

# Play and the Exhibition: The problematic fun of showcasing of videogames in informal and formal contexts

Gregor White  
Abertay University  
Bell Street, Dundee, UK  
[g.white@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:g.white@abertay.ac.uk)

Lynn H. C. Love  
Abertay University  
Bell Street, Dundee, UK  
[l.love@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:l.love@abertay.ac.uk)

Clare Brennan  
Abertay University  
Bell Street, Dundee, UK  
[c.brennan@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:c.brennan@abertay.ac.uk)

**This paper contributes to the developing body of videogame exhibition knowledge by evaluating the methods utilised within informal and formal contexts of videogames exhibition from the perspective of reception theory. The study of both large-scale exhibitions such as those by the Victoria and Albert museum and the Smithsonian American Art Museum alongside the one-night indie game night is a unique contribution to the field, with studies typically focussing on one given context. Reception theory and the hermeneutic circle provide lenses through which the active participative role of the player/reader in meaning-making can be evaluated. Exhibition method analysis across formal and informal contexts allows modelling of a connection between the need for player/reader specialist knowledge and the resulting co-participation in meaning-making possible. These models suggest the ways that exhibition methods and settings can shape audience profiles and the potential for co-participation. The results of this study may provide curators and game developers with alternative modes of thinking about player/reader meaning co-participation across exhibition and audience contexts.**

*Videogames. Exhibition methods. Reception theory. Co-participation in meaning-making.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Videogames are a relatively new medium that struggle to command cultural legitimacy in society (Reed 2018) driven perhaps by its playful nature being associated with childishness and frivolity or their association with violence (both digital and real world). In 2012 The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) purchased 14 videogames to add to its permanent collection (Antonelli 2012). This was seen by some as cultural acknowledgement of videogames as an artform (Zuckerman 2012), yet this has not permeated general society (Faber 2019). MoMa's addition of videogames to its collection can be seen as cultural appreciation of videogames or, more cynically, as appropriation of a highly popular form of media for the benefit of the institution.

For over 25 years, videogames have been widely exhibited in art, design and videogame centric exhibition institutions. Videogames exhibitions motivated by an art or design institution tend to propagate discourse regarding the cultural value and highlight their technological innovation or historical development (e.g. Game On! 2002). Exhibitions motivated by organisations specialising

in videogames exhibition move beyond historical or cultural discourses, instead interrogating the form through playful, critical and political framings (e.g. Chaotic Interfaces, 2020).

Regardless of the institution motivating a videogames exhibition, they face similar challenges in exhibiting videogames works including: problems of stability (both of software and hardware); currency of technology (robustness for exhibition, affordability); direct interaction as a potential barrier (complex control schemes, technological intimidation); and potential incompatibility with public play (limited number of players due to one-to-one nature of gameplay or long play times).

The problems presented by videogames exhibition are not new as media art and participatory museum studies have shown (Graham 2014; Simon 2010). However, academic texts around videogame exhibition typically focus upon archiving and preservation (Brennan & Holford-Lovell 2016; Newman 2009), a particular context (Romuldo 2017) or gallery visitors (Reed 2018) rather than informal and formal settings.

This study aims to model the relationship between exhibition design and the role of the reader/player in meaning-making. Reception theory, a method of literary criticism with roots in hermeneutics, provides a model for studying the relationship between a text and a reader. In the context of videogames exhibition, reception theory will allow analysis of the relationship between the videogames as mediated by curatorial decisions and the reader/player. The study will also examine the ways that setting (formal/informal) shapes meaning-making potential.

This research is informed by academic and practitioner grounding in games as a form (Love 2018; Love & Bozdog 2018); practices of interactive art exhibitions (Decoding space 2015; Lifespans 2018), participation in Game Arts International Assembly (a workshop for leaders in the world of videogame derived exhibition [Gameon2019.com 2019]) and the extensive body of knowledge of game studies.

To manage the scope of this study, videogames conferences such as the Game Developers Conference (GDC) or Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) have been omitted as their exhibitions are primarily determined by commercial rather than cultural criteria. Study of the traditional arcade has similarly been omitted. The study focuses on events held in Europe, US and Australia. These regions were chosen due to commonalities in the curatorial culture and language.

## **2. VIDEOGAMES EXHIBITION**

The arcade was the first space for public play of videogames but the modern arcade has diversified encompassing traditional notions and also barcades, indie game nights and game circuses. Each of these contexts leverages typical forms of social and cultural activity to promote play and videogame consumption. They provide access to play experiences, which are inaccessible to players otherwise, and provide a social setting, cultural framing and/or spectacular encounter, which places participation at the heart of game consumption (Goddard & Muscat 2016).

Indie game nights are one-night events, which occur once or several times a year such as GAMMA in Canada and The Wild Rumpus in UK. These events showcase new and often unpublished interactive experiences to expand the notion of videogames with their typically general audiences (Wethrowswitches.com n.d.). Some, like Beta Public in the UK, mix videogames with other forms of media, in this case, performance. They also invite provocative talks and discourse (beta-public.com n.d.). The indie game night tends to

undertake a selective practice of curation of exhibition objects display approaches (e.g. Games are For Everyone, UK) but this can also be emergent.

Playful media festivals offer alternative discourses around videogame development than commercial conferences such as GDC and E3. They mix the arcade with knowledge sharing through talks, demonstrations and workshops. Events such as Now Play This in London design their exhibition around a connecting theme, organising playable games and installations across different rooms offering varying forms of invitation and levels of energy (Now Play This 2016). The exhibition element of A MAZE/Berlin (2019) celebrates their award-winning games and is part-curated, and part-open to contributions by the community. The audience for these events is primarily game developers and makers but they welcome the general public through association with London Games Festival and Games Week Berlin respectively.

The arcade is a permanent space, which draws from the arcade traditions but aligns its curatorial practices with formal exhibition contexts. Arcades tend to focus on playable games around specific themes, which are often political, current or challenging to notions of the form (Pedercini 2019). They tend to be organised by practitioners specialising in videogames exhibition and selecting and presenting games in modes appropriate not only to the media but also to communicating with attendees. They can be grassroots such as Babycastles in USA or may play with the formality of white cube setting such as LikeLike in USA (Pedercini 2019). Their audiences may be niche or general depending upon their location and curatorial aims.

The formal games exhibition typically sees an organisation from outside the world of videogames engage with the media in an institutional setting. These events often map formal exhibition practices onto videogames aligning to institutional aims, requirements and audiences. Focus can be towards technological or historical perspectives such as Game On! (2002) at the Barbican, UK, and The Art of Video Games (2012) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in USA. They can offer extensive interaction such as Game Masters (2012) at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, Australia or can approach from a particular creative perspective such as Design/Play/Disrupt at the Victoria and Albert Museum, UK (2018), which focussed upon design. The target audience is often general due to the institutional setting.

In the context of this paper the videogames exhibition is organised under three general themes: Formal institution derived exhibition (e.g. Game On!), formal game derived exhibition (e.g. Babycastles or Now Play This) and informal game derived pop-up (e.g. The Wild Rumpus).

### **3. RECEPTION THEORY AND VIDEOGAMES**

Reception theory relies upon the hermeneutic circle where the parts of a text inform the reader's understanding of the whole, which in turn shapes their understanding the parts (Hoy 1982). Interpreting a text is a dynamic and complex process of constantly interpreting and re-interpreting a cohesive whole. This has much in common with exhibition design. The formal exhibition relies on selection of materials and the creation of a pathway (or series of pathways) through materials to create a curated narrative. These pathways can be: physical in regards to how a reader/player moves through a space; educational in relation to how information is given about the objects; contextual in how each object is presented as an individual and in relation to those around it; and narrative-building in relation to the timing of object introduction in the reader/player journey and their influence on the complete exhibition experience (Greenberg Ferguson & Nairne 1996). Informal settings may also consider these elements or may tend towards a more emergent arrangement.

Reception requires the reader/player to concretise meaning through interpretation of indeterminacies, often utilising codes of reference (Eagleton 1996). Indeterminacies or gaps require the reader to make connections in the spaces between sentences and paragraphs. Indeterminacies are a precondition for reader/player co-participation in interpretation; like videogames, they require interpretation for meaning to be made. Codes of reference help meaning-making by providing unspoken but culturally agreed rules, which can be implied in the text (e.g. social, literary, or contextual) (Eagleton 1996).

Indeterminacies can be found throughout exhibition design including the physical spaces between objects in the pathway through the space, the gaps in literary content of exhibition texts (e.g. catalogue or object texts), the arrangement and space between objects collected together etc. Like literary texts, co-creation of meaning is invited through these gaps as reader/players continually piece together (and reframe) a narrative based upon the objects and information presented to them throughout the exhibition. Co-creation of meaning is not a new idea in formal museum design (Manacorda 2016; Reeve 2013; Simon 2010),

whether through active co-creation in meaning making in exhibition reception or co-creation in the inception and design of the exhibition.

#### **3.1 Horizons of expectation and videogames**

Ingarden believes a text to be a set of "schemata" which readers bring to fruition and that they approach a text with "pre-understandings," beliefs and expectations which they apply in the interpretation of the text (Eagleton 1996; Sharpe 1990). Jauss (1982) talks of the "horizon of expectation" being not only what a reader brings to a text but also how their reading of the text is shaped by what they predict the middle and end may be from their interpretation of the beginning. This expectation constantly shifts during a complex process of on-going interpretation and meaning-making.

The knowledge of a reader/player equips them for interpretation. Experience with specific types of games technology, input devices and tropes will enhance reader/players ability to access games as texts for interpretation. Mastery of game control input unlocks the game allowing for interpretation to take place (Sharp 2015). This need for direct interaction can be a barrier to reception: control methods may be inaccessible or intimidating to audiences, technology may be too fragile or outdated to be practical for physical interaction, and certain types of control mechanism may fail to consider accessibility by favouring and prioritising abled bodies.

In videogames exhibition, curators often amend display methods (e.g. through projection, arcade cabinets etc.) and/or control methods to enhance accessibility and provide varying levels of participation. This better meets the needs of diverse audiences enhancing participation (Love 2018).

The historical positioning of the reader/player can also shape their pre-understandings and horizon of expectation (Jauss 1982). Videogames pre-understandings may be charged with preconceptions of the form, its social impact, its technological currency, and its relevance (or lack thereof) to the reader/player's own interests. Videogames reader/players arrive at an exhibition with pre-understandings which can act as barriers to co-participation in meaning-making including issues of accessibility and their own social, cultural and historical preconceptions of the form.

#### **3.2 The right kind of reader/player**

Iser's reception theory implies that a reader should be transformed by the power of the text to draw the reader's attention to their "routine habits of

perception” (Eagleton 1996, p68). Play has also been recognised as holding transformative potential (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Yet the concept of transformation in Iser’s reception theory is somewhat problematic however, as it implies there is a ‘right’ kind of reader and ‘right kind of text’: the reader is flexible enough in their values and skilled enough in their interpretation that they can unlock the transformative potential in a particular text. By being prepared for transformation Eagleton (1996) believes that the reader is never really transformed or are not particularly attached to their own values prior to their transformation. Iser discusses the ‘actual’ reader and ‘implied’ reader, “to whom the structure and language of the text speaks” (Hardwick 2003, p.8) highlighting that there is a target audience but also an audience embedded into the text.

The tensions in reception theory around the reader and text are very pertinent to the analysis of videogames exhibitions. As with many forms of media, the reader/player’s approach to videogames may reflect diverse expertise. For instance, they may be a developer (commercial, indie, student), player (enthusiast, casual or professional), streamer, hobbyist, academic or the general public. With each reader/player comes different knowledge structures for engaging with and understanding videogames. Videogames also vary in form, intent (i.e. commercial, artistic, technical and so on) and potential for interrogation. In videogames exhibition, the curator (and the setting) provides another layer forming narratives through selection of and design of artefacts to exhibit.

The videogames exhibition has to navigate the different forms of authorship at play and the audiences embedded within and targeted by curatorship and setting in order to unlock their transformative potential.

#### 4. METHODS

This study undertook analysis of videogames exhibitions across a series of informal and formal settings (Table 1). Exhibitions and/or venues for the study were selected for: being the first example of an event of this kind; their positive reception by audiences; or their reputation as leaders in the field in their local area.

Event analysis drew from secondary sources including online documentation, exhibition catalogues, press releases, reviews and interviews with curators. The authors also have first-hand experience of several of the events. Each event was profiled utilising eight criteria: audience, background, longevity, stated intent, external influences on programming, accessibility to

audiences, curation and programming and unique affordances. Curation and programming was broken down into a further six criteria, informed by key concepts of reception theory (described in brackets): Selection processes and theming (*pre-understandings*); videogames objects; textual framing approaches (indeterminacies, implied audience); curatorial approaches to showcase (indeterminacies, pre-understandings, hermeneutic circle); curatorial approach to participation (horizon of expectations); programming (implied audience, horizon of expectation, pre-understandings).

**Table 1:** Videogame exhibitions selected for analysis

FORMAL institution derived exhibition	FORMAL game derived exhibition	INFORMAL game derived pop-up.
Game On! At Barbican, London, UK (2002)	A/MAZE Berlin, Germany (2008 - Present)	GAMMA, Montreal, Canada (2005 - 2010)
The Art of Video Games Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, USA (2012)	Babycastles, New York, USA (2009 - Present)	The Wild Rumpus, UK and USA (2011 - Present)
Game Masters at Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, Australia (2013)	Now Play This, Somerset House, London, UK (2015 - Present)	Beta Public, London, UK (2013 - Present)
Play/Design/Disrupt at V&A London and Dundee, UK (2018/19)	LikeLike, Pennsylvania USA (2018 - Present)	GamesAreForEve ryone, Edinburgh, UK. (2015 - Present)

Profiling allowed for patterns in display methods across the three different exhibitions settings to emerge. These patterns were interrogated through iterative modelling of the links between audience, specialist pre-understandings and co-participation in meaning-making in relation to each of the three setting types. Each iteration was motivated by review of the models against the original profiles to enhance depth and specificity beyond the pattern led stage of analysis.

#### 5. FINDINGS: MODELLING GAME EXHIBITIONS

Profiling of videogame exhibitions led to the emergence of three layers of meaning-making opportunities for the reader/player, driven by showcase methods: the game objects, the curatorial mediation of these objects and setting (designed and embedded).

The first layer, the game objects, are the physical or digital artefacts that are displayed to an audience. These may include game hardware,

game code, the game itself and game design artefacts such as concept art, paper prototypes, wireframe plans, and its marketing material.

The second layer is the curatorial mediation of these artefacts in an exhibition setting. This relates to the steps a curator takes to make the game objects more accessible for meaning-making. This includes selection/production of material to expand the meaning-making potential around the game objects (e.g. gameplay videos, behind-the-scenes videos, developer talks), designing in different levels of participation in this selection/production, enhancing accessibility through augmentation and display. It also includes programming that enhances meaning-making through direct interaction with game makers or perhaps participating in game making processes.

The third layer considers setting, both the embedded meaning and the designed experience. Embedded meaning relates to aspects that cannot easily be altered (e.g. the pre-understandings of an institution). The designed experience relates to what a curator can do to enhance meaning-making potential of space such as considering atmosphere (e.g. lighting a space, use of music), comfort (e.g. providing gender neutral bathrooms, leveraging existing social settings as a site for game reception) and providing scaffolding to enhance reader/player co-participation (e.g. planning meaning-making pathways, providing spaces for activity and contemplation).

These layers of meaning-making are used to structure the analysis of exhibition approaches in relation to their potential to invite reader/player co-production of meaning and the specialist knowledge a reader/player requires to be able to participate (Figure 1). The mapping aims to formalise, by considering specialist knowledge (e.g. videogames techniques, aesthetic theory or formal criticism) the ways that different showcase strategies imply a particular kind of reader/player. The mapping also considers how curation can provide indeterminacies, which invite or reduce possibilities for co-production of meaning.

It is worth noting that the placement of methods upon this chart is based upon an assessment of indeterminacies provided by these methods in general. Each method has the potential to be more or less open for interpretation depending upon the curatorial approach but for clarity the model can only consider the 'average' potential for indeterminacy.

The game objects (layer 1) in general are deemed to have lower co-participation in meaning-making due to the largely closed nature of the media. Playable games have the greatest level due to their indeterminate nature and need for participation to exist. The potential within a game can be difficult to unlock for players with limited game playing experience or social concerns about playing in public and/or an institution, thus these objects require some level of specialist knowledge.



**Figure 1:** Reception based model of the three layers of meaning-making opportunities in an exhibition assessed against the reader/player's role in co-production of meaning and the specialist knowledge required.

Mediation (layer 2) can help to lower the need for specialist knowledge to interpret game objects. For example, through the creation of custom accessible control methods to simplify interaction or provision of spaces for observation of live play (using projection, large scale screens, arcade cabinets) to allow for reception at a lesser level of participation. Game play videos narrated by players can provide accessibility for interpretation but demands less of the reader/player in terms of direct or social play interaction. The facilitation of play by the maker or a gallery assistant may also lower barriers to participation. Exhibition theming can help to shape the horizon of expectation of the reader/player by providing framing for their pre-understandings and constraining the scope.

The setting (layer 3) can enhance co-participation further: Exhibition pathways can be examined against the horizon of expectation to consider how the early parts of the exhibition shape predictions about what is to come. Through design of an increasing difficulty curve (difficulty in interpretations, interaction and/or participative challenge) the horizon of expectation can be leveraged to scaffold confidence and skill development of reader/players. Such an approach can be seen in *Design/Disrupt/Play* (2018) where the exhibition flows from commercial videogames to more experimental through to examination of challenging discourses around videogames including violence and religion.

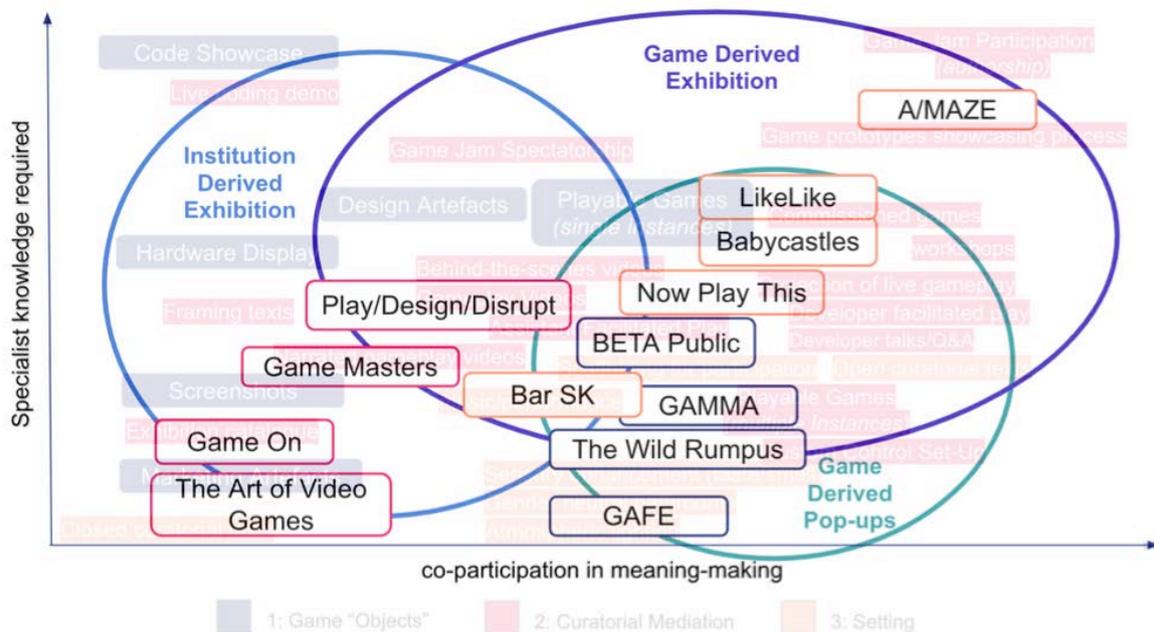
The pathways designed through an exhibition can evoke the hermeneutic circle by providing spaces with different rhythms which draw attention to the parts: active spaces where the focus is the

game/social aspects and spaces for contemplation, and reflection on the subject with more intimate play experiences (e.g. *Now Play This* 2016).

### 5.1 Formal and informal exhibitions

It is possible to map showcase methods and the potential for co-production of meaning broadly on to formal and informal exhibition settings (Figure 2). The resulting model suggests that formal exhibitions derived from the videogames community tend to require the player/reader to have specialist knowledge of the field but offer a high level of co-production of meaning through the use of participative and interactive approaches. Events derived from a formal institution tend to require less specialist knowledge but also tend to provide less opportunity for co-production of meaning (the supporting programme of events may enhance this). Informal pop-up events tend to require very little specialist knowledge whilst also supporting high potential for co-production of meaning due to their reliance on playable games, social interaction and social play.

Not all informal pop-up events are highly accessible and provide enhanced opportunities for co-production of meaning. Figure 2 also maps specific events against their required specialist knowledge and potential for co-production of meaning. It is clear that the utilisation of methods, which invite co-production of meaning, do not always lead to high levels of reader/player co-participation. This disparity is perhaps due to the potential of the method not meeting its actualisation within its given context. The actualisation is dependent on a variety of factors including the tone/atmosphere of the



**Figure 2:** General and specific event types mapped against the reception-based model of videogame exhibition.

event (i.e. a club style setting may enhance sociality but lessen 'seriousness' in meaning-making), the location of the event (i.e. the embedded meaning that shapes reader/player trust, cultural value, permitted behaviour etc.), the scaffolding provided for reception (i.e. the extent to which this directs/influences/disrupts reception), and the reader/player themselves, their pre-understandings and horizons of expectations.

The goals of an exhibition, like audience, shape the methods that are most appropriate to invite meaning-making. An exhibition focussed upon telling the technological story of videogames, for example, may rely more heavily on hardware showcase, developer interviews, behind-the-scenes videos and "less" interactive forms to accessibly bring technology to life for a general audience (e.g. Game On!). An exhibition such as Now Play This in 2019 which focussed on play's community building aspects relied on playable games, provocations, and making workshops appealing to general and specialist audiences through diverse invitations and a niche theme.

Co-participation in meaning-making does not mean providing the most interactive methods possible to create greater indeterminacies for interpretation. An exhibition relying wholly on indeterminacies would require the reader/player to become author. Rather, co-participation achieves a balance between methods, which guide, frame and equip the reader/player and those which challenge, provoke and invite active interpretation. This balance builds reader/player subject confidence develops their skills and prepares them to form, critique and reform their own opinions throughout the experience.

## 6. CONCLUSION

There is no one size fits all approach to videogame exhibition; the setting, curatorial goals, audience and game objects themselves create complex interactions and dependencies which alter potential for reader/player meaning-making co-participation. This paper takes a step towards formalising co-participation in meaning-making by proposing three layers at play in videogame exhibition: the game object, its mediation through curation and the embedded and designed impact of setting. It also promotes the link between the display and curatorial strategies and the specialist knowledge required by the reader/player to be able to read a game object. The implementation of design strategies can enhance or limit reader/player co-participation in meaning-making and more participative strategies have potential for but do not guarantee critical depth and enhanced meaning-making.

The videogame, if it is to be accepted in society as having cultural value, needs both formal and informal settings to reach diverse audiences. Future work in this area includes consideration of collective meaning-making around videogames between reader/players in an exhibition and examination of the role of the video game author in reader/player meaning-making.

It is important to acknowledge that in large non-videogames institutions and informal spaces, reader/players may be unintentional audiences who stumble upon videogames due to the appeal of the space rather than specific content. This presents an opportunity to the games community to expand the audience for the medium and redefine its cultural legitimacy by exposing non-specialists to frameworks, which allow engagement with, and interpretation of videogames as part of the cultural landscape.

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