy members of the audience, leading to the necessity of spending more time educating the audience, as well as extended time and space requirements for the experience itself.¹⁰ Therefore, by looking at examples of curatorial work developed around new media art, we can extrapolate lessons that can be applied to the exhibition of videogames.

To a certain degree, artworks from all media cannot exist without the audience's participation, but videogames take this to the next level by depending on hands-on, player interactions to become fully realised. This runs counter to the attitude of not touching the art which is traditionally encouraged by museums. At the same time, the performative qualities of gameplay mean that, at the same time that a player is activating the game, the rest of the audience can become spectators and use the performance as a learning experience. They also offer experiences which are typically extended in time, and their physical characteristics mean that they

require controlled lighting conditions and gallery attendants trained to deal with the associated technology. When developing an exhibition, the aim for curators is not simply to tell a coherent story based on the objects on view, but also to create a temporary world where that story is told to the audience with as much efficiency as possible: "the goal is to incite a *process* of thought and discussion, of action and reaction. We want [the audience] to feel free to explore the world that we have built, to think and talk about the possibilities of the world, to talk about it with their co-visitors" (Boykett, 2006). The attention paid to the physical side of the galleries for exhibition means that the process also bears relation to theatre and the creation of performance spaces, in which the audience engages in an unguided but still structured journey. The costs for creating these exhibitions may be higher than when exhibiting more traditional forms of art, as they incur "costs for electricity and computing equipment, the technical specialties needed in the setup and teardown of such work, as well as any needed security" (Grace, 2017). Moreover, new media art, like videogames, "has shifted the focus from object to process: as an inherently time-based, dynamic, interactive, collaborative, customizable, and variable art form, new media art resists "objectification" and challenges traditional notions of the art object" (Paul, 2008). This resistance to "objectification" and emphasis

on process opens up interesting considerations as to what exactly is being exhibited, collected and preserved when introducing videogames into museums. According to authors who study new media art, this emphasis calls for curators to “rethink the practice of exhibiting static, unchanging aesthetic objects in favor of presenting dynamic, durational, changing projects” (Cook, 2008).

In the next section, we will investigate how some of these challenges have been addressed by curators of videogames, and we will then discuss possible strategies for adopting curatorial work to this medium.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF VIDEOGAMES EXHIBITIONS

What follows is a short historical overview of videogame exhibitions in a museum or gallery context. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but exemplificative, so as to draw observations about the variety and significance of curatorial strategies employed.¹¹ Similar to the diversity of approaches that it is possible to find in other media, these exhibitions were created with different goals in mind. However, the goal of presenting broad historical narratives of the medium seems to be the most common. Others had the aim of exploring topics concerning the design and technologies of videogames, while a few were dedicated to indie developers or so-called

artgames. The recent *The Game Worlds of Jason Rohrer* (2016) at The Davis Museum in Wellesley College remains one of the few attempts at a monographic show dedicated to a single author's works.

Held in 1983 at the now closed Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., *ARTcade* is perhaps the earliest example of an exhibition with videogames, in the form of arcade machines, being held at a cultural institution solely dedicated to art, as part of a fundraising event (Reed, 2017). Following the theme of exhibiting arcade games, *Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade* (1989), at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, was an exhibition which marked not just “the first museum retrospective of the video arcade game” (Slovin, 2009), but also a change in the museum's philosophy regarding the scope of its collection, which was dedicated to “the art, history, technique, and technology of motion pictures and television” (ibid.) and from then on expanded to include interactive technologies. According to the museum's founding director, Rochelle Slovin, this decision was made in an attempt to identify and make visible links between old and new media under the moniker of ‘moving image’, through the inclusion of “games that had somehow stood apart from the mass – because they had broken new ground in graphic design, introduced a new type of gameplay, or perhaps been unpredictably

popular” (ibid.). It included a selection of playable arcade machines, with classic games such as *Asteroids*, *Frogger*, *Space Invaders*, *Donkey Kong*, and *Ms. Pac-Man*, which visitors could play with tokens, presented lined up against the wall in a space reminiscent of commercial videogame arcades. The placement and spacing of the cabinets allowed visitors a good view of the artwork in the machine. Therefore, the focus was not just the videogames, but also their supporting technologies, the physical and social context in which they could be found, and the gameplay experience they afforded. The show subsequently travelled to several locations around the United States, and would sometimes lose the delicate balance between arcade and exhibition, tipping towards becoming more arcade-like, which led to visitors behaving less like they would in an exhibition and more like they would in an arcade, “sticking gum on the underside of the cabinets or causing damage to decals” (ibid). Nevertheless, the trend of employing immersive curatorial strategies reminiscent of and inspired by the contexts in which videogames can be found, creating just enough decontextualization in order to allow visitors to appreciate the works on view on their own terms, can be traced to today, and forms the basis of one of the curatorial typologies to be explored later in this paper.

A good example of a specialised cultural institution, the Museum of the Moving

Image has continued organising videogame exhibitions throughout the years, including *Computer Space: A Digital Game Arcade* (1995), *Digital Play* (2004), *Spacewar! Video Games Blast Off* (2012), which traced the influence of *Spacewar!*, one of the first digital videogames, throughout the history of the medium, and *Indie Essentials: 25 Must-Play Video Games* (2014), organised in partnership with the IndieCade Festival of indie games, which takes place at the museum every year, and most recently, *Arcade Classics: Video Games from the Collection* (2016), which revisits the curatorial and thematic aims behind *Hot Circuits*.

Located in the Spanish city of Gijón, the LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial is a specialised cultural institution dedicated to information and communication technologies and their significance in cultural production. LABoral has emerged as an important landmark for videogames by creating three back-to-back exhibitions dedicated to the medium. The first, *GameWorld* (2007), was curated by Carl Goodman of the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, closely followed by *Playware* (2007), co-curated by Goodman and Gerfried Stocker, the Artistic Director of Ars Electronica, and *Homo Ludens Ludens* (2008), which was accompanied by an international conference on play.¹² All three exhibitions featured Game Art alongside videogames, exhibited in boldly designed display cases formally

reminiscent of game technologies, in an effort to interrogate the historical influence of games and playfulness in culture. Keeping with the aim of the host institution, the focus was on videogames as technology-driven cultural creations, and not necessarily as a contemporary contribution to art history.

In contrast to these cultural institutions dedicated to technology, the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, is home to a collection of art focused on more traditional media, such as oil paintings and watercolours, though it regularly hosts temporary exhibitions of eclectic historic, modern and contemporary art. In 1996, it was the first home to *Serious Games*, an exhibition "exploring the manifestations of games and software in a contemporary high art context" (Reed, 2017), which travelled to the Barbican Art Gallery in London the following year. Curated by Beryl Graham, the intent of the show was to focus on the content of the works and the types of interaction they afforded, rather than on the technology (Graham, 2008). By doing so, and aided by the institutional context in which they were presented, the works in the exhibition were able to establish dialogues with playful precursors in the history of art, such as Fluxus and Performance Art. Graham noted the architectural differences between the two venues and the influence they had in strategies regarding light, sound, and temperature control, bringing to the fore

the myriad technological concerns often associated with exhibiting these types of works (ibid, p. 195). While the scenography had to be controlled so that the works could be presented properly, the curator stressed the conscious choice to avoid modelling the exhibition space too closely to that of electronic festivals or tech labs, by creating a balance between darkened rooms and art gallery aesthetics (ibid.). We can also identify here a concern regarding the pacing of the exhibition and the timings that each visitor is expected to dedicate to each work. By their nature, videogames and other interactive digital works require more time and deeper participation from visitors, which can "tire visitors or make them anxious that they will not have enough time to experience every artwork" (ibid.). To counteract this, the decision was made to intersperse artworks that required more time with others that afforded more immediate interaction and comprehension. To encourage interaction and help those visitors less acquainted with videogame technology, the exhibition included signage and wall labels at the entrance to each work, which included a type of tutorial with "an image of the project, a conventional description of the artwork, and an end section on "how to work it"" (ibid.). Challenges that can be traced in other exhibitions since include the curator having to resist an over-reliance on 'computer graphics' for marketing materials, as well as the tendency to promote videogames

events as directed towards children entertainment. The Barbican Art Gallery went on to create *Game On* (2002),¹³ a historical overview of videogame culture of more than 150 playable games which toured to over 20 countries around the world, and which was re-developed in 2010 so as to include more recent videogames and technologies. Largely modelled after arcade spaces, in the tradition of the exhibitions developed by the Museum of the Moving Image, the scenography of these exhibitions features dramatically coloured lighting and backgrounds. The exhibition is organised into 'stages' which illustrate the evolution of the medium, and the games are accompanied by a diverse and thorough range of supporting material, including concept art, cartridges, box art, and publicity materials.

Another exhibition that started in an established museum and went on to tour throughout several institutions within the United States was *The Art of Video Games* (2012).¹⁴ Organised by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, it also provided a historical overview of the medium's evolution, with a focus on graphics and technology. Like others already mentioned, this exhibition adopted dramatic lighting and bold colours for its scenography, creating display cases whose format was reminiscent of arcade cabinets. However, this exhibition is unique in that the selection of the videogames to be included was made

with the help of the general public, who were enlisted to vote on which eighty games were significant enough to be exhibited, from an initial list of two hundred and forty games prepared by Chris Melissinos, the curator of the exhibition. The exhibition also differs from others already mentioned in this section in that most of the games were not playable, and were instead presented through screenshots and video footage. Only five videogames - *Pac-Man* (1980), *Super Mario Brothers* (1985), *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), *Myst* (1993), and *Flower* (2009) - one from each historical 'era' explored in the exhibition, were available for players to interact with. These games were clearly separated from the rest of the exhibits in that they consisted of walled-off, large-scale projections, with a single bold-coloured stand for controllers facing them, which accentuated the spectating possibilities of gameplay. Other artefacts in the exhibition included game consoles and video interviews with developers, designers and artists.

In the same year, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image organised *Game Masters* (2012).¹⁵ Curated by Conrad Bodman, who also curated the aforementioned *Game On* (2002) at the Barbican Art centre, this exhibition followed the latter's example and went on to tour internationally. Its focus was slightly different from the exhibitions mentioned up until now, in that it focused not on

videogames themselves as a starting point, but on their designers, tracing the influence of the most innovative authors of the medium, including Hideo Kojima, Peter Molyneux, Warren Spector, Will Wright, Fumito Ueda, Tim Schafer, Jonathan Blow, and thatgamecompany, to name a few. The exhibition featured over one hundred and twenty five playable games by more than thirty notable videogame designers. Following its aim of focusing on the authors, and only then on the games, it includes interviews with the designers and supporting materials that reveal the creative process behind the games. The highly dramatic design of the exhibition space featured, once again, coloured and focused lighting that is used to create ambiance, more than illuminating the scene, and blocks of colours in the walls and floor, with coloured Plexiglas and other materials creating stands for the controllers and separating spaces within the exhibition. One peculiarity of this exhibition is that it was accompanied by a mobile game, *Game Masters – The Game*,¹⁶ for iOS devices, which took players on a journey through the history of videogames.

The natural evolution of creating exhibitions that focus primarily on authorship in videogames is to create monographic shows dedicated to the work of a single author, which is what happened in *The Game Worlds of Jason Rohrer* (2016),¹⁷ recently held at The Davis Museum in Wellesley College, Massachusetts,

United States. Curated by Michael Maizels, it can be considered the first museum retrospective dedicated to a game designer. It presented Rohrer's short videogames in a comprehensive and playable fashion, accompanied by supporting material, such as design sketches and ephemera. The exhibition featured blue-coloured, dramatic lighting over custom-built constructions which housed large-scale projections of Rohrer's games, creating immersive spatial experiences which played on spectacle and contrasted with smaller handheld screens in the space, in which other games can also be played. In a subtle nod to gaming culture, the organisers made available an instruction manual with objectives, explanations of the controls and strategy hints. Once again, the curators organised many side events to accompany the exhibition, including a lecture by Jason Rohrer himself, gallery talks with the curator during which visitors could play the games against him, workshops directed at young people, an academic symposium about play, and a game play party featuring DJs and refreshments, a social event reminiscent of the Friday Late events organised by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

A different focus on authors was also the primary aim behind *Games: Computer Games by Artists* (2003), held at Hartware Media Art Association, a former industrial space in Dortmund, Germany.

Curated by Tilman Baumgärtel, Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler, it was dedicated to showcasing game mods, modifications of existing commercial videogames, created by authors who did not identify as game developers or designers, but as artists who happened to employ the medium. While the majority of resulting works cannot be classified as videogames, but fall instead into the category of Game Art, this exhibition is included here as it illustrates several strategies that curators can use to navigate the tension between the former industrial exhibition space and the (mostly) playable artefacts. As the curator says of the space:

The contrast between the warehouse, the cubes (pointing to a museum context), and the artworks, which only in some cases had been designed for the white cube, created an atmosphere of the "in-between" that fit our curatorial objective. While making sure that we accommodated the lighting and sound requirements of the individual works, we also presented some of the projected pieces in open space, along with different game modifications, which could be played on computers and gaming consoles. The sequence of closed and open room segments made it possible at once to separate works

that required closure and concentration and open up a field of possible relations between different positions. (Baumgärtel, Christ, & Dressler, 2008)

While the curatorial choice to not include more conventional videogames was deliberate, the curators included a nod to gaming culture by organising a LAN (local area network) party during one weekend within the exhibition space, a strategy which, once again, plays with familiarity in gaming culture within a largely decontextualized space. Beyond the LAN party, the exhibition was also accompanied by workshops and a film and lecture series which explored the influence of videogames in culture (Baumgärtel et al., 2008).

Finally, we can include in this section the exhibitions in museums solely dedicated to the medium of videogames. These include, among others, the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin, Germany, the National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham, England, and VIGAMUS, the Video Game Museum of Rome, Italy. Like other museums, these institutions typically house collections in archives and present them in permanent exhibition spaces, while also having gallery space available for temporary events. The permanent exhibitions tend to be attempts at comprehensive overviews of the history of the medium, comprised of videogames and supporting

materials, including screenshots, game consoles and interfaces, merchandise, publicity materials, concept art, design documents, and interviews with game developers, artists, and designers. The curatorial strategies followed for these exhibitions tend to be modelled on traditional museological models still found in other museums. These institutions also regularly organise events and activities related to videogame culture, including gaming tournaments, talks, conferences, performances, thematic nights, game-making workshops, film projections, and festivals, once again underscoring the importance of side programming in the development and cultural appreciation of the medium.

CURATORIAL MODELS FOR VIDEOGAMES EXHIBITIONS

Following the examples of videogames exhibitions in cultural institutions explored in the previous section, we will now reflect on curatorial processes for exhibiting videogames, detecting common configurations and choices that can lead to the development of models of exhibitions, and identifying challenges, advantages and possible issues to be resolved.

As mentioned when discussing the similarities between exhibiting videogames and other types of new media art, videogames have the peculiarity of being more process-oriented than object-oriented,

and this processual, interactive and time-based nature needs to be respected by curators. There is a risk of adopting curatorial methodologies from other media, which may result in them going against the very nature of videogames. For example, in order to minimise the risk of technology breaking down and exhibits not working, curators may opt to exhibit a videogame through the use of screenshots and gameplay footage, borrowing curatorial strategies from video art, instead of making the artefact available for playing within the gallery. This may have benefits if used alongside the playable artefact, in order to enhance the contextual information surrounding it, but is problematic as a substitute for gameplay, as that is arguably the most important characteristic of videogames. The inclusion of documentation material such as design sketches, concept art, publicity materials, merchandise, press articles, box art, video interviews, and so on helps to contextualise the videogames, gives insight into their creative processes, and supports their historical significance (Swalwell, 2013). These materials can be exhibited alongside videogames using more traditional curatorial methodologies.

The interactivity needed from visitors to get them involved in gameplay has the effect of turning them into players, but even those who are not playing at a given moment can become participants in a gameplay performance by the act of

spectating. Contrary to popular beliefs that link videogames with isolation, videogame playing has long been a shared social experience, from the commercial spaces of arcades, to internet cafés, to consoles in living rooms, to the multiplayer experiences made possible by the internet (Vosmeer, Ferri, Schouten, & Rank, 2016). In gaming culture, practices such as Let's Play videos, livestreaming, eSports, and speedrunning all combine the act of gameplay performance with the act of spectating. Spectators may do it simply to enjoy the player's performance, or use it as a learning experience so that they are more informed when their time with the controllers comes. Even games designed for a single player often become a shared social experience when translated into an exhibition space. There is the risk of visitors feeling awkward with the visibility that comes from playing a game in front of other visitors. While this can be said to be the case with any interactive artwork, games do have the added characteristic of allowing for failure, which might make this matter more problematic. On the other hand, this visibility mitigates the potential problems regarding visitors who are not well-versed enough in videogame culture to be able to immediately grasp the significance of the technology and how to play. Non-player visitors may have trouble associating joysticks and keyboards with specific actions inside the game, in which case becoming a spectator is an advantage not just by

allowing them to participate in the performance without being an active part of it, but also to learn new skills, should they wish to eventually become players.

When it comes to curatorial models for videogames exhibitions, as is the case with other media, namely new media art, it is possible to identify metaphors for curatorial strategies derived from the characteristics of the work to be presented, in what has been described as a productive way to adapt old institutions to new media and new ways of working (Graham & Cook, 2010).¹⁸ In the case of videogames, as we have seen from the examples included in this paper, the most noticeable curatorial model adapted from gaming culture is that of the arcade, but it is by no means the only possible one. LAN parties and internet cafés, for example, may also be used as models to develop curatorial strategies and spaces uniquely adapted to videogames. Even the living rooms or bedrooms of players can be used as models: in the 2016 iteration of *The Blank Arcade*, an exhibition of videogames that accompanies the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) annual conference, which in that year was held in Dundee, Scotland, curators Emilie Reed and Lindsay Grace decided to create a partition within the exhibition space in order to showcase a specific game with restricted content, *You Must be 18 or Older to Enter* by James Earl Cox III:

These display choices also were intended to serve the content of the game and make this freely available online PC game, 0077hich visitors could download from home, become a unique gallery experience. The partition served the purpose of allowing us to simulate the scale and setup of the computer room mentioned within the game itself. Used furniture and knickknacks were acquired from the gallery's existing resources and local thrift shops under the supervision of myself and the artists. The light of a lamp also added a glow that extended beyond the partition, which *Fugl* [a flying game created by Will Hurt] was projected on, to increase visitor awareness that the exhibition continued that way. (Reed, 2017)

The point here is not to use exhibition design to replicate the original spaces inside the museum, in an attempt to re-enact the contexts in which videogames first appeared; instead, it is to create that contextualization up to a certain point, so that the nature and culture of videogames is respected, while allowing the surrounding space of the museum to introduce a tension that decontextualizes artefacts enough for them to be considered critically. The aim for curators is to find a productive

balance between the extremes of nostalgia and decontextualization.

It is important for curators to remember that these methodologies are fluid, and should be adapted to the specific videogames that they wish to exhibit. The artefacts under the moniker of videogames are extensively varied, in terms of genre, gameplay mechanics, interface, controllers, and time frame for playing. Some videogames are built to ideally be played on big screens, others are meant for mobile phone screens; some use buttons as controllers, others rely on natural physical movements, touch screens, virtual reality, mouse and keyboard, or even unconventional controllers. Some games are meant to be quiet experiences that players go through alone, others are social experiences which require multiple players to be activated. Some are immediately graspable, others have a steep learning curve. Games may allow for short gaming sessions, or they may only be appreciated after dozens of hours of gameplay, as is the case of many story-based roleplaying games. Curators of videogames need to develop strategies that reflect this diversity, or risk excluding important parts of the medium and culture from an art historical conversation that already alienates them.

One strategy that curators of videogames can pursue to tackle the complicated task ahead of them is to consider developing not just exhibitions, but also

accompanying events and activities. Examples of events include seminars, conferences, discussions and talks, which can give more critical, academic and formal contextualization to the topic; game-making workshops, which can help the audience develop their gaming literacy, thereby equipping them with increasing critical appreciation of the medium; guided tours with curators and developers, which may include the chance for visitors to watch them play or play against them; mobile apps or games that enhance the visiting experience, bringing into full circle the use of videogames as interpretation and engagement tools in museums by using them to support their own exhibitions; livestreaming games on the museum's website or social media channels, with curators or game developers playing, as the audience follows along and asks questions remotely; or livestreaming in a theatre setting, replacing film screenings with gameplay screenings, a possible strategy for showcasing videogames such as longer roleplaying games or competitive multiplayer games.

Finally, we may ask ourselves: are museums the best places for the exhibition of videogames? Should we not be considering alternative spaces which may be better suited for the medium, such as festivals, dedicated cultural institutions, or perhaps even commercial arcade spaces, either repurposed or still in use? Is it better for curators to adapt

the exhibition space so that it resembles more closely the original spaces in which the medium is encountered – spaces such as the arcade, internet cafés, and even the living room – or to attempt to decontextualize videogames by exploring the tension of exhibiting them within the white cube? Perhaps the answer is that curators should strive to achieve a balance between these two extremes.

Conclusion

Videogames have long been present in art, science and technology museums as tools for engagement, mediation, and interpretation, but their relatively recent inclusion as objects of design or art raises tensions between the medium, the archives, and the exhibition spaces. In this paper, we have seen how curators have developed strategies to productively engage with that tension. We have identified commonalities between these strategies, and set forth suggestions for curatorial models and methodologies that can be adopted in order to exhibit videogames in ways that give visitors the best gameplay experience possible, while allowing the artefacts to become part of a larger discourse regarding culture and art history. In terms of future work, more experimentation is needed with the suggested formats, and possibly others which have not been suggested here. This experimentation will allow curators to find out what works

and does not, and to eventually develop a corpus of curatorial knowledge which is still lacking around the medium of videogames.

The trend of museums hiring curators dedicated to videogames, acquiring games for their collections, organising exhibitions dedicated to the medium, and including videogames in exhibitions alongside other media are positive trends that signal a growing sensitivity to the significance of videogames in culture and art history. As more exhibitions appear, both solely dedicated to videogames, and which place games at the same level as other, more established media, the resulting practices and discussions will hopefully advance the medium and make cultural institutions more confident in critically engaging with it.

Notes

- 1 As author Grant Tavinor says, "(...) videogames have always had something of an image problem. Among the common charges are that videogames are a pointless waste of time, are offensive, misogynistic, immature, addictive, encourage sedentary behavior and hence obesity, cause seizures, dumb children down, hype children up, keep them up late at nights, cause occupational overuse syndrome, destroy the culture of reading, involve players with the occult, lead to suicide pacts, and attack the moral fiber of our society." (Tavinor, 2009)
- 2 There are too many possible examples to list here, but a very short list of critically acclaimed examples include the works of game designers Jonathan Blow (*Braid*, 2008, *The Witness*, 2016) and Jason Rohrer (*Passage*, 2007, *The Castle Doctrine*, 2014), the interactive environments of artistic duo Tale of Tales (*The Path*, 2009, *Bientôt*

REFERENCES

- Altshuler, B. (2008). *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Baumgärtel, T., Christ, H. D., & Dressler, I. (2008). games: Computerspiele von KünstlerInnen (games: Computer games by artists). In C. Paul (Ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (pp. 233-250). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 233-250.
- Boykett, T. (2006, December 4-6). Playing the Game: Notes on Games, Play and Gameplay in Interactive Installations. Paper presented at the Cyber Games '06, Perth, Australia.
- Cook, S. (2008). Immateriality and Its Discontents: An Overview of Main Models and Issues for Curating New Media. In C. Paul (Ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (pp. 26-49). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Dziekán, V. (2012). *Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.
- Grace, L. D. (2017, September 6-8). *Heuristics from Curating and Exhibiting Game Art in the 21st Century*. Paper presented at the Artech2017, Macau, China.
- Graham, B. (2008). Serious Games. In C. Paul (Ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (pp. 191-206). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Graham, B., and Cook, S. (2010). *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.
- Paul, C. (2008). Introduction. In C. Paul (ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (pp. 1-9). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- l'été*, 2012, *Luxuria Superbia*, 2013), as well as games such as Playdead's *Inside* (2016) and Campo Santo's *Firewatch* (2016).
- 3 For work being developed in these fields see, for example, the KEEP (Keeping Emulation Environments Portable) European research project, and the work led by Stanford University's curator Henry Lowood in the Preserving Virtual Worlds project.
- 4 For example, the Science Museum created *Rugged Rovers*, a videogame that allows players to build and test their own space exploration rover, while Tate created art-inspired games such as *Cuboom*, which is based on the concepts behind cubism. These and other games can be found at <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/games-and-apps> and <http://www.tate.org.uk/kids/games-quizzes>, respectively (accessed October 2017).
- 5 Tate Worlds – Art Reimagined for Minecraft <http://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/tate-worlds-art-reimagined-minecraft> (accessed October 2017)
- 6 Great Fire 1666: The Great Fire of London in Minecraft <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/great-fire-1666> (accessed October 2017)
- 7 Minecraft Infinity Project at the Liverpool Biennial <http://www.biennial.com/minecraft-infinity-project> (accessed October 2017)
- 8 New Acquisition: Feng Mengbo's *Long March: Restart* https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/02/04/new-acquisition-feng-mengbos-long-march-restart/ (accessed October 2017)
- 9 London in Video Games <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/london-video-games> (accessed October 2017)
- 10 This paper focuses on the exhibition of playable artefacts commonly referred to as videogames. Hence, it does not include so-called Game Art: "artists using the technologies, formal considerations and content of videogames to artistic ends" (Sharp, 2012) and which often results in artefacts which reference videogames and game culture, but which are not playable.
- 11 Exhibitions which will not be explored in

Reed, E. (2017, July 2-6). *Exhibition Strategies for Videogames in Art Institutions: Blank Arcade 2017*. Paper presented at the DiGRA '17, Melbourne, Australia.

Sawer, P. (2017). *Videogame sexism and violence to be at heart of new V&A exhibition*. Retrieved October 10, 2017 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/06/videogame-sexism-violence-heart-new-va-exhibition/>

Sharp, J. (2012, May 29 – June 1). *A Curiously Short History of Game Art*. Paper presented at the FDG '12, Raleigh, NC, USA.

Simon, N. (2010). *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0.

Slovin, R. (2009). *Hot Circuits: Reflections on the first museum retrospective of the video arcade game*. Retrieved October 15, 2017 from <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/hot-circuits-20090115>

Swalwell, M. (2013, August 26-29). *Moving on from the Original Experience: Games history, preservation and presentation*. Paper presented at the DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies, Atlanta, GA.

Tavinor, G. (2009). *The Art of Videogames*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Vosmeer, M., Ferri, G., Schouten, B., & Rank, S. (2016, August 1-6). *Changing Roles in Gaming: Twitch and new gaming audiences*. Paper presented at the 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG, Dundee, Scotland.

detail here include *Game Show* (2001) at Mass MOCA, which included a mix of Game Art and playable installations; *Neoludica: Art Is a Game 2011-1996* (2011), a 54th Venice Biennale collateral event which explored relationships between play, art and games; *XYZ: Alternative Voices in Game Design* (2013), an exhibition at the Museum of Design Atlanta dedicated to women as players and creators of games; and *Applied Design* (2013) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, an exhibition curated by Paola Antonelli and which featured the games in the museum's collection alongside other objects significant for the history of design.

12 GameWorld <http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org/en/exposiciones/gameworld>, Playware <http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org/en/exposiciones/playware>, Homo Ludens Ludens <http://www.laboralcentrodearte.org/en/exposiciones/homo-ludens-ludens> (accessed October 2017)

13 Game On & Game On 2.0 – Barbican Art Gallery <https://www.barbican.org.uk/hire/exhibition-hire-bie/game-on-game-on-2-0> (accessed October 2017)

14 The Art of Video Games – Smithsonian American Art Museum <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/games> (accessed October 2017)

15 Game Masters – Australian Centre for the Moving Image <https://2015.acmi.net.au/exhibitions/touring-exhibitions-folder/game-masters-the-exhibition/> (accessed October 2017)

16 Game Masters – The Game <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/game-masters-the-game/id529384505?ls=1&mt=8> (accessed October 2017)

17 The Game Worlds of Jason Rohrer – The Davis Museum at Wellesley College <https://www.wellesley.edu/davismuseum/whats-on/past/node/79126> (accessed October 2017)

18 For example, Sarah Cook has identified three curatorial models for new media art exhibitions: the Exhibition as Software Program or Data Flow, as a Trade Show, or as a Broadcast [4]. These work in opposition to traditional museum exhibitions, which she describes as more static and linear.