Exhibition review: *Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt,* Victoria and Albert Museum, London. September 8, 2018 – February 24, 2019

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Abstract The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London ran a special temporary exhibition about videogames. The exhibition, titled *Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt,* focused in particular on the design elements involved in creating videogames, and the growing mainstream prevalence of gaming as a digital culture, and as popular culture in general. Particularly striking was the sheer materiality of the creative process that goes into designing videogames, and the exhibition layout and opportunities for participation were conducive to a lot of visitor interaction with both the exhibits and with each other.

About the author Suzie Thomas is Associate Professor of Cultural Heritage Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland. She completed her PhD in 2009 at the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University, UK. She visited and reviewed the exhibition *Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt* as part of a seedcorn project "Digital Educational Tool Development – Durgapuja and Museums," funded by the University of Helsinki Future Fund.

Introduction
Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt was a temporary exhibition organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, on view from September 8, 2018 until February 24, 2019. Through four key themed areas ("New Designers," "Disruptors," "Players_Online," and "Players_Offline"), the exhibition addressed several aspects of video gaming in the present time. As perhaps might be expected given the remit of the V&A, the opening and driving focus was on the importance of design in videogame development; the museum itself explains that videogames are "one of the most significant design fields of our time" by means of accounting for its presence as a topic for an exhibition (https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/about-videogames-exhibition).

Design: featured videogames
The opening sections (the first area – "New Designers") of the exhibition focused on the design aspect of producing videogames, with eight games and their creative processes featured in detail. Each of these games had their own small exhibition room, in effect, filled with text, images, screens and objects. The first game featured, *Journey* (thatgamecompany, USA) (figure 1), is classed as a mid-size independent game.

The next three games are all AAA – the classification given to games produced with the highest budgets and by large teams, often from several different companies (Lipkin 2013: 9). These games: *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, USA)*; Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, Japan), and *Splatoon* (Nintendo Co., Japan)*,* hail from different countries and cover quite different themes. These range from post-apocalyptic adventure, to gothic horror, to a team-based playful (and non-violent) shooting game.

Figure 1. Visitors watch sections of playthrough of *Journey* projected on a large screen. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

Independent games featured in this section were even more varied in terms of scale and theme. After the artistic and peaceful *Journey,* intended to foster collaboration and discourage toxic competitive behavior, *Consume Me* (USA) represented the work of an individual and independent designer, New York-based Jenny Jiao Hsia (https://q_dork.itch.io/consume-me). This at first seemingly simple game for a mobile device explores different food fixations, an issue the designer is open about and has channeled into a playful experience. A particularly nice and seemingly popular interactive at this point was the line of suspended devices on which visitors could play both *Consume Me* and another of Hsia's games, *Wobble Yoga* – also with an underlying theme of trying to achieve health and wellbeing by following set instructions.

Kentucky Route Zero (Cardboard Computer, USA) and *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, Belgium) (figure 2) are quite different games. The first follows the format of an adventure novel where the reader chooses the paths to take, and the other is a slow-paced but profound reflection on life, through the process of guiding an elderly lady through a Flemish churchyard to a bench. Both games share a strong artistic expression. It is clear that these games are as much, if not more, about exploring the genre through new and creative lenses and possibilities, as about gaining commercial success. The phenomenally successful *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games Ltd., UK) is the final videogame to be featured in this section. The game pushes different boundaries through its "procedurally generated game-making" (Hornshaw and Bassett 2018), in which there are almost unlimited permutations of different worlds to explore with varying terrains, beings, and so on for players to encounter (fig. 3).
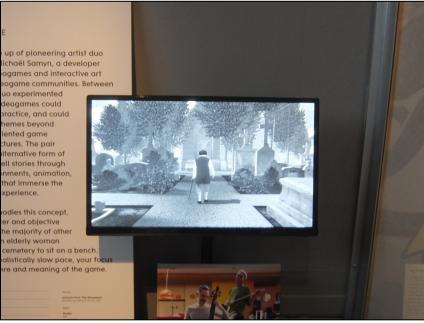
Figure 2. *The Graveyard* playthrough on a small screen in the exhibition. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.
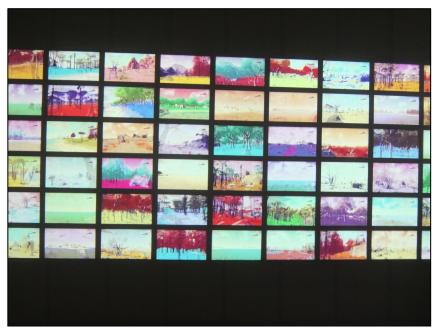

Figure 3. Wall of screens showing a small fraction of the almost infinite possible environments that *No Man's Sky* can generate. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

Disrupt: social impact of videogames

Only after these different games have been exhibited – admittedly in beautiful detail with plenty of exhibits that shed light on the artistic processes that go into their design – does the exhibition turn to the social issues around videogames. In an even larger room we encounter separate exhibit stations, each tackling a particular problematic element of current videogaming culture that reflect

wider societal challenges. These include the language politics of coding; almost all coding is based on the English language and alphabet, arguably at the cost of other languages (see Hamel 2007 for discussion of the domination of English in academia, as another example). One stage to counter this trend is the development of coding specifically in Arabic. Issues such as representation of race, gender, and sexuality in games are also addressed. However, perhaps because I was paying close attention to the earlier sections of the exhibition due to my intention to review the exhibition later, I personally felt some information overload, and perhaps was less receptive to engaging deeply with this section than I would have been had it emerged sooner in the exhibition.

Play: scale of international gaming and gaming culture

Visitors encounter more visual spectacle as they enter the cavernous "Players_Online" exhibition space (figure 4). Another striking feature of the whole exhibition that one takes away is the sheer scale of the videogaming "scene" in general. Although verging on overwhelming in places, the exhibition succeeds at showing the visitor not only the diversity of games themselves – ranging from the high profile AAA-produced games to the smaller independent and sometimes experimental pieces – but also the scale at which video gaming has taken the world by storm.

Figure 4. Cinematic scale montage of global gaming trends such as tournaments and fan culture in "Player_Online." Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

In "Players_Online" we see on a large cinematic screen in a darkened room the huge crowds that fill stadia to watch champion videogaming teams battle for victory, and we witness the side-culture of cosplay and fans who devote their time and creative energies to emulating and celebrating their favorite games and characters.

Play more: offline and letting off steam
Towards the end of the exhibition, before the dedicated gift shop, is a final gallery that exhibits the DIY gaming scene – entitled, as a mirror complement, "Players_Offline." Here the video gaming equivalent of outsider art is to be found, as the introductory text says: "This is a punk scene. Nothing is predictable. Anything is possible." Again, the very material aspect is more than apparent with home-made arcade consoles, and repurposed objects turned to games including backpacks and even sections of cars (figures 5 and 6). It is also a space packed with robust interactive opportunities, and serves a second purpose as a place in which especially younger visitors can run around and effectively let off steam after the more didactic sections that preceded. This is an excellent strategy, and allows some release for visitors before leaving the exhibition.

Figure 5. Bat backpack repurposed to act as a gaming console in "Player_Offline." Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

Figure 6. Front half of car repurposed for gaming in "Player_Offline," and open for visitors to experience for themselves. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

Discussion: materiality in focus
As a non-gamer who nonetheless has a history of enjoying watching friends and loved ones playing games, I was particularly struck by the sheer materiality of gaming design that the exhibition presented. Without particular knowledge of the process of videogame design, one might reasonably expect much of the focus to be on the digital, since the end product (notwithstanding the material presence of devices and consoles through which videogames are played) is essentially a digital entity. Therefore the overwhelming presence of material objects that attest to the various stages of game conceptualization, planning, and finally realization is striking in many cases. The section of the exhibition about Hsia's game designing process speaks to this materiality, with countless small objects from everyday life on display that have inspired and informed her design process (fig. 7). Similarly, we see models that the designers used to help them visualize the conceptual art for *No Man's Sky*, and notebooks and sketches abound throughout (figs. 8 and 9). We also come to understand that many other creative arts are needed to help videogames come to fruition, not least musical composition and performance, as well as the performative input of actors.

Figure 7. Objects of inspiration: items selected for display by video game designer Jenny Jiao Hsia, to indicate her creative process. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

Figure 8. Visitors examine the post-it notes and board that designers of *The Last of Us* used to plan the play and storyline. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.
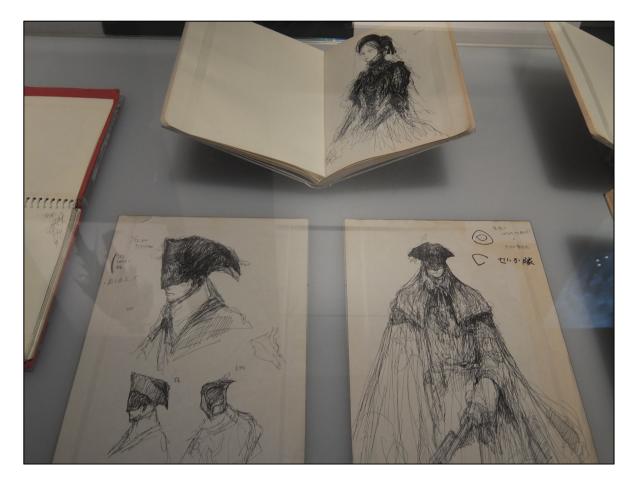

Figure 9. Hand-drawn sketches of possible characters for *Bloodborne*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: S. Thomas.

Materiality is also expressed through the associated merchandise that accompanies games. Quite aside from sales of the devices themselves – PCs, mobile phones, different gaming consoles – and selling the games themselves, certain games such as Splatoon spawn their own merchandise through which fans can express their appreciation of the game, but also their affiliations within the game itself (figure 10).

Figure 10. Merchandise connected to *Splatoon*. Victoria and Albert Museum London. Photo: S. Thomas.

A space for interaction and hearing many voices

Multivocality was a key element of the exhibition, from hearing the actual voices of designers such as Jenny Jiao Hsia (*Consume Me*), to the opinions of high profile game reviewers. British game reviewer Matt Lees can be heard and watched reviewing and playing through a boss fight in *Bloodborne*, revealing the serious gamer experiences of these games, as well as the side-culture that develops with people utilizing YouTube and other web platforms to share experiences, give hints, and help each other through challenging sections of play.

The wider spectrum of opinion also appears in the "Disruptors" section of the exhibition, where a large screen plays sound bites of different individuals connected to the videogaming industry: an artist, an author, a journalist, a game company director, and a sociologist reflecting on the evolution of videogames. This looped video attracted a lot of viewers, possibly also as an opportunity to rest after intensive exhibits that precede it (an example of part of this discussion is available to view at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_LT4XVMT2M).

This openness of many voices and opinions seemed to spill over to the visitors themselves. We have all been in exhibitions that feel almost like holy spaces. The lights are kept low, either for mood or for better conservation of the exhibits on display (or both), and visitors move carefully and silently through the displays, speaking only in whispers, if at all. Happily this was not the case in *Design/Play/Disrupt*, where the multiple moving images, bright lights, things to handle and play with, and – importantly – sound, seemingly stimulated discussion and interaction among the

visitors. I saw groups of young adults enthusiastically discuss games they had played and now were seeing deconstructed and presented in the galleries, and I saw parents explain the processes of game design and development to their children, using the artefacts of this process to aid their narratives. The overall atmosphere was conducive to interaction; play, if you will.

Fulfilling but exhausting

Despite, or perhaps because of this feeling of high energy and the throngs of enthused, interested people throughout the exhibition, along with the overall length, *Design/Play/Disrupt* was also ultimately an exhausting experience. I visited in February 2019, towards the end of the exhibition's run, but it was still selling out of tickets for the hourly slots in which people could pre-order to enter. While I attempted to take in as much information as possible, reading every label and panel, trying to absorb the imagery and its effects, in the end, I was almost overwhelmed by it all. This is the challenge with any temporary exhibition, especially with ticketed blockbusters such as this one. Permanent exhibitions, particularly those in national-status museums in the UK which are by law free entry (Selwood and Davies 2015: 44), invite repeat visits. The museumgoer can tackle exhibitions over several visits if they wish, or dip in and out of a particular exhibition, focusing on different aspects or sections at different times. For most ticket buyers for *Design/Play/Disrupt*, visiting will be a one-time only event. The challenge is on for visitors to consume as much of the exhibition as possible, without in turn feeling consumed.

At the same time, this exhibition does not leave the non-gaming visitor feeling excluded for lacking the gaming cultural capital. It was clear that many of the visitors were or felt themselves to be true aficionados of the videogame genre, and clearly felt served by the exhibition and its topics, yet there was enough information and explanation for the outsider to this world to feel that the exhibition is intended for all. Clearly, many of the exhibits had important meaning for the true fans of videogames, yet the exhibition was inviting enough and varied enough also to cater to non-specialists who may just be visiting because the exhibition happened to be on view.

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