A Ludomusicologist Goes to the Museum

ABSTRACT From September 2018 to February 2019, the famous Victoria and Albert Museum in London hosted Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt, a major exhibition on contemporary video game design and culture. Announced as “a unique insight into the design process behind a selection of groundbreaking contemporary videogames,” this immersive exhibition was the end presentation of a project that took four years to undertake. Dutch PhD student Martine Mussies went over the Channel to take a look and write down her experiences for this first issue of the Journal of Sound and Music in Games. KEYWORDS Exhibition, museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A Museum, curation, canon, expo, game design, game culture

Behind the Portland stone main façade, around the corner from the statues from classical antiquity, I took some pictures of the impressive Ice Blue and Spring Green Chandelier and admired the 1699 Stradivarius violin. There is more than enough to behold in this museum, for the V&A, founded in 1852 and named after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, contains a permanent collection of over 2.27 million objects such as paintings, sculptures, and musical instruments (classified as furniture by the museum). The exhibition I came for combines elements from all the art forms mentioned before, as it was about video games. According to the V&A website, that is a fitting subject, for

the Museum has a long history of engaging with and collecting digital design, from early computer art in the 1960s through to major exhibitions such as 2009–10’s Decode: Digital Design Sensations, which surveyed contemporary digital and interactive art and technology. Videogames are one of the most important design disciplines of our time making them the perfect fit for the V&A.1

But, as also noted by Melanie Fritsch,2 games are far more than “just” a design discipline; they are strongly embedded in “participatory cultures.”3 As Fritsch explains: “Besides exploring what can be done within the game itself, players also started to experiment with the software and hardware components, the artwork, or the narratives of games in order to create

something themselves.”

How can this engaging dimension of games—interactivity—be captured in a museum setting?

Most similar exhibitions—such as the Dutch national video game museum in Zoetermeer and the German Computerspielemuseum in Berlin—showcase the history of video games as a linear process of the history of advancing technology. The V＆A chose a different approach, by explaining video games’ relevance as a cultural force. Unfortunately, with this line of thinking, the validation for the right to exist—of both the expo and the games themselves—is often mainly monetary. In the very first line of the exhibition catalogue, the museum’s director, Tristram Hunt, defines “the world of video games [as] a huge global industry, with billion-dollar earnings.”

But luckily, this emphasis on financial significance is only a starting point, for the curators of this exhibition acknowledge that financial forces are only part of the story. As Marie Foulston and Kristian Volsing write in the second piece of the same catalogue, “To truly value videogame design, we need to look beyond benchmarks of an industry such as sales figures and further investigate this complex and creative field.”

Therefore, the museum also examined the cultural spaces that video games occupy, for example, through the roles and experiences of the players. The scale and reach of video games—a quarter of the world’s population plays them—were made explicit by a mini-documentary that was part of the exhibition, about the fascinating phenomenon of top e-sports game tournaments, like the League of Legends World Championships at the “Bird’s Nest” Olympic Stadium in Beijing, China, in 2017. For me, as a retro gamer (slash creator slash hacker slash modder), the selection of games that were on display at Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt was a little disappointing. No Pong, no Space Invaders, no Pac-Man. And certainly no Little Mermaid Ariel on the Genesis/Mega Drive. Instead, the expo had a focus on recent history, more specifically on games created after the mid-’90s. Due to technologies such as equalizing broadband access, social media gaming, smartphones, etc. in the twenty-first century, video games are more accessible than ever before. This radically changed the means of making video games—and therefore the ways in which video games are designed, disrupted, and played as well. As such, this chronological boundary was a logical and conscious decision, but nonetheless, I would have loved to see more nostalgia in the exhibition—if only to explain the recent trends of retro gaming and its manifestations in gadgets and fashion.

As the title indicates, Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt was an exhibition in three parts—but in a slightly different order, as the disruption was in the middle hall. Even before entering the exhibition’s first hall, the visitor was already immersed in its sonic world. Fragments of game music, voices, bleeps, and other sound effects greeted you while you watched a huge video screen that displays keywords (like “collaborate,” “fly,” and “code”) in bright white letters against a background of tiles showing images from all kinds of games that you went

---

4. Fritsch, “‘It’s a-Me, Mario!’”, quote from the abstract.
6. Foulston and Volsing, 10.
on to encounter in the exhibition. The visual collage on-screen was thus empathized by the audio collage of the museum itself.

The first section, Design, opened with a much-reblogged quote of confidence from Frank Lantz: "Making games combines everything that’s hard about building a bridge with everything that’s hard about composing an opera. Games are operas made out of bridges." With this bold statement, the V&A not only underlined the validity of this exhibition but also pointed out its approach, combining the presentation of video games as a form of objective system engineering with the notion of video games as subjective emotional experiences. Under the banner of "NEW DESIGNERS" an eclectic selection of eight games from the last fifteen years was examined from the design perspective, showcasing concept art and prototypes with thought-provoking supplementary materials. The Bloodborne display, for example, included the original hand-drawn concept art, and that was linked to a theory of performance poetry. And the concept art for the sci-fi dream of No Man’s Sky’s procedural worlds showed even more fantastic beasts than I have already encountered in the game itself.

But what struck me most in this section were the loving pencil drawings of Ellie and Joel from The Last of Us, which immediately brought to my mind the Hank Williams songs “Alone and Forsaken” and “I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive,” which are associated with the characters in the game. With a beautiful display of concept art that places the sweet character sketches next to the destructed urban landscapes, the exhibition highlighted the game’s internal contradiction of a warm relationship against, and interacting with, the background of what can be described with the neologism of “ruin-porn.” At the same time, images like these represent ideological failure, for, as Siobhan Lyons (2015) explains, they are “a break with modernized conceptions of cultural innocence and everyday enjoyment.”

In this case, the story is set against the aftermath of an apocalypse caused by a fungal infection that destroys human identities. In the words of Darran Anderson: “What existed before is still recognizably there but it is rustic and dusty, falling apart and nailed together again . . . The future of The Last of Us feels lived in and worn out.” Next to the awe and enhanced appreciation I felt for the game and its designers, the imagery from The Last of Us made me realize how lucky we are, as players, that we can spend our time in such a broken world just for fun, because we can also escape it whenever we like.

Next to the design artifacts of the cinematic blockbusters made by large AAA studios, the audience could explore ideas about game design by experiencing independent and alternative video games. The very first game you encountered in the exhibition, for example, was the indie adventure Journey (2012), which was examined from the angle of emotional response design. By reading the developer’s notebooks and looking at the game, the audience gets to wonder: (how) can a game evoke feelings of love and empathy? The collection also showed a couple of modest personal games, often through an autobiographical lens.

Consume Me, for example, is Jenny Jiao Hsia’s darkly humorous story about her relationship with disordered eating. Playing (with) Consume Me was an uncomfortable experience for me, both through the distressing mechanics and by the fact that I liked the game: I felt embarrassed that I was poking fun at the suffering of the creator’s avatar. Another example of such an intimate work by an independent designer was on a playable display in Disrupt (the second section of the expo). “I’m definitely interested in making games about things that are hard to talk about,” wrote developer Nina Freeman in the expo’s catalogue. And such a game is her creation how do you Do It? (free to play on Steam), which explores human sexuality and interpersonal relationships. In this semi-autobiographical game, the player is an eleven-year-old girly girl who bashes Barbie together with Action Man. The audience I observed playing reacted with self-reflection and giggling conversations. Game-changer Freeman holds a degree in English literature (from New York’s Pace University), and when she first encountered intimate games they reminded her of the poetry that inspired her. She pursued a career at game developer Fullbright, while simultaneously creating diary-like personal games, as an outlet for herself. “When I first started making video games, I was in a bad place healthwise,” she told The Guardian.10 “Making games helped me restore a lot of my self-confidence, and gave me an outlet during that difficult time.”

With its choice of games in Disrupt, and the many clips and captions accompanying the games, the museum pointed out challenging issues that are all too familiar for researchers working on video games, like the political, sexual, and gun-based content. This varied approach opened up discussion as the V&A lightheartedly showed how video games’ possible meanings can be (re)examined and (re)assessed. The game/app Phone Story, for example, is a critique of capitalist exploitation. This game is a collection of minigames that draw attention to the economic, environmental, and human costs of smartphone manufacturing practices. By creating this subversive, satirical, and anti-capitalist game for a phone, the game denounces the abuses surrounding the fabrication of its own media.

The social inequality and issues of representation within the gaming world were explored in an on-screen panel discussion, “Why Are Games So White?” Influential game makers and commentators were interviewed and their answers played on separate screens, making it a virtual round-table discussion for the audience to engage with. Some screens showed coding in the Arabic language, which made the viewer wonder why most programming languages seem to be based on the English language.

The unanswerable question about the validity of games as art was made explicit as well, which I found curious, for I would have expected that the V&A considers all they exhibit to be Art—and that the framing of the collection artifacts as Art was what made the design processes of them interesting for both the curators and the audience. The bombastic opening statement comparing games to opera initially confirmed this idea, but it was set in contrast by many other statements in this expo. For example, in a video interview as part of the “behind the scenes” movie clips in Design, Splatoon (Nintendo

producer Hisashi Nogami says: “Video games are often thought of as art, similar to the way movies are. But for me, I think games are as much a product of engineering.” At the same time, the exhibition captions frame Splatoon as an artistic commentary of ’90s street style. Another section of the exhibition put a scene from the game Kentucky Route Zero alongside Rene Magritte’s 1965 “Le Blanc Seing,” illustrating the visual similarity (together with some explanation about the “eclectic references” of this “magical-realist adventure” game). This example served to complete the confusion and conflicting answers. The displaying of the Magritte could of course be interpreted as a statement about the status of video games as art: “look, a screenshot next to a famous painting in the museum—now it’s culture, now it’s Art.” But for me, this was just a confirmation of how strongly embedded video games are in the culture in which they were made, so that all sorts of elements from that culture—such as literature, music, cinema, and paintings—are inescapably traceable in games and resonate with them more broadly. On the website It’s Nice That, lead curator of the V&A exhibition Marie Foulston suggests an alternative approach: “It isn’t a case of asking if video games are art. We don’t need to ask if all games are the Mona Lisa. We need to change that question. We need to ask, ‘are games craft[?]’, and we need to do that through the lens of design.” And therefore, the exhibition is opening up the video game as a design object, while at the same time stressing its relevance in contemporary culture.

The last section, Play, was divided into two parts. Under the title “PLAYERS ONLINE,” in a separate, theater-like setting, the audience made a stopover to watch some TV coverage of events such as the 7,500 Eve Online players going into battle simultaneously, the Minecraft players joining arms for their ambitious building projects, and the large tournaments in League of Legends e-sports. As Philippa Warr explains in the catalogue, these “esports venues are a mismatch of online and physical spaces,” and this meshing of spaces was further complicated by becoming the audience in the V&A watching the video footage. The result was an interesting form of the “Spiegel-im-Spiegel” (Droste) effect. Looking at the live audience that was looking at the on-screen audience watching the e-sports reminded me of Pink Floyd’s album Ummagumma, whose cover features a distorted mise en abîme as well. The films provided a fascinating look at the fan culture surrounding these events, the role of the casters (who commentate and analyze), and the emotions of both the players and the fans. Unfortunately, other aspects of video game fan culture were hardly mentioned. Where are the mods, the altered screenshots, the cosplayers, and the beautiful fan art based on the beloved video game avatars? Back at home, I discovered that some of these fannish topics are being discussed in relation to Overwatch, by Kat Brewster in the exposition’s catalogue, so maybe this was the video that didn’t show on the day I attended the museum. What I missed most was the extra-use of video game music—from YouTube covers to live orchestral performances.

performances—that have become so popular these recent years. As also noted by Sebastian Diaz-Gasca (2018), “the interactive nature of gameplay . . . promotes the appropriation, rework and remix of game music by gaming audiences.” But no attention was paid to this at this exhibition.

The exhibition’s grand finale was “PLAYERS_OFFLINE,” with impressive examples from the hacker-maker cultures and DIY arcade scenes. This included a classical arcade that was painted in a graffiti style and loaded with Anna Anthropy’s 2013 Twine hypertext game Queers in Love at the End of the World. On her personal homepage, Marie Foulston writes about her “love for the alternative, the absurd, the playful and the disruptive,” which is most visible in this last section, with works like Hit Me! where your only goal is to push the button on top of the helmet of your opponent. The game’s creator, Kaho Abe, is shown on-screen, repairing a broken helmet. It felt rather intimate and personal to watch her soldering this alternative controller, as, in the words of Marie Foulston, the helmets are a “unique embodiment of the creativity, skills and constraints of their creator’s hands.” The playthings in this section helped me to rethink what video games are, to move away from codes to physical encounters. In the words of Ian Livingstone, “In a world of digital downloads, it’s easy to forget how tactile the world of videogames still is.” Unsurprisingly, Play was my favorite part of the show, because of the many fan-made punk/alternative craftings. Also, I found that the materiality of the showcased objects still best suited the environment of a traditional museum such as the V&A.

To answer the question on whether the V&A captured the engaging interactivity of games in a museum setting—I would say yes and no. While browsing through these three sub-exhibitions, I wondered whether it would have been possible for the curators to have more explicit connections between the sections, and to offer more recognizable games to play, so the exhibition could also appeal to a broader audience that might come from very diverse backgrounds and have very different degrees of video game literacy. As a game music researcher, I was happy to encounter a small section devoted to game music, namely a musical score with a set of headphones, to listen to some examples of symphonic game music. In my opinion, the inclusion of this element did address the importance of the musical understanding of video games, but it could have been more elaborate. The symphonic examples were nice and easy to grasp for an audience that is slightly familiar with classical music, but there is so much more that game music has to offer . . . as Tim Summers wrote, “music for fighting, music for racing a car, music for evading zombies, music for dancing, music for spying, music for solving puzzles, music for saving the Earth from aliens, music for managing a city, music for being a hero” and so on, and so forth. For example, I would have loved to hear and read some examples of the musics of BioShock, Grand Theft Auto, and Fallout, to

experience “the disconcerting effect that pop music can have on an audience” as it is eloquently described by Andra Ivănescu.18

Although the discussion of game music remained on the surface, it was enjoyable nonetheless. And there were many things I could take home from this museum visit. Not directly, for, in my professional work, I am focusing on mermaids, Alfred the Great, and autistic experiences, and as could be expected, subjects such as these are far too specialist to be covered in an exhibition for the general public. But still, this interesting exposition offered me inspiration to think further and try new things in my own work. The V&A showed a video games exhibition in a new “curatorial language” for the multiplicity of perspectives on the situation of games in wider design and artistic cultures. Similar to an author, a curator has to give voice and style to an exhibition—caring and curing, hence the name—and while the curatorial languages for archeological items are relatively uniform and established, for video games they are rather new. The curators succeeded in their complicated and complex undertaking of showing the significance of video games in a prestigious museum. Scrolling back through the catalogue, while googling the games and developers mentioned, I can conclude that Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt was an exhibition that shone when it cast new light on ways of thinking about gaming, games and game research.

Should readers be interested in learning more about this exhibition, the catalogue is available online and the Twitter conversation is via #DesignPlayDisrupt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


