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Exhibition Strategies for Videogames in Art Institutions

Blank Arcade 2016

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ABSTRACT

While debate over videogames' cultural status can still become contentious, theorist Bruce Altshuler describes the contemporary exhibition form as a route into art history, and exhibitions of videogames and their display choices have already drawn videogames into the discursive construction of the history of art. Therefore, contextualizing past exhibitions of videogames and

examining curatorial practices is a vital part of shaping an interdisciplinary history of videogames. This paper summarizes my research and practical work in games curation within this context through a case study of *The Blank Arcade 2016*, specifically focusing on unexpected ways spectatorship and interaction coexist in videogame exhibitions. By reviewing the process of exhibition organization and the resulting visitor feedback, and finding intersections in game studies and contemporary art perspectives on tensions between spectatorship and interaction, I reflect on the effectiveness of the present curatorial process at addressing the varied ways gallery visitors experience videogames as an art object or aesthetic experience.

Keywords

Art games, art history, curation, game exhibitions

INTRODUCTION

A frequent tension that emerges in the exhibition of videogames in art spaces is how spectatorship, interaction with the game, and interaction between visitors coexist in the exhibition space, and complicate the understanding of where a videogame as an art object begins and ends. When the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. temporarily welcomed arcade machines into its halls for its ARTcade, held in 1983, the institution was making certain aesthetic, historical and value judgements about videogames. Since then, many art and design institutions have more formally incorporated videogames and similar software-based works into their exhibitions and collections. Bruce Altshuler describes the temporary exhibition, the now-dominant form in which contemporary art is conveyed, as a route into art history (2008, 11). Additionally, new media scholar and curator Beryl Graham also describes the function of the new media exhibition as a “testbed,” the success of which determines later collection, conservation and historicization (2014, 1).

For over 30 years, exhibitions of videogames have been temporarily on display at internationally renowned art institutions, recently the V&A in London, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Major touring exhibitions have traveled across countries and between continents. While many recent exhibitions of games emphasize the interactivity of the form and offer a large number of interactive displays, to fully account for the ways in which videogames are experienced as art objects or aesthetic experiences, it is important to also consider how alternative modes of engagement, like spectatorship and collaboration, have shaped both the reception of videogames and the exhibition of art.

During 2016, I co-curated the third iteration of *The Blank Arcade* with its original organizer, Lindsay Grace. This exhibition launched during the Joint DiGRA/FDG Conference in August 2016, and ran through October 2016 in the Hannah Maclure Centre (HMC), the institutional art gallery of Abertay University in Dundee. The featured videogames and other forms of interactive technology were selected from a submissions pool by the co-curators, and evaluated for their playfulness, innovative qualities, and how they expanded mainstream conceptions of videogames and play. Existing knowledge of the history of exhibitions of videogames informed my curatorial approach, and shaped my reflection on the effectiveness of the exhibition itself, and visitor feedback from surveys contributed to my evaluation and indicated new areas to investigate.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Art exhibitions displaying videogame-based works span a broad variety of production and display contexts. Lynn Hershman Leeson developed one of the first interactive media installations, *Lorna*, on laserdisc from 1979 to 1983, which describes itself as “the world’s first interactive video art disc game.” Shortly afterwards, in 1983, a piece of interactive art directly

contextualized within videogame culture; *Mike Builds a Shelter*, a homebrew game installed in a custom arcade cabinet, debuted. In the same year the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. staged an exhibition of arcade games for a fundraising event, a choice framed as an initial exploration of incorporating videogames into the category of the arts (Trebbe, 1983).

As artists were introducing interactive technology, and specifically videogame technology, to museum exhibitions, institutions also began to consider the impact of this technology. In 1989, the Museum of the Moving Image put on the exhibition, *Hot Circuits*, which presented a collection of playable arcade machines, presented not as historical artifact or technological advancement, but as living culture. This exhibition indicated a change in philosophy, expanding the institution's conception of what fell under the category of "moving image" (Slovin, 2009). *Hot Circuits* retained many of the contextual elements that would have been present if encountering the games on display in an arcade. The cabinets were preserved in full, and visitors were given a set number of tokens (and could purchase more) to play the machines.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, other institutions would offer counterpoint exhibitions exploring the manifestations of games and software in a contemporary high art context. Beryl Graham's 1996 exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, *Serious Games*, is an early example that reveals many challenges and preconceptions relevant to presenting videogames in a contemporary art space. Graham notes that the show was not intended to be primarily about the technology supporting the works, but the interaction involved with activating them, and this is demonstrated by some of the included works not having technological components at all. This usefully contextualized videogame-based works in the tradition of previous playful, interactive, and rule-based forms of art production, such as Fluxus, Conceptual and Performance Art. Despite this, Graham still noted some institutional prejudices in how the show was handled. For example, while able to avoid stereotypical "computer lettering" or "fractal" graphic design, the

battle was lost trying to avoid a “fun for kids” marketing angle, because of the presence of the word “games” (Paul, 2008).

Other exhibitions followed, focusing on artists using game-making and modding tools to create works that were primarily situated within new media or net.art circles. The exhibition *Games:Computer Games by Artists* (2003), curated by Tilman Baumgärtel, Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler, was in part inspired by a curiosity about the potential offered by homebrew gaming and commercial videogames adding more options for modification, and contextualized this in artistic practice by relating modification to “appropriations” and “détournements.” While noting the disproportionate marginalization of games as a cultural form, only pieces presented as “artists’ approaches” were selected for the show, maintaining an awareness of, but simultaneous separation between, homebrew and modding communities and the art world (Paul, 2008).

In 2000, Antoinette LaFarge and Robert Nideffer curated *SHIFT-CTRL* for The Beall Center for Art and Technology at UC Irvine. This show presented the work of many net and new media artists who had a history of working with videogames and game mods, but also featured two videogames that were popular commercial products, *The Sims* and *Ultima Online* (LaFarge, 2015). Between *Hot Circuits* in 1989 and *Game On* in 2002, this was one of the very few popular commercial videogames on display in art institutions, without artist mods placing it in the tradition of appropriation-based work.

Game On (2002), alternately, attempted to capture a broad view of the form, presenting over 150 videogames between several locations and covering topics from the 1960s to the present (as well as updating selections with each iteration of the show.) *Game On* also set a major precedent for commercial games beyond the arcade era being presented in an arts institution. While other exhibitions displaying “artist’s takes” on videogames in the spirit of appropriation or critical response continued, *Game On* toured

multiple countries in the following years, entering many different art and design institutions, presenting the idea that videogames do not necessarily need the intervention of existing artistic approaches to fit into the narrative being produced by art and design museums. This would shape eventual collecting and exhibition strategies adopted by major institutions like MoMA, the V&A and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

With the spread of the internet and more accessible software tools for game creation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the weaknesses in the binary categorization of games as commercial or artistic became apparent. Sites like Newgrounds, GameJolt and itch.io, as well as tools like Macromedia Flash, GameMaker, Unity, Twine and many others, made the creation and distribution of games by individuals more broadly visible and popular. The sharing of mods and other player-customized content, as well as performances of gameplay in speedrunning and Let's Play communities being compiled and distributed online also made the role that spectatorship and collaboration had in the reception of videogames more prominent.

Presently, there is a broad range of methods of production, and the scale of the production method has less of an effect on visual aesthetic and gameplay design due to the accessibility of tools and knowledge provided by the internet, as well as increasingly sophisticated and affordable home PCs. Many videogames created within this context, from experimental works to those modeled on mainstream genres and conventions, were gathered under the umbrella of "indie." Indie "arcades" brought together many of these games, such as Indiecade, which started in 2005, and similar exhibitions (such as *The Blank Arcade* itself), which provided another influential exhibition style for videogames.

The commercial and critical success of several independent games, created by single authors or a small team of developers, as well as an ongoing conversation about the stylistic influence of well-known figures from large game studios, created a renewed interest

in games, both as authored objects and stylistic works of art. This is reflected in two major exhibitions from 2012, *Game Masters* and *The Art of Video Games*. Originating at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and Smithsonian American Art Museum respectively, both exhibitions made arguments through their selections that certain games bear the print of some sort of particular stylistic or expressive authorship, whether from an independent developer, producer, or large studio. The focus on authorship by particular figures or well-known companies helps to establish videogames as a form belonging in art institutions, because of the art world's similar focus on tracing styles, relationships of influence, and artists' careers. However, historian Raiford Guins criticizes this approach, noting that, when applied to videogame production, it tends to focus on large corporations or high-level producers or directors, and anonymizes other artists who may have made important contributions to the final product (Guins, 2014).

These exhibitions were followed shortly by *Applied Design* (2013), The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition celebrating their first acquisition of videogames, including commercial successes like *Tetris* and *SimCity* alongside indie and freeware titles like *Dwarf Fortress* and *Passage*. The MoMA has both fine art and design collections, however, Paola Antonelli, the curator of the selection, was clear that they were collecting the games as design objects. On display, most of these games are presented with only a screen and the minimum required control interface. This is opposed to the collection and display strategy of The Museum of the Moving Image, which conserved and presented the cabinets as if they were also part of the videogame, displaying them in a way that maintained some of the original arcade context. While Antonelli says this decision intended to isolate design elements and avoid "arcade nostalgia," it can neglect important aesthetic and historical components of the games (Antonelli, 2013).

Smaller exhibitions have used their narrower scope to explore more specific themes. For example, in 2013, *XYZ: Alternative*

Voices in Game Design presented a selection of games that challenged not only the presumed demographics of game players and creators, but also the aesthetic and conceptual potential of videogames. Recently, in 2016, *The Game Worlds of Jason Rohrer* was billed as the first monographic retrospective of a single game maker (The Davis Museum at Wellesley College, 2016). Whether or not this is technically true, considering new media artists who worked primarily in games and software during the 1990s and 2000s, such as Jodi and Natalie Bookchin, it demonstrates a further integration of games made outside of an art context into the art world and its styles of exhibition.

CASE STUDY: *THE BLANK ARCADE 2016*

The 2016 edition of *The Blank Arcade* exhibition was initially planned as an event associated with the First Joint DiGRA/FDG conference in Dundee, Scotland. Because of its proximity to the event venue, as well as the gallery staff's experience with new media art objects and the resources to display them, the Hannah Maclure Centre gallery at the host institution, Abertay University, was identified as the best venue for the exhibition. The convenience and resources afforded by the location led to the decision that *The Blank Arcade's* usual duration should be extended to last almost three months, from August 2nd, 2016, to October 27th, 2016. *The Blank Arcade 2016* would also have an opening event targeted at delegates of the conference, and a subsequent event for students and the public. The longer exhibition period and increased accessibility to the public offered an opportunity to collect information on how many types of visitors respond to exhibitions of experimental and unusual videogames.

Early meetings determined that the goals of *The Blank Arcade 2016* would be to curate a selection that would continue the tradition of presenting videogames, and other forms of playful experience that offer experimental perspectives on the purpose and potential of play. Accessibility was a primary concern due

to the increased public access to the show, but the games' appropriateness for a different display context was also important. Adjustments to what type of works could be accepted as well as how many had to adapt the exhibition to the expectations and limitations of a space that was more like a traditional contemporary art gallery. Both curators were committed to presenting experimental works, but they would have to be durable and non-ephemeral enough to withstand being displayed five days a week for three months, and also able to be transported to and fit in the top floor gallery space of a university building, rather than a conference venue or other multipurpose space. Selection Process

Conscious of the above issues, the curators drafted a submission form and made it available online. We distributed it via mailing lists and social media, extending the invitation to submit to independent game developers, games-related academics, and new media artists. During the six weeks the call was open, we received a response of 57 different submissions from a variety of individual artists, studios, collectives and development teams based across the UK, Europe, Asia and North America.

After submissions closed, Lindsay Grace and I prepared to curate the submissions. We ranked the projects separately before meeting via Skype to discuss the works we agreed were suitable, and decide on the content as well as general theme of the show. While evaluating the selections, some had to be declined immediately due to lack of quality, non-functionality, or insufficient relevance to the prompt. Other works were conceptually original and of sufficient quality, but required too much space, or more advanced technology and upkeep, which the HMC could not afford to provide for the three months of the exhibition.

From works that were not disqualified for these issues, I curated two ideal but different selections; one of a show that featured games that responded to current events, and another that focused on games that appealed to the senses in unusual ways, through

alternative graphics styles, tactile interfaces, sound engineering and so on. These were two categories that there was a lot of interest in, because many submissions tended to fit in one of these categories, and they also matched themes of major indie arcades and other showcases, such as Alt. Ctrl. at GDC, and Games For Change. The limitation of only selecting from the pool of submissions (a common approach for many “arcade” type exhibitions) made it difficult to select a more specific theme, but there was still a desire that some unifying thread group the selected games together. In hindsight, using only this approach may be worth reconsidering in future iterations if a stronger theme is desired. In this case, the theme of “senses” is defined as excellent submissions which deviate from ways that mainstream videogames create sensory experiences, and the theme of “current events” is defined as excellent submissions which deviate from the escapism associated with mainstream games by addressing real-world events and issues.

As co-curators, we overlapped more on our positive opinions of the “senses” category of games. Many of the politically themed games were from an English-speaking and specifically American perspective, and some relied on outside knowledge related to past or current events. Overall, the works fitting the theme of the senses were more accessible. The games we both felt most positively about, and felt fit this general theme, were narrowed down to nine, which led to the eventual eight selections featured in the show.

The final selections were *Abstract Playground AP1* by Will Hurt, *Beeswing* by Jack King-Spooner, *eBee* by the collective Pins and Needles, *Fugl* by Johan Gjestland and Team Fugl, *Katakata* by Kirsty Keatch, *Lissitzky's Revenge* by Christopher Totten, *Orchids to Dusk* by Pol Clarissou, *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* by Seemingly Pointless, and *Walden* by Tracy Fullerton, though *Walden* was found to be beyond the means of the exhibition, requiring a graphics and video card the HMC could not supply.

Due to limitations of space and budget, as well as the desire to create a tightly curated show, the 2016 edition of The Blank Arcade ended up being the most selective iteration. This selection draws from the history of videogame exhibitions, and challenges it by including works by teams and single creators, works of vastly different scales and media, and works from creators that described themselves as artists, designers, and game developers alike. This was done partly to bridge the gap between the parallel histories of independent and new media art game development, which rarely interact in the history of game exhibitions, in the hopes of creating fruitful and provoking juxtapositions between works that feel more like “art” and “games,” or works made by teams and a single artist.

Deliberately, most of the games in the exhibition were intuitively accessible, or at most could be figured out through a brief period of experimentation. *Fugl* and *Lissitzky's Revenge* were the videogames in the exhibition that demanded the most traditional gaming skill with controls, but they also allowed the player to restart and change their approach quickly in the case of failure, so that it was not a major discouragement or setback. This is not to say that all gallery games must be simple. A difficult control scheme that draws from tacitly accepted “gamer” culture norms can even be used strategically to add to the themes of a piece and its aesthetic experience. Eddo Stern's *Vietnam Romance*, for example, was displayed concurrently in the Dundee Contemporary Arts center as a part of a different exhibition, and has a complex control scheme with a high learning curve, even for experienced mainstream videogame players. However, it was also situated in a larger gallery space and had a robust attract mode that could communicate the content of the game to people intimidated by the control scheme. Gauging the appropriateness of including difficult or unintuitive games requires a case-by-case judgement, and considering the other games in the exhibition, the flow of visitors through the space, as well as the likely audience, are important aspects of this curatorial process.

Exhibition Installation

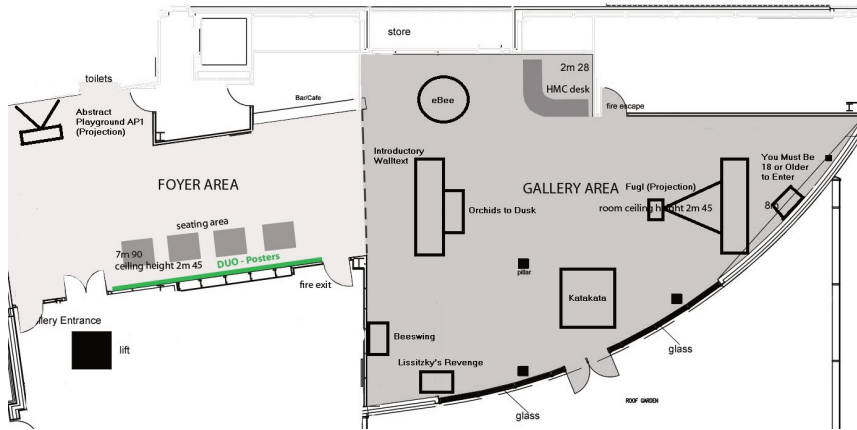


Figure 1: Floorplan for *The Blank Arcade 2016* installed at the Hannah Maclure Centre in Dundee.

Within the gallery space, two mobile partitions were used to mount the introductory wall text and direct flow through the space, and also to create a slight barrier between the general exhibition space and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*. For this work, some specialized furniture for setting a scene similar to the one implied in the game was acquired. For cohesion, both with the HMC's other exhibitions as well as between the works on display, I exhibited the rest of the works on either standard desks or plinths provided by the gallery, projected, or freestanding in the case of *Katakata*. Lindsay Grace and I also prepared texts for wall labels as well as the catalogue to offer background information, interpretation and an explication of the exhibition's theme for visitors.

The Hannah Maclure Center frequently put on new media related exhibitions and had a rather typical medium-sized gallery space for them. Generally, the walls are white, and the works are either placed on pedestals, hung on the wall, or freestanding sculptural works. While the gallery itself is not strictly rectangular, with a long, curved wall, the aesthetic and hanging style coincides with what Brian O'Doherty refers to as the "white cube," a display paradigm that emerged in the mid-20th century and that still

dominates many art institutional spaces. These spaces are characteristically painted white or a similarly non-distracting, solid color, with minimal seating, decoration and uniform lighting. These design choices intend to encourage an uninterrupted encounter between the art object and visitor, without anything significantly altering the appearance of the work or creating distractions. O'Doherty notes that "unshadowed, white, clean and artificial," this style of display presents works as timeless, and attempts to "subtract from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is art" (O'Doherty, 2000).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, initiated this style of exhibition with Alfred Barr's exhibitions of Modern art that hung paintings on neutral colored, undecorated walls, evenly spaced and at eye level. A lack of immediate hierarchy on the walls and linear, sequential hanging style conveys that the museum is a neutral container for artists' ideas, and this hanging style has become so successful, and spread to other institutions, to the point it has become "invisible" (Staniszewski, 1999). However, this attitude can conceal many choices the museum or gallery made about how to show the work on display, as well as what was not to show. While MoMA classifies the videogame works within their collection as "design" rather than art, the display approaches they use for traditional artworks like the painting and sculpture has influenced their approach to displaying videogames, as Raiford Guins notes in an interview. He particularly draws attention to their portrait-painting like orientation on the wall, which makes it difficult for others to see the onscreen action when a visitor is at the controls, as well as their use of emulation and stripping down of control interfaces, which removes important elements of industrial design as well as the time period and context the game was made for (Ferranto, 2017). In the same way that the white cube environment presents works of art as static, timeless and removed from cultural context, adapting videogames to this display paradigm strips them of many of their historical and aesthetic details.

To avoid the shortcomings of this universalizing approach and experiment with alternatives, *The Blank Arcade* included some display styles that focused on the direct interaction experience, but also others that considered participation and spectatorship occurring simultaneously. Combining these approaches was an attempt to acknowledge the variety of personalities and experience levels visitors would be bringing to the exhibition, as well as to mesh with the overall theme of presenting a variety of unconventional ways games can engage with perception and the senses.

The videogames that were oriented most towards a one-to-one experience of interaction were *Beeswing* by Jack King-Spooner, *Lissitzky's Revenge* by Christopher Totten, and *Orchids to Dusk* by Pol Clarissou. Both *Beeswing* and *Lissitzky's Revenge* shared aesthetic themes in that they were games utilizing tactile media like cut paper, sculpture and drawing in the creation of their digital graphics. They were also both displayed on desktop monitors set on plinths with standard interfaces for control (an Xbox 360 controller in the case of *Lissitzky's Revenge* and a QWERTY keyboard for *Beeswing*) and a set of headphones. The eye-level monitors and headphones conveyed a focus on the unique sound and visuals that were a part of these works and made up their most important details. In this case, the one-to-one experience was intended to draw close attention to visual and audio details in a potentially crowded and noisy gallery environment.

Beeswing is a personal narrative game about revisiting the Scottish village that King-Spooner grew up in, and so pulled local topics into an international selection of games. All of *Beeswing's* graphics began as drawings, paintings or clay figures, which King-Spooner scanned or photographed, and animated digitally before putting them into the game. The game allows the player to take control of the King-Spooner's avatar within the world and explore locations in the village and nearby city at their leisure and in any order.

Personal photographs and video clips are included, in addition to the intimate subject matter. The fact that all game assets, writing, audio and programming were gathered or created and implemented by a single author gives *Beeswing* potentially a different reception as an art object within the gallery, as opposed to other projects that rely on abstract or digitally-generated imagery, or work credited to teams or collectives. *Beeswing*, being a videogame that reflected this working style, as well as emphasized a handmade feel were primary reasons why this work was selected as an example of how the aesthetic horizons of videogames are being expanded.

Lissitzky's Revenge has graphics that mimic the drawings and designs of the Suprematist painter, El Lissitzky. Christopher Totten is an independent game developer who is interested in facilitating meeting points between videogames and cultural institutions, such as galleries and museums. *Lissitzky's Revenge*, like *Beeswing*, expands the aesthetic horizons of mainstream games by referencing an art historical movement in all aspects of its design. Suprematism is significant in the history of art and design because it was a movement that explicitly attempted to shape not only the aesthetic taste of the people, but also their political consciousness through abstract imagery.

Lissitzky's Revenge utilizes motifs and principles of Suprematist design to question whether such abstract symbols can provide motivation and narrative to the player, and if the videogame player of the 21st century can be manipulated by the same principles developed by the Suprematism movement a century ago. This not only taps an unusual design inspiration and medium for the videogame's visuals, but also challenges dominant preconceptions of the game studies field, which often rhetorically separate the underlying code of a videogame and its "aesthetic trappings" (Niedenthal, 2009).

I set up Pol Clarissou's *Orchids to Dusk*, running on a PC at a desk with a single chair and headphones. This game is controlled with a typical keyboard and mouse setup. *Orchids to Dusk* is particularly

suiting to gallery display because it has a set play-time that is the same or shorter for each player. The game follows an astronaut who crashes on an apparently depopulated planet. After pausing to examine the environment for a few moments, the option to remove one's helmet appears to the player. Unlike the fast-paced action in many mainstream games that has been associated with videogames as a whole, this game requires the player to play slowly and carefully to reveal all gameplay choices.

Orchids to Dusk also exists as a networked environment that records every play session experienced by players who download the game from Clarissou's Itch.io page. In the year since it was released, Clarissou noted on his Twitter account that some areas of the networked version have become heavily forested, as previous plays' effects on the gameplay environment shape how the next players explore (Clarissou, 2017). The iteration displayed at *The Blank Arcade* was not connected to this networked version, however, so the environment created was specific to those who visited Blank Arcade. Placing only one chair with the work made it the most explicitly one-to-one experience, but because of its brief set length and themes of isolation, it was also the most appropriate work for this display style. Additionally, the changing game environment offered an indirect way for visitors to interact with those who visit before or after them.

I installed the other five videogames in the gallery in ways that more explicitly considered spectatorship. Upon first entering the gallery, visitors were in front of Will Hurt's *Abstract Playground AP 1*. This work is made up of a projection that players interact with through a custom control panel of arcade buttons. Button presses trigger sounds and animations, changing the color scheme and configuration of the depicted structure, as well as the selection of sounds. It was considered a strong inclusion for the show for its distinct graphical style that references Brutalist architectural movements that appear in the skyline of Dundee. Will Hurt's project also involved collaboration with players who had learning and/or motor disabilities, and may not have been able to enjoy

the complex control schemes or speed and challenge of more mainstream videogames.

While few of the videogames on display in *The Blank Arcade* had traditional fail states, many still utilized more complex standard interfaces such as contemporary game console controllers or WASD-mouse style controls for PCs, which rely on pre-existing knowledge of videogames. Placing a work with an interface more firmly rooted in daily life at the beginning of the exhibition (visitors likely used similar push buttons in the elevator on their way to the gallery) established confidence in a broad swathe of visitors before leading them to more complex experiences. One visitor from the 45-65 age group noted that *Abstract Playground* was the only work they found “immediately accessible” and needed help from the gallery attendant with the others. *Abstract Playground*’s lack of explicit goals often caused players to treat it more as an instrument than a game, “performing” small improvisations before moving on.

I placed *eBee* near the entrance of the exhibition at a large round table with several chairs. *eBee* also does not utilize a typical technological interface. In terms of genre, it has more in common with tactile puzzles and table games, staging gameplay that can be either cooperative or competitive, guided by the universal laws of electronics. The rules of the game are literalized in that, to be successful, the players must place game pieces that represent a functioning electrical circuit, and because of the e-textile elements in the pieces, properly placed pieces will result in an actual circuit being created and an LED light turning on. *eBee* was created by the Pins and Needles collective, which is a group of students and faculty at Northeastern University with a multidisciplinary background interested in game design.

eBee also aspires to bring forward forgotten elements of the history of computing and social life that are neglected in mainstream videogames. The choice to use textile and quilting processes and motifs in the creation of a game about electronics references the

origins of early punch-card computing, which was used to control textile design through Jacquard looms, and also draws inspiration from female-oriented social spaces, like quilting bees. Because of the game's more complex yet flexible rule structure, and because it was up to visitors to enforce the rules, as it is not a digital game managed by a computer, laminated cards fully explaining the rules were provided in addition to the gallery text. Additionally, the rules could be applied to any number of players, making it a work that a social experience of multiple visitors could be built around, and creating less pressure for players to hand off the controls if they feel they are taking too long or playing poorly.





Figure 2 & 3: *Abstract Playground AP1*(top) and *eBee*(bottom) as installed at *The Blank Arcade*.

In the center of the exhibition space, visitors encountered an object that initially does not seem like any recognizable form of game at all. This large sculpture, made of a metal frame, wooden plinth, and a long Jacob's Ladder toy with a robotic servo motor and contact mic attached, is Kirsty Keatch's *Katakata*. A computer and Wi-Fi router within the plinth allows visitors with a smartphone to connect to the sculpture and control it. Once the user connects with their phone to *Katakata*, flipping the phone activates the motor at the top of the statue, turning the Jacob's ladder toy and processing the audio data that goes through the contact mic into an accompanying sound that plays through nearby speakers. Moving the phone from side to side allows the user to alter the frequency of the sound, speeding it up or slowing it down as it loops. For Keatch, *Katakata* originated in a dissatisfaction with sound design for mobile technology, where, despite the potential offered by the portability and features of smartphones, generally little effort is put in beyond basic sound effects and music in smartphone apps because many users play the games on mute, while in a

noisy area such as their commute. *Katakata* innovates on mobile phone related audio by using the ubiquity of mobile devices to control external sound. Only one user is able to play with it at a time, adding elements of spectatorship and performance to the often solitary world of mobile gaming. This made it an extremely relevant selection, but it also came with more risk and challenges than the other objects in the exhibition. It was the only piece with robotic moving parts, which sometimes had to be repaired or reset by Keatch herself or another expert. Therefore, *Katakata* experienced the most downtime in the exhibition.

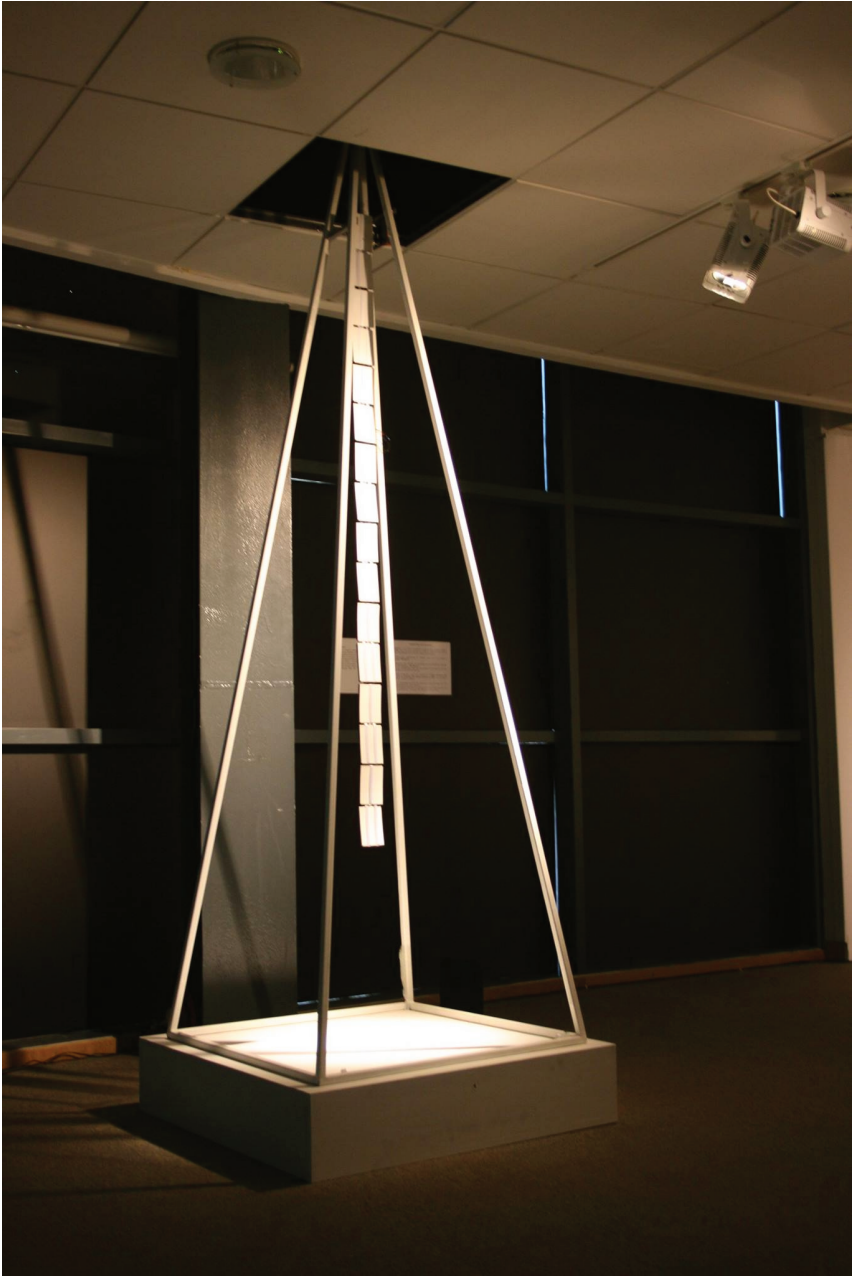




Figure 4 & 5: *Katakata*(top) and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*(bottom) as installed at *The Blank Arcade*.

Beyond *Katakata* was a large, colorful projection that served as the visual focal point of the exhibition. I projected Johan Gjestland and Team Fugl's *Fugl* on the central movable wall form. *Fugl*, like *Lissitzky's Revenge*, can fit into an existing videogame genre, in this case the flight simulator. However, while mainstream flight sims typically involve piloting some sort of vessel, like an airplane or spaceship, and navigating to specific goals or engaging in combat, *Fugl* does not include any of these features. Instead, players control a bird. Rather than the controls approximating vehicular movements, they include flapping, perching, and riding gusts of wind. This decision was meant to create a flying simulator that was less about racing or combat and instead focused on the sensation of flight itself, and leaves the goals and motivation for play up to the player. The game is available on mobile platforms, using tactile touch and tilt controls, for the Virtual Reality headset Oculus Rift, and for basic desktop PCs. The PC version may seem most detached from the idea of sensation, as a mouse and keyboard or game controller controlling the action onscreen would be the

most abstracted form of engagement with the work, diminishing the sensation of flight for the player, considerably more so than it would with touch and tilt controls or the perspective of VR. However, we decided a VR headset would hamper flow through the exhibition and require more monitoring, space and resources than the gallery could provide, and similarly, using the mobile game would only accommodate one player at a time and risk being overlooked as the smallest screen in the gallery space. Running the game on a PC, but projecting it, was the best option. Because of the scale, all viewers, not just the player, could get a sense of the feeling of Roger Caillois' concept of *ilinx*, a type of play that relies on sensations of speed and being out of control due to the disruptions of perception that *Fugl* provokes (Caillois, 2001). I placed the final game in *The Blank Arcade* in a small room-like space created by the movable wall *Fugl* was projected onto within the gallery. Separating this game from the main area of the exhibition with this partition served multiple purposes. *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*, by collective, Seemingly Pointless, was the only game in the show to feature sexual content. The game is an interactive fiction piece primarily about being a child sneaking onto the family computer to look at online pornography for the first time. The use of ASCII art to represent pornographic elements puts a kind of screen between the viewer and what would typically be scandalous content, making the focus more on the narrative and atmosphere generated by the work. Despite this, some moments in the game could still be seen as inappropriate or uncomfortable, so the installation of the game was behind a partition and a content warning was included on the label. These display choices also ended up serving the content of the game and made this freely-available online PC game, which visitors could download from home, a unique gallery experience. The partition allowed us to simulate the scale and setup of the computer room mentioned in the game. 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* was projected on, to increase visitor awareness that the exhibition

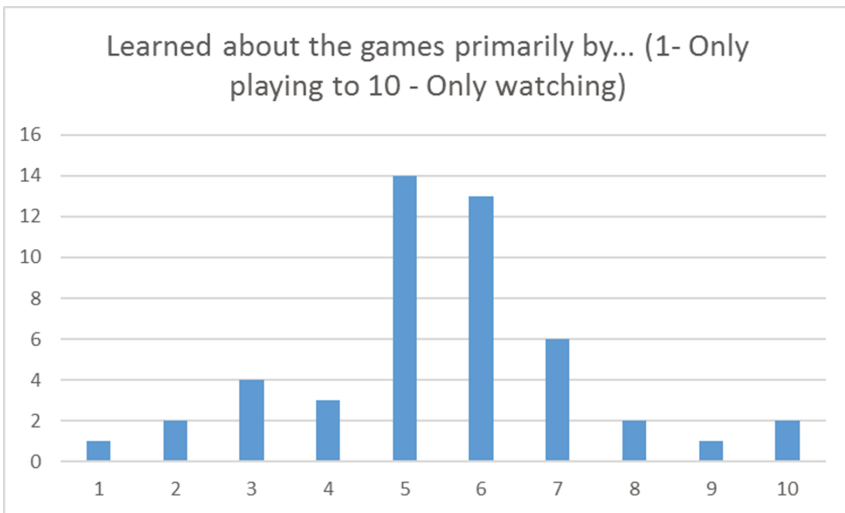
continued that way. The effect of creating the computer-room like setting within the gallery contributed to the exhibition's overall theme of games extending the aesthetic and sensorial potential of digital game design. The shape of the created room mimicked the implied setting of the game, and the layout of the room, with the visitors being able to see the computer screen over the current player's shoulder as they entered, referenced the anxiety within the game of the player character sneaking onto illicit websites and looking over their shoulder to ensure their parents aren't home. It created an atmosphere that was both intimate and nostalgic, as well as spectated, playing with ideas of comfort and performance as well as suggesting the typical setting where videogames are played. Visitor Feedback

I prepared paper surveys and made them available for visitors to answer basic demographic questions that are a traditional part of gauging the reach and influence of gallery shows. Because of the interactive element of the artworks, as well as their technological interfaces, which may seem daunting and unfamiliar to certain audiences, I also included questions about the perceived accessibility clarity, and functioning of the works to provide perspectives for future iterations of my curatorial practice.

Because these forms were voluntary for visitors to fill out, they do not represent nor were they intended to record an accurate number of attendees or precise demographic data. Instead, they were intended primarily to gain impressions of the variety of people who attended, and their response to the exhibition methods. Overall, 48 responses were collected, of which 19 respondents were female, one was non-binary, and 25 were male, with the remaining three opting out of sharing their gender identity. In terms of age, at least one response was collected from every category, but it predictably slanted to being dominated by the 16-22 age group, due to the gallery's proximity to Abertay University and the fact that professors were encouraged to promote the show to their game design students. 26 respondents were 16-22 years old, 15 were 23-30, five were 31-45, one was 46-64, and

one was over 65. Despite the scarcity, some of the surveys from older respondents offered interesting insights, as cited in the case of *Abstract Playground AP1*.

The next section allowed the visitor to select any number of available statements that were related to their reasons for attending the exhibition. Among the many options, 22 respondents noted an existing interest in videogames as a primary reason, and 19 indicated a pre-existing interest in new media or contemporary art generally, more in line with the program of the HMC, which does not regularly exhibit videogames. “Gamers” and mainstream gaming often tends to be at odds with so-called “art games” or use of gaming technology in new media art, so it is encouraging that the exhibition was advertised and presented in a way that appealed to both interests.



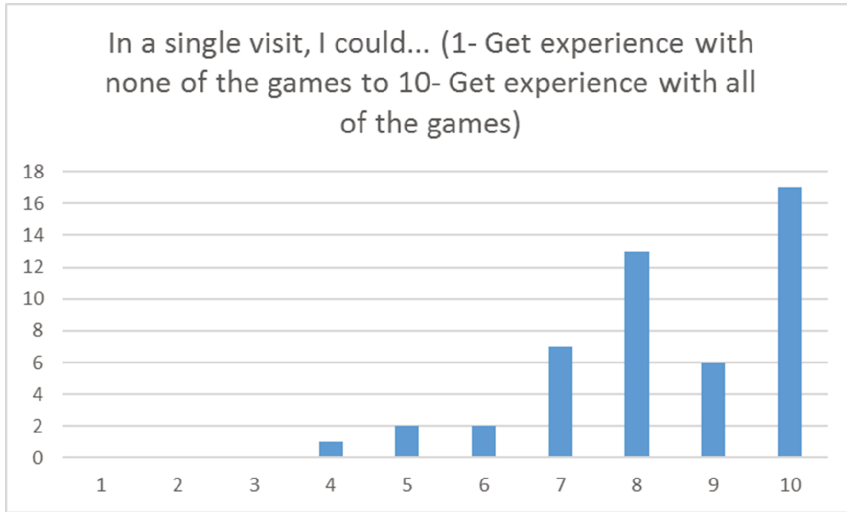


Figure 6 & 7: Distribution of answers for questions 4 (top) and 6 (bottom) from the visitor survey.

Other questions asked the visitor to rate their opinion or experience on a spectrum from 1 to 10. One of these questions asked visitors to rate how they primarily learned about the games; Only by Playing (1) or Only by Watching (10), with a clarifying note of Equally Playing, and Watching Others in the center. The mean value of these responses was 5.5, very close to the middle, with distribution across all the values. This response especially had interesting connotations for exhibitions of videogames, and was my main takeaway from this exhibition that I carried into future work and research. Academic discourse surrounding games has long prioritized the individual experience of the player, or the game as activated by player interaction as the primary object of game studies. Recent work considering spectated and cooperative play of so-called “single player” experiences, such as Let’s Plays, streaming, speedrunning, and so on, has begun to play a notable role in discussions, and this statistic is additional evidence of the importance of these considerations. Not only in recreational play of mainstream and commercial games does watching have a marked effect on how players receive games, but the same also appears to be true of videogames in a gallery context.

Visitors were also asked how many games they felt they could get sufficient experience with during a single visit to the gallery, rating from None of the Games (1) to All of the Games (10). The mean value of all the responses was 8.4. The distribution ranged from as low as four, implying slightly less than half the games, to the maximum of 10. A high number of games available to play has been a selling point for several past exhibitions, such as *Game On*. However, that a smaller exhibition of only eight games still overwhelmed some visitors in terms of being satisfied with the amount of time spent with each game confirms that tighter curation of selections may offer a deeper understanding of the games on display.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

The Blank Arcade 2016 was both a continuation and expansion of an existing curatorial approach towards games. By staging it in a gallery location and for a longer period, as well as building an event program around it and collecting visitor feedback, we were able to gather insights into how a variety of visitors respond to experimental videogames in an exhibition context. While *The Blank Arcade 2016* did not contain any games that would be considered mainstream, it did cover a variety of approaches, with creators describing themselves as artists, designers and game developers all included. It was thematic rather than historical, with the aim to present new works that surrounded the topic of experimental play with the senses, and came from a variety of different production methods and aesthetic approaches. In the end, the goal of the exhibition, to present a set of unconventional approaches to digital games and play, and accessibly expose them to a broad audience of academics, students and the public, was achieved through the selections and display choices. Despite this, it is important to pay attention to additional issues that arose amid the exhibition's reception.

This case study has addressed certain issues evident in videogame exhibitions, primarily visitors' perceptions of the accessibility of experimental games, the challenge of creating experiences that build on games that are downloadable or free to play at home, and presenting works together that cross lines of genre, production method and form. As I progress with my interpretation of past videogame exhibitions, and curation of new ones, visitor feedback to *The Blank Arcade 2016* has emphasized the importance of not only examining the direct interaction with videogames on display in these analyses, but also considering those who, because of crowds, ability or just personal preference, end up understanding the exhibition through spectating gameplay.

While the history of videogame exhibitions in art institutions may take many different approaches in terms of how it organizes the form's history, what it includes, and how it presents interactive displays, most of these approaches are primarily oriented around a normative idea of a player, which does not reflect how many experience videogames. Game Studies perspectives have investigated and engaged with the ways that videogames are often not simply interacted with, but enable a whole spectrum of spectatorship, participation and collaboration behaviors. Samuel Tobin (2016) has written on the variety of lingering behaviors in video arcades that challenge their historical framing as primarily a place where gamers interacted directly with arcade games, and James Newman (2002) has also noted the roles of "non-controlling" players and how these roles complicate binaries of "player" and "spectator."

There has also been much recent attention to how gaming marathons and online streaming has brought spectatorship to the forefront in videogames. Like the eSports, Let's Play channels, and speedrun communities studied by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux (2017), the gallery space is another context for videogames to become sites for performance and collaboration. While these behaviors aren't what is typically considered "interaction" with videogames, they are not a lesser form of

engagement, and can reveal their own forms of understanding and aesthetic appreciation of videogames.

The data collected from visitor surveys only offers impressions of what visitors subjectively reported on their experiences in the gallery, but still supports the importance of these emerging areas of scholarship that consider spectatorship. The finding that the majority of surveyed visitors reported both playing and watching the games to understand them, as well as scholarship that criticizes the binary separation of these two states, both in the gallery and in the context of videogame play, challenged the preconceptions I brought to *The Blank Arcade* and the installation style I used for the featured games.

In her study of the history of spectatorship and participation in art contexts, Claire Bishop notably does not examine any new media exhibitions. She considers interaction with technology different from participation because interaction is a one-to-one relationship, whereas participation involves multiple people (Bishop, 2012). This is similar to the view of interaction demonstrated by the MoMA and other exhibitions of videogames, which focus on a single, direct interactor. However, within the gallery videogames (or in the case of games that are only shown in galleries, such as work by new media artists, videogame technology and interfaces) are placed in an unfamiliar context, and use of them becomes somewhat self-conscious and performative. Along these lines, Beryl Graham notes that how interactive and technological works are exhibited often favor those that are already confident and experienced, and at worst can further alienate those who are less comfortable with a technological interface or not willing to “perform” in front of others, turning a democratizing gesture into one that instead only appeals to the typical audiences of videogames and technology (Dovey, 1996). Some major exhibitions, such as *The Art of Videogames*, presented their interactive videogames in a way that made their performance element explicit, with large projections into nooks that many could gather around while a player stood at the controls, but emphasis

on one-to-one interaction can still dominate both discussion of videogames and how they are exhibited.

Bishop's work complicates the contrasting of participation and spectatorship in the art world. While spectatorship is seen as an old and elitist form of engaging with artworks, which forces the viewer to concede to the expertise of the artist or institution, participatory exhibitions are seen as politically and socially engaging, allowing the visitor to take part in the institution, and even become empowered. However, like the binary of player and non-player, things are not so simple. Drawing on reality TV and social media as examples, she argues that participatory media are not necessarily empowering or enriching, and can entrench existing power relations just as static exhibition forms do. Further, she argues that a binary contrasting spectatorship as passive, and participation as active inherently maintains inequality, "either a disparagement of the spectator because he does nothing... or the converse claim that those who act are inferior to those who are able to look, contemplate ideas, and have a critical distance on the world" (Bishop, 2012). This usually maps to class divisions of the aestheticized; intellectual fine arts as high culture, and the popular and hands-on as low culture, or upper-class intellectual labor versus working-class manual labor; an issue it is especially important to be sensitive to when presenting a popular art form.

Engagement with spectatorship in *The Blank Arcade 2016* was mostly led by the experimental nature of the games included, but going forward I believe it is important for curators to consider how to engage with the presence of spectatorship in any exhibition of videogames. Instead of viewing accessibility in terms of an unrealistic ideal of every visitor engaging in one-to-one interaction with every game, it may be more appropriate to consider an exhibition as accessible if it facilitates the variety of ways people engage with videogames, without necessarily judging one as more legitimate.

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