Towards a History of Videogame Exhibitions

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INTRODUCTION
For over 25 years, exhibitions of videogames have been temporarily on display at major art and design institutions, recently the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and many others. Large touring exhibitions, such as *The Art of Video Games* and *Game Masters* have travelled between countries and continents. Some institutions have also opened specifically for the display or collection of videogames for their merit as art or design objects, while others have begun to incorporate videogames into a broader collection. This is a positive trend, but also one that deserves to be examined with a critical eye. As videogames are being accepted by museums and galleries, simultaneously these exhibitions are playing a role in determining how the history of videogames is told, as well as how and what videogames are prioritized to be conserved for the future.

This paper will consist of an overview of several significant exhibitions that have shaped public consideration of videogames as a cultural form with a history of innovation and experimentation, followed by an analysis of the effects of their selection and display choices. My current overview spans early arcade exhibitions such as *Hot Circuits*, exhibitions in New Media art centers like *Bang the Machine*, and recent large traveling exhibitions like *The Art of Video Games*, and is based on discussions with curators, investigations into catalogues and archive materials, and in some cases, firsthand attendance at these exhibitions. Because it is a part of ongoing research, it does not attempt to catalogue every videogame-related exhibition between the 1980s and today, instead identifying important thematic and practical choices that shape how broader culture thinks about games historically and as art objects.

Historians and museologists have noted the long-standing role of the museum and its various modes of exhibition in constructing the canon, reception and theorization of art, so examining exhibitions and their implied positions through curatorial choices is vital. For the ephemeral and technological forms videogames take, these issues are even more urgent to consider, before this history becomes inaccessible or lost. The contemporary exhibition form has been identified as a route into art history, and therefore, these exhibitions and their curatorial and display choices have already drawn videogames into

the discursive construction of the history of art (Altshuler 2008). Investigating the strategies enacted by a spectrum of arts institutions, from small galleries to internationally renowned museum collections, reveals arguments about the place of videogames in a larger arts and cultural context.

It is possible to separate out several important threads for analyzing the curatorial choices made in these exhibitions and how they shape history and conservation practices. First, exhibition and collection approaches each make different arguments about the purpose of videogames and play, and also what, materially, a videogame is. The exhibitions also use different methods to organize their selections of videogames, focusing on form, theme, chronology or authorship, all of which have varied histories as display strategies in art institutions, and prioritize different canons of games. Finally, it is also worth examining how these exhibitions differently address practical concerns for staging videogames in a public space. The most prominent of these issues are time spent, knowledge assumed, level of engagement, and maintaining functionality.

These approaches have different effects on the visitor experience, while making different arguments about what games are, and what makes them an aesthetically and historically important part of culture. New Media scholar and curator Beryl Graham describes the function of the New Media temporary exhibition as a "testbed," the success of which determines later collection, conservation and historicization for works institutions may see as potentially highly complex and risky to collect. (Graham 2014) The pressing issues of historicization and conservation is gated by the testing bed of these exhibitions, and so it becomes vital to interrogate what kind of gaming history is created through these selections and display strategies.

Previous literature in this area has primarily focused on conservation and accessibility in the case of certain older games. While that is necessarily an element of researching and maintaining games history, there is much less attention on the contextualization of works outside of those categories, like contemporary works, and related accessibility and display questions for these works. The goal of my ongoing research is not to decide on one strategy, technique, or type of exhibition or institution that is best for addressing these purposes. The opposite is much more beneficial, to question existing strategies and develop a more comprehensive culture of display, collection and conservation through looking at how to capture neglected areas of game history and aesthetic experience. Examining the arguments made by display techniques and contextualization materials used to build exhibitions offers insight into what criteria institutions use to make aesthetic and value judgements. Evaluating what these judgements include and exclude will lead to a critical history of videogames pointing towards new possibilities for videogame curation moving forward.

OPTIONAL BIO

Emilie Reed is a PhD student at Abertay University. Coming from an Art History background, her primary focus is examining the history and discourses generated by exhibitions of digital games in art spaces, and developing new curatorial approaches based on these findings. Her current interests include overlooked game histories, educational games and artists' CD-ROMs, as well as DIY cultures and software making game creation more accessible. She recently co-curated *The Blank Arcade* as part of FDG-DIGRA 2016, and her writing appears in The Arcade Review and Critical Hits: An Indie Gaming Anthology, as well as on her website (emreed.net).

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