Videogames and the Public Museum
Six Months Behind the Scenes

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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June 2023

FIGURE 0.1. *Wheeling an arcade cabinet through the sculpture gallery. © We Throw Switches, used with permission.*

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Michael McMaster
June 19, 2023

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Abstract

Over the past four decades, and especially within the last 15 years, videogames have emerged as a recurrent and increasingly prominent fixture in the exhibitions, collections, and programming of public museums. Despite their pervasive presence in cultural institutions, however, the situation of videogames within the museum remains poorly interrogated. Why are museums apparently so interested in videogames? How do videogames fit within the work and organisation of museums? And how do the established practices and ideologies of the public museum shape videogame displays in turn?

Developed from a six-month ethnographic field study behind the scenes at London's Victoria and Albert Museum in 2018, this research documents the final stretch of the multi-year development cycle of a blockbuster exhibition of videogames. Following the day-to-day work of the exhibition's curators and coordinators, the thesis examines the museum's backstage to understand how videogames – as a relatively unfamiliar medium, technology, and culture – fit into the established professional practices that comprise contemporary museum work. Beyond this granular perspective, the research connects the tensions encountered throughout the exhibition's development with broader museological concerns, suggesting that although videogames themselves are relatively unprecedented within cultural institutions, the frictions that emerge from their display are not. By examining what museums want from this new exhibition subject, the research uses videogames as an analytical lens through which to examine the position of the museum within its cultural economy. This thesis articulates how the gradual stripping of state funding from the public museum compels an institutional logic geared towards high visitation targets, which accordingly results in an inflexible system of exhibition

production which poorly serves subjects as materially and culturally complex as videogames.

The primary assertion of this thesis is that videogames trouble museums. They resist the entrenched material practices that comprise the task of exhibition-making, and confound its traditional modes of display. The unfamiliarity of the medium of videogames – the strangeness of its materiality, communities, and cultures of production – results in an incompatibility that requires significant and sustained effort to overcome. The research conveys a vision of the public museum as a multifarious institution whose activities are mediated through a complex assemblage of professional, cultural, and commercial interests. Through this, the videogame exhibition is positioned as a contested terrain: a site in which the heterogeneous desires of curators, museum directorate, and the videogame industry (among many others) collide.

1. Introduction

This thesis seeks to understand what videogames do for, and to, museums.

The question of *for* is not easily answered but it is relatively easily understood. In 1983, the Corcoran Gallery of Art – a large museum of fine art in Washington DC – hosted an invite-only display of arcade videogames, which it called the *Video ARTcade*. The event was a fundraiser for the Corcoran School of Art; it was also, possibly, the first ever exhibition of videogames by a public museum. An article written at the time for the *Washington Post* bemusedly contrasted the civilised aura of the museum and its visitors against the novel spectacle of the videogames permitted, for one night only, inside the decorous space of the Corcoran:

> "C'mon, for five bucks you can beat [television journalist] Bob Schieffer and [former White House Press Secretary] Jody Powell."
> Columnist Art Buchwald's voice drowned out the beeping and humming of the rows of video games that stood in the marble halls of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, daring the 400 or so party guests.
> The invitations billed it as a video ARTcade. And folks in formal dress hunched over their control sticks and buttons, not to be interrupted by talk of the town. They were there to play games. (Trebbe 1983)

In 1983, the situation of videogames within the gallery space was deeply unfamiliar, to both the institution and its audience. As game studies scholar Emilie Reed (2019, 11) wrote of the event, when it temporarily welcomed arcade machines into its halls the Corcoran Gallery "[seemed] to have capitalized on this unfamiliarity," and framed the videogames as "different from the art in the rest of the gallery for several reasons, because they are commercial, because they are technological, and because they are only there for a temporary event." Along with its celebrity guests, the *Video ARTcade*

instrumentalised videogames as a shallow marketing gimmick, and quite a transparent one at that – a novel strategy to get people through the door and to donate. This is by no means a cynical projection of sinister intent; the museum's director explained his rationale in clear terms:

> Throughout the two floors, kids with Corcoran T-shirts, men in tuxes and women with gowns were mesmerized by the video games, the drinks, the make-it-yourself salads and sundaes and the celebrity players. …
>
> "Look at the people coming in the door," Michael Botwinick, the new director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, said from the center of the crowd. He wore a tuxedo, a bright red vest, a flashing visor and a big smile. "This building is full of art. The machines are here to raise money." (Trebbe 1983)

Along with its connected School of Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art was chronically underfunded for most of its life as an institution (Montgomery 2012). With this precarity in mind, the Corcoran's reasons for engaging with videogames are easy enough to discern. In the director's own words, the machines are there to raise money.

In the four decades since the *Video ARTcade*, and especially within the last 15 years, videogames have emerged as a recurrent and increasingly prominent fixture within the exhibitions, collections, and programming of public museums.[1] They have been the focus of high-profile exhibitions at numerous prestigious art and design museums worldwide,[2] many of which have enjoyed wide-reaching and long-lasting global tours – the most prominent of these is the Barbican's *Game On*, which has toured continually since 2002 at over 40 venues internationally, and whose success has been

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[1] My usage of the term "public museum" throughout this thesis describes a ubiquitous yet fairly specific type of organisation: an established cultural institution, which is not-for-profit and partially reliant on state funding, and is accordingly committed to the display, collection, and conservation of cultural material for the benefit of its public. Examples of this include the Met or MoMA in New York City, the Louvre in Paris, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, or the British Museum in London. The kind of organisation that this research deals with is distinct from private museums – which receive funding from different sources and often exist to exhibit private collections, which accordingly dictates different responsibilities and remits – as well as smaller not-for-profit galleries and cultural spaces, which (in the context of exhibitions of videogames) may encounter similar curatorial difficulties to those discussed in this thesis, but are influenced by very different organisational and institutional dynamics.

[2] I do not provide a survey of prior videogame exhibitions within this thesis. See Reed (2019) for a critically minded exhibition history of institutional videogame displays, which was an invaluable point of reference in the development of my own research.

hailed as a testament to the blockbuster potential of videogame exhibitions as a format (Stuart 2015). Beyond the gallery space, videogames are at the centre of a variety of museum-hosted projects: ongoing preservation efforts, pop-ups and ancillary events, game-designer-in-residence programs, and gamified interpretive technologies, to name a few (Merkle et al. 2022; Sayej 2014; Templeton 2012). How have museums apparently become so interested in videogames? While the display at the Corcoran was given a clear enough reasoning, it is rare for museums' public messaging to be so straightforward. The ideologies which motivate museum work are typically inscrutable, and bear questioning. What institutional tendencies and logics are reflected through the display of videogames? Are the machines really there to raise money? In other words: what do videogames do for museums?

The question of what videogames do *to* museums is a little more complicated in its asking. Though this project began with an aim to understand the situation of videogames within culture, and within cultural institutions, as my research continued I found myself continually drawn to the interior organisation of the museum itself as my object of study. A fundamental premise which informs the arguments of this thesis is that videogames are largely unfamiliar to public museums, relative to more established disciplines such as fine art, design, architecture, or fashion – though there has been a recent surge in videogame exhibitions, these tend to represent experimental forays into the field, and relatively few institutions retain staff with in-depth knowledge of videogames as a curatorial subject. Given the obscurity of museums' backstage workings, it is difficult to deduce how the introduction of unfamiliar media conforms to – or complicates – these institutions' existing methods, infrastructure and attitudes. The objective of this research, then, is to articulate what happens when videogames enter the museum. What changes need to be made to the museum's work and organisation in order to accommodate them? And how do the entrenched practices and ideologies of the museum shape videogame displays in turn?

In order to answer these questions I went behind the scenes. This research is built on six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2018 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I was there to study the final months of development and eventual opening of *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt*, a blockbuster exhibition that was the 166-year-old institution's first major engagement with videogames as a subject. The exhibition, which was among the largest and most expensive of those the Museum had produced, framed videogames as a complex design discipline, in keeping with the V&A's history as a museum of applied design, and documented the

development practices behind multiple contemporary videogames as well as the critical discourses and player communities which constitute contemporary videogame culture. In my time behind the scenes of the V&A, I followed a small team of workers – the exhibition's curators and producers – in their day-to-day work, as they brought into fruition an exhibition which had been in development for three years. My fieldwork was devised as an ethnographic study of how videogames complicated work inside the museum, and was conducted through a near-constant attachment to the exhibition's makers – as I occupied their offices, their meeting-rooms, the staff canteen, and the gallery floor – to witness, in real time, the great interdepartmental project that was the making of *Videogames*.

As is typical of contemporary ethnography, I was simultaneously an observer of and participant in the goings-on of my field (Seim 2021, 2). My position at the V&A was formalised through a visiting fellowship with its Research department, meaning that I attended various meetings as a (temporary) member of staff, and was accordingly invited to weigh in on a variety of (typically minor) aspects of the exhibition's final shape: terminologies used in interpretive text panels to the work; the laying-out of exhibited objects inside display cases; editing choices within the exhibition's commissioned video content. Whatever qualification I projected in this work was owed in part to my position as a videogame researcher, though this was mingled with my experience as a professional videogame developer, which granted me a degree of perceived expertise which was relatively rare inside the Museum.

FIGURE 1.1. *Installing* Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt.
© Marie Foulston, used with permission.

During my time in the field, I was overwhelmingly preoccupied with making sense of the work of exhibition-making. Given the scale and complexity of the V&A as an organisation, I found that most of my observational effort was spent simply trying to keep up with the intricate system of museological practice that comprised exhibition development, which was widely distributed amongst the organisation's many departments and enacted through a thoroughly standardised set of procedures and policies. The exhibition-making process was so standardised, in fact, that it was difficult to ascertain what might distinguish videogames from any other exhibition subject within the Museum's remit – generally speaking, the making of *Videogames* was business-as-usual for the V&A. Gradually, though, I became aware of a distinct feeling of incompatibility or mistranslation within the work that I was seeing. In various material and conceptual contexts, the V&A's "business-as-usual" – its conventional methods of exhibition-making – seemed ill-equipped to engage videogames as an exhibitionary subject.

This incompatibility is apparent in a number of persistent issues that arose periodically throughout the exhibition's development – the ethnographic account presented in these chapters testifies to incompatibilities at multiple scales. Day to day, issues arose out of divergent understandings within the organisation around what videogames — and, by extension, the exhibition itself — should represent; where *Videogames*'s curatorial staff sought to present videogames as a complex and mature contemporary design discipline, other teams in the Museum tended to fall back on more naive representations of videogames as a populist or nostalgic commodity, leading to operational difficulties in the exhibition's development and disjunctions in its final form. Also apparent were clear disjunctions between the Museum and the videogame industry, whose relationship was strained by differences in aims and value – not only was the V&A inexperienced in working with videogames, but the Museum's commitments to cultural heritage and historical preservation were also equivalently alien to the capitalist logic of the commercial videogame industry. When the exhibition finally opened, systemic issues reflecting the attitudes and desires of the institution's leadership became apparent. Although *Videogames* was critically well received, it was poorly attended relative to the Museum's established target, which appeared to anticipate a degree of blockbuster appeal and commercial success upon which the V&A had grown expectant and reliant. After the exhibition closed, the Museum's commitment to videogames as a subject seemed to wane – seemingly as a response to that tepid interest and unproven commercial viability – and the exhibition's lead curator soon left the organisation.

Although I am hesitant to present a unified theory which might neatly explain the varied and contingent issues which arose in the development of *Videogames*, I can summarise the various arguments of this thesis into an approximate explanation of what happened at the V&A. The exhibition was originally approved and then produced under the twin logics that rationalised all museum activity: the responsibility to preserve and display cultural heritage in service of its public, and the preservation of its sustainability as a financial enterprise. These logics also dictated how the museum functioned as a professional workplace – its long history of working with traditional disciplines and materials, coupled with a constant financial precarity that demanded total efficiency, had led to a highly standardised system of exhibition production within which videogames were an uneasy fit. This thorough standardisation meant that the Museum lacked the tools to effectively engage with the cultural and material nuances of videogames as a medium; even more problematically, the rigidity of this system meant that the V&A was unable to adapt its practices to suit these curatorial demands.

As a result, the exhibition conformed to the V&A's deeply prescriptive model of display, which was thoughtfully curated but essentially conservative in its approach. This led to an exhibition that was relatively well attended, and generally well received, but did not achieve the same blockbuster success as the V&A's prior hits. Without proven commercial potential, the Museum's stated interest in videogames as a cultural subject quickly evaporated. Lacking the necessary institutional support and curatorial flexibility, videogames could not survive under the commercial logic of the institution.

The assertion that acts as a kind of nexus conjoining the various arguments of this thesis, then, is that videogames trouble museums. They resist the entrenched material practices that comprise the task of exhibition-making, and confound its traditional modes of display. The unfamiliarity of the medium of videogames – the strangeness of its materiality, communities, and cultures of production – results in an incompatibility that requires significant and sustained effort to overcome, backed by both long-term institutional commitment and curatorial expertise. Videogames in this sense are a challenge to contemporary museum practice. The study of videogames in the museum reveals two deeply nested and interlinked problems within the makeup of these institutions that extend well beyond videogame exhibitions alone: 1) a destructive market logic through which all museum activity is filtered, creating a demand for new audiences and therefore new exhibition subjects; leading to 2) a rigidly standardised system of work that

discourages curatorial experimentation and produces homogeneous exhibitions, resulting in tepid public interest, which further discourages longer-form investigations into new and difficult subjects.

While the object of my study was to describe how museums interact with videogames, this thesis repeatedly demonstrates how videogames affect and reflect the public museum itself. Videogames revealed latent tensions within the V&A and its institutional logics, and produced entirely new ones. Through this ethnographic study of videogames as an exhibition subject, the seemingly monolithic facade of the museum is revealed as multifarious and brittle.

Videogames and the public museum

Though the ethnography presented in this thesis is illustrated through a granular mode of description and analysis, larger undercurrents emerged and recurred as I began to make sense of the work I witnessed and recorded at the V&A. Here I will introduce two major themes which suffuse the issues engaged across this research – these are presented as background for the problems worked out through my ethnography as well as a compact summary of its findings.

First, I describe how the position of videogames within the V&A was determined, and contested, by the Museum's simultaneous responsibilities to the preservation and display of cultural heritage, and to financial sustainability; this demonstrates a key analytic method of the thesis, which is to use videogames as a means of drawing out deeper museological issues – in this case, the underfunding of the public museum and its consequences for museum work. I then raise the question of compatibility between videogames and the public museum, which prompts an exploration of the ways that the display of videogames at the V&A was shaped by constituent processes of exhibition development which were rigidly standardised throughout the organisation. Ultimately I argue that the public museum's established systems are insufficient to work effectively with videogames as an exhibition subject.

Revealing the multifarious museum

Understanding the situation of videogames inside the public museum demands an understanding of the situation of the public museum within its cultural economy. Much of the institutional activity explored in this thesis is rationalised through an essential precondition: the ongoing marketisation of

the public museum. Marketisation here refers to a transformational process through which state-funded cultural institutions such as public museums are increasingly exposed to market logics and ideologies, which correspondingly reshapes their operation, typically as a consequence of changes in public policy (Ekström 2019; V. Alexander 2019, 81). As cultural funding is stripped out of state budgets, public museums are compelled to behave more and more like private enterprises, and what funding remains is typically granted on the basis that museums can prove the money is being invested wisely, leading to an institutional emphasis on visitation targets and reportage. Rather than softening museums' swerve towards a market orientation, such provisional government funding motivates an obsessive focus on annually increasing visitor figures in order to prove their ability to earn their keep, alongside their commitments to cultural heritage and relevance to the public interest (V. Alexander 2019, 90–94). Effectually this means that museums become dependent on two income sources instead of just one – public funding and commercial enterprise – each of which compels and compounds the marketisation of the museum. These factors combine to create a situation in which public museums are not only beholden to their commitments as custodians of cultural heritage, but also must become commercial enterprises whose goal is to draw in as many visitors as possible, commonly through programs of expensive and spectacular exhibitions.

While developing this research into the practice of museums, and with the commercial history of videogames held separately in mind, I have thought of the contemporary condition of the public museum as similar to that of old arcade machines, which would autonomously loop snippets of flashy gameplay in order to draw in passers-by and convince them to pay the machine's cost of admission. In the language of arcade machines, this sequence is referred to as an *attract mode*. The attract mode is a useful shorthand to refer to the heavily marketised operation of contemporary museums, which now must demonstrate their relevance and breadth of appeal in all of their public programming. Facing the challenge to "earn their keep," museums today are increasingly reliant on visitor ticket incomes to fund their operations, and so "a major outcome of the need to generate money to help fund museums has been to place visitors and their satisfaction at the heart of institutional strategic planning" (Ballantyne and Uzzell 2011, 87–88).

These tensions are well theorised in existing museological research, though typically in abstract terms or via broad, top-down accounts (Zolberg 1986; Krauss 1990; V. Alexander 1996; Schubert 2009, 157–179). This concords

with a point made by Handler and Gable (1997, 9), that "most research on museums has proceeded by ignoring much of what happens in them." This is not in itself surprising, as museums are by their nature opaque – when visiting a museum exhibition, it is difficult to see through its polished veneer to determine how or why it was made. This analytical task is challenging even from the inside: the unforgiving pace of exhibition-making at the V&A, combined with the mundane character and granular scope of the work going on, meant that I was not afforded much opportunity in the field to investigate and interrogate big-picture questions about how the Museum's operational agendas and institutional logics were formed and administered. Nonetheless, I noticed within the fieldwork an ever-present tension between the commercial ambitions of the Museum's leadership and the professional aims of the exhibition and its makers, which were to present videogames as as a complex design discipline and to make that complexity sensible to a general audience.

The pull between commercial profit and cultural heritage is an essential characteristic of the operation of public museums, which extends well beyond the exhibition of videogames. However, this disjunction is less immediately apparent, or at least less disruptive, when working with longer-established museological disciplines and materials. A crucial argument of this thesis – and one of its main analytic methods – is that the study of videogames inside the museum inevitably draws these latent tensions to the surface. Videogames are an especially potent exemplar of the fractured makeup of the museum, and therefore an especially clear lens through which discord within its organisation and can be revealed and studied.

Broad claims regarding the underfunding of public museums, and the effect of this precarity on their operations, have already been compellingly argued – my aim is not to retrace these arguments, but to animate them through a vivid sociological lens. By anchoring my enquiry to the V&A's handling of videogames as a subject, and the production of *Videogames* as an exhibition, this thesis illustrates the push-and-pull of cultural production inside the marketised museum via thick description of on-the-ground fieldwork.

Lathing down the square peg

Earlier, I posed the question of what videogames do to museums – as such, this thesis articulates a number of ways in which videogames, as a relatively novel media form which did not fit neatly within the established practices of the V&A, required – though did not sufficiently receive – a fundamental reworking of these practices in order to be displayed effectively.

One recurring metaphor that arose in my time studying videogames at the V&A was that of the square peg and the round hole. In spite of the expertise of the exhibition's curators, and the competency of its production staff, videogames as an exhibition subject proved itself continually to be a square peg that did not readily fit the round hole of the Museum's standardised exhibition-making processes. Various qualities inherent to videogame production and play – in particular the technological complexity and ephemeral digitality of either – made it a problematic subject for translation onto the gallery floor. These difficulties emerged most frequently in fairly mundane and practical contexts, which in some cases posed interesting curatorial conundrums requiring interesting curatorial interventions (e.g. how do you convey the experience of playing a frustratingly difficult videogame over the course of many hours, in a digestible gallery-suitable format?) as well as difficult engineering problems (e.g. how do you ensure that a custom-made videogame cabinet can be played by hundreds of people per day for several months, without either the software or the hardware breaking?). Also emergent were ideological differences between the world of the museum and the world of videogames, as the curators' stated desire to uncover the typically opaque processes of game development and make them sensible to a general public came into conflict with the videogame industry's tendency to guard the secrets of its practices. Generally speaking, the task of introducing videogames to the Museum – both its workers and its systems – was itself a necessary hurdle that the curators were repeatedly required to clear before conducting the more broadly standardised work of exhibition curation.

Beyond discrete operational and curatorial difficulties, the overwhelming rigidity of the V&A's practices shaped the exhibition – and its construction of videogames as an exhibited subject – in broader and less apparent ways. The Museum had, over many decades, developed an efficient yet inflexible system of procedures for developing exhibitions of a standardised format and structure. Any curatorial experimentation or invention could only be enacted within a set of narrow remits, meaning that this exhibition of a lively and ephemeral digital media form was presented through the same methods, and in the same interpretive voice, as its other exhibitions of more static media.

The exhibition's primary pedagogical aim – to distinguish videogames as a legitimate design discipline like any other – was inherited from the V&A's long-held historical mandate to espouse the value of applied design. By the same token, the modes of display customary to V&A exhibitions were utilised extensively in *Videogames*. Though the exhibition featured many

screens – both to display digital documentation and to present games as interactive works in and of themselves – videogames were most commonly explored through displays of artefacts inside glass cases and images mounted on walls, whose significance was described through interpretive text labels mounted nearby. A visitor's experience of *Videogames* relied on the same interpretive strategy as the V&A's displays of the design of ocean liners, or the wardrobe of Frida Kahlo, or of a series of Fabergé eggs: looking at objects and reading about them.

As with the Museum's overwhelming market orientation, the V&A's exhibitionary regime was so normalised and widespread that it was difficult to recognise from the inside. The standardised methods of the V&A – whose procedural documents anticipated lists of physical objects and their dimensions, and whose ordered production process divided various aspects of an exhibition's outcome between many internal departments – meant that it was extremely difficult to produce, or even envision, an exhibition that diverged from this generic format. Through this thorough standardisation – of methods, and therefore remit and format – the rigidity of the V&A's exhibition-making program imposed itself on the exhibition and drastically influenced its final state. In order to be exhibited, the curator's diffuse vision of videogames as temporary and immaterial became delineated into a series of discrete artefacts encased in glass. Though videogames were a square peg to the V&A's round hole, the V&A did not do much to accommodate these eccentricities. Instead, the obtrusive corners of the square peg were progressively lathed down – through its display methodologies, through its pedagogical aims, and through a genericised exhibition format – until they were smooth and round and museum-compatible.

This is not to argue that this curatorial approach was the wrong one, or that a broad presentation of playable games would have been preferable to *Videogames*'s object-led display. My intent here is to describe how the V&A's institutional nature – its longevity and obstinacy – imposed strict limitations on how videogames could be imagined and displayed within the scope of exhibition-making. Though this obstinacy affected everything the museum did, videogames in particular required new and flexible methods of exhibition production, and in the absence of these methods, both the creative and commercial potential of the exhibition were diminished.

This research is therefore an examination of how change happens and how change is resisted inside public museums, by looking at what happens when unfamiliar media arrives at the institution's doorstep. Through its study of

FIGURE 1.2. *Display cases in the* Bloodborne *exhibit in* Videogames, *2018.*
©Victoria and Albert Museum.

FIGURE 1.3. *View of the V&A's South Court, c. 1886.*
©Victoria and Albert Museum.

the particular situation of videogames as an exhibition subject, this thesis illustrates a grand futility at the heart of contemporary museum operation. The commercial pressures of the museum drive it to seek new audiences through new popular media, and yet these same pressures create inflexible systems of production which flatten unfamiliar subjects into well-trodden display formats, and prohibit long-term commitments to naturalise those new media within the museum's infrastructure and its curatorial remit. Under this market logic, the public museum's mission to explore new subjects is ultimately self-defeating. While the exhibition was heavily shaped by the exhibitionary regime of the V&A, it was granted little opportunity to reshape the institution in turn.

Research development and scope

This research is situated at the intersection of two largely disconnected worlds. The scholarship by which it is informed, and to which it responds, is similarly disconnected. To give context to the project as a whole I would like to describe how this research has developed – out of a desire to examine the cultural position of videogames in general, and into into a concrete study of a specific cultural institution.

"The art history of videogames" and the limits of aesthetic critique

This research began with a desire to understand how videogames intersect with and inhabit the world of fine art. While this aim was eventually narrowed into a much more specific enquiry, as I explain in the section following this one, I first want to situate this research within the scholarly field of game studies by explaining my departure from existing work that examines this intersection.

The question of whether games can be understood as art, and therefore exhibited as such, has been deeply entangled within popular videogame criticism of the last two decades (Parker 2018, 77). Recent scholarship in the field of game studies (cited throughout this section) mirrors this preoccupation, demonstrating a clear academic interest in the relationship between videogames and fine art, as reflected by the formation of a small canon of texts which thoroughly stake a claim for game development as a legitimate and multifaceted form of art practice. Though diverse in their focus and references, these works typically conform to a common critical tactic: proving games' artistic legitimacy through an aesthetic analysis of their formal affordances, and thereby locating the medium within the wider scope of art history. There is more at stake in the discussion of games and

art than historical legitimacy, however. My argument is that the dominant critical methods used in game studies to discuss the intersection of games and art – referred to here as *the art history of videogames* – are overwhelmingly focused on aesthetic interpretation, and are therefore too narrow in their critical scope to sufficiently discuss the social and material conditions of that intersection, and of the art-game discourse itself.

The art history of videogames as a critical model broke into the academic mainstream in 2009 with Mary Flanagan's widely cited *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Though the book's title suggests an approach to game design practice, it more closely resembles an art-historical textbook, tracing a fairly comprehensive history of games and play as tools of cultural critique. In identifying the role of play in various artistic traditions throughout history – both as a subject (21–25) and as a medium (88) – Flanagan envisions a framework for understanding game design as an artistic practice, thereby clarifying the historical and contemporary positions of games in the sphere of fine art. This historiographic impulse gained further prominence within game studies the following year, when a symposium titled *The Art History of Games* was held in Atlanta, Georgia. Throughout the conference, a dominant trend emerged. Many speakers stated a desire to reject the populist question of games' artistic legitimacy altogether, instead aiming to deepen the art-historical context for understanding games as an artform – for instance, by describing the lineage of games in 20th-century movements like Dada and Fluxus, or by asserting an understanding of videogames as its own avant-garde art movement (Pearce 2010; Bolter and Schrank 2010). These talks offered a great diversity of perspectives and approaches, but they seemed to be motivated by a recurring critical tactic: inferring the contemporary legitimacy of videogames by retroactively positioning them within art history. This strategy was reflected most explicitly in a promotional flyer produced for the symposium – which repurposed Magritte's famous 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images* to display a Nintendo Wii controller with the caption "Ceci n'est pas une raquette" – quite literally superimposing contemporary videogame culture upon the canon of Western art history.

A more recent example of this overall drive to better understand videogames through the lens of art history is John Sharp's 2015 book *Works of Game*, which offers a thorough taxonomy of the various "communities of practice" that exist between videogames and fine art, defining multiple discrete ways in which videogames are enmeshed within contemporary art practices – again, both as a subject and a medium (16). His clear focus on specific modes of practice helps him present well-articulated models for

how games and artworks should be compared, though the book was critiqued for this overwhelming focus on rigid interpretation, at the expense of any serious discussion of videogames' sociocultural position. This concern is reflected in a review of the book by game studies researcher Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2016), which describes *Works of Game* as "factually a book about searching for elegant meanings from non-elegantly treated cultural artifacts." Karhulahti's critique draws attention to a deeper problem of critical scope in Sharp's text, and indeed throughout all of the scholarship presented above. The dominant academic approach to connecting games and art, as outlined in this review, tends to be relegated to a restrictively formalist analytical framework, which is inattentive to the social dimension of the practice and critique of videogames and art. Despite Sharp's stated aim to study interconnected "communities of practice," he fails to seriously position these art practices as belonging to any kind of community at all. Though he refers broadly to concepts like "the aesthetic and critical values of both the contemporary art and game communities," his book – as with most scholarship in the field, Flanagan's (2009) included – never clarifies in concrete terms where these values stem from, nor what they signify of their respective cultures (Sharp 2015, 16). Instead, Sharp

enacts a strictly aesthetic mode of analysis that situates videogames almost exclusively within the scope of art history and theory.

I see this problem in game studies as sitting in parallel with a problem in critical art theory. Though useful as a departure point for taking videogames seriously as a creative practice, the scholarship described above typifies a kind of "intellectual baroque" – an idea introduced in art critic Grant Kester's (2011) book *The One and the Many* which he uses to tease out the limits of post-structuralist critique, where he defines this critique as "an essentially aesthetic category in which a given critical or creative protocol takes on a life of its own, operating independently of the mechanisms of social and political change necessary to realize the ideals on which it is founded" (14). Through the intellectual baroque, Kester identifies a gap between theory and practice in art criticism; my concern is that the theory motivating the construction of a hypothetical art history of videogames lacks a groundedness or realistic specificity needed to reconcile it with how videogames are socially and materially practised – that is, how they are produced and received. In other words, the art history of videogames is fundamentally disconnected from what Kester (2011) describes as "the actuality of lived experience" (14). In this regard, the dominant scholarly unpacking of the art–games intersection is crucially limited – it offers a viable framework for understanding game development as a serious formal practice, though it stops short of a deeper line of sociomaterially grounded enquiry.

How, then, can game studies scholars productively engage the tired question – "are games art?" – now that it has become completely rhetorical? Ideally, by moving beyond the aesthetic realm of the intellectual baroque and looking to the material concerns embedded in the question. An alternative critical model to the hyper-formal art history of videogames is demonstrated in a 2013 paper by academic Felan Parker, titled "An Art World for Artgames." Here Parker redefines the terms of the "games as art" dilemma by focusing on the critical values required for this process of legitimation to occur: "The question, therefore, is not *is this cultural product art?*, but rather *how has this cultural product been repositioned materially, institutionally, and intellectually and thus redefined as legitimate art?*" (Parker 2013, 45, original emphasis) In his paper, Parker takes as his object of study various attempts by videogame critics and game studies academics to canonise certain titles as "artgames" or "prestige games", and analyses this desire for legitimation as its own sociocultural process. This mode of grounded, reflexive analysis is a much more productive dialectical pursuit than another attempt to historicise games as a form of fine art. Contrasting

Parker's enquiry against the work of Sharp (2015), Flanagan (2009), et al., the underlying critical motives of these approaches are clear: one is an attempt to understand legitimation as a process, the other is an attempt to enact it.

This move to bring a sociomaterial weight to this rigidly aesthetic discourse bears a synecdochic resemblance to a broader shift in the field of game studies, which Thomas Apperley and Darshana Jayemanne (2012) have recognised as game studies' "material turn." Though academic analyses of videogames have long been grounded in materiality – for instance, David Sudnow's cult-classic autoethnography *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983) – in the early 2000s the emergence of games studies as a cohesive discipline was mired in a deep preoccupation with essentialist analysis, which Apperley and Jayemanne (2012, 7) trace to Espen Aarseth's incitement of "the infamous ludology-narratology debate." Building on Janet Murray's (2005, 3) call to move on from games studies' formalist methodologies and "reframe the conversation," Apperley and Jayemanne (2012, 7) recognise several extant "methodological tendencies" within the field which constitute a general sensitivity towards materiality. Materiality is recognised as crucial to understanding videogames for their "stubbornness" which "introduces an aleatory or contingent element into what might normally be thought of as formalized and calcified structures (academic or otherwise)" (7); and the authors draw particular attention to the practice of ethnography for its capacity to acknowledge "the complex contexts in which game play takes place" and account for the multitude of ways in which games are played "in terms of diverse affective, cultural and situated responses" (10).

Though my research is not particularly interested in the affective experience of videogame play, it is certainly invested in videogames' cultural situation as a medium – I first envisioned this ethnographic research inside museums as one of many possible frames through which we can view the relationship between games and high culture. Now that game studies has conclusively positioned videogames as a legitimate component of fine art, my aim was to build on this foundation by casting a wider net, to understand the social conditions of this convergence of cultures, and the origins of the values reflected therein. Inferring the cultural legitimacy of games through aesthetic critique is useful, but it is also limited by its essentially teleological nature. These limitations call for a methodological reappraisal of the art history of videogames. There exists, after all, a plurality of intersections between games and art beyond abstract questions of legitimacy and history – beyond the intellectual baroque – which demands a plurality of critical lenses through which they can be studied.

Refining the enquiry

I originally chose to study the museum in order to bring a sociomaterial focus, and necessary narrowing of scope, to my larger enquiry into the cultural position of videogames. My intention was to examine the museum as a meeting-point between two insulated cultures, where many of the formal and cultural tensions between videogames and fine art – as engaged by scholarship outlined above – collide in actual material space. Though I did not intend to argue for or against the cultural legitimacy of videogames, I was interested in understanding how legitimacy was constructed behind the scenes of the museum. My intent was to respond to the popular discourse which surrounded exhibitions of videogames, and tended to be preoccupied by questions of assigned value. The emergent exhibition practice is frequently – and often naïvely – positioned as a key signifier of games' long-awaited coming-of-age, demonstrated in ostentatious headlines such as "Video games level up in the art world with new MoMA exhibition" or, most transparently, "An Exhibition That Proves Video Games Can Be Art" (Holpuch 2013; Reese 2016). This is reflective of the common conception of the museum as the ultimate legitimator, as Boris Groys describes in his essay "On the New", wherein "ordinary objects are promised the difference they do not enjoy in reality–the difference beyond difference. This promise is all the more valid and credible the less these objects 'deserve' this promise, i.e. the less spectacular and extraordinary they are" (Groys 2008, 33). In Groys' (2008) view, the museum acts as a cultural elevator "valorizing" marginal media – that is, it lifts videogames from low- to high-art – which in turn reinforces the legitimating power of the museum (44). My presumption – from the outside – was that the position of videogames inside the Museum would be scrutinised and ideologically contested by various parties within the organisation, perhaps requiring some argument for videogames' significance from the exhibition's curators.

However, not very long after I entered the V&A, these abstract cultural questions were quickly replaced by much more grounded and practical ones. While the exhibition's thesis was to define videogames as a legitimate contemporary design discipline, this was accepted as a matter of fact. Nobody inside the Museum seemed particularly invested in videogames' cultural legitimacy – I was suddenly inside a world of meetings and budgets and spreadsheets. There were no obvious tensions regarding the cultural status of the games on display. In fact, things for the most part seemed to be running smoothly: though the work was often frantic, and subject to a variety of operational challenges, these difficulties were typically either

attributed to dysfunctions in the organisation of the V&A itself, or accepted as inevitable logistical roadblocks common to all exhibition projects, which seemed to have very little to do with videogames' specific situation in the Museum. My time and place within the field played a significant part in this, in that I had arrived in the museum shortly before the exhibition was set to open, long after the exhibition had been pitched and critiqued and approved for production; with these conceptual questions out of the way, and the standardised processes of the V&A now in full swing, the work I saw was deeply procedural in nature. As a result, my fieldwork was overwhelmingly occupied by attempts to make sense of the complex intra-organisational work that constitutes exhibition development.

Of course, a number of museological issues arose throughout my time at the V&A which were complexly intermingled with the particular cultural situation of videogames – these intersections are the primary analytical subject of my ethnographic analysis. However, these more abstract cultural collisions were deeply buried within the day-to-day mangle of museum work, and only became truly evident after I had left the Museum and began sorting out the substantial volume of data that I had gathered over my six months behind the scenes. Moreover, these issues ultimately had little to do with struggles for or against the "valorisation" of videogames, and instead had more to do with videogames' position as a distinctly unfamiliar media form, which challenged the institution's established practices as well as its commercial desires for blockbuster success. In other words, the focus of this research shifted away from an explication of how the museum constructs and legitimises videogames for an external public, and instead became focused on how videogames affect and reflect the internal working of the museum. During the writing of this thesis, an aphorism surfaced which proved itself over and over, and will recur a few times more throughout the text: studying the situation of something in the museum tells you more about the museum than it does about the thing itself.

The structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into eight chapters.

Chapter 1 establishes the overall aims and stakes of the thesis as a whole, and **Chapter 2** continues this preparatory work by specifically outlining the methodology of the project across two sections. The first section explores the relatively narrow field of museum ethnography, and contextualises the methodological objectives of my research with reference to other ethnographic studies. The second section discusses conceptual problems

stemming from the terms of my access to the V&A's backstage, including the implications of my various entanglements within my field as a researcher, in particular my close friendship with the exhibition's lead curator, whose perspective and experience of the making of *Videogames* heavily shaped my own.

The next two chapters together serve as background for the ethnographic analysis which follows. **Chapter 3** serves as an introduction to the V&A, the exhibition, and the ethnography itself, by presenting an overview of *Videogames*'s structure, contents and curatorial thesis, as well as an abridged history of its development up until my entry to the field. **Chapter 4** unpacks the V&A's interest in videogames through two accounts of its history: a history of the Museum as a pedagogical design institution, and a history of the Museum's relationship to its public – and the impact of that relationship on its increasing commercialisation. Beyond providing a background for the rest of the ethnography, these histories provoke a critical examination of the V&A's interest in videogames, and explore how this interest, in context of its history, reveals conflicting values within the organisation, arguing that these conflicts are inherent to the work of commercially-driven public museums.

Chapter 5 begins working through my field study at the V&A by first describing how the work of exhibition development at the V&A is organised, and then exploring how the introduction of videogames complicated that work and its organisation. Invoking Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer's theory of institutional ecology, this chapter frames the Museum as an intricate and heterogeneous workplace, and explores how the atomisation of departments within the institution resulted in differences in the conceptual understanding of videogames, thereby challenging its standardised methods. I argue that the insufficiently standardised understandings of videogames in general, and the exhibition itself, produced tensions and affected the work of exhibition-making, thereby exposing the seemingly stable methods of interdepartmental work as surprisingly brittle. The chapter is closed with an exploration of how the prescriptive methods of exhibition production at the V&A shaped *Videogames*'s outcome, and precluded the flexibility needed to meaningfully explore videogames as a curatorial subject. I argue that the standardised methods of exhibition production within the V&A, meant to resolve the heterogeneity of its complex organisational structure, tend towards the production of essentially homogeneous exhibitions.

Chapter 6 examines the relationship between the museum and the videogame industry, describing the curatorial process of collaborating with videogame studios as the exhibition developed and the difficulties encountered in doing so – particularly in working with large-scale games studios, whose institutionalised secrecy and corporate interests made the curatorial promise of penetrating the "black box" of game development a difficult proposition. The chapter describes a tendency within major videogame studios towards secrecy and selective disclosure, and positions this tendency as incompatible with the aims of museums, before exploring what "compatibility" might mean in the context of co-produced exhibitions. Compatibility is first explored through comparing the museum's fraught relationship to the videogame industry with its apparently more comfortable, but deeply complicit relationship to the fashion industry. Compatibility is then envisioned as a commitment to curatorial integrity and critical autonomy wherein these differences in values are anticipated and proactively addressed.

Chapter 7 explores the work of curating *Videogames* in order to present a re-examination of the responsibilities of the public museum curator more generally, especially in the context of exhibitions whose subjects are unfamiliar to their institutions. This chapter uses the concept of cultural intermediation to characterise the extensive work required of the curator to make videogames, as a complex and unfamiliar field of cultural production, sensible to the V&A in order to embed a deeper institutional knowledge of the subject that might persist beyond the exhibition itself. By tracing the curation of *Videogames*, and the meagre legacy that remained after the exhibition closed, this chapter argues that while curatorial knowledge can be embedded through cultural intermediation, this knowledge is fragile, and ultimately contingent on sustained support and interest from the institution's leadership.

The final two chapters conclude the research and make recommendations for further study. **Chapter 8** wraps up the ethnography by assembling the various perspectives of the preceding chapters into a broader argument, which suggests that videogames as a curatorial subject are poorly served by large-scale blockbuster exhibitions, and by the tendencies of marketised cultural institutions more generally. A final argument is made that in order for videogames to find their place in cultural institutions, deeper and longer-term engagements beyond the formal and methodological constraints of blockbuster exhibitions are needed. **Chapter 9** closes the thesis with an epilogue describing my own encounters with public museums as a professional videogame developer. Through this account, I question the

efficacy of museum display within the field of cultural production of videogames, and call for further research at the intersection of videogames and museums which is attentive to the experience of videogame developers.

Who is this research for?

The relative disconnection between the two bodies of literature that I engage with throughout the thesis – game studies and museum studies – raises questions regarding the intended audience for this research. As described above, I envisioned my ethnographic study of the position of videogames in museums as a usefully narrow lens through which to understand the position of videogames in culture generally. This research should therefore be of interest to game studies scholars who wish to learn more about the role that videogames play inside institutions of culture, and how they are understood within those typically opaque organisations. However, my research is as concerned with museums as it is with videogames. After my fieldwork at the V&A was complete, I realised that I had at least as many questions about museums as I did about videogames, and so the internal organisation of the museum became a central focus in my study. Following this, I see this research as being especially relevant to museum professionals and museum studies scholars who are interested in the difficult fit of a complex technical medium and culture of production into the relatively brittle remit of the contemporary public museum – and, more broadly, the conceptual and organisational difficulties of working with creative industries, especially those unfamiliar to the museum. Additionally, the sociological nature of my research means that it can be situated within museum studies' own "ethnographic turn" – see Chapter 2 for a more extensive survey of texts from the fields of organisational ethnography and sociologically engaged museum studies. To phrase all of this more simply: this thesis is for museum people who wish to learn more about videogames, and for videogame people who wish to learn more about museums.

There is a third audience for whom this research will be a little more familiar throughout: the practitioners and academics already working within the overlap of videogames and cultural institutions, or the more general practice of curating new forms of media. Many of the issues engaged here will therefore come as little surprise to those who have experienced for themselves the obstinate systems and commercial impulses of the contemporary public museum. Through my account of work at the V&A, my hope is to complicate these issues common within the operation of public museums by connecting them with their less-obvious effects on

museum practice, particularly regarding the ways that institutional logics shape the display of new subjects such as videogames.

I would also like to be clear about what this research is ultimately trying to do, and where it fits within existing scholarship at the intersection of videogames and museums. While productive scholarly attention has been paid to the display of videogames within museums and other exhibitionary contexts, this attention has typically been drawn to practical or creative questions regarding the curation and conservation of videogames as contemporary creative practice and as cultural heritage.[3] This research is not concerned with videogame preservation at all, nor is it intended as a practical guide for museum workers or curators engaging with videogames. By and large, this thesis does not aim to boil down its findings into prescriptive recommendations for further exhibition-making practice; instead, it aims to describe particularities. I went to a particular museum at a particular time to study a particular exhibition, and discovered there a very particular mess of entangled professional, cultural, and commercial interests. Through my analysis of this fieldwork I am not trying to untangle this knot of concerns myself by describing how a better exhibition could have been made, nor am I trying to write a guide on how similar knots might be untangled in future – I am trying to describe the contours of the knot itself, tangled as it is, and account for the institutional, organisational, and economic circumstances that led to its entanglement. This is not to say that my aim is purely descriptive, but rather to clarify how I mean to engage the curatorial labour of exhibition-making in the public museum setting: not as a practice of creation, but as a process of interprofessional negotiation. My hope has been that through a detailed focus on the situation of *Videogames* at the V&A in 2018 – how its making was influenced by people and processes within the institution, as well as the videogame industry outside it – will uncover a higher-level analysis of institutional work, and how videogames are received within established cultural infrastructures.

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[3] For analysis of and recommendations for videogame curation as a practice, see Stuckey (2010), Ferranto (2015), Reed (2018), Romualdo (2017), or Prax et al. (2019). For discussions of the practical and conceptual concerns which surround the conservation and preservation of videogame material and cultural heritage, see Guins (2014), Newman (2015), Stuckey et al. (2015), Swalwell (2017), Nylund (2020), or Merkle et al. (2022). For a more general primer on strategies for, pitfalls of, and barriers to the curation of new media in museum contexts, see Dietz (2005), Graham and Cook (2010), or Bianchini and Verhagen (2016).

2. Methodology

The core fieldwork underpinning this thesis was conducted over six months at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, from May to October 2018. I was there to study the development of the exhibition *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt.*

I was aware upon my entry to the Museum that I would be witnessing a very particular segment of the total life-cycle of the exhibition – I was onsite for the final four months of a three-year development process, and then two months after its opening in August. By the time of my arrival, most (if not all) of the exhibition's conceptual work had been thoroughly established: its central thesis determined, its display objects selected, its design finalised, and its accompanying publication written. Turning up at the beginning of a final stretch of development, I was therefore exposed to a quite specific category of exhibition production: the work of actually manifesting an exhibition that had grown for two and a half years as an abstract curatorial project. Across four months I saw the arrival of loaned exhibition objects, helped copyedit interpretive text, visited the exhibition installers' fabrication workshop, and sat in on innumerable interdepartmental meetings. Though I was not around to see the conceptual development of the exhibition, I was there for its physical realisation, and all of the motion, stress, and tedium which accompanied that process.

The scope and focus of my field research, and my own position within the field, bears mentioning. Although I was officially situated within the Museum's Research department – an expectedly quiet and studious sector of the museum – in practice I spent most of my time away from my desk as I followed the exhibition's production by shadowing staff from other departments. In contrast with my original plan to examine the Museum holistically, as a web of interdepartmental and infrastructural connections, this fieldwork quickly found itself focused on a small faction of museum

staff – the curatorial and exhibition management team at the core of *Videogames*. This perspective was made more complex by my own pre-existing friendship with the exhibition's lead curator, Marie Foulston, as well as the various informal – and often intangible – contributions I made to the exhibition due to my own experience within the videogame industry.

This chapter is split into two major sections. The first section – "Why an ethnographic study?" – contextualises the methodological objectives of this work with reference to other organisational ethnography, and defines the boundaries and conception of the museum as a research field. The second section – "The price of admission" – discusses conceptual problems stemming from the terms of my access, including the inadvertent narrowing of focus described above, the implications of my various entanglements within my field as a researcher, and what might be gained from embracing the partiality of my position.

Why an ethnographic study?

In Chapter 1 of this thesis I described my initial interest in museums in the context of a broader cultural crisis between the spheres of videogames and fine art. Accepting the role that museums play in the construction of culture, we're still left with some fundamental methodological questions. Why did I need to fly to London to study videogames in museums? What makes ethnography a practical tool for museological study?

To answer simply: because museums are complex and mysterious spaces, particularly from the outside. The most effective way to make sense of videogames' contested position within them, then, was to go and see what was happening inside.

To answer more discursively: as outlined in Chapter 1, the cultural tensions around videogames that I intended to address had already been thoroughly examined through *post factum* modes of critique. This problem is not specific to game studies, either – museum research has traditionally been conducted far away from the museum itself. In the introduction to their study of Colonial Williamsburg, a living-history museum in the United States, Handler and Gable (1997) highlight the limited methodological range typical to museum studies:

> Due largely to disciplinary conventions, most scholars who study museums work from already produced messages … Some scholars have attended to aspects of institutional histories and dynamics, but there has been almost no

ethnographic inquiry into museums as arenas of ongoing, organized activities. As a result, most research on museums has proceeded by ignoring much of what happens in them. (9; original emphasis)

While this was certainly true in 1997, in the intervening years a number of museum-based social studies have since emerged, alongside a larger wave of socially grounded organisational studies which has been said to constitute an "ethnographic turn" (Rouleau, Rond, and Musca 2014). Museum ethnographies have held various disciplines as their object of study, as summarised in a recent methodological paper (Macdonald, Gerbich, and Oswald 2018, 141) – grouped loosely, we find detailed accounts of exhibition-making (Morgan 2013; Franklin 2014; Shannon 2014; Bouquet 2015; Jung 2016), conservation and archiving (Domínguez Rubio 2014; Beltrame 2015; Marsh 2016), and education/public programming (Roberts 1997; Morse and Munro 2015; Knudsen 2016). Though my study looks at the way videogames are understood by various museum disciplines, the core focus of my fieldwork is the development of an exhibition. Two key texts, which focus on exhibition-making in the confines of the public museum as a workplace, have been useful references for my fieldwork: *In Search of a Lost Avant-Garde* by Matti Bunzl (2014) and *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum* by Sharon Macdonald (2002). As effusive accounts of the troubled development of exhibitions within major museums, and as structural analyses of the sociopolitical conditions of those troubles, these two studies bear clear methodological and conceptual affinities with my own, and Macdonald's work in particular is cited extensively throughout the thesis.

My impetus as a researcher is to account for the museum's backstage or inside workings, as well as its frontstage or outside view, and to clarify the process by which meaning is transferred between the two. For an organisation as multifarious in structure and inscrutable in intent as the contemporary museum, ethnography offers a particularly useful methodological tool – or perhaps a toolkit of various methods – in its ability to demystify. As Handler and Gable state, "It is obvious that the museum's publicly foregrounded messages are influenced by other messages and communicative processes not normally open to public inspection – messages and processes that contribute to the final, public product." (11) Understanding this backstage-to-frontstage transfer – the abstruse process through which a long series of internal meetings and emails produces a coherent exhibition, which then reverberates out to shape its own cultural sphere – is perhaps the core methodological objective of this research.

While I entered the field with an intent to engage abstract questions of cultural legitimacy and tension – as described in Chapter 1 – the task of making sense of the Museum as a workplace soon overwhelmed any longer-term research goals. My fieldwork inside the V&A was therefore driven by an intuitive and descriptive ethnographic methodology in which I spent most of my time watching, listening and writing. My schedule was tethered to that of my immediate subjects – namely the exhibition's curators and production staff – as I followed them from meeting to meeting and sat in their offices as they worked. This was an essentially reactive and unstructured mode of documentary research: though I would frequently ask clarifying questions of my subjects about their work, and was occasionally asked to participate in the work itself – as described in the following section – I had little say in what museum activity I was able to witness, and what work I did witness had little apparent connection to the larger themes I had hoped to explore. I was able to engage these more abstract problems through supplemental interviews with the *Videogames* team, which were conducted opportunistically during my time in the field – as I explain towards the end of this chapter – as well as in retrospect, several years after the exhibition closed. My articulations and conclusions throughout this thesis are illustrated through descriptive accounts of museum work as well as expanded reflections voiced by museum workers themselves.

I went to the Museum to discover how people worked there, and why they worked in the way that they did. Considering the museum setting, as well as this notion of a concrete-to-abstract transfer of knowledge and meaning, my research takes its methodological cues from the field of organisational ethnography. One text that bears particular mention is Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life*, a 1979 study which took as its fieldsite a Californian scientific laboratory, and was concerned with "the way in which the daily activities of working scientists lead to the construction of facts" (40). Their conclusion is surprisingly tidy: these facts are constructed through an obsessive focus on the production of scientific journal papers, the process of which is calmly observed and neatly described. My own conclusions as to the essential focus of the museum as a system are nowhere near as tidy. The crucial point of relevance, though, is the deconstructive process through which Latour and Woolgar's study demystifies the construction of scientific facts: exposing something hallowed and mysterious as relatively mundane, by making visible various socio-institutional agents and factors which would otherwise be left invisible – or

actively kept so (168–74).[1] The methodological aim of my research is analogous to theirs in this way – in describing the day-to-day labour involved in museum work, and articulating its underlying institutional motives, it should be possible to make sense of the systems through which cultural capital is consolidated and imparted.

The price of admission: access and positionality

Perhaps the biggest obstacle facing the organisational ethnographer is the problem of access. This is not a problem specific to museums; any researcher studying a powerful organisation is likely to have trouble "getting inside." One of the earliest and most influential reflections on "studying up" – the act of studying "the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless" – is Laura Nader's (1972) article "Up the Anthropologist," which is in many ways a methodological manifesto for the study of the powerful (289). Here, she reflects on the access problems inherent to studying up: "The powerful are out of reach on a number of different planes: they don't want to be studied; it is dangerous to study the powerful; they are busy people; they are not all in one place, and so on" (302). She ponders why studying the powerful within one's own culture should be so different from "studying down" – in context of the history of successful ethnographic access to hostile foreign cultures, she says "it is rather surprising that anthropologists could be so timid at home." Despite this, Nader suggests a tried-and-true method for finding access, regardless of setting: "making rapport" (302).

This more or less describes the method through which I was able to get inside the V&A, though my rapport was built long before this study had even been envisioned – I was, and still am, close friends with the exhibition's lead curator, Marie Foulston.[2] Prior to and alongside my time as a PhD student, I have worked professionally as a videogame developer as the co-

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[1] The tendency for institutions to selectively keep work practices invisible in order to carefully control and represent themselves is an important consideration in doing organisational ethnography. See Lucy Suchman's "Making Work Visible" (1995) for further discussion on this topic.

[2] A note here on naming and titles – throughout this thesis I have pseudonymised participants by substituting their name with the title of their role where possible. However, certain staff members' actual names are used in cases where their names and roles are connected in the public record – just as I could not effectually anonymise the name of the Museum itself, or its Director, I could not anonymise the exhibition's curators. In the case of Marie and some others, however, I refer to them by their first name, as an implicit acknowledgement of our mutual familiarity.

founder and co-director of a small studio in Melbourne called House House. In the course of development of our two major releases, we have become well connected (or well entangled) within the network of the Western independent game development scene. I was first in contact with Marie via email through her role as an independent curator, when she included our first title – a local-multiplayer sports game called *Push Me Pull You* – in the lineup of a party organised with her collective from London, the Wild Rumpus, at the 2014 Game Developers Conference in San Francisco.[3] Later that year we met in person at a videogame festival in Austin, Texas, where *Push Me Pull You* was being exhibited, and took a road trip with other members of House House from there to a separate festival in Los Angeles. Since then, we've stayed in regular long-distance contact, and met again at videogame conferences and festivals in the United States, a typical meeting place for those in this global scene – at least those with the funds to do so.

Marie was appointed as Curator of Videogames by the V&A in 2015, a decision which I describe in further context in Chapter 3. By the time I was developing this research project in late 2016, access to Marie and her experience working in the Museum – if not access to the Museum itself – seemed like a strong possibility. This access was eventually formalised, quite conveniently, through an application to the museum's Research department, for a six-month Visiting Fellowship. After some delays – owing to some bureaucratic obstructions within the Museum, with which I would later become intimately familiar – my fellowship application was accepted, and my access to the V&A's backstage was secured.[4]

This was a relatively easy pitch to the Museum: working out of the Research department, my project would "focus on the development of the V&A's upcoming *Videogames* exhibition, with a specific aim to articulate the professional, conceptual, and logistical challenges involved in this work across various museum departments (and, in doing so, assist the museum in its own positioning of videogames as a form of digital design)." Per Marie's suggestion, I would "give back" to the exhibition's development through my own expertise in the field: "Beyond my study of the exhibition in the context of my own doctoral research, I would act as a curatorial consultant, drawing upon my expertise both as an academic and as a professional

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[3] See Chapter 9 for a more detailed account of this first encounter, and its significance within my own professional career.

[4] Contrary to the typical problems of access in "studying up", ethnographers might actually have an easier time than expected accessing certain museums due to their existing traditions and cultures of research.

videogame developer." The conditions of my access to the V&A – the unavoidable price of admission, so to speak – hinged on these two significant and complicating factors: my position as the lead curator's friend, and my position as an expert in my field.

A monophonous ethnography?

There are many accounts of the development of close ethnographer–subject relationships within the course of an immersive field study, to the point that it is practically an expected feature of the discipline (Yberma and Kamsteeg 2009, 101). Less has been written on the idea and consequences of friendship as a factor in initial field access. Combined with her central role within the development of the exhibition, my friendship with Marie meant that my perspective on the Museum was heavily filtered through her own. Our friendship preceded the fieldwork, extended well beyond it, and was strengthened during it – outside of the V&A, we walked around the nearby Hyde Park after work, hung out on weekends, and took holidays together along with other friends. Though I rarely had my fieldnotes on hand outside of the museum, our conversations together in these nonprofessional settings inevitably drifted to work, and despite mutual assurances that these conversations were off-the-record, it was unavoidable that this time together would skew my outlook on the Museum.

Of course, this is distinctly at odds with the one of the classical principles of good ethnography: reflecting the multiple voices of the real world; claiming an "objective" authority through a plurality of perspectives. This quality has been variously described as "multivocality" (Rodman 1992) or as "the plurality of subjectivities" (Collinson 1992, 44), and has historical affinities with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "dialogism" (Clifford 1983; Sangren 1988). I'll use the term "polyphony," as used by S.P. Bate (1997, 1167), which he frames as one of the essential qualities of good organisational ethnographic research: "Polyphony is ideally suited to organizations, which are by their very nature pluralistic and multivocal, and made up of a rich diversity of intersecting dialects, idioms and professional jargons." I believe that my fieldwork at the V&A and beyond captured this polyphony to a degree – I interviewed staff from several different departments, and saw interactions between virtually every sector of the Museum in various meetings and assemblies. I cannot deny, though, that Marie's centrality to the exhibition, and her position as both gatekeeper and friend, made her, and her understanding of the exhibition and Museum, the primary focus of my study – a study that, inadvertently, became informed more through "monophony" than polyphony.

If this feels like a compromised position to find myself in as a researcher, consider that I likely wouldn't be there at all without our friendship,[5] nor would I have gained the same depth of understanding of her position as lead curator. I mean this to describe two kinds of understanding. Prolonged time with a single subject afforded me a serious depth of operational understanding – I developed an extremely detailed picture of her daily work: not only the actions involved, but also the reasoning behind those actions, how her work was informed by her professional responsibilities and understanding of her role as curator. More significantly, though, I was afforded a depth of emotional understanding. Museums are notoriously tense professional environments (Kahn and Garden 1993; Jung 2016) and the experience of finalising a multimillion-dollar curatorial project amidst bureaucratic stress and interdepartmental tension is, understandably, a turbulent one. I mentioned previously our out-of-office discussions, which typically took the form of complaints, grievances, and frustrations – this was a degree of access that I would never have gained had I only spoken to Marie within the walls of the Museum. This was a dialogic relationship, too: if I had questions about the operation or customs of the institution – and I had many – she would be the first person I'd ask. Although my understanding of the Museum was undeniably filtered through hers, I would argue that there is something to be gained from embracing the relative "monophony" of my ethnographic study – the conditions of this embrace are discussed later in this chapter.

Access via exchange

A second concern, adding to the implications of my friendship with the exhibition's curator, pertains to my status as an expert in my professional field. As mentioned, a significant factor in the negotiation of my access to

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[5] By this I mean that my friend's position in the Museum gave me a relatively easy foot-in-the-door in terms of access. To read this another way, though: to some degree, my friendship with Marie played a significant part in my decision to study museums in the first place. Though there are a number of serious academic inspirations for this project, as described in Chapter 1, I can't deny that the prospect of living overseas and working alongside a close friend wasn't itself a strong motivating factor. See ethnographer Daniel Miller's (2012) tongue-in-cheek reasoning for choosing a fieldsite for his project on mass consumption in Trinidad: "Why did I go to Trinidad in order to study consumption? Should I be really honest and admit how much listening to David Rudder's *Calypso Music* played a part, and that once I got there I discovered that a Trini fete just has to be one of the best parties in the world? No, perish the thought. The grounds were entirely academic" (ch. 2: "Anyone for a Coke?").

the Museum was my ability to contribute to the conceptual development of the exhibition, owing to my experience as a game developer.

This is a familiar ethnographic problem: as an informal contributor to the exhibition, I was directly shaping the object of my study. On my first week in the V&A, one staff member asked me about my duties as a researcher studying the exhibition as it develops: "Are you like one of the makers of a nature documentary, where if they see a pack of lions tearing apart a herd of gazelles, they won't stop and intervene no matter how horrible it is? Are you here just to watch this exhibition fall to pieces?" I was not, of course – per my fellowship application, part of my role there was as a consultant. Even if I had taken some vow of total observational distance from the exhibition, it would have been a struggle to maintain that distance – as I explain below, my experience in game development meant that I was frequently called on to consult on various aspects of the exhibition. Moeran (2009) suggests that this shift from participant observation to "observant participation" is not only inevitable in immersive organisational fieldwork, but actually desirable: "in my opinion, this transition brings about a qualitative leap in understanding on the fieldworker's part (because he or she learns things with their whole body and not just with their mind), and thereby leads to a far more nuanced analysis of the organization being studied" (140). This is certainly true of my experience in the V&A – at some stage in the six months of my fieldwork I found myself actively *feeling* the affective experience of working in the Museum, rather than just transcribing that affect through the comments and behaviours of other staff. At some point, as my work increasingly came to resemble that of those around me, the lines between subject and colleague began to blur.[6] Rather than compromise the integrity of my research, this "observant participation" – negotiated as an access-via-exchange – offered a useful immediacy in how I made sense of the process of exhibition-making.

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[6] This is related to something that I have not otherwise seen discussed in the accounts of organisational ethnography that I've read – the uncanny sense of doing a kind of "fake work" as I was conducting my research at the V&A. Throughout my fieldwork I frequently found myself reflecting the behaviour of my subjects: sitting next to someone holding a notebook taking minutes in a meeting, as I was holding my own notebook taking fieldnotes; sitting at a desk frowning into a computer screen in a room full of curators doing the same thing. At best this could be described as a kind of methodological affinity, at worst as a hollow simulacrum of labour – either way, I could not shake the sense that everyone around me was doing very deep and meaningful work, as I was following a step behind in an attempt to summarise it.

There are, however, more complicated implications to this exchange that need to be accounted for. I was bringing my expertise into an organisation where that expertise was scarce – and more importantly, it was valued. This lack of embedded disciplinary knowledge emerged as a primary frustration for the curatorial team, as Marie expressed to me in an interview:

MARIE   If you're working on an architecture show here, you have so many people who have experience in architecture … [within the Department of Design, Architecture and Digital] you have all these people who have this awareness. Even if they're not architecture specialists, they know things: they know the core history; they know the core things about that design medium. For videogames, the only thing people would say to me a lot of the time is, like, "oh, I don't play games, I'm not a gamer," and that's kind of where it ends. Because videogame design is so disconnected from other fields of design. …

ME   It sounds like you were out there alone, more so than other disciplines would be, right?

MARIE   Yeah. I say this, but then people say, "oh no, well, there's not that many people here that know architecture." And maybe I'm wrong, maybe other curators feel that, but I don't buy it myself. … There's just a fundamental understanding of context of those other design disciplines, and their key moments, which there just isn't of games. … It's still not embedded, because the staff here don't naturally engage with the subject on a frequent basis, so it's not like, say, having you here.

This puts me in a complicated position as a researcher: part of my reason for being in the Museum was to document this scarcity of institutional expertise in videogames – a scarcity which was alleviated, and therefore endangered, by my being there.

This is a conundrum that I have not seen faced in other studies, which might be explained by the specificity of my situation. Thankfully, in practical terms, my contribution ended up being quite minor relative to the scale of the exhibition. Had I arrived earlier in the process I might have had a more active hand in its outcome, but its conceptual development was so far along that there is very little I could point to in the finished exhibition and claim responsibility for. Though there were a handful of concrete elements in the gallery that I assisted with – transcribing some subtitles in an AV installation; the suggestion to display one page from a designer's sketchbook over another – my role as a consultant within the exhibition was more or less ambient in nature. For the most part, I sat in on production meetings and offered opinions when called upon: on aesthetic details in the

marketing campaign, or copyediting tweaks in interpretive texts, or suggesting solutions to technical issues in interactive displays, for example. Just as often, I'd assist with fairly rote physical tasks: moving trolleys of exhibition objects from Conservation to storage; unloading and sorting piles of printed interpretive text panels; or filling the teapot for the weekly departmental afternoon tea – working with my "body" as much as my "head" (Moeran 2009, 140). In this sense I was able to evade, to some degree, the thorniest implications of the problem listed above – nevertheless, I am left with a responsibility to maintain a careful awareness of my own position in discussing the dearth of expertise within the Museum as I found it.

Untangling my entanglement

This is all to say that my position is a significant yet unavoidable complicating factor within this research, which therefore deserves to be embraced as another layer within my ethnographic account. As the researcher, I am another piece of field data. There's a postmodern tendency to maintain an awareness of ourselves as embedded in our methodology, but there is also a tendency to simultaneously elide our own personal experience. Consider *Laboratory Life*, which I mentioned in the previous section – in this study Latour and Woolgar (1979) performed a method of "anthropological strangeness" (40) by "bracketing [their] familiarity with the object of [their] study" (29) and acting out a total ignorance of the routines and values of the laboratory setting. They take this to quite radical ends, imbuing their field with such total alterity that they deny themselves recognition of even the most rudimentary scientific processes (47–53). Similarly, in Bunzl's (2014) study of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art he describes his "agonizing" over the dilemma of studying the institution while also being a major donor to its collection, which helped facilitate his access. He eventually reached a "tortuous" resolution: "Ultimately, I compartmentalized. In the art world at large, I might be seen as a collector; at the MCA, I would be an anthropologist" (19–21). Arguably I could attempt a similar turn by artificially denaturalising myself from the museum setting, or by defensively compartmentalising my various partialities – effectively removing the "self" and its subjective entanglements from the field, in pursuit of a claim to objectivity. Should this necessarily be considered a problem, though? Ideally, I could retain this partial position within my research and make sense of how it might be useful to my ethnographic account.

Donna Haraway's essay "Situated Knowledges" (1988) presents a thoroughly argued critical reasoning which seeks to problematise conventional notions of objectivity in scientific research. According to Haraway, it is only through deep situation in one's field – in all its subjective entanglements – that researchers are able to stake any claim to objective authority. Importantly, she does not dismiss the necessity of objectivity itself, but aims to deconstruct and redefine the conditions of its claim – not through impartial detachment or distance, but through radical specificity.

> We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name. So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. (582–83)

It would be counterproductive, and probably impossible, to effectively "bracket" my familiarity with the Museum and the exhibition's curator, as Latour and Woolgar bracketed their familiarity with their fieldsite. If part of what I'm studying is the affective experience of working within an institution, my own position within – and access to – that institution is a vital element of this ethnographic account. By locating myself and my various entanglements so consciously within my fieldwork I mean to establish a meaningful affective context for my research, and, through the inclusion of my own "voice", return some degree of reflexive polyphony to my study – sidestepping what Deleuze described as "the indignity of speaking for others," perhaps.[7] (Foucault and Deleuze 1977, 209)

I am still wary of leaning too heavily on the crutch of subjectivity, though – the complexity of my entangled position does not absolve me of my responsibilities to report fairly on the circumstances of my field. In their outline of various ethical problems faced in contemporary organisational ethnography, Fine and Shulman (2009, 190) argue that although an ethnographer's claim to objectivity is misguided, "excising such a claim does not solve the problem. The response, embracing subjectivity, is equally problematic. The reality of occupational backstages is that values inevitably conflict. By admitting one's perspective or by describing the world in terms

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[7] Though it is less of an issue in this project's context of "studying up," I want to be careful in my use of this quote, which has typically been invoked to discuss discomfort with ethnography's historical tradition of "speaking for" its subaltern subjects (Alcoff 1991, 22; Bate 1997, 1162).

of ideology and narrative, we wear a mask of openness without doing justice to all the ways in which a setting might be understood." I am therefore drawn in two directions simultaneously: towards striving for an abstract and unattainable objectivity, and towards embracing a conscious and reflexive subjectivity. Keeping these opposing values in mind throughout the fieldwork, and weaving both into the resultant ethnographic report, is perhaps the only viable course of action. As Fine and Shulman conclude, "This cannot be avoided, but we should admit the paradox" (190).

Reconsidering "access"

A final thought on the conditions of my access: so far I have presented institutional access as a tidy binary of inside and outside – or "frontstage" and "backstage", in classical sociological terms (Goffman 1956). It should be noted, though, that throughout my work at the V&A there were clear limits as to how "inside" I was allowed to get. Through my fortunate position I had easy access to the exhibition's curators, exhibition management, and other staff who were "on the ground" developing the exhibition on a day-to-day basis. However, the echeloned structure of the V&A meant that executive staff – the Museum's directorate – were well and truly inaccessible by virtue of their seniority. Members of less familiar departments – and even the senior management of teams I was otherwise very familiar with – were similarly out of reach. This complicates the inside/outside binary and calls into question our understanding of "access."

In describing her difficulty getting inside the Hollywood studio system, ethnographer Sherry B. Ortner (2010) unpicks the idea of access: "There are really two distinct issues of access for the anthropologist. One has to do with the possibility of participant observation; the other with obtaining interviews. While in classic fieldwork the two are part of a single package, in a situation like Hollywood they have emerged as quite distinct" (213). Ortner found that she could secure interviews without much difficulty provided her interviewee was sufficiently interested in her project. However, she was only able to find opportunities for participant observation under very particular circumstances, when the closed Hollywood institution selectively opened itself up to the public through press screenings, festival panels, and so on, which led her to an opportunistic observational practice which she terms "interface ethnography."

My experience in the Museum was, more or less, the exact opposite. Opportunities for participant observation were abundant: once I was inside the Museum and had a clear context for being there through my fellowship,

staff members seemed very comfortable speaking unguardedly in my presence. Typically I would be introduced to staff within interdepartmental meetings – I'd explain my position in Research and my role as it pertained to the exhibition, and that I was here to document the work involved in the development of the exhibition up until its opening. Generally speaking, staff did not seem perturbed by the presence of a documentary researcher, or even all that interested; I suspect that there were so many staff members with a hand in this exhibition, fulfilling such varied roles, that an in-house researcher was not much of a break from the norm.

Interviews, on the other hand, were much harder to arrange. Inside the Museum, schedules were almost incredulously tight, and asking for an hour of someone's time was a major imposition – everyone directly involved in the exhibition was already operating at maximum capacity due to its impending opening, and those more tangentially involved were occupied with work across various other projects. On several occasions scheduled interviews were (apologetically) cancelled at the last minute, as staff had to prioritise unexpected work responsibilities. This is a methodological obstacle common to organisational ethnographies (Grace 2013, 598) and I suspect this is especially true in museums. My supervisor suggested that I try to work around these schedules by organising lunch meetings: "everyone has to eat lunch sometime." This resonates with Bunzl's (2014, 9) approach in the MCA, where he "made it a habit to take someone to lunch every day." This was successful to a degree – the majority of the interviews I conducted took place in the noisy staff cafeteria – though I found that most staff tended to keep these lunch hours reserved anyway, to catch up with colleagues from other departments as informal work meetings. While it wasn't necessarily the case that everyone's schedules were completely full all of the time, the frantic conditions of the Museum as a workplace meant that staff were hesitant to carve out time to indulge something as "extracurricular" as a research interview – there was work to do, after all. In the end, my access was by no means a totalising permission or freedom within the institution, but rather a pastiche of accesses allowing me "fragmented bits of immersion" (van der Waal 2009, 34). Even though I was "inside" the Museum, I only had access to certain staff at certain times and in certain contexts, leading me to rely on a form of opportunistic interface ethnography of my own.

3. Introducing "Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt"

This chapter introduces the V&A and the *Videogames* exhibition. As a preface to the following chapters' ethnographic account of my six months spent within the Museum, I provide a compact history of the exhibition's development before my arrival, describing its origins and gradual evolution from 2013 to 2018. I then give an overview of the exhibition's content, structure and underlying thesis, which is meant to serve as a point of reference for the rest of the dissertation.

Welcome to the Victoria and Albert Museum

The angular, porcelain-tiled Sackler Courtyard is nestled within the western flank of the Victoria and Albert Museum – a polished and ultramodern architectural work, it sits in sharp contrast with the ornate Victorian building which envelops it. Opened in 2017 after a £43 million redevelopment, this shiny new side entrance is symptomatic of the museum sector's seemingly universal drive towards redevelopment and reinvention via architectural spectacle.[1] It was a bright spring morning in London, and the porcelain glared as I first crossed the courtyard into the Museum's

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[1] That same symptom has manifested in many major museums internationally over the past few decades, especially in contemporary art museums, which seem to be in a constant state of renovation and rebranding. Curator Shumon Basar (2009, 47–8) interpreted MoMA's 2004 redevelopment as a reassertion of its formidable institutional power: "The New York MoMA revamp opened in November 2004. Not surprisingly, it was white. And very big. … A cavalcade of 'modern' special effects have ensured its blockbuster status (including the $20 entrance fee):massive expanses of achromatic walls that float above the floor (courtesy of 'shadow gaps'), as well as anechoic volumes and exquisite lighting. This. Is. Modern. Art. Don't forget it."

equally pristine Blavatnik Hall. I was there for the "press launch" of the Museum's upcoming exhibition titled *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt*. This newly refurbished gallery, replete with touchscreen displays and polished concrete floors – a pocket of stark contemporaneity within a stately and historic institution – provided a fitting venue for a preview of an exhibition of videogames in a 166-year-old museum of art and design.

It was early April of 2018. The press launch commenced at 8:30 am – 90 minutes before the Museum's doors opened to the public. I made my way past a few security guards and entered the Blavatnik Hall to sign in, receiving a press packet containing a few stapled pages: an introduction to the exhibition, an outline of works included, and a statement from Tristram Hunt, the V&A's Director. The setup was a temporary one – during normal hours, this room served as an entrance hall connecting the Museum's collection galleries, but today a makeshift stage had been set up with five rows of folding chairs sitting before a podium and large screen. Although it was standard practice within the V&A for exhibitions of this scope, the setup was all a little less ceremonious and generally much smaller-scale than I'd expected for the announcement of a blockbuster exhibition. Which isn't to say that it was slapdash or makeshift – it wasn't – but it was evident that this event had been organised by a small collection of overworked people with limited resources. Folding tables had been set up by the entrance with an array of pastries from the Museum café and large urns of tea and coffee. Journalists were filtering in slowly. Many seemed to know each other, and made polite small talk, while others huddled around some small tables and tried to simultaneously eat a pastry, drink tea, and read over their press packets. There was an ambiguous sense of division between the journalists, who could broadly be distinguished between old-guard arts columnists and younger, games-focused press – it was not exactly factional, but the cues were there. Also in the room were two screens showing looping footage from *Journey* and *No Man's Sky*, two games featured in the exhibition, along with a playable installation of *Line Wobbler*, a handmade "one-dimensional dungeon crawler" controlled with a wobbly spring-based controller and displayed on a long strip of densely packed LED lights, which snaked its way up a gallery wall and along the ceiling (Baumgarten n.d.). It's a flashy crowd-pleaser of a game that I'd encountered a few times before at various videogame festivals and parties, but here at 8:30 am, as it blooped loudly in the Blavatnik Hall, its gaudiness felt somewhat at odds with the hushed professional air of the press launch. As I watched an older journalist timidly nudge *Line Wobbler*'s springy joystick and quickly step away, I opened a

blank notebook and wrote my first fieldnote: "It's early, and everybody in this room is at work."

Videogames had been formally announced six months earlier in a press release, traditionally understood in museums and beyond as the most basic tool for communicating with the media (Kotler, Kotler and Kotler 2008, 390). Sent in September of 2017, the press release detailed the Museum's programming lineup for the following year, and explained the overarching premise of the show:

> There is a renaissance happening in videogames. A new wave of designers, players and critics are pushing the boundaries of the medium in radical new ways. This V&A show is the first to fully consider the complexity of videogames as one of the most important design fields of our time, investigating ground-breaking contemporary design work, creative and rebellious player communities and the political conversations that define this movement.
>
> This exhibition explores the design and culture of the medium since the mid-2000s, when major technological advancements increased access to the internet, social media and new means of making which had a profound impact on the way videogames are designed, discussed and played.
>
> Large-scale immersive multimedia installations and hands-on interactive experiences will feature alongside object-based displays providing rare glimpses of design materials from the leading studios whose work defines this new wave. (V&A 2017, 4)

Central to the pitch of *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* was a vow to take videogames seriously, as a design discipline and as a significant cultural form. Characteristic of the modern museum press release (Lazzeretti 2016, 219), the novelty of the exhibition was firmly asserted – as "the first" to intellectually engage with the medium in this way, the V&A seemed eager to set it apart from blockbuster videogame shows of the past. It was also a fairly short description amidst an announcement of six other exhibitions to open that same year, and beyond a handful of news articles written in the wake of the press release, not much had been said of *Videogames* by the press or the Museum since. That morning's press launch was the Museum's opportunity to freshly present the exhibition to an audience of journalists:announcing various functional details about the exhibition – its title, its structure, the works that would be on display – but also its central thesis and place within the Museum's wider remit. The Museum had, in fact, engaged intermittently with videogames over the previous few years: in 2013 the V&A hosted its first Game Designer in Residence; in 2014 it

acquired the iPhone game *Flappy Bird*; it had hosted a handful of videogame-centric evening events as part of its monthly *Friday Late* program, and two one-day conferences on game design – organised by the exhibition's curators. Though these had signalled a degree of enthusiasm for the medium, they had been relatively scattershot, and these interspersed engagements did not communicate a clear curatorial position on why videogames were valuable or where they sat within the museum's disciplinary remit. The press launch of *Videogames* would formally assert and rationalise the Museum's interest in videogames as a medium; and, with five months to go until the exhibition opened, it would hopefully drum up some publicity, too.

FIGURE 3.1. *Press launch for* Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt. *© Victoria and Albert Museum.*

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the Victoria and Albert Museum." The first to take the stage was the Museum's Director, Tristram Hunt. Formerly a Labour MP for the constituency Stoke-on-Trent Central, Hunt had recently left a 20-year career in politics and been appointed as Director of the V&A in early 2017, succeeding the previous Director Martin Roth. At 43, Hunt was relatively young for a museum director.[2] Despite his position as the head of an increasingly contemporary design institution, though, Hunt's academic background – as an historian of

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[2] A survey of all members of the Association of Art Museum Directors by *The Economist* in 2015 showed that "more than a third of directors are aged 60 or over and approaching retirement."

Victorian-era urbanism – was more in line with the V&A's past than its apparent future.

He introduced the exhibition by first speaking broadly about the Museum's "lineage and tradition" of engagement with digital art and design: the V&A had been actively collecting digital art since the early 1960s, and in 2017 became the first museum in the world to "collect" a social media platform – the Chinese messaging service WeChat. The V&A's first exhibition of videogames was, Hunt argued, simply a continuation of this long-held interest in digital design. "As the UK's leading resource for the study of contemporary design's impact on society, the V&A is proud to be engaging with this vital design medium. Considering their universality in contemporary culture, videogames are now rightly taking their place in the world's leading museum of art, design and performance. This exhibition will provide a vital insight into one of the most important design disciplines of our time."

After taking a moment to thank the exhibition's primary sponsor, the Blavatnik Family Foundation, he gestured towards the two curators standing next to him. "We'll now hear about the exhibition from our brilliant Curator, Marie Foulston, and Research Curator, Kristian Volsing, so please join me in welcoming Marie and Kristian to the stage to tell you about *Videogames*." The journalists offered a polite round of applause as Marie Foulston, the V&A's first Curator of Videogames, stepped up to the podium.

A brief development history of *Videogames*

"Good morning, and thank you so much for joining us here today." Matching the dignified air of the event, Marie addressed the crowd of journalists in a slightly more formal register than the voice I was used to. "We've been working on this exhibition for a few years now, and I remember the excitement and the significance that I felt when I first took the job here as Curator, on an exhibition on videogames, and as we've been developing it for so long it's easy in the day-to-day to be worn down by the details. So, on a personal note, it's really significant and amazing to be here today for the press launch, to see all of you here that have come out to see this exhibition, and I hope that some of you feel that significance." She meant this – after years of day-to-day toil behind closed office doors, the press launch represented a significant milestone in the exhibition's development. *Videogames* had a long and complex history behind it which

preceded Marie, Hunt, and nearly all of the V&A staff there inside the Blavatnik Hall.

Months later, I sat with Marie and Kristian in the curators' office looking over various documents they'd prepared years before, during the early stages of development. We looked at a huge spreadsheet which presented an overview of a number of games that they had considered for inclusion in the exhibition. Marie groaned: "There's just these little pockets of hell all throughout development that you completely forget about." My six months at the V&A permitted me a limited view into the seven-year life cycle of *Videogames*; during this time I was able to witness a handful of these "pockets of hell" for myself, which largely compose the focus of this study. The vast majority of the exhibition's development, however, is more or less undocumented. I do not intend nor am I able to correct this – this ethnography is not meant to be exhaustive – but in order to provide some context for the rest of this thesis, I will attempt to assemble a brief history of how *Videogames* at the V&A came to exist.

2013 – The department is formed

In early 2013, a new curatorial team was formed at the V&A. Within the Furniture, Textiles and Fashion department, a new collections-based section was formally carved out: the Contemporary Architecture, Design and Digital section. This section was established in response to the directive of the then-recently-appointed Director, Martin Roth, who wanted to modernise the Museum's approach to culture, and develop its capacity to collect and exhibit contemporary subjects, with a particular focus on design and its role in society (Kane 2020, 26). While there had previously existed a team within the V&A's curatorial system that produced exhibits exploring contemporary design, the Contemporary Architecture, Design and Digital section was created with an intent to more deeply explore its contemporary subjects – namely product design, architecture and urbanism, and digital design – and establish their place within the V&A's remit through a purposeful collection and exhibition strategy. Later, the section within Furniture, Textiles and Fashion was broken out into its own separate department, and renamed the Design, Architecture and Digital Department (referred to conversationally by its staff as DAD, pronounced "dad").

Hired to lead the new team was Kieran Long, who began as a Senior Curator and was eventually promoted to the role of Keeper once DAD became its own department. Long's professional background was in architecture – as a critic and journalist who had worked in editorial roles at

multiple architecture publications – however, his intent in leading the department was "not to be bound by disciplinary boundaries, but reflect people's engagement with architecture, design and digital through popular culture and their daily lives" (Long, quoted in Frearson 2012). Like Roth, Long's intent was to broaden the scope of the V&A's disciplinary remit, and he described his desire, through his position as curator, to "wage war on parochialism" (quoted in Frearson 2012).

From this vision for the mission of the department emerged an interest in videogames as the subject of a hypothetical exhibition – as Marie later told me, "Kieran wanted to get involved with videogames. Videogames were a part of what he envisaged the digital design strategy of the department to be." The prospect of an exhibition was pitched by Long to the V&A's Director, as an in-depth exploration of violence and combat in videogames; as I understand it, Roth expressed an openness to the concept of a videogame exhibition in the abstract, found the focus on violence and combat to be too niche, arguing that the V&A's first engagement with videogames needed to take a broader view, and be accessible to a wider audience. The hypothetical exhibition was developed further by Louise Shannon, DAD's Curator of Digital Design, alongside Alex Wiltshire – the former editor of *Edge* magazine, brought in as an external advisor – all under the guidance of Long. In late 2013, the exhibition was pitched more formally to the V&A's Exhibitions Steering Group under the working title of *Headshot: A Philosophy of Videogames*; this iteration of the exhibition was broader in its purview, and solidified a view of videogames as a design medium through a fairly technical lens, taking key concepts or technologies that were distinct to videogames and their design – virtual avatars, engines, headshots, et cetera – and opening those concepts up to audiences through discrete displays.[3] The exhibition was tentatively approved by the Exhibitions Steering Group, but without a set date or venue, and was sent back to DAD for further development.

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[3] In contrast to the exhibition that finally opened, which focused largely on physical artefacts, *Headshot*'s proposed displays seemed to rely heavily on digital/technological spectacle, at an ambitious scale – for instance, audiovisual installations where a visitor could encounter a digital avatar of the character Alex Vance, from the *Half-Life* series, to understand the role and technical makeup of non-player characters in videogames. The question of whether this would be possible from a technological design perspective, or whether *Half-Life*'s developers Valve would permit this, seemed entirely hypothetical. Kristian later reflected on this proposed exhibition: "It would have been amazing, but I think it would've been quite difficult to pull off. It also had a very strong focus on technology … in a way that's almost, to me, a bit fetishistic? In terms of the role of technology in the museum."

2014 – Marie is recruited

In March 2014, Long attended that year's Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco. He later reflected positively on the conference in an opinion piece for *Dezeen*, which was titled "The most important design event in the world is one you've probably never heard of." In the article, he spoke glowingly of both the event and the field of videogame design in general, arguing for its unappreciated significance as an emerging design discipline: "I went to GDC precisely because video games seem to me an unignorable field of design and popular culture. … Despite the astonishing financial and cultural success of many games, there's a reticence about seeing game design as related to the rest of design history" (Long 2015). This rhetoric seemed to foreshadow the exceptionalist tone that *Videogames* would later convey.[4]

At GDC, Long attended a session of short talks titled "Curating Video Game Culture: The New Wave of Video Game Events," given by five curators and organisers who all hosted events – parties, exhibitions and festivals – which involved the public display of videogames (Brin et al. 2014). The first speaker was Marie Foulston, who presented a talk describing her work as an independent curator with Wild Rumpus, a London-based six-person collective who organised parties and temporary installations exhibiting alternative and independent videogames. Since 2011, Wild Rumpus had been hosting events in distinctly informal contexts: nightclubs, bars, and a fishing vessel docked in an East London wharf. As Marie put it, her exhibitionary roots were from "a DIY space," and she did not initially refer to this practice as curatorial work: "we were putting on parties" (Foulston, quoted in Dibella 2020).[5] Eventually, this work involved collaborations with more formalised cultural and professional spaces: the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Museum of Popular Culture in Seattle, the Game Developers Conference, and others – alongside this, Marie described a "gradual acceptance of what that work was" amongst her and other

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4 Long's praise for the Game Developers Conference in this article feels distinct from the feeling of weary cynicism that characterises my own impression of the conference as a professional game developer, which is shared by many of my friends and colleagues in the field. I recall Marie lamenting the mundanity of her professional trips as a curator compared to those of her colleagues at the V&A: architecture curators would go to their cool biennale in Venice; fashion curators would go to Paris Fashion Week; she would fly to a grim conference hall in downtown San Francisco and stand around, jetlagged in a lanyard.

5 See Chapter 9 for a substantive account of my own experience as an exhibitor in one of these parties, and the significant consequences it bore for my and my colleagues' careers as professional videogame developers.

organisers who were running similar events showcasing independent videogames in public spaces around the world, as part of an emerging practice then described as the New Arcade (Albrecht 2014). According to Marie: "Over the years, myself, with other peers, began to term it curation. Because of that, I eventually called myself a curator" (Foulston quoted in Dibella 2020).

Later that year, Marie was hired as a curator at the V&A. She was hired in a limited capacity, as maternity cover for DAD's Curator of Digital Design – Louise Shannon, who had been developing the exhibition under Long's guidance. The role encompassed a great deal of other work beyond the development of this nascent exhibition – the collection and display of other forms of digital and contemporary media – however Marie was aware that she had been hired in part to fill a particular gap in the department's curatorial knowledge: "When I started, it was like a weird sort of dance was beginning. … I was given that role, not necessarily to work on the exhibition, but to be within the department for that year, and to build up an engagement with videogames; to be the Digital Design Curator but with an obvious slant towards videogames." This broader purview did not seem to last long, however, and she soon drifted towards the exhibition:

> I read through that proposal, I had concerns about its approach, and wanted the opportunity to scope out something different, and had a few ideas of what we could do, and it didn't take much for me to– basically, as soon as I said to Kieran, "I'm not happy with this proposal," he said, "Great, come up with another one." About three months into the job here that pretty much became the majority of what my work was.

Marie began this work with a clear purpose in mind – while the exhibition had been tentatively scheduled, this was a tenuous commitment, and in order to guarantee its opening the the exhibition was to be presented again to the Exhibition Steering Group. Marie was therefore tasked with charting a new direction for the exhibition, drawing upon her deeper familiarity with the various communities of practice and play that constituted the culture of videogames. Where Long had introduced videogames to the V&A as an area of interest, Marie had begun the work of concretising and codifying that interest.

2015 – Redeveloping the proposal

Throughout 2015, Marie continued redeveloping the proposal. This began as a very open process of creative exploration, as a breadth of ideas for

possible displays was researched. As ideas emerged and solidified Marie printed them out and pinned them to foam boards, so that they could be reconfigured and rearranged as well as quickly presented to other Museum staff. This was an established practice within the department – a necessary means of externalising an evolutionary process which would otherwise only exist inside of a curator's computer, or their head.[6]

This process seemed largely to be a matter of refinement – taking a broad concept such as speedrunning, fan art, or controllers, and then attempting to crystallise it into a coherent display where it could be conveyed concisely through objects or media. A number of concepts were developed and then gradually dropped as the exhibition took shape. As Marie described it to me, this communicative method helped her determine which ideas would be feasible as exhibition displays:

> For some of the stuff that was more complex, the way that that stuff normally worked its way out of the exhibition, was that I'd be sat down, normally with Kieran [Long], and I would talk him through the boards. I would be explaining a concept, and if I had to be sat there for more than five minutes explaining it, it probably wasn't going to be something we could communicate in the exhibition.

Gradually, these varied concepts cohered into broader categories, and a new concept and structure emerged for the exhibition, developed by Marie under Long's guidance. At the core of this new exhibition was a renewed focus on videogame design as a process, which would be presented via individual works as emblematic of larger paradigm shifts in how games are produced. Importantly, this "opening up" of the game development process was conveyed not through in-depth technical breakdowns of videogames, but through the careful selection and display of design artefacts: tools, documents, and drawings which could testify to their games' making.

> The way we talk about it now … is this idea of constellations, where you have the game which exists at the centre of a constellation of objects which are dotted around it. And then you have that one focal point of the installation, and you don't

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[6] In a published interview, Marie described the fragility of such a physical method of exhibition development: "Over the weekend, some contractors came in. They did some work on the balcony and opened the doors. And if you opened the doors, the wind that came in was like a little tornado. When I came in, all the pieces of paper were blown off these boards. These boards were shredded and I said, 'Oh my God.' … they ordered some biscuits, bless them, to apologize, but we still had to spend another couple days recreating them by cutting things out of tiny pictures" (Foulston, quoted in Dibella 2020).

have everything, but you have enough to tell a story of a specific aspect of its design.

In June of 2015, the exhibition was formally presented to the Exhibitions Steering Group under the working title of *Rebel Videogames*. This title was meant to convey a theme of renaissance which was central to the exhibition's thesis and scope: per the submitted proposal, the exhibition would "showcase the transformations that have happened in the world of videogame design since the mid-2000s" and stated its aim to be "the first ever exhibition to fully consider the complexity of videogames as a design medium in their own right, leaving visitors with a new-found awe and respect for the artistry of contemporary videogames." Every work in the exhibition was selected for its capacity to convey some kind of innovation or against-the-grain artistry, even when displaying mainstream titles.

This revised vision of the exhibition was approved, and given a guaranteed place in the schedule. One crucial aspect to this approval was a change in venue, and therefore in scope: where *Headshot* was pitched for the V&A's Porter Gallery – a square room near the Museum's entrance, which typically hosted medium-sized unticketed exhibitions – *Rebel Videogames* was approved for display in Gallery 39 and its adjoining North Court, which was 2.5 times larger than the Porter Gallery and was used to host much larger and more expensive exhibitions, which were accordingly charged a premium ticket price.[7] As Marie told me, this change was discussed during the development of the new proposal, due to the Museum's expectations of high visitor figures.[8]

Shortly after this approval, with the long-term prospect of actually making an exhibition now ahead, a position was advertised for a Research Curator – someone who could support Marie's work as lead curator by doing more extensive research into the various facets of the exhibition, while developing other display concepts themselves. In late 2015 this position went to Kristian Volsing, who had already been working within DAD as an Assistant Curator since 2013, and in various other curatorial roles at the V&A since 2007. Kristian had a relatively general interest in videogames, but was brought on to supplement Marie's expertise in the exhibition's subject by

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[7] Full-priced tickets to *Videogames* cost £18, making it the most expensive show open at the V&A during its run, and among the most expensive shows that had ever been open at the Museum.

[8] As I explore in Chapter 8, this move from a medium-scale exhibition of videogames towards a ticketed blockbuster bore serious consequences for the content of the exhibition, its commercial performance, and the ultimate fate of videogames as a subject within the remit of the V&A.

providing a strong working knowledge of the Museum as an organisation. He described the conditions of his hiring to me in these terms:

> They wanted two things. They wanted someone with a knowledge of the museum – its systems and functions. And somebody who has at least some level of knowledge of videogames. … To some extent, I knew a lot more about museum practices then, when Marie had just started here – the way that this museum had worked in the past. I also understand and respect that Marie has a lot more experience and a lot more connections in this space too.

With two curators playing to two different strengths, and with the proposal stage now behind them, the work of planning and producing a no-longer-speculative exhibition now lay ahead.

2016–17 – Developing the exhibition

The actual work of planning the exhibition remains largely mysterious to me. My understanding of these two years of development is informed through a handful of snapshots of work as described to me after the fact, which feel insufficient to describe the entire process. This seems to be true for the curators, too, as Marie articulated in an interview:

> When we go back and look at presentations or the first presentation I did to the Exhibitions Steering Group, I think, "What on earth did we do for two to three years?" because the exhibition was there. The majority of the games are there, the majority of the exhibition is there, but you forget … When you get to the end and look back, you can see this straight line. And you're like, "Why didn't we just follow the straight line to get from here to here?" But you have to go through this cycle, this process of refining, circling, and regurgitating ideas until you get to the end. (Foulston, quoted in Dibella 2020)

In 2016, with the proposal out of the way and a clear opening date on the schedule as their deadline, the curators began their process of refining, circling, and regurgitating in earnest. In developing the proposal, a prospective structure for the exhibition had been worked out, which meant that the task of researching content for the show could be split between Marie and Kristian, and then developed in parallel. Marie began exploring the processes of game development, and determining which titles and studios could be interesting case studies for display; Kristian began researching the political and critical discussions that surround videogame culture, and explored ways that these could be presented. This work was all enacted under the guidance of Long, as Kristian described: "We were kind

of 'appointed' by Kieran to look after certain sections, but of course that was a discussion process all the time. So we'd be talking to each other, we'd have ideas, we'd present a little bit to each other."

Once a shortlist of potential exhibition content began taking shape, the curators commenced the task of reaching out to game developers to gauge their interest in being involved. Marie's existing connections to various game development scenes meant that independent creators were relatively accessible, however larger studios – who were typically reticent to share their practices publicly, and whose creative leads were often only accessible via PR departments – took more work to contact and correspond with.[9] As part of this research, Marie and Kristian conducted a series of visits to various studios and developers internationally: Naughty Dog in Santa Monica, California; Blizzard Entertainment in Irvine, California; Nintendo in Kyoto, Japan; and so on. These visits permitted more direct access to these black-box creative environments which instigated new ideas for displays – both in terms of development artefacts, and as inspiration for the exhibition's design.[10] Through these interactions, the possibilities of what could be displayed were explored and refined, and the curators gradually developed coherent theses which could act as a conceptual core for each work's display.

In 2016, as the exhibition's scope and content were becoming more concretely defined, a brief for the exhibition's design – which encompassed its architecture, audiovisual elements, graphic design components, lighting, and soundscapes – was advertised as part of the V&A's standardised tender process. The brief was open and un-prescriptive, but set some clear boundaries in terms of its tone, in line with the deliberate scope of the exhibition:

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[9] See Chapter 6 for further discussion of the working relationship between the curators and the videogame industry.

[10] For example: a "visit report", written as a summary by Marie after one of these studio visits, pondered the possibilities of reflecting the cluttered desks of the studio staff in the exhibition displays: "It'd be great to get photos of the office in a 'fly on the wall way' – e.g. not staged way. Personalised desk set ups (kettles, toys, posters, lights). Scooters propped up by the toilets. Small huddles of people over a screen. Different tech and hardware set ups (e.g. 3 screens, wacom tablets). Could we get some [photos] which capture the office as a whole and some in detail on a few peoples desks? These would just be used as exhibition design references at this stage, not exhibited objects." This concept worked its way into the finished exhibition in the arrangement of some of its screens, which were mounted on monitor arms as an allusion to the multi-monitor working setup of these studios.

The exhibition's design should reflect the progressive and contemporary approach of the show's thesis. It should not recall the aesthetics of pixel art/retro arcades used in past game-oriented exhibitions. … *Rebel Videogames* does not seek to be an 'arcade in a museum' and will rarely exhibit videogames in their final unedited form for visitors to play through. Instead this exhibition will use key physical/digital artefacts and interactive exhibits to explore the videogame design process and games' reception with both critical and player audiences. Designers should look beyond past videogame exhibitions and instead towards playful, participatory exhibitions and installations from other design fields for inspiration.

Through this process, a design team of two small London-based studios, who had applied as joint creative leads, was eventually selected: the exhibition's spatial design would be led by Pernilla Ohrstedt Studio, and the audiovisual displays would be produced by Squint/Opera. Their proposed design – which is described further in the final section of this chapter – suited the brief well, presenting a mature and reflective space which alluded to the materiality of videogames while eschewing cliched references. As Marie later reflected, getting this early design in place was a crucial step in the development of the exhibition, from an open and abstract creative exploration into something more productively bounded:

What felt good about that at the time was that the design of the show created a physical framework, that made it much easier to map objects and research onto that, because then you're working with constraints, and it's like, "This is the mode of display; this won't work; that won't work; this *will* work." So you can see what is and isn't working, whereas normally that would be a much slower turnover.

With a blueprint for the exhibition firmly established, and a clear structure and flow in mind, the curators moved towards finalising the content and interpretive focus of each display.

In April of 2017, Kieran Long was hired as the Director of the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design (also called ArkDes) and moved to Stockholm, Sweden, leaving the V&A and the department that he'd founded. The V&A's Director Martin Roth had left the Museum late the previous year. This change in leadership redefined the situation of the curators, as well as videogames as a subject, within the V&A – the Museum's first advocate for videogames, and the Director who had first supported the exhibition, were now gone; Marie and Kristian were left as

the solitary experts and advocates for videogames inside the V&A, with nobody more senior to defer to or guide them.[11]

2018 – The final stretch

In April of 2018, after the press launch had wrapped up and the crowd of journalists had begun to disperse, I chatted briefly with Kristian, who described the work that had been occupying them so far, and the work still to come. For the past while, the curators had had their hands full preparing the exhibition's accompanying publication – a 208-page series of essays, printed in glossy full colour and bound in neon-yellow plastic, containing reflections from videogame critics – and the curators themselves – on works featured in the exhibition, as well as reflective writing from several of its exhibited practitioners (Foulston and Volsing 2018). Alongside this major project, the curators had spent serious time preparing thoroughly for the press launch itself, involving thorough media training for both curators, and the refinement of a series of talking points around the exhibition as well as prepared answers to expected questions from press. In the lead-up to this public announcement of the exhibition, the curators had also needed to determine a final name for the exhibition. Its working title, *Rebel Videogames*, had proven contentious – other stakeholders in the Museum felt that the exhibition was not strictly rebellious in nature, and that a title should instead reflect a more celebratory tone. After extensive brainstorming and workshopping, a new title had been found, and the exhibition was announced as *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt.*

With the publication largely squared away and the press launch wrapped, the curators could get back to the work of finishing the exhibition itself, which was scheduled to open in five months – the final stretch of *Videogames*'s four-year development, which would be the focus of my fieldwork. Compared to the research-heavy work of the previous years, the next five months would be much more hands-on in nature, as a litany of curatorial details was finalised. Loaned objects from various videogame developers around the world would soon arrive via freight, requiring careful handling and storage, then the selection of which specific pieces should be displayed, and then how they should be displayed: working out their arrangement in display cases; determining how interactable objects could be handled and protected, and how component pieces could be replaced if needed. Interpretive texts accompanying these objects would be written,

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[11] See Chapter 7 for an exploration of the consequences of this solitary expertise on the exhibition.

and then edited, and then reviewed, and then edited again. The "raw material" of the exhibition's audiovisual elements – recorded interviews, behind-the-scenes development footage, found videos, et cetera – had been filmed and licensed, but still needed to be edited by external subcontractors, requiring many rounds of briefing and feedback from the curators. A marketing plan was at its early stages: a brief had been advertised as part of the Museum's standard tender process, and soon pitches for the exhibition's advertising campaign would arrive and a contractor would be chosen to design the exhibition's posters and visual identity. Finally, the exhibition needed to be installed on the gallery floor – a huge logistical undertaking requiring close collaboration with builders, AV technicians and fabricators to transmute the exhibition from a series of documents and architectural drawings into a physical, visitable space.

Not long after the press launch was over, Marie and Kristian were whisked away for some extended press interviews, and I was left alone in the Museum. My research fellowship would not begin for another month, and I felt very much like an outsider. I walked through the V&A – which then felt enormous and inscrutable – as a visitor. After wandering around its permanent galleries, I eventually settled at the Museum's historic Gamble dining room, where I paid £4.50 for an Earl Grey-infused raisin scone, which is served with a dish of clotted cream and a tiny screw-topped jar of raspberry jam. This was expensive for a single scone, but it was a museum cafe, and a particularly stately one at that – the walls were decorated in ceramic and enamel, with a big frieze of cherubs along the ceiling. One month later, I would be sitting on the other side of that wall, in a noisy and sterile staff canteen, eating the same scone for 55p, though it would then be served with a cheap pad of butter instead of cream, and the jam would come in a disposable plastic tub. Well and truly backstage.

An overview of *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt*

The V&A's first exhibition of videogames, titled *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt*, ran from September 8, 2018 to February 24, 2019. In keeping with the Museum's history of design education – as I will describe in Chapter 4 – the exhibition's stated aim was to consider videogames through the lens of design and design process, taking a particular focus on "contemporary" videogames, which it defined as games from the mid-2000s to the present. This limited scope reflected the curators' desire not to present a retrospective view of the medium's history, which had been the approach of most blockbuster videogame exhibitions that had come before it. Instead, it

periodised its featured games by taking the late 2000s as an inflection point, when a series of techno-cultural paradigm shifts – smartphones, broadband internet, the democratisation of development tools – catalysed a "new wave" of game development practice which the exhibition took as its focus.

With regard to the curatorial selection of games featured within the exhibition, *Videogames*'s aim was to focus on depth rather than breadth. There were only around 30 games featured in the exhibition – significantly fewer than the 100+ typically showcased in the blockbusters that preceded it. Another distinctive curatorial choice was the rather limited use of interactivity throughout the exhibition, which had been a hallmark and selling-point of these earlier shows. The curators believed that interactivity should only be deployed when it was the most effective way to communicate the key message of a display – in the cases of many of its games, particularly AAA[12] titles which normally took 20+ hours to play through, the curators found new ways to provide interpretive inroads for their inexperienced audience, through displays of physical and digital development artefacts and custom-commissioned audiovisual displays. In this respect the exhibition could be viewed as a curatorial experiment – an attempt to build a new curatorial methodology for the display of videogames, to communicate the nuances of an essentially durational and interactive medium in a space where interactivity was unfeasible.

Structurally, *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* comprised three sections which corresponded to its three-word subtitle. The first section – "New Designers" – looked in-depth at the design process of eight videogames, by presenting "constellations" of development artefacts. The second section – "Disruptors" – presented views into the sociopolitical discourse surrounding contemporary videogame culture. The third section was split across two halves: "Players_Online," which used a large-scale AV installation to depict the diverse agencies of online player communities, and "Players_Offline" which looked at the rise of the "new arcade" scene, featuring an array of handmade arcade cabinets and interactive installations.

New Designers

> What does it take to make a videogame? Rarely seen design
> materials from the desks and hard drives of leading designers
> sit alongside specially commissioned multimedia installations

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[12] AAA (pronounced "triple-A") is an informal classification term, analogous to the film industry's use of the term "blockbuster," used to describe videogames developed by very large studios – typically over 100 people, often several hundreds – with equivalently high production budgets.

to provide new perspectives and insights into the craftsmanship and inspiration behind a selection of groundbreaking contemporary videogames.

From the cinematic blockbusters of large AAA studios to the modest and often intimate work of independent designers, this section of the exhibition presents an eclectic and diverse range of voices and work from across game design. All are united by their ambitions to break boundaries. (V&A 2018a)

Videogames's first section, which sought to demystify the normally opaque videogame development process, was in many respects the "flagship" section of the exhibition. As the section with the clearest focus on design process, it most explicitly delivered on the exhibition's promise to go "behind the scenes" of videogame development. Eight games were featured in this section of the exhibition – a number of big-budget AAA titles alongside small-scale works made by independent creators (listed here in the order that they are encountered in the expected "flow" of the exhibition):

- *Journey* (2012) by thatgamecompany
- *The Last of Us* (2013) by Naughty Dog
- *Bloodborne* (2015) by FromSoftware
- *Splatoon* (2015) by Nintendo EAD
- *Consume Me* (unreleased) by Jenny Jiao Hsia
- *The Graveyard* (2008) by Tale of Tales
- *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013–20) by Cardboard Computer
- *No Man's Sky* (2016) by Hello Games

The space of the section was architecturally divided by large sheets of diaphanous grey scrim, intended by the exhibition designers Pernilla Ohrstedt Studio to emulate a "distance fog" effect – a graphical technique used in videogame development which shades distant objects to create a stronger illusion of depth. Each game was represented in its own isolated display, through a collection of physical and digital objects which Marie would later describe to me as a "constellation": "The way we talk about it now – for the Design section specifically – is this idea of constellations, where you have the game which exists at the centre of a constellation of objects which are dotted around it. And then you have that one focal point of the installation, and you don't have everything, but you have enough to tell a story of a specific aspect of its design." Rather than provide a linear arrangement of objects to express a didactic message, the process of game

development was described through this nonlinear constellation of artefacts, which constituted one or two broad themes per display.

Though the section featured a rather diverse and disparate collection of games, they were selected according to the exhibition's unifying thesis, which was to demonstrate a "new wave" of game design. This sense of revolution underpinned the exhibition as a whole, but was most explicit in the "New Designers" section, even through the big-budget games which might normally be seem quite safe compared to the more experimental independent titles in the exhibition. *The Last of Us*, for instance, was chosen for how it exemplified – and catalysed – the shift towards cinematic action, through depictions of motion-capture and high-fidelity animation. Nintendo's *Splatoon*, despite being made by one of the oldest existing game development studios, was chosen because it represented a paradigm shift within Nintendo's creative practice, being made by a relatively young and inexperienced team whose work which sat in stark contrast to the company's much older entrenched franchises. Marie described this philosophy to me in an interview after the exhibition had opened: "At no point have I ever wanted to, and I don't think that we ever have, compromised on the fact that every work in the show has to earnestly be groundbreaking in some way. Something like *Splatoon* is definitely at the more extreme end of how much that shift or change is visible, because it's still a big traditional AAA game – but every work had to be different to some extent and I'm glad that I never really had to compromise on that."

Disruptors

> As tools to make games have become more available and distribution has broadened, game designers have begun to engage more widely with social and political debates. The second section of the exhibition presents the work and voices of the influential game makers and commentators who are leading critical discussion and debates that challenge not only ideas about videogames and what they should be, but how this relates to society as a whole. (V&A 2018a)

Distinct from the previous section, which looked at games purely in the context of their creation, the exhibition's second section examined the sociopolitical context of videogames, presenting them less strictly as a design medium and instead as a complex and richly political culture. This was conceived of as the exhibition's version of a "reading room" – a quiet space to read and reflect, usually with ample seating space and a library of texts – which was an archetype found in so many other V&A exhibitions that it was more or less an unwritten rule.[13]

Developed under the working title "Politics in Code," this section aimed to display discourses rather than games. Exhibiting a discourse proved to be a difficult challenge for the curators, as Marie later reflected: "The Politics section went through lots of iterations, and lots of concepts … the problem is that with so many of the conversations about works politically, there's a narrative attached to a game, or there's narrative attached to a work, and that narrative is normally something complicated to outline. But then what's the display object?" Since so many of the vital conversations happening around videogames took place online, in tweets and essays and articles rather than in published texts, as would feature in a typical "reading room," the curators needed to find a way to materially represent this digital discourse. "There were some thoughts about whether people could read whole articles in this space; maybe you could come in and scroll down, but then it's like, well, what is that experience like if you come in after someone's scrolled through an article? You're just left with a page of words." In the end, the curators ended up winnowing these articles down into digestible fragments of text – paragraphs from essays, news article headlines, assorted quotes and tweets – which were printed on acrylic sheets and laid out as a sort of broadsheet, along with projected videos and playable games. "I remember being sat at my computer, trying out different configurations with the monitor, and seeing how articles looked, and

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[13] See Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of the written and unwritten "rules" that formed professional practice at the V&A.

whether we could frame an article on a computer, but then just realising that actually the thing that we need to communicate from these is sometimes a quote – that's the most important thing to impress upon people. Sometimes it's the headline, so if we just want those, we don't actually need all these screens."

FIGURE 3.3. *Headlines and quotes featured in the* PLAYING WITH GUNS *desk.*
© Pernilla Ohrstedt Studio.

This section comprised six "desks," each developed around a particular theme. These six themes were signposted by glowing headlines, which floated above each desk:

- PLAYING WITH GUNS, which surveyed the debates around guns and violence that surround videogames and their representation in the media.

- VIDEOGAMES ARE POLITICAL, which looked at the contested political agency of videogames, and the role that videogame distribution platforms such as Apple's App Store play in the dissemination or censorship of explicitly political games.

- حـــواجـــز الــلغة ("Language Barriers"), which looked at the geopolitical barriers-to-entry of the Western games industry, as well as the cultural biases ingrained in its development tools.

- WHY ARE VIDEOGAMES SO WHITE?, which depicted racism both as a subject matter within videogames, and as a pernicious component of videogame culture.
- VIDEOGAMES ARE A GIRL THING, which looked at problematic representations of gender in videogames, and the subsequent feminist discourse critiquing the medium's widespread sexism.
- LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX, which looked at representations of sex and sexuality in videogames.

Each desk presented a game or piece of media as a centrepoint which encapsulated the tensions of its theme. حـواجـز اللغة, for instance, exemplified the English-speaking biases embedded in game development tools through its display of a version of *Pong* written in the Arabic programming language قـلب (pronounced "qalb," meaning "heart"), developed by artist Ramsey Nasser, to highlight the "cultural biases of computer science and [to challenge] the assumptions we make about programming" (Nasser 2012). VIDEOGAMES ARE POLITICAL featured Molleindustria's 2011 satirical game *Phone Story*, which depicted the human-rights violations inherent to the manufacture and distribution of smartphones – *Phone Story* was removed from the App Store because of its overtly political message, reigniting a discourse around censorship which the exhibition presented through a series of text fragments: quotes from cultural critics; headlines from news articles reporting on similar cases of censorship; passages from Apple's App Store review guidelines which were used to justify their "curation" of

FIGURE 3.4. *"Disruptors" section.*
© *Victoria and Albert Museum.*

polemical apps; and an excerpt from the US Supreme Court's ruling in 2011 which defended videogames as a form of protected speech.

Alongside the desks, a wide video projection displayed a series of talking-head interview responses from various critics and commentators, which expanded upon the themes presented through the desks in a more discursive and conversational format. In contrast to the relatively aloof curatorial tone of the exhibition's interpretive texts, these interviews allowed for more direct and polemical arguments to be made, layering in a sense of multivocality to soften the monolithic voice of the institution. As the curators wrote in the introduction to the exhibition's accompanying catalogue, "The story of contemporary game design is also one of new discussions. Some of the most influential voices within the field today are its cultural commentators, be they writers, game designers or advocates" (Foulston and Volsing 2018, 11). This video, and the section as a whole, functioned as an acknowledgement that the contemporary field of videogames is not shaped by videogames alone, but also by the voices of its commentators and critics.

Players_Online

> Online player communities connected through servers and social platforms create, collaborate and spectate together. From mind-blowing megastructures built in *Minecraft* to the vast array of fan art that embraces and extends beloved virtual worlds, their work sees them transcend the role of the designer to democratise design on a vast scale. A large scale immersive installation in this section celebrates the dazzling imagination and creative chaos shown by videogame players. (V&A 2018a)

The final two spaces shifted focus from how videogames are created to how they are played. Developed under the working title of "Folk Design," the third space aimed to represent the empowered role of the contemporary videogame player – no longer passive consumers, players become increasingly active and co-creative following the mainstream adoption of broadband internet. Using a large projection of four commissioned videos on a cinema-sized screen, this section sought to document the ways in which communities of players creatively adapted and extended videogame play, to "transcend the role of the designer," as the curators put it (Foulston and Volsing 2018, 11).

The V&A commissioned four videos from London studio Squint/Opera, which also produced the other AV material throughout the exhibition. Each video took a different videogame – and its player-community – as its focus:

- The first video presented the creative output of the fan community of Blizzard Games's *Overwatch* (2016), presenting a myriad of fan art depicting and relating to the character D.Va – digital painting, animation, cosplay, makeup tutorials, and custom PC building.

- The second video focused on the "megabuilds" made in Mojang's *Minecraft* (2011) – enormous, complex constructions made by dedicated individuals as well as large co-ordinated communities – which were conspicuously depicted through a series of windowed YouTube videos, remediating the cinema screen into a computer desktop, to acknowledge the importance of the online platform to the mainstream popularity of the game.

- The third video depicted the grandeur and spectacle of the 2017 *League of Legends* World Championship finals, held at the Beijing National Stadium, by compiling televised footage of the players and play-by-play commentary intercut with high-performance and inscrutably complex gameplay.

- The fourth video documented the "Bloodbath of B-R5RB," which was a large-scale virtual space battle fought between approximately 2600 players over a period of 21 hours in the massively multiplayer online game *EVE Online* in January 2014.
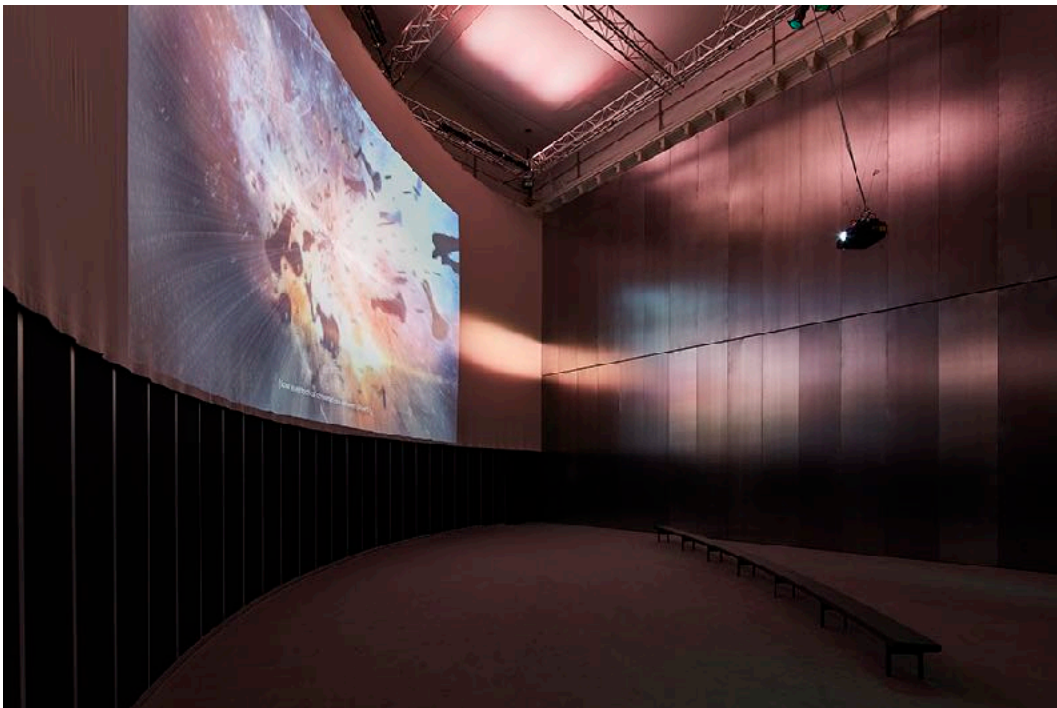
FIGURE 3.5. *"Players_Online" section.*
© Pernilla Ohrstedt Studio.

After the quiet, contemplative space of the "Disruptors" section, "Players_Online" presented visitors with a major tonal shift. The films were projected on an enormous screen, which was laid over a grid of coloured LEDs that accentuated the visual effects of the projection. With all its bright colours and loud music, this section seemed to deliver on the vibrant spectacle expected of the vibrant blockbuster exhibition, and although the films were relatively short, visitors tended to linger in this room for a while – after a fairly dense and intellectual first half of the exhibition, this was a nice place to sit and be overstimulated for a little while.

Players_Offline

> From the online to the offline the playful exhibition finale looks to the rise of a new DIY arcade scene. Handmade arcade cabinets and interactive installations of spectacle and performance provide a punk alternative to the traditional arcade space that playfully reminds us of the social power of videogames. (V&A 2018a)

As a counterpoint to the large-scale spectacle of the previous room, "Players_Offline" presented a variety of lo-fi works made by independent creators. Referred to as the "DIY Arcade" throughout its development, this space exhibited the works and culture of a loose community of practice – which Marie was a part of when she joined the V&A – that was once called the "New Arcade" scene (Albrecht 2014). The exhibition's final section displayed a number of experimental handmade works which were designed to be played in public spaces, for example:

- The UCLA Game Lab's *Arcade Backpack* (2012–2019), a portable arcade machine that could be worn as a backpack, which contained a number of games developed by UCLA students.
- Robin Baumgarten's *Line Wobbler* (2015), a "one-dimensional dungeon crawler game" controlled by a wobbly spring, and displayed on a dense strip of colourful LEDs (Baumgarten n.d.).
- SK Games' *Bush Bash* (2014), a two-player racing/shooting game whose controls were embedded in the front seats of a Mitsubishi Magna whose rear half had been sawn off.
- Kaho Abe's *Hit Me* (2011), a game played by two players who each wore hard hats upon which had been mounted large buttons and small digital cameras, where each player would try to hit the button on their opponent's head, at which time a photo of the opponent would be taken and projected on a wall, alongside the score, for spectators to see.

- Lucky Frame's *ROFLPillar* (2013), a game played while lying down underneath a suspended screen, and controlled by physically wriggling left and right while wearing a motion sensor, to correspondingly move an onscreen caterpillar.

The section was populated with a variety of alternative controllers like these, alongside an array of small videogames presented inside custom-built arcade cabinets produced by Scottish studio We Throw Switches, as well as artefacts and ephemera from the New Arcade scene. At the centre of the room sat a structure built from steel shelves, referred to throughout development as the "AV pyre," upon which sat a series of screens and monitors depicting documentary footage of various works in the room, as well as some large and heavily worn soft toys that had served as mascots for the New York based gallery space Babycastles.

FIGURE 3.6. *"Players_Offline" section.*
© Squint/Opera.

This was the most vibrant, and most explicitly "playful" section of the exhibition. As the space with the highest density of interactive works in the exhibition, "Players_Offline" functioned as a kind of catharsis in comparison to the preceding exhibition: it was looser, wilder, and continued the feeling of overstimulation from the previous room. This catharsis was reflected in the exhibition design – the space was lit by bright multicoloured neon lights, reflected by metallic wall panels, and much of the room was covered in a vibrant mural by local illustrator Angus Dick, which collectively

created the atmosphere of a club, or a particularly trendy contemporary arcade. The room felt like the exhibition's concession to the interactivity expected of blockbuster videogame shows – where other rooms featured long-form videogames designed to be played in private, and were therefore impractical to display as interactive works, "Players_Offline" featured games which were designed specifically to be played either in short sessions or in public.

4. Why videogames?
Two histories of the V&A

I once heard an old joke from a member of staff: that the V&A existed to collect whatever the British Museum and the National Gallery didn't. Described by its former Directors as "a refuge for destitute collections" and "an extremely capacious handbag," the disciplinary boundaries of the Museum have never been completely clear. (Cole 1884, 292; Strong, quoted in Chilvers 2009, 658). Why would a dignified institution like the V&A be drawn to a medium as ostensibly juvenile and messy as videogames? Where does this institutional interest originate, and how does it fit into the broader remit of the Museum?

In a speech given at the 1995 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums in Philadelphia, museum theorist Stephen A. Weil (2002) described the essentially schismatic or "hyphenated" interests of museums and their workers. "On one side of the hyphen," Weil said, "is our disciplinary interest: art, history, science, and their variants. On the other side is our institutional interest, our concern with the museum as a highly specialized and distinct means of cultural transmission." To Weil, these are two separate yet overlapping lenses through which museum activity can be understood. "Put otherwise, except for any surviving McLuhanites who still believe the medium is the message, most of us are inevitably involved both with a disciplinary message and with the institutional medium by which that message is disseminated. Rarely, though, are any of us equally involved with both" (Weil 2002, 93). In other words, museum operations are dualistic in nature, and tend to serve both sides of the hyphen simultaneously, even as the priorities of individual museum workers differ.

Through this bicameral view, we can formulate two distinct – though still compatible – answers to the question of the origin of *Videogames*, each

linked respectively to two histories of the V&A. The first is the disciplinary history of the V&A as a design museum, which had used the curatorial display of objects to didactically espouse the values of good design since its foundation. The second is the institutional history of the V&A as a public-facing cultural space, which has been characterised more recently by its search for relevance and self-definition amongst an ever-broadening audience. The V&A's history as a design museum approximates the sanctioned creation narrative that the museum tells of itself, making it relatively simple to summarise through its "publicly foregrounded messages" (Handler and Gable 1997, 11). The history of the Museum's relation to its public is more abstruse, and also more obscure, relying primarily on sources not broadcast by the V&A itself. I recount both histories here in order to better understand the Museum's contemporary priorities and mission, and to give context for an analysis of its interest in videogames as an exhibitionary subject – as well as context for many of the events discussed in the following chapters' ethnographic account.

One important qualification for the historical accounts which follow: with a few exceptions, throughout this chapter I consistently refer to "the Museum" as a monolithic unitary agent, with its own principles, objectives and preferences. This is, of course, a total fallacy. A museum cannot possess this sentience or agency – that agency is constructed by the collective action of the people within it. The V&A has always been a vast and heterogenous organisation comprising hundreds of diverse staff, all with differing professional and personal values. In the interest of brevity, though, I have abstracted this collection of motives into the amalgamated will of "the Museum" or "the institution." In the scope of one chapter, I cannot represent the total diversity of voices in the V&A throughout its history; I therefore tend to summarise the motives of the Museum through its most influential and powerful staff – its executives. In order to give a picture of the V&A's institutional priorities throughout its history, I have quoted as much as possible directly from the Museum's various – and typically quite verbose – Directors, as they have historically been the staff who most authoritatively speak for the Museum as a whole.

Through its two histories of the V&A, this chapter presents a broad, macroscopic view of the Museum in order to contextualise further analysis of its actions and motivations – I hope to deconstruct this notion of the museum as a unified, monolithic intelligence through the granular, first-person perspective of my ethnographic fieldwork in the following chapters. As well as establishing a background of the V&A to inform the rest of my ethnographic study, I use these historical accounts to provoke a critical

inquiry into the V&A's interest in videogames, and explore how this interest reveals tensions inherent within its Museum's organisation.

The design museum

At the exhibition's press launch, Marie Foulston presented a quote by the Director of New York University's Game Center, Frank Lantz, from a talk he gave at the 2014 Game Developers Conference: "Making a game combines everything that's hard about building a bridge with everything that's hard about composing an opera. Games are operas made out of bridges." As a snappy summary of the complex difficulty and interdisciplinarity which characterises the game development process, this quote was central to the thesis of the show, and would later be displayed in large letters at the entrance room of the exhibition, and preface the curators' introduction in exhibition catalogue. As Marie put it in her speech, "This is a quote that, to me, talks about what is so fascinating and uniquely complex about videogames – that inherent tension in this as a design discipline. Videogames are objective system design meets subjective emotional aesthetic design." The exhibition presented videogames as a deeply complicated design medium, made through inscrutable and difficult processes, and one of its broadest goals was to expose and demonstrate these processes to the museumgoing public. In this sense, novelty of the medium aside, *Videogames* had much in common with the foundational principles of the V&A.

A strong disciplinary interest had been central to the V&A's remit since its conception, and design education has always been an essential part of the Museum's function. The canonical creation narrative as told by historians, and by the V&A itself, suggests that the Museum was founded as a direct response to fears about a decline in the quality of British art and design(V&A 2018b, 37). As Physick (1982, 13) has observed, the V&A's prehistory began two decades before its opening in 1852. In 1836, a report from members of a committee of the House of Commons, investigating the state of art and design in Britain, attributed the nation's insufficient cultural output to its dearth of museums and galleries:

> In taking a general view of the subject before them, the Committee advert with regret to the inference they are obliged to draw from the testimony they have received; that, from the highest branches of poetical design down to the lowest connexion between design and manufactures, the arts have received little encouragement in this country. The want of instruction in design among our industrious population; the

> absence of public and freely open galleries containing approved specimens of art … have all combined strongly to impress this conviction on the minds of Members of the Committee. (quoted in Robertson 1837, 120–21)

The committee made a clear recommendation that, if Britain wished to rehabilitate its cultural image, governmental encouragement should be given to the "formation of open Public Galleries or Museums of Art" to empower the public to "enjoy the advantage of contemplating perfect specimens of beauty, or of imbibing the pure principles of art." As well as demonstrating these principles through objects of antiquity, the committee recommended that the British public should be educated through display of "the most approved modern specimens, foreign as well as domestic, which our extensive commerce would readily convey to us from the most distant quarters of the globe" (quoted in Robertson 1837, 122–23).

These recommendations would eventually be borne out in the Great Exhibition, an ambitious world's fair held in London's Hyde Park in the summer of 1851, and another key component of the V&A's origin. "Part trade fair, part festival, part shopping mall, part art gallery and museum," the Great Exhibition was conceived as a celebration of modern industrial design: a means of educating the British public of the accomplishments of their nation's industry through the display of its industrial design objects (Shears 2017, 1). Once it closed and the bills had been settled, the Great Exhibition had earned a surplus of just over £186,000,[1] a significant portion of which was put towards the foundation of the South Kensington Museum, renamed in 1899 as the Victoria and Albert Museum, which purchased many of the Great Exhibition's industrial design exhibits to form the "nucleus" of the Museum's collection (Physick 1982, 19).

The Museum's interest in design as a discipline, and the teaching of design as a subject, has been attributed to its first Director and founder, Sir Henry Cole, who was also one of the main organisers of the Great Exhibition. To Cole, the function of a museum was fundamentally didactic; the gallery space was a medium through which audiences could learn about design and decorative arts by studying the privileged objects of the Museum's collection. This educational directive heavily informed the display methodologies of the South Kensington Museum:

> Models of patented inventions, specimens of animal produce, architectural casts, objects of ornamental art, and sculpture, cannot be packed as closely as books or prints in a library.

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[1] Equivalent to approximately £30 million in 2023.

They require to be well seen in order to make proper use of them; and it will here be a canon for future management that everything shall seen and be made as intelligible as possible by descriptive Science labels. Other collections may attract the learned to explore them, but these will be arranged so clearly that they may woo the ignorant to examine them. This Museum will be like a book with its pages always open, and not shut. (Cole 1884, 292–93)

Henry Cole's belief in the instructive potential of the museum has persisted as an elemental value of the V&A since its establishment as the South Kensington Museum, and still shapes its display and collection strategies in the present day. Tristram Hunt reflected on his predecessor's lasting influence in a discussion held at the MuseumNext conference in 2019: "Cole's great vision … was around design education. We've always had this very strong, functional approach to the value of a collection, which was about teaching design. The museum was never a place to retreat from the world – it was always a place to use a collection to think about rather functional, often utilitarian values about good design." Though the Museum's operations and activities had radically diversified in the intervening century and a half, this didactic spirit was still central to the V&A's stated mission: "to enrich people's lives by promoting research, knowledge and enjoyment of the designed world to the widest possible audience" (V&A, n.d.a).

Of course, this isn't to say that this vision actually informs much of the day-to-day work that goes on inside the Museum. The V&A's "mission" is, in reality, quite dissolute, expressed through a multitude of documents and directives: various collection policies, its irregularly updated Strategic Plan, its "FuturePlan" which maps out the Museum's redevelopment projects, and a Public Task statement which describes its accordance with the National Heritage Act of 1983 – which itself, along with other related legislation, guides and governs the Museum's activity. And besides, most of the work that I saw during my fieldwork was motivated by an array of factors beyond the institution's publicly stated aims.[2] However, this foundational didactic function – to teach the public about design – remains a recurring fixture of the contemporary V&A's projected image of itself, and therefore useful in understanding how the Museum's disciplinary interest in

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[2] As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it's also worth questioning how plausible it is to ascribe the unitary agency of a "mission" or "values" to an entity as abstract and disembodied as a museum; for a more granular look at the differing motivations of various museum departments, see Chapter 5.

videogames came to be defined, and publicly expressed, through the *Videogames* exhibition.

Marie illustrated this display strategy in her speech at the exhibition's press launch by taking an example of the exhibition: "I'll always be stunned by the fact that the very first object that we actually confirmed as a loan for an exhibition on videogames was a Magritte painting." The screen behind her showed a slide with two images: a videogame screenshot next to a surrealist painting.

FIGURE 4.1.
Left: still from Act II of Kentucky Route Zero *by Cardboard Computer, 2013.*
© Cardboard Computer.
Right: Le Blanc Seing (The Blank Signature) *by René Magritte, 1965.*
© National Gallery of Art.

"As you can see here, this is *The Blank Signature*, which is a painting that provided the inspiration for a key sequence in the videogame *Kentucky Route Zero*. It's through examples like this that we can see the connection between videogames and broader design and culture – it's the ability to be able to look in detail and to provide examples like this that help us understand and illustrate what makes the medium so interesting." The exhibition would present videogames as a focal point alongside artefacts of their production such as notebooks, concept art, and behind-the-scenes development videos, as well as key points of influence – in *Kentucky Route Zero*'s case, the Magritte painting – in order to create a "constellation" of objects and media which would tell the story of a specific aspect of that game's design. This notion – "looking in detail" in order to illustrate its design process and locate videogames amongst other disciplines, thereby defining it as a significant discipline in its own right – was arguably the essential curatorial premise of the exhibition.

Videogames's most significant departures from the methodologies of the exhibitions that had come before it were, in many respects, quite traditional. Though the definition and practice of curation has become blurrier in the past decade, the curator's traditional role as caretaker of objects – from the Latin root *curare*, "to care" – was still decidedly relevant at the V&A (Graham and Cook 2010, 156). Where most exhibitions of videogames were led by immaterial displays, in the form of playable digital games, the V&A's exhibition was deeply concerned with materiality. With relatively few playable games on display, and a focus on physical artefacts, the exhibition distinguished itself from prior blockbuster shows which had been characterised, both positively and derisively, as "arcades" within the museum (Slovin 2009; Brin 2015, 27).[3] Instead, the exhibition looked in great detail at a comparatively small number of games. The purpose of the exhibition was not just to display interesting and important videogames, but also to display *how* they were interesting. In lieu of an abundance of playable games, *Videogames* would demonstrate the game development process using a quite classical – but by no means antiquated – method of curation: the thoughtful selection and arrangement of tangible objects, to provide a specialised interpretive reading of those objects by a nonspecialist audience.[4] Per Cole's vision for the Museum, the exhibition would be "a book with its pages always open," carefully arranged to teach the public about this complex design discipline.

The people's museum

With the V&A's history as a design museum in mind, it is understandable how videogames fit into its purview and publicly stated mission. However, a museum is not solely defined by its disciplinary interests. In tandem with our discussion of the disciplinary remit of the Museum, we can also consider the allure of an exhibition of videogames from the perspective of the V&A as a social institution – an institution that is expected to contribute to and engage its varied publics. The museum is concerned not only with its

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[3] These early blockbusters were frequently promoted on the basis of sheer quantity of playable videogames and "interactivity": "Highly interactive, with more than 150 playable games" (Barbican, n.d., 3); "[with] more than 100 playable games, visitors won't want to leave!" (NFSA 2019)

[4] Though this was a more traditional display methodology, the curators' approach was not therefore more straightforward to execute. Once, when I asked Kristian if he'd thought people were expecting a more arcade-like exhibition, he laughed. "Well, that would have been easier. Just put some games on display. … 'Here's some nice games; why don't you play them?' Don't need to speak to any studios; don't need to research anything. Easy."

disciplinary message, but also, as Stephen E. Weil (2002, 93) puts it, with "the institutional medium by which that message is disseminated."

The role of the institution as a disseminary medium has fluctuated over the years, as theorised by Weil (1999) in another essay titled "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody." In the essay, Weil identified a transformation that had taken place, and was still ongoing, within the priorities of western museums throughout the 20th century.[5] Though they were invariably established with an "educational rhetoric" in mind, by the end of World War II museums had become engaged in "the salvage and warehouse business" (Weil 1999, 229). Preoccupied by the growth and maintenance of their collections, museums were essentially focused inwards, with no particular impetus to provide the public "physical and intellectual access" to those collections. Gradually, though, this focus shifted outward, and 50 years later the museum had emerged as a "more entrepreneurial institution" whose priority was now to serve its public, and was coming to terms with "the notion that the collection might no longer serve as the museum's raison d'être but merely as one of its resources" (229–30).

What prompted this change in museums' focus? Weil quotes Kenneth Hudson, who offers several lenses through which to account for this postwar shift: changes in disposable income, demands for new forms of leisure, or the growing "professionalisation" of museums leading to the development of formal outreach policies. Perhaps the most obvious – and most concrete – reason for the shift, though, was the museum's need for financial sustainability. Under a comfortable expectation of government subsidy, this old style of inward-facing institution was financially secure and therefore complacent in its operations, with no particular sense of debt or duty to its visitors: "It existed, it had a building, it had collections and a staff to look after them, it was reasonably adequately financed, and its visitors, usually not numerous, came to look to wonder and to admire what was set before them. They were in no sense partners in the enterprise. The museum's prime responsibility was to its collections, not its visitors" (Hudson 1998, 43). Museums were finally shaken out of this stagnation after the sudden emergence of many new museums, which led to a sudden scarcity of resources. By Hudson's account, three-quarters of the museums existing today were established after 1945 – and, as Weil (1999) adds, "in no way has

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5 Weil specifies North American museums as the focus of his essay – which was written for a special issue of the journal *Daedalus* devoted to "America's Museums" – however I believe his observations can be expanded to encompass most Western collection-based public museums founded during or before the early 20th century.

the level of direct governmental assistance to these museums kept pace with that growth" (232). As an unprecedented number of museums scrambled for a share of ever-shrinking state subsidies, institutional outreach to the public was less an organic evolution than, as Hudson (1998, 43) typifies it, an "obligation." Complacent, collection-first museum work was no longer sustainable; now more dependent than ever on box office income, the museum had to face a new challenge of making itself attractive to visitors (Weil 1999, 232). Two decades on, the museum's relationship to its public is fundamental to contemporary museum practice, and remains a central concern of museum studies, which has been extended to questions of the museum's responsibility to its publics (Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh 2013) and reconceptualisations of the visitor as an active participant, rather than passive consumer (Simon 2010).

The V&A was by no means an exception to this shift; its relationship to the public it serves has undergone multiple paradigm shifts throughout its history. As I describe below, the Museum's shift from being *about* something to being *for* somebody closely follows the three-stage pathology laid out by Weil (1999) and Hudson (1998):

1. a turn inwards towards collection-focused complacency;
2. changes in public funding creating a need for self-sufficient revenue streams;
3. a turn outwards to serve (and profit from) the public, prompting a new focus on outreach and relevance.

As described above through its role as a design museum, it is fairly clear what the V&A has historically been "about," and how videogames as a medium fit into this disciplinary remit. But whom is it now "for"? Of course, the pedagogical function of the V&A fits Weil's conception of the museum as a medium quite well. This is a limited perspective, however, and only partly accounts for its total "dissemination" – the Museum relates to its public in many ways beyond the didactic function of its collections and exhibitions. Preconditional to the V&A's ability to teach are much broader questions of relevance and accessibility: if the V&A is now decidedly *for* somebody, whom does it serve? What motivates and defines this service? And how do videogames figure into the Museum's relationship to its audience, beyond education?

"A powerful antidote to the gin palace"

The V&A's relationship to its audience was, in fact, an essential element of its foundation. Henry Cole hoped that his museum would be accessible to

the full breadth of London's social strata, by serving the varied needs of its people. One particular strategy to this end was to extend the Museum's opening hours well into the evening, which was facilitated by the unprecedented installation of gas lighting, making the V&A the first museum in the world to employ this new technology (N. Smith 2013).

> It has been the aim to make the mode of admission as acceptable as possible to all classes of visitors. Unlike any other public museum, this is open every day, on three days and two evenings, which gives five separate times of admission, making in summer an aggregate of thirty hours weekly free to every one. (Cole 1884, 292–93)

This appeal to London's proletariat echoed the model of the Museum's predecessor, the Great Exhibition of 1851, which went to great lengths to provide travel, accommodation and affordability – in the form of "Shilling Days" – to the British working class (Shears 2017, 154). Considering the famous success and profit of the Great Exhibition, Cole's vision for such a widely inclusive South Kensington Museum may seem utopian, or financially shrewd. It should be noted, though, that this was not necessarily meant in the spirit of benevolence, nor as a scheme to raise funds. Rather, this has been viewed as an expression of Cole's belief in the museum as an instrument of social reform. As well as the cultural elite, one of the primary audiences envisioned by Cole upon opening the South Kensington Museum was working-class men, whom the Museum might uplift and inspire, projecting an image of the reformed working man:

> The working man comes to this Museum from his one or two dimly lighted, cheerless dwelling-rooms, in his fustian jacket, with his shirt collars a little trimmed up, accompanied by his threes, and fours, and fives of little fustian jackets, a wife, in her best bonnet, and a baby, of course, under her shawl. The looks of surprise and pleasure of the whole party when they first observe the brilliant lighting inside the Museum show what a new, acceptable, and wholesome excitement this evening entertainment affords to all of them. Perhaps the evening opening of Public Museums may furnish a powerful antidote to the gin palace. (Cole 1884, 293)

So intense was Cole's reformist attitude that he began to equate the social power of the museum to that of the church. Though Cole could not get permission from the government – which was fearful of opposition from the church membership – to open the Museum on Sundays, he continued expressing the virtues of the museum as a supplement to the virtues of religion (E. Alexander 1983, 163). "Open all museums of Science and Art

after the hours of Opening of Divine service; let the working man get his refreshment there in Company with his wife and children, rather than leave him to booze away from them in the Public-house and Gin Palace. The Museum will certainly lead him to wisdom and gentleness, and to Heaven, whilst the latter will lead him to brutality and perdition" (Cole 1884, 368). On one occasion Cole went as far as to describe a hypothetical "Museum Sunday" as a means of "defeating Satan by an indirect process" (345).[6]

A turn inwards

Cole's vision was not to last, however. As V&A Director Leigh Ashton (1945–55) would later recount, although the South Kensington Museum had been founded with a diverse disciplinary remit and – admittedly paternalistic – visitor-centric principles at its heart, "the success of its principles led to the acquisition of works of art for themselves and the extension of collecting in general" (Ashton 1953, 43). Through the late 1800s the Museum became increasingly preoccupied with "the salvage and warehouse business," and placed a particular emphasis on the aesthetic character of its collection. In 1865 the Museum was indefinitely loaned the Raphael Cartoons by Queen Victoria – a set of tapestry designs by the Renaissance painter, which today are a centrepiece of the V&A's collection – which Director John Pope-Hennessy (1967–73) would later reckon as an "aesthetic awakening" for the new institution (Chong 1998, 423). Derrick Chong (1998) has argued that this shift from a "heterogenous site" to relative homogeneity was aggravated in 1885 when the Museum's science collection was cleft from its original site in order to found the neighbouring Science Museum, leading the newly renamed Victoria and Albert Museum to more fully resemble an art museum by the turn of the century (422–23).

The V&A continued its turn inwards throughout the first half of the 20th century, gradually calcifying into the inward-focused, collection-obsessed type of institution that Hudson would later describe. In a column written for a 1964 edition of *Museums Journal* titled "The Fault is in Ourselves," Charles Gibbs-Smith, who was then the Keeper of Public Relations at the V&A, posed an invective call to the professional museum world, chastising

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[6] It should be noted that Cole's construction of the Museum as a reformist social space, though novel, was apparently quite well received. Upon the opening of the South Kensington Museum's gaslit Sheepshank Galleries, the newspaper *Lloyds* expressed hope that other museums would soon follow suit: "The anxious wife will no longer have to visit the different taprooms to drag her poor besotted husband home. She will seek for him at the nearest museum, where she will have to exercise all the persuasion of her affection to tear him away from the rapt contemplation of a Raphael" (*Lloyds*, quoted in Physick 1982, 35).

the institutionalised complacency and elitism of curators which had overridden their duty to serve the public.

> The general attitude now apparently encouraged in the rising generation of museum staffs tends to take them even further away from the desire to feel and communicate enthusiasm for the objects in their charge, and also further away from any obligation to share their knowledge with the public. They want to feel that they are among the élite of museum mortals, perpetually engaged in the more rarified regions of research. (Gibbs-Smith, quoted in Hudson 1975, 2)

In his experience as the head and founder of the V&A's PR department, curators had learned, through the apathy and seclusion of their professional environment, to "either patronise, resent, despise, dislike or even hate the public" (Gibbs-Smith, quoted in Hudson 1975, 2). In terms of relating to its visitors, the V&A had been progressive to some degree – founded in 1947 as "Museum Extension Services," Gibbs-Smith's department was the first dedicated public relations department of any British museum (V&A 2016). However, after decades of solitary focus on its collections, the Museum's public character and internal *raison d'être* had become dissolute.

A turn outwards

A series of changes in the latter half of the 20th century suggested that the V&A had begun to recognise the existential problems that it faced. Roy Strong, who joined the V&A as its Director in 1973, wrote in a 1978 article that "I, for one, would have been grateful for some definition of what the Victoria & Albert Museum was about by someone later than its first director, Sir Henry Cole, when I was interviewed for the job in 1973. Fortunately, no one on the Interviewing board asked me because I would not have been able to answer them. Perhaps I am right in believing that they, too, no longer knew" (272). At the beginning of his tenure as Director, writing in his diaries – which were later collected into a published volume – Strong aired his frustrations with his museum's apparent lack of interest in proving its contemporary relevance:

> We must now begin slowly to move positively on acquiring post-1920 artefacts or else the V&A will be a laughing-stock. … Everything there has got fossilised: the design is static, the exhibitions haphazard, there's no follow-through and there's a "That's what you can have whether you like it or not" attitude. We must alter this. With tremendous changes happening in Britain we must be a spearhead. People are crying out for art and information, often on a broader, less literate level than a

century ago. We must pick this up and not look down our noses at it. … The success of the Museum depends in a real way on demonstrating the classlessness and relevance of all art past and present. (Strong 1997, 148–9)

To fully shake the Museum out of its introversion, Strong began a project that would begin to assert its social relevance. Under Strong's direction, the V&A's public programs took on an increasingly populist slant. In an attempt to reach younger audiences, the Museum became the first in the world to host a rock concert, presenting a combined concert/lecture by British progressive folk-rock band Gryphon (V&A 2016). Early in his tenure he led the development of the now-famous *The Destruction of the Country House 1875–1975*, a landmark exhibition which graphically illustrated the century-long campaign of destruction of British country houses. The show was a success, both commercially and politically, leading to lasting impacts on public conservation policy long after it closed. Strong later described this as "changing people's perception, the first time, as far as I know, that a museum exhibition was an exercise in polemic" (1997, 139). A wildly popular exhibition of Fabergé treasures led to "all day" queues that stretched around the block, which fit Strong's (1997) definition of "the three ingredients essential to any successful exhibition: death, sex and jewels" (195, 193). The *Fabergé* exhibition emerged as the museum's first true blockbuster, which Strong saw, pragmatically, as a tentpole whose success could support the museum's more incisive but less profitable projects. Strong seemed to regard *Fabergé* as a means to an end: "A few nice pieces but rather like the contents of a superior cracker. Playing to the gallery really, but the public love it, pure escapism" (1997, 198) Buoyed by the profit and success of *Fabergé*, the museum ran an exhibition alongside it called *Change and Decay: The Future of our Parish Churches*, which successfully agitated for cultural change along the same lines as *Destruction of the Country House*; though it was not especially popular, Strong (1997) wrote that its polemic vitality offered "a balance in shows" to offset the shallow spectacle of *Fabergé*: "This was the really important exhibition, empty for much of the time while the mobs fought to see the jewels" (198).

Budget cuts

Though Strong's revitalisation attempts in the early 70s had begun to open it up to its visitors, what really seemed to spur the V&A into action – that is, the "obligation" to which Kenneth Hudson referred – was a series of funding cuts, beginning with the Labour government in 1976 and growing significantly worse in the 80s during the reign of Margaret Thatcher. As part

of a broader Tory attack on "dependency culture," the new expectation was that museums would become self-sufficient, or they would shut. This spelled crisis for the V&A, as well as many of Britain's oldest heritage institutions, which had long enjoyed the presumption of stable government funding. Throughout the 70s and 80s, Strong enacted a series of austerity measures: in 1976 the Museum's regional touring program was "amputated"; in 1977 Fridays were cut from its opening schedule; and in 1985 a "voluntary charge" was instituted. (Strong 1997 160–61, 189–90, 389) All of these proved unpopular, both inside and outside the organisation, and in some cases ineffectual – the voluntary charge, though simply a suggested entry fee of £2, led to a drop in attendance of about 30%, and also failed to raise any significant revenue, which has been attributed in part to an avid anti-charges campaign which produced lapel badges proudly stating "I didn't pay at the V&A" (Macdonald 2002, 34; Stewart 2013).

By the end of the 80s, after a decade of cuts from a Thatcherite government whose leader seemed more or less disdainful of museums as a concept, institutions across Britain were facing disaster.[7] Many museums were in a state of severe disrepair and feared for the safety of their collections; the V&A faced a maintenance debt equivalent to US$80 million (Rule 1989). Inheritor of the beleaguered V&A was Elizabeth Esteve-Coll, who took over as Director from Roy Strong in 1988; one of her first acts as director was to introduce a new structure which "effectively separate[d] the scholars from direct contact with the collections" and led to offers of redundancy to nine senior members of staff, including the Museum's deputy director and five curatorial heads (Thorncroft 1989). This proved controversial, leading to public accusations of corporatisation and philistinism from Museum staff; newspaper headlines at the time described the "Culture Clash in Kensington" and, most vividly, the "Massacre of the Scholars" (Thorncroft 1989; Watson and Marks 1989). Rallying around their threatened colleagues, approximately 70% of Museum staff passed votes of no confidence in their new Director (R. Adams 2010, 33). Meanwhile, similar campaigns of corporatisation were underway throughout the South Kensington museum complex, as documented by Sharon Macdonald (2002), who had been following these museums during fieldwork for *Behind the Scenes of the Science Museum*. A major restructure of the curatorial departments at the Science Museum severed the "directional link" which

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[7] In a speech at the opening of the Design Museum in London, Prime Minister Thatcher (1989) began by declining to use its real name. "First, we needed this Design Exhibition Centre in London. I call it an Exhibition Centre and not a museum–a museum is something that is really rather dead."

had made the collections essential to the development of new exhibitions – exhibitions were now to take the public interest as their starting point and "main orientation" (Macdonald 2002, 43–44). Across the road from the V&A at the Natural History Museum, 17 staff were sent to Walt Disney World, Florida, to study "customer care and corporate image techniques," and as with its neighbours, museum management began distancing curators from their exhibitions, "handing the creation of exhibitions over to a unit which pioneered visitor studies (research on visitors) and mainly 'objectless' interactive exhibitions" (Macdonald 2002, 34–35).

FIGURE 4.2. *Two posters from Saatchi & Saatchi's 1988 V&A poster campaign. © Victoria and Albert Museum.*

Facing a significant funding gap, museums consequently went to great new lengths to endear themselves to the public which they had once comfortably ignored. At all the South Kensington museums, new logos and advertising campaigns were rolled out to rehabilitate their corporate identities, and serious market research was being undertaken to find new audiences. In 1988, Esteve-Coll commissioned the marketing firm Saatchi & Saatchi to create a promotional campaign for the opening of a redesigned restaurant in the Henry Cole Wing, which produced a series of posters with the infamous tagline "An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached." Apparently intended as a winking or irreverent means of communicating the social

appeal of the Museum to a younger demographic, the poster campaign was broadly viewed as crass and vulgar, exemplifying the institution's gradual slide towards into populism. As Macdonald recounts, "for those V&A staff who publicly called for Mrs Esteve-Coll's resignation, this advertisement was a blatant admission of the debasement of scholarship and the proper functions of the museum, and their subsumption to mere commercial and leisure interests" (Macdonald 2002, 35).

Another key ingredient of the V&A's new public image was a wave of exhibitions of pop culture throughout the 90s. While Strong had ushered in a series of popular exhibitions, they were still markedly "aesthetically driven" and "insufficiently attuned to the economic realities of the period" (R. Adams 2010, 30). Under Esteve-Coll and her successor Alan Borg, though, the V&A cast a broad net in its search for new audiences, with exhibitions looking at women's tights, the history of graphic design in pop music, biscuit tins, and so on. As with its other recent changes, these new bids for public appeal were met with skepticism – an Arts column in the *Daily Mail* suggested that the Museum's Director and trustees had abandoned any attempt at making its historical collection relevant or interesting to its visitors: "Instead, they have introduced tap-dancing in the corridors, jiving in the Raphael Cartoon Court, trendy candlelit buffets for the Yuppie 'V&A Club', … and ridiculous exhibitions of socks and jumpers from designers the Yuppies may be expected to admire" (Simon, quoted in R. Adams 2010). Nevertheless, the V&A's strategy of public engagement seemed to work – not only had it figured out what audiences wanted, but it had also learned how to retain them. An article in *The Independent* conceded that the "access-obsessed" V&A's approach of "luring children in and keeping them there" was paying off: in an appraisal of *Street Style*, an exhibition on postwar youth fashion which opened in 1994, the newspaper said that "it was so well and so lovingly done that no indie kid or raver could bear not to see it, but it was located in the North Court, as far away as possible from the entrance: so, to get to it, they had to traipse all the way through the rest of the museum first" (Popham 1995). This eagerness to please the wide breadth of the museumgoing public came to typify the Museum's image for years to come – by the late 90s, what the V&A was *about* seemed more or less eclipsed by whom the V&A was *for*. In an editorial for a 1998 edition of the *V&A Magazine*, then-Director Borg intimated that this sense of service to the public might be the *only* thing that could define the Museum, whose collections and operations were now inscrutably broad: "… although our name is widely and generally recognised, we need to convey more clearly what it is we do. The collections

are so broad that this is difficult. A cynic might suggest that, in the age of Cool Britannia, we should be The Peoples' Museum."

Rise of the blockbuster

This period had cemented the V&A's status as a museum in service of its audience, and had stabilised its financial situation to some degree, though it was not quite a golden age. The local museum sector had survived Thatcherism, but only barely – cultural historian Robert Hewison (2014, 1) writes that "[i]n 1997 the British cultural world had been in a decayed and fractious state, stale and starved of public funding." New Labour's consequent renewal of cultural support was significant, but bore its own consequences for museum management – Hewison notes that funding for the arts doubled between 1997 and 2010, though the government's oversight of this funding and its outcomes was also multiplied (2). Around the turn of the millennium the V&A faced stalling attendance figures, which had fallen by 22% between 1995 and 2000, reporting 1.27 million attendees in 2000; – a report ordered by the House of Commons to examine this decline led a Select Committee on Public Accounts (2002) to recommend that the Museum "pay attention to its core business to help increase its appeal to visitors" (par. 4–5). Though the report acknowledged that "there is a balance to be struck between exhibitions aimed at special interests, and those aimed at wider audiences," it unequivocally called for "more exhibitions with wider appeal" that might "provide the museum with an opportunity to show what else it has to offer" (Select Committee 2002, par. 5). At the time, public funding accounted for 61% of the V&A's total income (NAO 2001, 11) – failure to meet attendance targets, the primary metric through the V&A was evaluated by the government, endangered the Museum's most significant funding stream.

Per the Select Committee's recommendation, the Museum looked at the success of its early blockbuster exhibitions – in particular, Fabergé during Strong's tenure – to draft a blueprint for the future. In the following years, the museum produced a series of tentpole exhibitions which brought new waves of visitors to the museum: although there were some which took an historical design focus in keeping with the museum's traditional remit (2001's *Art Deco 1910–1939*), this new wave of blockbusters were focused on pop culture, in particular fashion retrospectives (2004's *Vivienne Westwood*; 2015's *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*) and monographic shows of pop musicians (2013's *David Bowie Is*; 2017's *Pink Floyd: Their*

Mortal Remains).[8] This new program to establish the museum's social accessibility was supported by attempts to sustain its ongoing contemporary relevance. This was concretised in the 2001 establishment of the Museum's "FuturePlan," which allocated £150 million to redesign its galleries and public facilities throughout the following decades. Beyond architectural renewal, though, the Museum also sought to prove its relevance through a series of public programs, including a series of live catwalk events titled *Fashion in Motion*, as well as the institution of their *Friday Late* program: a monthly late-night event that was free to the public, which aimed to celebrate "all aspects of contemporary visual culture and design in society" and featured "live performance, film, installation, debate, DJs and late-night exhibition openings" (V&A, n.d.b). The blockbuster exhibitions, with their broad popularity and profitable touring programs, coupled with the contemporary relevance and social capital projected through its public programs, helped propel the V&A towards record-breaking attendance figures. In 2018, the year I entered the V&A, the Museum reported attendance figures of over 4.4 million visitors in the 2017–18 period, representing a 26% rise of almost a million more visitors than the previous year, attributed largely to the success of 2017's *Pink Floyd* exhibition (M. Brown 2018).

This success appears to have had major ramifications for the governance of the V&A today. Speaking to *The Guardian*, Director Tristram Hunt downplayed its record-breaking 2018 figures:

> It is wonderful to get to 4 million visitors, but my ambition is not to get to 5 million visitors. My ambition is to make sure we are doing more with education and design and to make sure our scholarship and research is where it needs to be. (Hunt, quoted in M. Brown 2018)

This comment, though commendable, felt at odds with the institution that I was studying in 2018. Visitor targets appeared to be the Museum's primary benchmark for success; the high profitability and attendance figures of these tentpole exhibitions had raised the bar for all of its shows. Speaking to V&A employees over six months, there was a clear sense that the Museum's

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[8] This shift from traditional cultural heritage to popular culture was by no means specific to the V&A, which seemed to be following the same pattern of a much larger paradigm shift within the British culture sector, as Derrick Chong (1998, 421) described as it was happening in the late 90s: "The concept of 'culture' and how it is marketed has undergone a shift from the Thatcher/Major accent on the 'heritage industry' … to New Labour's emphasis on 'creative industries' (e.g., film, video, television, fashion, design, popular music, etc.): the arts which pay in the form of export earnings and inward investment."

executive management placed stiflingly high expectations on all of its exhibitions. One employee explained their frustrations to me: "Ever since *Bowie* opened, [the V&A's directorate] have been filled with adrenaline. It happened again with *McQueen* and then last year with *Pink Floyd*. Now they need every exhibition to be this huge blockbuster, and it's just impossible." There was a perception amongst staff that the museum's biggest exhibitions acted less as tentpoles than as yardsticks: rather than allowing the success of one exhibition to take the pressure off of others, it actually compounded this pressure to succeed, placing exhibitions implicitly in competition with one another.

This history of the V&A's relationship to its public, which itself was heavily influenced by the V&A's dependence on government funding, helps explain the conditions behind the predominantly commercial values of the Museum as I found it in 2018. If the V&A of the 1970s could be defined by its holistic view of success – allowing blockbusters like *Fabergé* to "balance out" exhibitions with more depth but narrower appeal – then the V&A of 2018 felt distinctly atomised, as the success of each exhibition was evaluated in relative isolation, and each one individually was held to the same commercial expectations and visitor targets as the others, without the comfort of one blockbuster success "balancing out" the others. As I describe below, this atomised view of success mirrored the atomised values of the museum itself, as reflected through its differing constructions of videogames.

Why videogames?

How can we conceptualise the relevance of videogames as a medium to the goals and motives of the museum, now that they are more concretely defined? The original question – why videogames at the V&A? – is, admittedly, a blunt and straightforward one, and has left us with two answers which are fairly straightforward, almost self-evident, when viewed separately. Understood together, though, as expressions of the "hyphenated interests" of the museum (per Weil 2002) they describe the fundamental tensions which are inherent to the governing principles of the V&A, and which are, arguably, an essential trait of the contemporary museum.

As described above in the chapter section "The design museum", the first straightforward answer is offered quite explicitly by the Museum itself in its public messaging around the *Videogames* exhibition. The V&A is ostensibly interested in videogames for their unique complexity as a design medium. Tristram Hunt encapsulated the Museum's official position on the medium

in his speech at the exhibition's press launch: "As the UK's leading resource for the study of contemporary design's impact on society, the V&A is proud to be engaging with this vital design medium. Considering their universality in contemporary culture, videogames are now rightly taking their place in the world's leading museum of art, design and performance." Though the Museum's interest in applied design has oscillated in focus throughout its history – as I have detailed above in "A turn inwards" – this interest has more recently been renewed, and design has now become cemented as a pillar of the Museum's disciplinary remit. In the 80s, then-Director Roy Strong gave the V&A an official subtitle – "The National Museum of Art and Design" – which still stands today as the most succinct expression of the Museum's disciplinary interests. The V&A's work with videogames, its attempts to demystify the medium's production and process, are a continuation of the Museum's work with digital design in accordance with its pedagogical traditions.

Looking at the history of the V&A's relationship to its public prompts a second answer: videogames are a way for the Museum to appeal to new audiences. In 2018, the museum's activity was strongly motivated via visitation metrics. Though museums have many heuristics by which they measure success through their visitors – surveyed visitor satisfaction, dwell time, repeat visitation, interpretive engagement – the most dominant seems to be a matter of simple quantity – the number of visitors through the museum doors. The V&A, which reports its attendance figures annually to the UK Government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to justify its public funding, is therefore motivated to maximise attendance through blockbuster exhibitions designed for the widest possible appeal. Considering the qualities inherent to videogames – their popularity, their interactivity, their spectacular visuality, their high-tech contemporaneity – it's easy to make a fairly cynical inference. As part of the V&A's ongoing commercialisation, videogames are a convenient way to draw in new crowds – and demographics – of visitors who would otherwise ignore the museum; the V&A's institutional interest in videogames is the latest extension of its decades-long program to project its contemporary relevance.

Although both of these perspectives – videogames as design, and videogames as populist spectacle – provide answers to the question of videogames' inclusion in the V&A, they are too simplistic, and deserve complication.

Reformed media

One refutation to this idea that videogames simply serve the commercial interests of the V&A is made, implicitly, by the curators themselves. In the introduction to the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition, quoted here at length, the curators of *Videogames* declared that the cultural ubiquity and commercial successes of videogames were irrelevant to their disciplinary interests:

> Videogames are ubiquitous. There are an estimated 2.2 billion people who play videogames in the world today, from those on their mobile phones sneaking five minutes of play into their commute, to the tens of thousands of spectators who fill Olympic stadiums to watch esports professionals. When the sales figures of a bestselling game outstrip those of blockbuster films, the media often suggests that "maybe now videogames will be taken seriously" (and in so doing, obtain broader social acknowledgement as an essential and valid cultural form). Yet while these statistics can detail the scale and reach of the medium, they only ever represent the view from afar. The skill and craft at the heart of each and every game cannot be conveyed through numbers alone.
>
> To truly value videogame design, we need to look beyond benchmarks of an industry such as sales figures and further investigate this complex and creative field. Videogames are where objective and rational system design meets subjective emotional and aesthetic design; where engineering meets composition; where technology meets art. *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* considers these different elements and looks at new ways to explore the medium, expanding the definition of design within this field. (Foulston and Volsing 2018, 10)

As the curators mention, their interest lies beyond the commercial appeal and surface-level spectacle of videogames, de-emphasising its successes as an "industry" in favour of its complexity as a "creative field." This directly contradicted the interest expressed by the V&A's Director, who opened his speech at the press launch by describing videogames' "universality in popular culture," which was reiterated in the first paragraph of his foreword to the catalogue, lauding videogames as "a huge global industry, with billion-dollar earnings and billions of players around the world" three pages before the curators' refutation of those commercial benchmarks (Hunt, in Foulston and Volsing 2018, 7).

By showcasing the design process of videogames, as well as the critical discourse which forms the culture that surrounds the medium, the curators aimed to make a case for the significance of videogames beyond its

mainstream popularity. Moreover, the exhibition deliberately eschewed the most crowdpleasing aspects of the medium in order to make its thesis clear. Those invested in the commercial success of the exhibition could not depend on the appeal of familiarity or nostalgia – by selecting a relatively obscure set of quite recent games as its focus, with only a handful of widely known titles featured, the exhibition would not draw masses of videogame fans excited to see their favourite AAA or classic game. Similarly, the majority of games featured within the exhibition were not playable, as the curators deemed this to be an unsuitable means of interpretation, opting for various other display methods. These principles had been part of the exhibition since its earliest development, as Marie explained to me in an interview:

> So, the things that carried over [from the exhibition's first iteration] – or, consciously carried over – was that it had to be contemporary, that it was looking at games more recently. There wasn't a specific timeframe set on that, it was just understood that it would be recent games, as opposed to being a nostalgic retrospective, and the other thing that remained was the fact that the exhibition was not to be an arcade in the museum. And that was terminology that Kieran [Long, ex-Keeper, and progenitor of the exhibition] had been using to talk about it – he said he didn't want to do an arcade in the museum, that he wanted to explore it as a design subject. … The ambition was to approach it differently from past exhibitions. That it didn't have to be, "Let's put *Pac-Man* on arcade cabinets in an exhibition."

This is all to say that *Videogames*, in several ways, explicitly aimed to subvert many of the qualities that would make it attractive as a blockbuster exhibition. Rather than producing a shallow celebration of videogames as popular media, the curators aimed to deepen the public understanding of videogames as a design medium. This isn't to say that *Videogames* was curated as a dry learning exercise – the exhibition was designed from the ground up to be accessible and enticing to a non-games-literate audience. Rather than presenting videogames primarily as a joyful and spectacular form of popular entertainment, however, the underlying objective of the exhibition was to present videogame development – and the culture which encompasses it – as a mature, difficult, and politically aware field of cultural production.

In a sense, by presenting the medium in this light, the V&A was "reforming" the public image of videogames for its audience. Though the curators were careful to clarify in their catalogue introduction that their selection of games

was "by no means an attempt to construct and define a canon," it is difficult to deny that the scale and spectacle of their exhibition – and of the V&A itself – signified real cultural legitimacy (Foulston and Volsing 2018, 11). Regardless of whether the curators were interested in making evaluative statements about the cultural status of videogames, it seems impossible to decouple the display of popular media from the prevailing social conception of the function of the contemporary museum, which is to act as a gatekeeper of high culture. As Emma Barker (1999, 133–39) has argued, this process of "veneration" is part of the fundamental function of the blockbuster exhibition format – though the exhibition made no statements about videogames' artistic status, these intentions were projected onto the exhibition anyway, as demonstrated in various review headlines such as "*Videogames*: The V&A exhibition putting game design on an artistic pedestal," "Video games are an underrated art form: The V&A's new exhibition shows why game design should be taken seriously," and "In London, Videogames Ascend into the Art World" (Williams 2018; Cross 2018; Marcus 2018). In this regard, the imposing cultural power of the museum has a tendency to flatten curatorial nuance. The curators didn't have much of a say in whether their exhibition was "venerating" videogames as a medium – the simple act of display was perceived as a value judgement in and of itself.

Reformed visitors

This perceived veneration benefits the commercial interests of the museum, too. Museums do not only valorise media – they also valorise audiences.

In his book *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett (1995) establishes a "politically-focused genealogy for the modern public museum" through which he describes the historical role of the museum – and high culture more generally – as an instrument of civil reform and control (5). Extending Foucault's theories of prisons, asylums, and hospitals as "institutional articulations of power," Bennett analysed the ways in which museums had been used by governments to regulate their citizenry, in particular the working class, comprising a larger "exhibitionary complex"(59–61). Bennett argues that, rather than simply excluding the working classes from the vaunted space of the museum, or using the museum as a means of maintaining their class position, governments in the 19th century reconceptualised the museum as a shared social space, where the working class could intermingle with their social superiors; as "an exemplary space in which the rough and raucous might learn to civilize themselves by modelling their conduct on the middle-class codes of behaviour to which

museum attendance would expose them" (28). This argument bears particular affinities with Henry Cole's original vision for the South Kensington Museum as "a powerful antidote to the gin palace," which Bennett cites as a significant instance of this kind of "exemplary space":

> The programme the South Kensington Museum developed in the 1850s – and it was a programme that proved influential throughout the English-speaking world – detached art and culture from the function of bedazzling the population and harnessed them, instead, to that of managing the population by providing it with the resources and contexts in which it might become self-educating and self-regulating. (40)

In other words, the South Kensington Museum's role as an educational institution was deeply entangled with its role as a site of social reform. As well as it could teach the virtue and beauty of design objects, the South Kensington Museum would also teach its audiences how to act virtuously and beautifully; as Bennett describes, "the public museum attached to this exemplary didacticism of objects an exemplary didacticism of personages" (28). In this regard the contemporary V&A has something in common with the founding principles of the South Kensington Museum: though it would be difficult to argue that it is animated by the same moralistic principles or a conscious drive towards civic reform, these values remain ingrained within the Museum – as they are in most public museums, per Bennett's "genealogy" – and there were visible traces of the V&A's effect upon its visitors in 2018.

At the very least, the Museum's exhibitions had a clear impact on the superficial appearance of its audience. An employee once explained to me how the blockbuster exhibitions would influence the day-to-day image of visitors throughout the Museum: during the run of *Pink Floyd* you'd see a lot of middle-aged men in band t-shirts; its *Ocean Liners* exhibition brought in a lot of older women wearing pearls. The employee described being confounded by a sudden influx of women wearing colourful textiles on one day in late 2016; she realised later that it was the final day of the V&A's *Fabric of India* exhibition – apparently it's during the final days of exhibitions' runs that this trend becomes most prevalent. Evidently, visitors saw their participation in the high-cultural activity of the museum visit as a reflection of their identity. Jay Rounds (2006) has contextualised museum visitors' use of exhibitions as part of their ongoing "identity work", a term originally coined by sociologist Judith A. Howard (2000), which Rounds defines as "the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that

identity" (Rounds 2006, 133). According to Rounds, the museum offers "a perfect setting for public performance of identity" wherein visitors "enact their own identities, borrowing for those identities a bit of the aura of special importance held by the objects on display" (142). This is not an artificial performance, however – enacting one's identity through the role of "museum visitor" is part of the formative process of identity work. In this regard, the museum visit does not only reflect the visitor's identity, it is a crucial component of its ongoing construction.

Videogames, too, play a constitutive role in certain people's identity work. The term "gamer" is typically deployed when describing cultures of videogame consumption. As Adrienne Shaw (2011) has argued, the term has been deployed as an externally applied label as well as a means of self-definition: "How people *identify* as gamers, is a different question from who *counts* as a gamer" (29). Videogames, and videogame consumption, are taken as an elemental part of many people's identity work, though this diversity is mostly rendered invisible by the popular homogenised construction of "the gamer," which conjures an image of a Western, white, adolescent, cisgendered man (Shaw 2014, 42). Though studies have authoritatively dispelled this static image of the gamer (Williams, Yee, and Caplan 2008), there is an evident disjuncture between who actually plays games and how they are popularly imagined, and the stereotype persists (Shaw 2014, viii). To the contemporary, commercially driven museum, this stereotype neatly fills a pronounced gap in its usual constituency – that is, young men. Although museums tend not to publicise their attendance records broken down by gender, what little public information exists suggests that a significant female majority is typical (Thelwall 2018, 2).[9] The most recent publicly available information on the gender of V&A attendees, for instance, is in a Visitor Profiling Report from 2013, which states that of its visitors in the 2011–12 period, 65% of visitors were female and 35% were male (Bentley 2013, 3).[10] This gender gap in museum

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[9] As Thelwall (2018, 2) writes, "there is little public information or academic research about museum attendance by gender, and no systematic comparisons of museum audiences by type." This is a puzzling gap in the field of museum studies, which has otherwise paid significant attention to gender issues within museums, including gender imbalances in museum workforces and representation via museum collections and exhibitions (Callihan and Feldman 2018; Kosut 2016). This omission within existing scholarship may be attributable to the general shortage of demographic data published by public museums, who typically publicise visitation numbers in fulfilment of their obligations for receiving public funding, but not demographic information.

[10] The report presented the gender of V&A attendees as a binary, with no mention of genders beyond this binary.

attendance is historically more pronounced in younger attendees – a 2010 report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that females aged 15–24 attended Australian museums and art galleries at a rate 49.3% higher than males of the same age range (ABS 2010, 8–9). The stereotype of the young male gamer, then, represents an under-served niche in museum audience demographics, and it therefore follows that videogame exhibitions present an enticing opportunity for museums to boost their visitation figures.

Courting new audiences can have adverse effects, though. In other museums' videogame exhibitions, the regulating apparatus of the museum was inverted to the extent that it began to resemble the wilder unregulated – or de-regulating – space of the arcade. Sarah Brin (2015, 27) reported that the Smithsonian American Art Museum's *The Art of Video Games* exhibition saw a "significant increase in attendees who were males, children, teens and adults aged 18-35." Despite the increased foot traffic and new demographics, however, the exhibition "[did] not do much to further contribute to the art historical discourse surrounding games and instead, [created] a space that feels like a traditional arcade" (Brin 2015, 27). Based on anecdotal accounts from staff at the museum, Brin reported that many visitors to the Smithsonian "found themselves in darkened, crowded spaces, many of which were in or near the lines to play one of the five playable games in the exhibition," which contributed to the arcade-like atmosphere (27). When the Museum of the Moving Image's 1989 *Hot Circuits* exhibition of arcade games went on tour, the sheer number of arcade machines included in the show meant that some smaller venues unwittingly found their museums arcade-ified, as described by the exhibition's curator, Rochelle Slovin (2009): "When the balance of 'museum' and 'arcade' was disturbed, and the sense of 'museum' lost, visitors clearly felt greater freedom to behave with the games as they would in an arcade: sticking gum on the underside of the cabinets or causing damage to decals." In its reconfiguration, the museum had evidently lost some of the "exemplary didacticism" which Bennett (1995) described.

This distasteful characterisation of the museum-as-arcade, and the behaviour of the audience which it drew, bears comparison to 19th-century protests against the proposal to open the British Museum to the wider public, which Bennett (1995) termed a "fear of the crowd" (70). In opposition to its existing policy, which allowed admission only to small groups that were evaluated before entry to ensure they were "not exceptionable," "it was proposed that there be public days on which unrestricted access would be allowed." According to Bennett (1995, 70),

"the proposal was scuttled on the grounds, as one trustee put it, that some of the visitors from the streets would inevitably be 'in liquor' and 'will never be kept in order'." The state's attitude towards museums saw its most significant shift after the opening of the South Kensington Museum, which – per Cole's vision of the museum as a means to uplift the working class – had a uniquely broad and permissive admissions policy, opening late into the evening and, later, offering free admission. This policy was successful, proving remarkably popular amongst the British citizenry, both upper- and working-class, and seeming to to impress some degree of temperance on its visitors; Cole reported in 1860 that only one person had been "excluded for not being able to walk steadily," and that sales from the Museum's refreshment rooms "averaged out to two and a half drops of wine, fourteen fifteenths of a drop of brandy, and ten and a half drops of bottled ale per capita" (quoted in Altick 1978, 500). The South Kensington Museum had made a strong case for its power over its citizenry – as Bennett (1995, 72) remarks, "in developing a new pedagogic relation between state and people, [the Museum] had also subdued the spectre of the crowd."

This comparison offers us potentially the bleakest lens through which we can view the social implications of the V&A's interest in videogames, and videogame exhibitions more broadly. Videogame exhibitions give videogame players cause to visit the museum; if "gamers" use their consumption of games as a means of constructing their identity, then the museum's veneration of videogames doubles as a veneration of videogame consumption. Though museums presumably conceive of videogame exhibitions in part as a way to court underrepresented demographics, in the V&A's case its "reformation" of videogames as a design discipline also fulfils the Museum's original function to reform its audiences and subdue the spectre of the crowd. Under the deeply commercialised logic of the V&A in 2018, the contemporary deployment of videogames in the museum space can be read most cynically as yet another paternalistic attempt to civilise a new public. One hundred and sixty-six years after its foundation, the Museum may still remain, at its essence, an instrument of power and control.

A site of tension

Of course, this is an acutely uncharitable reading of the V&A's operations, and might seem like a tenuous critique. Steven Conn (2010, 3) has admonished insensitive extensions of Bennett's (1995) Foucauldian characterisation of museums "as places where people go to get disciplined and punished," suggesting that this kind of "museophobia" is absurd: "As

any resident of the former Soviet Union will happily tell you, a day at the Hermitage is not the same thing as a day in the Gulag." To clarify, I do not wish to bluntly vilify the contemporary V&A on the basis of its 19th-century founder's ideals, however conservative they were. Rather, I see this kind of speculation as a productive way to explore how the museum functions as a social instrument, and how this social function intersects with videogames' culture and perceived significance. No individual within the Museum ever demonstrated any conscious intent to "reform" videogames and its audiences, or was necessarily cynical enough to use videogames as a means of attracting hordes of young men to a ruthlessly commercial V&A. However, the underlying commercial logic of the contemporary public museum inarguably shapes its collective motivations and actions – in this chapter I have attempted to describe certain confluences of institutional intent and outcome, in order to make that commercial logic a little clearer.

So – why videogames at the V&A? This chapter set out to answer a simple question and produced a multitude of overlapping and conflicting answers, amounting to a museological view of videogames that is rife with tension and contradiction. In the end, asking why something belongs within a museum tells you more about the museum than it does about the thing itself. This tension and contradiction is an essential quality of the operation of the museum; the V&A is best understood as a syncretic institution, whose work is defined through a variety of dissonant interests and agencies – a "contested terrain," to borrow a term from the sociology of sports. Museums are such broad and multifarious organisations, with so many competing and overlapping – "hyphenated" – interests, that it is impossible to construct a single totalising answer to why videogames belong there. At the V&A, videogames served multiple purposes at once: valuable as a creative medium and worthy of exhibition, while also being popular enough as a commercial industry to meet the needs dictated the capitalist logic of the institution; *Videogames* as an exhibition fulfils the V&A's mission to teach design to the public, and might do so at a scale that meets the museum's ever-rising visitation targets.

As *Videogames*'s curators tried to make an exhibition of this medium in a nuanced and thoughtful way, while also satisfying the needs of the capitalist reality that the Museum finds itself in, these two driving interests turned out to be complexly enmeshed, and this fundamental tension revealed itself as the root cause of many of the exhibition's later problems. It should also be acknowledged that my recognition of the V&A's dual motivations is a necessary simplification – of course, there is no unilateral divide or binary opposition between the curatorial and commercial interests of the museum;

various departments within the museum have various interests which overlap and intersect dynamically. This chapter has provided a macroscopic perspective of these interests and tensions within the institutional makeup of the contemporary V&A – in the Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I will take a closer view of how these tensions manifested within the final months of the exhibition's development.

5. Inside the machine: Exhibition-making in a heterogeneous museum

How does anything get done around here?

In early May I officially began my field study at the V&A, and immediately found myself caught within an odd bureaucratic gap. As a temporary member of staff, I was to be issued a photo ID that would let me in and out of the building outside of its public opening hours, and through its private entrances – my key to the Museum's backstage. Security at the V&A was extremely strict,[1] and although I had been officially granted a role at the Museum through a Visiting Fellowship within the Museum's Research department, the Security team required extensive documentation before I could be granted a pass – a copy of my passport, permission to study in the UK, a letter from the Research department confirming my Visiting Fellowship, and, crucially, some kind of proof of residence. This was, apparently, a brand new policy, which I was only informed of after I'd arrived at the V&A and was living in London under an unofficial sublease that I'd organised through a friend-of-a-friend. Proof of residence was commonly provided via mail from a British bank account, but I soon learned that opening an account with any of the major banks also required proof of residence. I seemed to be stuck.

Without a staff ID, entering the building's backstage each morning became a complex interdepartmental procedure: I had to check in at the Museum's security desk and ask them to call the Research department's Administrative

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[1] This is perhaps unsurprising considering the department's history, which originated as an extension of the local police station whose "beat" extended from the South Kensington streets into the V&A's galleries, and up until the early 1970s were viewed internally as "just police officers with museum badges on, without the truncheons" (Rapley, quoted in Adamson 2014).

Officer, who would then walk down to Security to sign me in, wait with me to be issued a one-day visitor pass, and walk me back up to the Research office to let me in. The process took about 20 minutes, altogether. The Security department was located on the ground floor of the Museum's southeast corner, and the Research department was on the top floor of its northwest corner – more or less as far apart as it was possible to be within the building – and so each morning the Administrative Officer and I would walk the full length of the Museum's quadrangle, through long hallways of medieval sculpture and silverwork, and we would apologise back and forth to each other: I would say sorry to have taken time out of her busy morning, and she'd say sorry that I'd become involved in this bureaucratic mess in the first place. Intermingled with these apologies were politely vented frustrations with Security. This overzealous new policy had been instated recently enough that the Research department were caught unaware and unprepared for the impact it'd have on their operations – they invited international researchers to the Museum on medium-term engagements like mine on a regular basis, and these new rules suddenly made that practice untenable. And though this particular problem was new, its emergence did not seem especially surprising to anyone. "This happens all the time," the Administrative Officer told me, as we walked through a long hallway lined with silversmithed artefacts: "These new policies just appear out of nowhere and we're expected to catch up." Many administrative pleas were made on my behalf – terse emails sent between departments, further letters written in my support from the Director of Research – but these were not successful. At the V&A, rules are rules.

After three weeks I managed to arrange a proof of residence[2] and was finally issued with a staff ID and accompanying lanyard. On the other side of this minor ordeal I realised that some of my assumptions about the Museum as an organisation had been unsettled – before entering the V&A I had perceived it as a monolith, whose workings might have been inscrutable but were, I presumed, at least professionally unified and streamlined. In retrospect I should have expected some degree of administrative incompatibility between departments in an organisation of this scale, but I found myself surprised to be confronted by this kind of problem from day one.

In that same first week I accompanied Kristian, *Videogames*'s research curator, to the press preview of *The Future Starts Here*, an exhibition which

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[2] I eventually obtained a suitable document by opening a spending account with an online bank, which, it turned out, had much less rigid verification policies than the V&A.

looked at emerging technologies to speculate on the role of digital design in the near future.[3] Held in the recently opened Sainsbury Gallery, a cavernous and columnless 1,100m² exhibition space, *The Future Starts Here* exhibited over 100 design objects: architectural models, service robots, companion robots, samples of the meal-replacement drink Soylent, a driverless concept car, and – suspended from the roof, looming over everything with a 40-metre wingspan – the "Aquila," an enormous aerial drone developed by Facebook. Displayed as a "flat hierarchy" which hearkened to the V&A's origins as the Great Exhibition of 1851, the exhibition's density of objects and lack of disciplinary categorisation – or dividing walls – gave the space a baroque, carnivalesque quality (Hyde and Pestana 2018, 7).

FIGURE 5.1. *Installation photo of* The Future Starts Here.
©Victoria and Albert Museum.

As the exhibition's curators gave their opening remarks, introducing the exhibition to a crowd of journalists and V&A staff, I leaned over to Kristian and whispered, "I can't stop thinking about how many emails had to get written to make all of this happen." Kristian laughed, and whispered back: "You have no idea."

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[3] At the V&A, the press preview takes place the morning before an exhibition's official opening night – attended mostly by journalists in order to review the new exhibition and interview the team behind it. It's also the first and only opportunity that other Museum staff might have to see the finished show before it opens to the public, since the invite-only opening night is much stricter about its guest list.

He was right; I had no idea whatsoever. Kristian did, though – not only was he already three years deep into the exhibition creation process himself, *The Future Starts Here* was also something of a sister show to *Videogames*, since they were developed desks apart within the same curatorial department. Through his many years in the Museum, he understood something that I was yet to learn: the astonishing granularity of exhibition work. Though the sheer quantity and diversity of these objects impressed an immediate sense of grandeur on any visitor that entered the space, the complexity of the work behind that impression was far less apparent. For the hundred-plus objects to be collated and displayed in this room, many tens of thousands of discussions were held, decisions made, compromises agreed to, concessions granted, and frustrations privately vented, all of which were mediated by the personal and professional agendas of a vast network of actors throughout various departments within the Museum and various spaces beyond it. I felt dizzy. The idea of trying to document the development of an exhibition as complicated as this one, in the brief time that I was allowed, suddenly felt especially daunting.

This prospect was made even more daunting by the sense that the museum as an institution seemed to actively conceal its own inner workings – everything was kept so polished and pristine that making sense of its practices would be an uphill struggle. My initial perception of the V&A as an inscrutable monolith was, of course, no accident. Suchman (1995) suggests that the work of organisations is kept secret from the public as a form of self-empowerment:

> We can ask why it might be not only inevitable but also valuable that members of an organization know their own work in ways that others positioned differently in the organization do not. The premise that we have special authority in relation to our own fields of knowledge and experience suggests we should have the ability to shape not only how we work but how our work appears to others. (58)

It is perhaps unsurprising, considering its expertise in methods of display, that the Museum would so tightly control its own representation – clearly, a great deal of work had been done to keep its frontstage visible and its backstage invisible, thereby reinforcing its own "special authority." As is typical of so-called "invisible" labour, the backstage was only made visible when the exhibition's seamless veneer broke down. Though most of these "seams" were only visible to those sensitive to the minutiae of exhibition development (e.g. Kristian), some were visible to the untrained eye (e.g. mine): for instance, the laundry-folding robot comprising a pair of robotic

arms, installed at the exhibition's entrance as a kind of frontispiece, for some reason sat completely immobile, with a note in front of it politely explaining: "The Laundry Robot is taking a break from his duties, and is temporarily out of action. The developers in California are working to resolve the malfunction. We trust the Robot will be doing the laundry again soon." Looking at this inanimate machine, it was clear that something had gone wrong, but not how or why. These surface-level imperfections signified great depths of organisational complexity and fragility.

Towards the end of this first week, I was struck by two competing ideas. After visiting the *Future* opening, I could recognise the incredible scope of production and coordination necessitated by the work of a museum of this scale. At the same time, I was mystified by the ingrained factionalism and compartmentalisation of the museum as an organisation – and the resultant bureaucratic inertia – that I'd witnessed between the Research and Security departments. Everything that I understood about museum work at that time made the prospect of actually opening a major exhibition in this professional environment seem more or less impossible. A question occurred to me then, to which I would return over and over in the months that followed: *how does anything get done around here?*

Heterogeneity and cooperation

A similar problem was addressed by sociologists Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer in their 1989 study of Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, who wondered how the necessary diversity of actors involved in the institution's work, accompanied by a divergence in their values and points of view – that is, its heterogeneity – could be reconciled with the organisational cohesion, communication, and cooperation which that work demanded. As Star and Griesemer put it, "The central analytical question raised by this study is: how do heterogeneity and cooperation coexist, and with what consequences for managing information?" (414) They proposed two major factors which allowed cooperative participation in a heterogeneous workplace. The first was *methods standardisation*, which referred to the establishment of operational guidelines which could mobilise diverse groups of actors towards common goals. The second was the establishment of *boundary objects*, which are objects – either abstract or physical – which "inhabit several intersecting social worlds … and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them" (393). In other words, boundary objects can mean different things to different groups, but they are valuable as a common point of reference or utility between these groups,

allowing for multi-directional "translations" of each group's interests, enabling cooperation within heterogeneous environments.

Since its publication in 1989, Star and Griesemer's study has been cited widely, particularly in further studies of collaboration between diverse communities of practice. However, as Lee (2007a) notes, an overwhelming degree of academic attention has been paid to boundary objects, with comparatively little focus on the importance of methods standardisation. The "favoured status" of the boundary objects concept is attributed to its relative novelty and innovation, whereas the "less glamorous" notion of methods standardisation was often elided from discussions of boundary objects, despite the fact that both concepts were described by Star and Griesemer as essential and inseparable when explaining the coexistence of heterogeneity and cooperation (Lee 2007a, 308–10). As I explain later in the chapter, the concept of boundary objects offers a useful lens through which to understand the role of videogames within the heterogeneous V&A, but it should be noted that this framing relies heavily on the ways in which boundary objects are intertwined with methods standardisation.

And the V&A is certainly standardised. As an organisation it is extremely complex, comprising many departments of various disciplines, values, and agendas, but it is nevertheless a very well-oiled exhibition-making machine. When complicated things "get done" in the Museum it is generally because they have been done before, and have been encoded as a standardised procedure. The Museum's highly intricate operations are kept moving by an established system of professional processes and responsibilities. Things break down, though, when obstacles are met which cannot be easily overcome by a codified precedent or process: a new security process is insufficiently standardised to allow temporary researchers access to staff IDs; a lack of technological literacy means a laundry-folding robot cannot be repaired ad hoc. Relative to other media and disciplines, videogames were unprecedented within the V&A, and therefore did not readily fit into many of the Museum's standardised methods, which created tensions throughout the exhibition development process.

The chapter presents several manifestations of heterogeneity and cooperation that I witnessed during my fieldwork at the V&A. In order to establish this, I begin with a description of the day-to-day work I saw at the V&A, introducing some of the key actors central to the *Videogames* exhibition and their role within the Museum, and I explain how this work was ordered. I build on this by discussing the ways that videogames appeared to complicate this order, before returning to boundary objects to

explore some contemporary amendments of that concept, in order to discuss the ways in which videogames represented both a boundary object and a boundary to the V&A's organisation. Finally, I conclude the chapter by expanding the scope of this discussion, beyond the daily patterns of work I saw in the field, to discuss the less obvious ways in which the V&A's highly standardised methods of exhibition production constrained the conceptual and material possibilities of *Videogames*'s exploration of its subject.

Museum methods

In order to explore how videogames complicate the work of museums, I first need to explain what that work involves. After a week or so in the V&A I began to settle into a routine. Due to my position there as a visiting researcher I belonged to the Research department, but most of my time was spent with the exhibition's curators in the Design, Architecture and Digital (DAD) department, where my own schedule was largely dictated by theirs. I would try to arrive early each day[4] and settle in at my desk in Research, where I'd have time to set down my bag, make a cup of tea, and look over any new emails and the day's calendar. Mornings at the Museum tended to be a flurry of activity, though; before long I'd leave to meet the curators at their desks at DAD, and then be whisked quickly off again to sit in on whatever meeting had been scheduled that morning.

Meetings were the operational lifeblood of the Museum – the primary tool of exhibition-making within a complex interprofessional ecosystem. They were everywhere at the V&A, and were held in many different professional contexts: informal, such as ad-hoc phone calls or brief chats in the office; semiformal, such as weekly catchups, or standard procedural meetings between departments; formal, such as monthly "all-team" meetings to catch up on an entire department's affairs, typically organised with pre-written agendas and recorded for posterity with minutes; and hyperformal, such as quarterly "all-staff" meetings, held in a large auditorium and hosted by the V&A's Director, which make museum-wide announcements such as new exhibitions, or new strategic plans.

Generally I found that meetings were used as a method of communication: a means of reportage, aligning the differing perspective of various staff or

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[4] I began my fieldwork with very good intentions, planning to arrive an hour before the curators and leave an hour after them. I will admit, though, that these good intentions did not hold for very long – as the months wore on and everyone's days got longer in the lead-up to the exhibition's opening, I found myself keeping essentially the same hours as my field subjects.

departments along a common trajectory, towards a common purpose. In spite of the standardised methods of the V&A, very little of the work of making an exhibition was rote or routine enough that it could be done in isolation – virtually every step of the exhibition's development was, if not directly collaborative in nature, at least preceded by or concluded with some kind form of interprofessional briefing or debriefing. In this sense meetings functioned most broadly as a kind of "meta-work", or "work that enables work" (Salzman and Palen 2004, 2). More specifically, meetings at the V&A could be understood as a category of work described by sociologist Anselm Strauss (1988) as "articulation work," which is "work that gets things back 'on track' in the face of the unexpected, and modifies action to accommodate unanticipated contingencies" (Star 1991, 275)

FIGURE 5.2. *A* Videogames *production meeting.*
Photo: Michael McMaster.

Articulation became more necessary as more Museum departments became involved in the day-to-day making of *Videogames*, and especially so when external parties were involved. For example: during the production of the exhibition's marketing posters by the external design agency Hato, feedback and guidance would be delivered by the curators in inter-organisational meetings; these feedback sessions were typically preceded by one or more internal meetings between the curators as well as the Exhibitions team and the V&A's Design department, in order to openly voice concerns and opinions and reach some kind of constructive consensus to be

communicated back to Hato; these interdepartmental meetings were themselves informed by less-formal discussions between the curators. Meetings like these often felt somewhat indirect or intermediary, even perfunctory, and I was often struck by how many meetings were less about direct strategisation of work but instead aimed to develop strategies for further strategisation. This recursivity is an expected feature of articulation work: "managing articulation work can itself become articulation work, and vice versa, ad infinitum" (Star and Strauss 1999, 10).

Feelings of frustration towards meetings tends to stem from a sense that they obstruct, or distract from, the "real work" of an organisation. For the V&A's curators, this "real work" – that is, the work that happened in the stretches of time between meetings – mainly took place at their desks, on their computers: researching, writing, planning, and (of course) emailing, which itself was a form of articulation work. This deskwork would inevitably be interrupted by ad-hoc meetings – signalled by phone calls, drop-ins, taps-on-the-shoulder – which meant that staff, including me, would occasionally stay very late at the office, or work an odd weekend day, to work in isolation with less risk of interruption. My delineation here between meetings and "real work" is more a reflection of my emotional understanding of work at the V&A than a serious analysis of how work was structured there; though they were often dreary, meetings were vital to the distributed project of exhibition-making in a heterogeneous system. Per Schwartzman (1989), the meeting as a practice is not simply a precursor to or facilitator of work, but itself represents the most essential work of an organisation. Meetings serve to reinforce a workplace's identity as an organised system, and are what manifests the organisation itself.

The Exhibitions department

The first meeting I attended took place at one of the tables in the Museum cafe – six of us huddled around a table with our notebooks and takeaway coffees, as visitors and other V&A staff bustled around us. This was a meeting between *Videogames*'s curators, Marie and Kristian, and three staff from the Exhibitions department: Ana, Ruth, and Tessa. The Exhibitions department was primarily responsible for the logistical work of exhibition planning and development. If the curators looked after the conceptual side of making an exhibition, Exhibitions staff were in charge of its practical demands – they interfaced with exhibition participants, managed contracts with external partners, coordinated the arrival of works, oversaw the exhibition's design and installation, and above all else, they ensured that the

exhibition's overall development was proceeding on time, per a very detailed production schedule.

Catch-up meetings like this between the curators and Exhibitions took place regularly, at least twice a week, and served as a way to debrief on everyone's work over the past few days, plan for the week ahead, and make decisions that either department couldn't make alone. After I introduced myself, and explained my role as a visiting ethnographer, Ana – *Videogames*'s Exhibition Manager, who would become my primary contact within their department – told me, "I should say sorry in advance; these meetings are not going to be very exciting." At the time of this particular meeting, we were about five months from the exhibition's scheduled opening, and everyone's work seemed to be getting quite detail-oriented. In the span of 20 minutes many seemingly small decisions were made, and further questions were raised. To name a few:

- The exhibition will include some behind-the-scenes photos supplied by FromSoftware, makers of *Bloodborne*, of some of the game's developers at work. Though FromSoftware have permitted display of the photos, Marie notes that Sony (*Bloodborne*'s publisher, and partial rights holder) are notoriously privacy-conscious, and might have their own concerns about the V&A portraying their intellectual property in this manner. Ana says that she will follow this up with Sony that week to confirm.

- One game developer whose work will be displayed in an arcade cabinet had asked for a $200 fee for inclusion of their game in the exhibition. Ana says that paying for it is no problem, but it's unclear how this should be allocated in the exhibition budget. Further, this creates a strange precedent, since most other participants are not being paid for the inclusion of their work[5] – it is deemed impractical to openly offer all participants artist fees, and $200 would be quite low to offer anyway. Eventually a workaround is proposed: the game developer's $200 will be called a copyright fee, and other exhibition participants will be contacted to ask if they have copyright fees to be paid.

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[5] Some exhibition participants were paid directly in cases where the display of their games required a significant degree of custom work – in that case, however, the work was budgeted as a commission, paid as labour rather than as a licence fee. As a general rule, though, the V&A did not pay exhibition fees for loaned work – this rule seemed to be inherited from the Museum's historical focus on exhibiting works of industrial design, where that display – and associated cultural capital – was recompense enough for the large commercial companies that typically produced those works. I further explore the historical relationship between museums and commercial industries, and its implications for contemporary curatorial practice, in Chapter 6.

- Ruth notes a number of exhibition objects which will be arriving to the Museum soon, including SK Games' *Bush Bash* – a game played from the front seats of a bisected Mitsubishi Magna – which is being shipped by freight from Western Australia. Ana flags a number of concerns about its display: What will be needed for OH&S approval? How do we stop visitors from breaking off bits of the dashboard? Where is it going to be stored, once it arrives?[6] These problems are allocated between the three Exhibitions staff, and a note is made to revisit them at the next meeting.

The issues raised in this meeting, and subsequent tasks generated from it, are characteristic of the Exhibition department's proactive role in manifesting an exhibition of this scale. Later, when asked about the demands of her role, Ana told me, "What I'm an expert in is displays. So I know how things work, and how things don't work together … I'm there so that I can see things that might be a problem in the long run." This work requires a granular attention to detail and a practical understanding of display methodologies in order to not simply execute but actively mediate the curators' vision. Ana described this to me using an example of the design and layout of the "desks" in *Videogames*'s first room, which were desk-like display cases where constellations of objects were arranged flat alongside wall-mounted exhibits:

> It was so many details that needed to be confirmed, just to get that design right. … All of the heights of the text depending on [the position of] the objects; the layouts of the displays on the wall, depending on how the objects could be framed, or couldn't be framed, or the way that they need to be mounted. We have to make a decision about how things can be displayed – because from the curator's point of view, they might just need to be placed flat together on the desk. But really, for the display, they needed to be upright. You know, things like that – if you're there in time to flag those issues, during the design stage, you'll save a lot of problems, and cost implications, in the long run.

Another defining characteristic of the Exhibitions department staff was their relative omnipresence throughout the exhibition's development. Their work requires a holistic, big-picture view of the exhibition to fulfil their responsibilities as overseers and schedule-keepers – they attended nearly every meeting relating to the exhibition that I saw, and other departments'

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[6] As these various questions are raised, Marie laments: "These are the kinds of questions that we've known are coming for months, and we've always said can wait until the last minute, but it's just now sinking in and I'm realising – wait, is this the last minute?"

work was inevitably filtered through them in some way. "Our skill is managing other people's skills," as Ana once told me.

One result of this broad purview was that Exhibitions staff seemed to me to be perpetually overworked – as the exhibition's opening neared, Ana would regularly work late into the night and come in on weekends to ensure that everything was under control. Of course, similarly high demands were placed on other Museum departments, and everyone's work grew more frantic as deadlines loomed – however, Exhibitions were in it for the long haul. Though other departments involved in an exhibition's development could relax (to some extent) after the exhibition opened, Exhibitions' work continued through the five-month run of the exhibition: they would liaise regularly with Visitor Experience to handle visitor complaints and feedback, et cetera, and with AV technicians, to make sure everything stays up and running.[7] This work continues even beyond their exhibitions' closure, as Exhibitions staff also manage the Museum's touring exhibition program, and need to oversee the installation and running of the exhibition in international venues, as another life cycle begins. When Ana first explained this aspect of her department's responsibilities to me, she looked at me gravely and said, "For us, it's never over."

In spite of their omnipresence, though, the Exhibitions department's work was affected by a kind of invisibility within the institution. They were certainly among the least public-facing of the Museum's many departments; although the result of their work was extremely visible in the finished exhibitions which they helped develop, the actual processes that defined their work – and the scale of those processes – were difficult to glean. Ana shared this concern: "I think there's been a culture, in the Exhibitions department, for a very long time, where we stay behind the scenes. And if everything goes well, it's proof of how good we are – that you don't even notice the work that we do." This invisibility is typical of most organisations which deal with public frontstages and private backstages – in *Making Work Visible*, Suchman (1995, 58) notes, "In the case of many forms of service work, we recognize that the better the work is done, the less visible it is to those who benefit from it." In the case of Exhibitions, however, this invisibility was felt not only on the frontstage but within the backstage, too. "If you asked someone from Learning, or someone from Marketing, what we do at Exhibitions, I don't think they understand the complexities of putting a show up. The complexities of managing so many different people

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[7] The ongoing technical maintenance of an exhibition was expected to be significantly more demanding in the case of *Videogames*, since it relied so heavily on interactive digital works.

across the Museum. … Conservation, Technical Services – we work closely together, so they get that – but the rest of the Museum, I'm not sure how much they actually understand what our job is about. Why exhibitions take so long to put together." The fundamental "behind-the-scenes"-ness of Exhibitions had various consequences for the department.[8] Though it was never expressed to me in explicit terms, I sensed that the dissociation between Exhibitions' labour and that labour's outcome had instilled a feeling of concern amongst members of the department in terms of their relationship to the wider organisation – Suchman (1995, 58) notes that although we might take the invisibility of certain forms of work as a given, "[w]hat we acknowledge less frequently is that bringing such work forward and rendering it visible may call into question the grounds on which different forms of work are differentially rewarded, both symbolically and materially." And the consequences of Exhibitions' invisibility were, certainly, both symbolic and material – accompanying a sense of thanklessness, or lack of affective recognition within the museum, were pressing concerns that this invisibility led to the department's under-resourcing. As one member of Exhibitions' staff told me while reflecting on the recently opened Sainsbury Gallery: "it's one more [exhibition] space, but we're still the same number of people."

As Ana pointed out to me, this practice of departmental elision within museums had a long history. "It's always been – looking back on the history of museums, on the making of exhibitions – it's always been the curator. When you look at who made an exhibition, it's a name. Or two names. But it really is always a big team, working behind the scenes." The long arc of the Museum's history showed some signs of improvement, however – I was surprised to learn, for example, that the V&A had only recently begun to publicly credit Exhibitions for their work, on the acknowledgement panels which were posted at the exits of each exhibition. This was, of course, a relatively symbolic gesture, but at least to Ana it signalled a positive shift:

> I think that at the V&A – at all institutions – there's this background where the curator is the only public-facing figure; the only figure that goes on the acknowledgement panel. … For example, at [a smaller institution where she'd previously worked], you had the names of everybody working on the project on the acknowledgement panel. Everybody. Technicians, lights – everybody is there. And that doesn't cost

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[8] This was not helped by the department's physical position within the V&A – located in the building's basement, which I always imagined as the Museum's "guts," their offices consisted of a network of small, low-ceilinged rooms connected by narrow, tunnel-like hallways.

anything, to anyone. It's dumb, you know, but it really is a nice recognition, to acknowledge how many people are involved in this project. Here there's a bit of that – we are getting there, I think.

Teamwork and the authorial puzzle

Though exhibitions had once been commonly understood as the products of individual museum departments (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 210), the sectorial shift in attention to the needs and interests of its visitors – as described in Chapter 4 – has broadened both the disciplinary methodologies and the scale of production of the museum exhibition, and so too the range of professions involved has broadened (Gilmore and Rentschler 2002). No longer considered the sole remit of museum curators, exhibitions became emblematic of the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of contemporary museum work, corresponding with a more general shift in organisational science throughout the 1990s towards team working (Lee 2007b; Van Maanen 2001, 255). Though teamwork was considered something of a buzzword-ish novelty in the late 90s and was still considered an emerging phenomenon in the mid-2000s (Lee 2007b, 184), by the time of my fieldwork in 2018 it seemed to be such a deeply embedded component of the museum's organisation – at least at the V&A – that it went more or less unremarked upon.

The "departmentalisation" of modern exhibition development has led to new kinds of problems – as responsibilities are split between various departmental disciplines, a clear sense of ownership or authorship can become diffracted. In Sharon Macdonald's *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*, she describes an abstract feeling of deflation and "disjunction" which fell over herself and the core development team of the Science Museum's 1989 *Food* exhibition, in the immediate wake of its opening:

> When the exhibition finally opened, it did not "feel" quite like the exhibition that those who had been making it had envisaged. I use the term "feel" here because it was difficult, for the members of the [*Food* team] as well as myself, to identify just what it was that created the sense of disjunction between the imagined new gallery and the one that materialised. (Macdonald 2002, 93)

In seeing the finished exhibition, Macdonald (2002) recounts a feeling of compromise from the perspective of its curators: originally envisioned as "buzzy" and "subversive" and emphatically "not boring," the opened exhibition felt "flat" and "serious"; a "book-on-the-wall" (93). Especially

concerning was the fact that it was unclear how this compromise came about. Macdonald identifies this "disjunction between 'encoding' (the production of the exhibition) and the 'text' (the finished exhibition)" as an "authorial puzzle" which becomes a central theme of her study (93). The feeling that a sense of control had drifted away from the curators throughout the multi-year development process is a typical side-effect of teamwork in general. As Van Maanen (2001) puts it, the renewed organisational reliance on teams and team working has led to the dissolution of standard divisions of labour and expertise, creating complex interdependent work structures where "a person's job becomes embedded within a greater variety of others' work such that just who is responsible for what becomes difficult to determine" (255).

It should be noted that Macdonald's study of the Science Museum took place in the late 1980s, when team working was considered a relatively new innovation, which made the development of an exhibition which encompassed the expertise of multiple departments something of an experiment in collaboration. Past exhibitions at the Science Museum had typically been developed within a fairly strict adherence to hierarchy and seniority, where most exhibition content was officially decided upon by individual senior curators, who were typically Keepers – heads of particular collections (Macdonald 2002, 109). This single-author model of curatorship bore its own problems, however, and Macdonald offers accounts from staff describing senior curators as variously disengaged – those who left all the serious work of exhibition-making to junior curators, and "just stepped in at the end to take the credit" – overbearingly controlling, or oblivious to the expectations of the public, generating exhibitions which felt like "a PhD thesis pasted onto panels, accessible only to the other three experts in the universe who are interested in the subject" (110). If the experiment in teamwork which the *Food* exhibition represented was intended to supersede this top-down model of exhibition development, the problems of single-author curation were similarly superseded by the "authorial puzzle" which team-led curation presented.

Three decades later at the V&A, team working was central to the daily work of the Museum. Many of the features of Science Museum's development of the *Food* exhibition which were then considered innovative or unusual – an interdisciplinary curatorial team, a more collaborative production process, the recognition of a team beyond a single curatorial "author" – were, in 2018, more or less *de rigueur* within the V&A. Exhibition work was a deeply interdependent process. The core exhibition team was fairly small, with only the two curators and two or three Exhibitions staff working full time for

most of the exhibition's development; and they were joined towards the end of development by a single staff member from the Interpretation department who guided the writing and editing of the exhibition's interpretive text – often referred to as the exhibition's "didactics". Despite the core team's small size, though, their day-to-day work was entangled with many different departments throughout the Museum, each of whom served multiple exhibitions simultaneously ,alongside other non-exhibition work. As I followed the curators during my fieldwork, I saw that their daily routines required constant interface – emails, phone calls and in-person meetings – with numerous departments. I would occasionally attempt to transcribe the curators' schedules into my fieldnotes – as an example, one workday was ordered as follows:

10 am – A catch-up with Exhibitions to debrief on the past few days' progress and plan for the week ahead.

11 am – A four-way meeting between the curators, Exhibitions, the Marketing department and an external graphic design company to review the ongoing development of the exhibition's advertising campaign.

12 pm – A break for lunch in the staff cafeteria with some of the other Design, Architecture and Digital curators.

1:30 pm – Marie stays at her desk to "plough through" some outstanding emails from various departments; Kristian leaves to conduct a presentation of the exhibition to a small audience of gallery invigilators from the Visitor Services department, to prepare them to answer visitor questions once the exhibition opens.

2:30 pm – More emails, occasionally punctuated by phone calls to and from Exhibitions.

4 pm – Ending the day with a meeting between the curators, Exhibitions and Interpretation, to conduct a proofread of the exhibition text – the descriptive blurbs which accompany exhibition objects – in the wake of some editorial notes from senior staff in the Interpretation and Research departments.

This was one of the busier days at the Museum, but not out of the ordinary – a result of this interdependent work structure was that exhibition-making felt like a distinctly collaborative practice, where practically every action taken by the curators was mediated in some way through at least one – and often many – other departments. Though the exhibition was undeniably led by the curators' vision – particularly Marie's, who (as the lead curator) tended to have the final say on decisions relating to the exhibition – nearly every significant choice made about the exhibition was heavily influenced by

input and advice from Exhibitions and Interpretation staff. Although the curators' general mode of work was decidedly more conceptual or immaterial than these other departments', this should not imply that these other departments' input was strictly rote or manual – the work of actualising an exhibition required a great deal of creative problem-solving, which was shared across all departments that touched *Videogames*.

This all begs the question – did the "authorial puzzle" which Macdonald identified at the Science Museum in 1989 manifest at the V&A in 2018? Did the interdisciplinary nature of exhibition development endanger either the authorial integrity of the development of *Videogames*, or the reliability of its working methods? Or, to reframe the question: did the essential heterogeneity involved in making *Videogames* impede its requisite cooperation?

Generally speaking, the development of *Videogames* ran smoothly. This is not to say that the entire development process was uneventful or completely free of tension – there were certainly significant tensions, most of which directly related to the museum's unfamiliarity with videogames as a medium, and which form the principal object of study of this ethnography. This is also not to say that the daily work of making the exhibition was not difficult or frustrating – as with the concerns expressed above regarding Exhibitions' position within the museum, I heard similar complaints from many other museum departments whose staff were broadly frustrated with "the way things were done" at the V&A. However, these tensions and frustrations were by and large exceptions to a general feeling that the making of *Videogames* was a surprisingly pleasant work environment, at least relative to other exhibition development "horror stories." When I spoke with staff after the exhibition had opened, they reflected positively on the exhibition development experience – multiple staff told me that *Videogames* was, by a wide margin, the most enjoyable exhibition they'd worked on at the V&A. Team working as a practice was so ingrained within the institution that nobody seemed to drastically overstep beyond their own professional remit, and there was generally very little interpersonal tension amongst the core team that I saw. There were no immediate concerns regarding the exhibition's scholarly integrity, and no looming threat of Macdonald's "authorial puzzle" – the "encoding" of the exhibition throughout its development seemed more or less to resemble its final "text."

In spite of this lack of friction, the exhibition was quite heavily shaped in ways beyond the curators' control by the imposing system of exhibition development at the V&A, as I described in broad terms in Chapter 1 and

will return to again at the end of this chapter. This was less a disjunction between the exhibition's envisioning and its outcome than a kind of institutional confinement of how the exhibition could be imagined in the first place – the V&A's standardised methods of exhibition production precluded certain forms of display and development practice, and delimited the possibilities of the exhibition's format from the earliest stages of development. At the interprofessional level, though, things ran smoothly – it seemed clear that, within this methodology, people seemed to know how to work together. In the sections below I will discuss the standardised systems which supported that cooperation, and the contested status of videogames which undermined that support.

Standardisation inside the well-oiled machine

It is difficult to give a single comprehensive answer for why the transfer between the exhibition's "encoding" and its "text" was so frictionless, except to say that the Museum seemed to be incredibly well prepared for the process of encoding exhibitions. As described in the section above, exhibition work at the V&A is performed as a tightly choreographed concert between many different departments, who work together cooperatively to manifest a shared – though not always unified – vision. In spite of a heterogeneous cohort of staff, the Museum is able to produce complicated exhibitions which require a high degree of cooperative coordination, which accords with the theory of "institutional ecology" laid out in Star and Griesemer's 1989 study. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, Star and Griesemer proposed two major factors which allowed cooperative participation in a heterogeneous workplace: *boundary objects* and *methods standardisation*. Though the making of *Videogames* was heavily negotiated by the establishment of various boundary objects – which I describe in the next section – I will first discuss the critical role of standardised processes and practices to the daily operation of the V&A.

In the case of The Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ), Star and Griesemer (1989, 395) describe how its first director, Joseph Grinnell, "codified a precise set of procedures for collecting and curating specimens." By establishing adequately precise methods, actors from various socioprofessional worlds and disciplines could work towards unified ends, regardless of any differences in background or knowledge.

> These methods were both stringent and simple – they could be learned by amateurs who might have little understanding of taxonomic, ecological or evolution theory. They thus did not

require an education in professional biology to understand or to execute. At the same time, they rendered the information collected by amateurs amenable to analysis by professionals. (Star and Griesemer 1989, 406)

Because these methods were so unambiguous, and so broadly propagated throughout the MVZ's network, the divergent concerns and needs of distant socioprofessional worlds could be "translated" with ease – Star and Griesemer (1989) thus described Grinnell's standardised methods as a "lingua franca" within the organisation (406–7).

The concept of methods standardisation was conceived by Star and Griesemer as an essential component of their theory of cooperative work in heterogeneous environments, alongside their concept of boundary objects: "objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds … *and* satisfy the informational requirements of each of them" (393, original emphasis). Since the study's publication in 1989, boundary objects have endured and been widely celebrated as a useful theoretical construct for making sense of how different communities of practice work together (Timmermans 2015). However, Charlotte Lee (2007a) has noted that the concept is too readily deployed without sufficient attention paid to the context of its inception: namely the importance of standardisation, which Lee poses as "the less glamorous and less innovative of the two concepts"(309). Lee observed that "a crack opened between methods standardization and boundary objects" which was eventually allowed to "widen into a canyon, with boundary objects standing uncomfortably apart from process" (313–14). As a result, Lee states that boundary objects tend to be taken as rote or given, and made to explain quite broad and multifaceted cooperative work practices, thus requiring extensions and amendments to the concept. Lee cites several case studies where "so-called boundary objects failed to satisfy informational requirements for various reasons" (311) such as when they are too abstract or ambiguous (Bechky 1999), or when they require significant contextual explanation to be intelligible and therefore useful (Henderson 1999; Subrahmanian et al. 2003; Boujut and Blanco 2003).

In the section that follows this one I talk about boundary objects as they existed in the development of the *Videogames* exhibition, and use the concept as a lens through which to examine the nebulous definition of videogames as a medium and culture by various departments. In doing so I call into question the conceptual versatility of boundary objects, along the same lines as Lee's (2007a) cautioning cited above. I argue, however, that this nebulous definition is strongly tied to its insufficient standardisation throughout the Museum – as such, I want to preface that argument by first

establishing the ways in which processes and knowledge were standardised at the V&A.

To say that the conception of videogames were not sufficiently standardised is not to say that the V&A's work in general is not standardised, however. If the V&A is good at anything, it is good at producing exhibitions, provided those exhibitions conform to a relatively familiar format. In the introduction to this chapter I described the Museum as a well-oiled exhibition-making machine – in speaking with different members of staff, this particular metaphor of the V&A as a "machine" was invoked repeatedly. I once asked Marie about her transition from an independent curator of relatively small-scale events to the curator of a major museum exhibition with a four-year development cycle. I asked: did she ever feel like she was seriously out of her depth? She shook her head: "No. It's just such a machine." The "machine" had been carefully calibrated through decades of precedent and refinement to establish a thoroughly standardised exhibition development procedure. Marie recognised the value of this procedure:

> And it's so incremental as well. You don't suddenly have something big dumped on you all at once – you're taken through a process. And I think a lot of that support comes from Exhibitions, because they take the lead with being like, "Okay, this is what an object list looks like, this is how we'll divide it up, this is when this is due, this is when this department's going to get involved, this is when this person's going to get involved." And so you're led in – you don't just jump into the deep end.

The availability of such a well-established development process meant that Marie, who had never held a professional role at a museum in the past, could be hired on the merits of her curatorial instincts and depth of her knowledge of industry and culture of videogames. The burden of responsibility of producing such a large and complex exhibition was never placed fully on her shoulders – it was counterbalanced by a reliable and repeatable process which atomised a complex multi-year development cycle into a more manageable schedule of deadlines and deliverable milestones.

How, then, were the methods of exhibition development standardised within the V&A? What did these standardised systems of work look like, and how were they propagated? In Star and Griesemer's study they attributed the success of the MVZ in part to Grinnell's codification of a precise set of procedures, of which a few examples are given: reportage methods to document fieldwork while gathering natural specimens; instructions on how to properly preserve specimens; prescribed formats for documenting those

specimens, either via notes or photographs; and so on (1989, 405–7). Star and Griesemer do not state how these procedures were recorded and propagated throughout the MVZ's network of actors, but given the retrospective nature of their study, it can be assumed that Grinnell's methods were explicitly recorded and formally disseminated as written documentation or correspondence. At the V&A I recall two broad categories of standardisation, which I will term *formal standardisation* and *informal standardisation*. Formal (i.e. explicit) standardisation was standardised information which was concretely recorded and openly available to museum staff – essentially the same mode of methods standardisation to which Star and Griesemer referred. On the other hand, I also witnessed a great deal of information being communicated between staff more or less verbally, as a kind of ambient or unrecorded collective understanding of the V&A and its workings, which I refer to here as informal (i.e. embedded or tacit) standardisation. I outline both of these categories of standardisation below.

Formal standardisation

The V&A's homogeneous methods of exhibition production were deeply and clearly inscribed within the organisation – these methods were directed most explicitly through a system of written processes and procedures. As is typical of ethnographic studies of workplaces, my understanding of the V&A as professional ecosystem was built in part through the extensive study of the documents around which it revolved (Geiger and Ribes 2011, 2). The highest-level goals of the institution are codified within its Strategic Plan, a concise document updated every few years that describes the V&A's sociocultural mission, split across five key objectives.[9] This mission is elaborated upon and rationalised across a raft of other documents, including its FuturePlan, which articulates the V&A's long-term redevelopment plans, and its Public Task statement – which describes the V&A's accordance with the UK's National Heritage Act of 1983, which

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[9] In 2018, during my time at the V&A, its strategic goals were outward-focused and entrepreneurial in spirit, reflecting both its commitment to its public and its position within its cultural economy. These goals were, in order:
1. Create a world class visitor and learning experience across all V&A sites and collections;
2. Focus and deepen the relevance of our collections and ideas across the UK;
3. Expand the V&A's international reach as a global catalyst for the UK creative industries;
4. Embed digital capacity and culture at the V&A and deliver an outstanding digital experience;
5. Diversify and increase commercial funding sources (V&A 2018c).

itself guides and governs the Museum's activity – as well as numerous strategic or policy documents which state how and why the museum conducts its varied operations.

These high-level documents, though significant in some abstract sense, were never cited within the course of day-to-day work that I witnessed in my field study. This work was typically directed through utilitarian forms of documentation. Earlier I described the work of the Exhibitions department, whose professional aim to deliver the completed exhibition on time was directed by their production schedule: a living document which was central to the making of *Videogames*, containing the exhibition's major milestones and deadlines. On a daily basis, the production schedule was used to outline and order the various interdepartmental tasks which exhibition development comprised, and to forecast how any changes or disruptions to these tasks would impact the schedule as a whole; in this regard the production schedule as a document was not merely reflective but actively directive, and would shape the exhibition by determining which prospective changes were feasible, and which were not. More broadly, this schedule was also representative of the V&A's standardised methods of exhibition production, and was used to implement them – these schedules began as templates, and delineated a inflexible sequence of work which dictated how a V&A exhibition ought to be developed, from beginning to end. Though the aleatory nature of such complex and long-term work meant that this schedule was inevitably modified to suit the needs of a given project, the generic format of the exhibition schedule nonetheless cast these contingent factors as undesirable variations to a tried-and-true formula, which were to be mitigated where possible, rather than potentially productive experiments in display. In this sense, formal standardisation tended to function more as a means of constraining or delimiting work, rather than motivating it.

Various systems of accountability and performance measurement also affected work at the V&A. Employment contracts, job descriptions and Key Performance Indicators, for instance, were used to explicitly define each staff member's role and responsibilities. At the institutional level, annual reports were published annually, and (per governmental requirements) were made available to the public, in order to articulate the alignment of the museum's activities and spending with the interest of the taxpaying British public. In the context of exhibitions, the development of *Videogames* was conducted under the looming spectre of the "wash-up" process: the Museum's standardised procedure for post-exhibition evaluation, primarily for the benefit of the V&A's executive staff, where the exhibition was assessed against various performance metrics – most significantly, audience

attendance – and codified into a confidential summative document which contained reflections and "lessons learned" from various involved departments. This evaluative method haunted the development of *Videogames*, as it presumably haunted the development of any other V&A exhibition – at all times, the curators seemed keenly aware of what the Museum expected of them, and how its directorate defined a successful exhibition.

Complicating my delineation between formal and informal methods were processes which adopted the posture of standardisation while actually being essentially improvised. One afternoon, I was sitting in the curators' office, talking to Marie and Kristian about the early stages of *Videogames*'s development, and we looked through some "subsection hierarchies." These were documents prepared by the curators which outlined various games that were candidates for inclusion in the exhibition – noting what they were, how they worked, what made them conceptually interesting, and how they might be exhibited – which were used to bring various internal and external stakeholders up to speed on these complicated and unfamiliar works. I asked Marie about the official-sounding title of these documents, and whether these subsection hierarchies were taught to her as standard exhibition-development procedure. She shrugged: "You just make shit up as you go, really."

Informal standardisation

Suffusing the formalised methods of work that ostensibly ran the V&A was an unspoken yet ever-present set of logics: a body of knowledge that was not clearly documented as explicit process, but seemed to be commonly – that is, homogeneously – understood throughout the heterogeneous organisation. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to comprehensively account for the multitudes of implicit knowledge contained within the V&A – my aim here is simply underscore the significance of these unrecorded methods to the daily function of the V&A, and explain how they affected the outcome of *Videogames*.

The professional activity of the V&A depended on a common understanding of the broad responsibilities of each department, as well as some idea of those departments' processes. My own induction to the organisation was almost entirely ad hoc: as I attended interdepartmental meetings, I was introduced to representatives of various teams, and was generally expected to infer the responsibilities of those teams through context. I often found myself unsure of where the professional boundaries

of each department were drawn, even when everyone else seemed collectively clear – for example, whether the reformatting and reprinting of text on a card of wall text was the remit of Interpretation, or the V&A's in-house Design team, or the externally contracted graphic design team who originally produced these panels. Up until the end of my fieldwork I was still learning of new departments within the organisation, and I never had a particularly complete mental map of the structure of the V&A – at no point was I ever shown an organisational chart, nor any explicit documentation outlining the responsibilities of each department.[10] Although these documents presumably existed, I never saw them consulted in other staff members' daily work; like me, it appeared that all staff at the V&A were primarily inducted into its system of work through a mixture of oral transmission and intuitive inference. I should emphasise that this tacit understanding of how the V&A was standardised was local to each staff member and their remit; keeping in mind the "invisibility" of the Exhibitions department as explored earlier, the scope and vitality of whose work other departments did not seem to understand, it seemed apparent that these other departments at least sufficiently understood Exhibitions' role wherever it intersected with their own. Cooperation here should be distinguished from due credit or appreciation, which was apparently not necessary to the continued function of the V&A's "machine."

A number of rules determined an archetypical format to which the V&A's exhibitions conformed. In the case of *Videogames,* the exhibition's second section – "Disruptors," described in further detail in Chapter 3 – was conceived of in order to satisfy the expectation that V&A exhibitions contain a "reading room." Reading rooms in exhibitions were typically quiet, reflective spaces containing ample seating and a collection of books selected by the exhibition's curators. I describe this as an expectation because that is how it was described to me by *Videogames*'s curators – and indeed, several V&A exhibitions I saw, though not all, contained analogous spaces – however it was never clear to me from whom this expectation was communicated, nor how it was rationalised in terms of a general institutional strategy.

As described above, the institutional mission of the V&A was formally codified through a variety of inward- and outward-facing documents, though these appeared to be essentially perfunctory in terms of how they

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[10] See above, where Marie described her introduction to the long-term process of exhibition-making via the Exhibitions team: "This is what an object list looks like; this is how we'll divide it up; this is when this is due; this is when this department's going to get involved; this is when this person's going to get involved…"

informed the on-the-ground work of the V&A's staff. The ideology of the V&A existed as a loose assemblage of principles which were embedded in daily work without an apparent need to be explicated; though they were abstract, there seemed to be little confusion or disagreement around what the Museum's aims were. When I asked Marie how conscious she was of having to wear a "museum hat" when developing the exhibition – that is, how conscious she was of the priorities of the V&A, as distinct from her own – she described this aspect of making *Videogames* as quite intuitive yet unambiguous, and dictated most significantly by the V&A's ambition to reach a wide general audience: "The pressures about what the exhibition was going to cover was something that I consciously felt: that this is not an exploration of things Marie finds weird and wonderful, because that's way too niche. I don't feel conscious that there was pull towards, 'How do you make this feel museum-y?' – it was more, 'How do you speak to a bigger audience?'" This expectation was therefore moulded through a variety of formal and informal channels: it was explicit in the methods of evaluation described above, especially the exhibition's visitor targets, but was also communicated verbally through discussions with other Museum staff – in particular, the curatorial department's Keeper and Senior Curators – and was inferred tacitly through contextual factors such as the budget of the exhibition and the scale of its gallery space.

My own understanding of work at the V&A was formed through witnessing vivid personal interactions: interprofessional meetings in which tacit knowledge was voiced and traded within a system of articulation work, and in which formal methods – with some exceptions, as noted above – seemed to act more as reflections of institutional work rather than drivers of it. Though my own mapping of these informal methods of work at the V&A is sketchy at best, it begins to confront a limitation of Star and Griesemer's (1989) study – theirs was a retrospective investigation, so it is natural that they would define the success of the Berkeley museum's standardised processes based on what had been documented. Their paper acknowledges the limits of their study, which they term a "managerial bias," and caution readers: "it is important not to mistake the search heuristic of starting with the centralized records for a theoretical model of the structure of the network itself" (390; 396). Separately, Star (1991, 275) noted the significance of this interactional work as important to understanding the function of organisations: "The important thing about articulation work is that it is invisible to rationalized models of work." Charlotte Lee (2007a) argues that that the limited perspective of Star and Griesemer's study has contributed to popular conception of boundary objects as "standardized

objects that pass cleanly and unproblematically between communities of practice and satisfying the needs of all" (313). This may explain why my invocation of the position of videogames at the V&A – which variably acted as both a boundary and a boundary object, as I explore below – troubles the productive role of boundary objects as put forth by Star and Griesemer. With this in mind, my attention to informal standardisation here should be considered an extension of their concept, and arguably an overextension – I am talking about more than just methods here, but a much larger body of institutional knowledge in which methods are contained. In any case, I consider it essential to account for these two overlapping systems of knowledge – formal and informal – in order to understand the way that people worked at the V&A.

Constructing videogames

As described above, the heterogeneous makeup of the V&A did not significantly impede the development of *Videogames*, due to that process's thorough standardisation; but this does not mean that it was entirely smooth – the exhibition's making was marred by a handful of persistent and recurrent problems. If coordinated exhibition development at the V&A was so well standardised and codified, then where and how did things go wrong?

The standardised structure of work at the V&A afforded smooth operation as long as an exhibition could be produced within the scope of that standardised structure; unprecedented activity and divergent views would bring that smooth operation to a halt, or produce undesirable outcomes in the finished exhibition. In the section that follows, I argue that a common concern lay at the centre of many of *Videogames*'s development problems – differences in what "videogames" could and should represent. Although methods of exhibition development were indeed widely standardised at the V&A, tensions were aroused and development stalled when different staff members' visions of videogames – and, by extension, visions of the exhibition itself – diverged.

Star and Griesemer (1989) posited that heterogeneous views within an organisation are not necessarily problematic to that organisation's operation, as long as its processes can be sufficiently standardised. It doesn't matter whether an organisation's heterogeneous actors understand things differently, as long as they know how to work together: "Standardizing methods is different from standardizing theory. By emphasizing how, and not what or why, methods standardization both makes information compatible and allows for a longer 'reach' across divergent worlds" (407).

In the case of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Alexander Grinnell's strict establishment of standardised methods "allowed both collectors and professional biologists to find a common ground in clear, precise manual tasks. Collectors do not need to learn theoretical biology in order to contribute to the enterprise. Potential differences in beliefs about evolution or higher-order questions tend to be displaced by a focus on 'how', not 'why'" (Star and Griesemer 1989, 407).

Note that Star and Griesemer use three interrogative nouns to describe peoples' motivations to work: how; why; what. In the section above I have broadly accounted for the ways in which museum staff were instructed *how* to work. I have also gestured at some of the ways in which their work was ideologically directed – that is, *why* – although, as I discussed, this did not appear to play an especially explicit role in the museum's day-to-day operation. I would argue, however, that the *what* – which Star and Griesemer suggested could be effectively sidelined through sufficient methods standardisation – acted as a crucial point of contention through the development of *Videogames*, and periodically undermined the standardised exhibition development processes. As a result, confusion about the *what* of the exhibition – arising from divergent understandings and constructions of "videogames" – exposed the Museum's seemingly stable set of methods as relatively brittle.

Videogames as boundary object

Of course, Star and Griesemer (1989) acknowledge that methods standardisation is in itself insufficient to ensure cooperation between heterogeneous communities of practice – other means were deemed necessary, including the establishment of boundary objects. To recap: boundary objects are described as concrete or abstract objects which simultaneously "inhabit several intersecting social worlds" and "satisfy the informational requirements of each of them." Vital to the boundary object's function is a degree of flexibility or interpretive versatility which does not endanger the object's informational integrity: "Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (393). Star and Griesemer (1989, 410–11) list four types of boundary objects:

1. *Repositories*, which are ordered "piles" of objects which are indexed in a standardised fashion – examples of such "piles" might be a library or museum.

2. *Ideal type*, which is an abstracted object – such as a diagram or atlas – which "does not accurately describe the object or details of any one locality or thing" but is highly flexible and "adaptable" due its essential vagueness.

3. *Coincident boundaries*, which are common objects bearing the same boundaries but different internal contents – an example given is the different maps of the state of California, whose borders were the same on various professional domains' maps, but filled with different information and served different purposes.

4. *Standardised forms*, which are standardised indexes devised as methods of common communication between dispersed work groups, such as standardised processes, documents, and forms.

The concept of "videogames" was, in many cases, usefully deployed as a boundary object during the development of the exhibition. Certainly, many of the videogame-related objects which were displayed in the exhibition held very different meanings and degrees of significance for different groups. One example: during a visit to the Paper Conservation department, Exhibitions and the curators needed to decide on a means to display a sketchbook containing early concept drawings from the development of *Bloodborne*. The possibilities for display were constrained by multiple overlapping priorities. The curators wanted to display a particular page of drawings, but the page was part of a two-page spread opposite drawings which *Bloodborne*'s publisher, Sony, had forbidden be shown. A difficulty emerged: how do you exhibit a two-page sketchbook spread when only one of the pages is allowed to be shown? Ana, from Exhibitions, briefly attempted to fold the rigid saddle-stitched sketchbook backwards upon itself so that only one page was viewable, which made the three Conservation staff present – whose main professional responsibility was the preservation of these loaned objects – visibly wince in unison. Ana apologised and explained that she'd seen people from Sony handle the sketchbook in the same way.[11] A solution, proposed very casually by Conservation, was eventually reached: blank "forgery" pages matching the sketchbook's paper stock would be cut and laid over the page that couldn't be shown, making it appear blank. Display objects such as this sketchbook acted as a "coincident boundary" during the exhibition's development, whose physical form was stable but served the divergent needs of the

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[11] A quote from my fieldnotes: "It's interesting to note that Sony are so deeply concerned with the protection of their intellectual property, but much less concerned about the preservation of their development artefacts." See Chapter 6 for a more involved examination of the videogame industry's uneven approach to cultural heritage.

FIGURE 5.3.
Examining Bloodborne *concept sketches in the Paper Conservation department.
Photos: Michael McMaster.*

object's original lenders, the curators, Exhibitions, Conservation, and many others, which had to be negotiated simultaneously.[12]

These sorts of multi-directional negotiations over concrete artefacts were common throughout the exhibition development process, and comfortably fit Star and Griesemer's framework of boundary objects as a means of explaining how museum work was coordinated in spite of various groups' heterogeneous needs. I want to talk about videogames beyond just their concrete artefacts, though. Throughout the exhibition's development the concept of "videogames" was discussed in the abstract, as an ambiguous and loaded catch-all term which encompassed many different – and sometimes opposed – meanings and associations. I use the term ambiguously throughout this thesis to refer to various concepts: individual creative works; an entire creative medium; a subset of popular media; a technology; a community of practice; a consumer culture; a set of adjacent and overlapping cultures. Hidden within each of these concepts are further distinctions and contradictions: preconceptions about what qualifies a given work as a game; what different videogame cultures represent; who these cultures include and exclude; et cetera.

The concept occupied a similarly vague position within the V&A. The adoption of the abstracted term "videogames" – also referred to as "games," "computer games," and so on – within the V&A as a boundary object was not always problematic. It proved to be generally useful as an *ideal type* in the sense that Star and Griesemer defined the category – for the most part, the complicated definitions and loadings of the term as described above could be sidelined, as the term's vagueness made it useful as a common rallying point around which to work, and a useful shorthand for understanding the exhibition itself; though the majority of the V&A's vast employee cohort were not professionally involved in the development of *Videogames*, it was commonly understood throughout the Museum that there was "a show about computer games" in the works.

Broadly speaking, the abstract nature of a boundary object is not itself problematic. They are defined in part by their being "plastic enough to adapt to local needs" while maintaining a commonly understood identity;

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[12] These divergences seemed well established and commonly understood among the Museum's departments. The interactions that I saw between various teams – in this case Exhibitions and Conservation, but most frequently between Exhibitions and the curators – were laced with a sense of friendly, almost jolly antagonism, wherein everyone conducted their work professionally and politely but with the tacit understanding that their departmental responsibilities would necessarily lead them towards these conflicts.

this flexibility is part of their function (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393). Star (2010, 602) later reflected that this versatility became the most recognisable and widely cited component of the "architecture of the boundary object"; although she was puzzled by the notion's appraised novelty, given its much longer history as a "cornerstone" of constructivist sociology, she conceded that "[b]ecause it was in the right place and the right time, boundary objects became almost synonymous with interpretive flexibility." Examples of abstracted boundary objects like the state borders of California (Star and Griesemer 1989, 411) or scientific variables (B. Smith 2015) have demonstrated that a degree of inherent vagueness or "plasticity" is part of what makes them useful in collaborative work between heterogeneous groups. But can a boundary object be too plastic? In the case of *Videogames*, the construction of "videogames" as a concept was not only vague but ambiguous – in other words, it was not just imprecisely defined, but it was defined in multiple conflicting ways. The necessary ambiguity of the term meant that many divergent understandings of what "videogames" were and meant were left unchallenged, leading to periodic disagreements throughout the exhibition's development and an inconsistent presentation to the public, which I describe below.

Heterogeneous constructions

How, then, was the ambiguous concept of "videogames" variously constructed within the V&A? And what were the consequences of these heterogeneous constructions throughout the making of *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt*?

The responsibility of developing a "canonical" definition and delineation of what videogames were, and what they represented, fell to Marie as the V&A's first Curator of Videogames. Among her other professional responsibilities as the exhibition's lead curator, one primary duty was to establish a conception of videogames which fit the museum's purview as a design institution. A key part of her job was to establish the exhibition's "thesis," which was a term used informally by Museum staff to refer to an exhibition's central idea or argument – this thesis was encoded into the finished exhibition in a number of explicit ways, so that a coherent

construction of "videogames" could be readily gleaned by the exhibition's visitors.[13]

A simple way to demonstrate how museums communicate a particular construction of videogames is to compare the visual presentation of two exhibitions. The exhibition *Game On* (later reprised as *Game On 2.0*), developed by the Barbican Centre in 2002 and toured widely since, presented videogames as a form of mass entertainment. Taking as an example the entrance hall of a toured iteration of the exhibition hosted in 2013 by the Ontario Science Centre, we can see that the space is lit brightly, decorated colourfully, and populated with icons from videogames' history: Mario, Sonic and a pixelated Space Invader. These combine to signify a fairly particular construction of videogames – popular, nostalgic, and fun.

Embedded in this construction of videogames is a suggestion of whom the exhibition is for, and what kind of experience they should expect: Reed (2019, 36) describes *Game On*'s installation style as "firmly focused on appealing to what gamers would already be familiar with," and Stuckey (2010, 58) says that it presented itself as "a family show for some, a nostalgia trip for others."

Conversely, the V&A's exhibition design in *Videogames* was very conscious to avoid these signifiers in pursuit of a more contemporary and more mature image. Its subdued lighting and minimal decoration conveyed a relatively reserved and thoughtful atmosphere. In contrast to *Game On*'s celebratory positioning of games as a popular commercial medium (Reed 2019, 34), *Videogames*'s presentation signified an intent to interrogate the underlying ideologies of videogames as a culture, with bold and provocative headlines such as PLAYING WITH GUNS or, most overtly, GAMES ARE POLITICAL. *Game On* framed its purview as a retrospective history of the medium, expressed through "retro" signifiers such as iconic characters and pixelated decoration; *Videogames*'s explicitly contemporary remit was expressed through subtler exhibition design touches: floating white boxes were meant to evoke the videogame iconography of navigational "waypoints"; the sheets of grey scrim that divided various exhibits were inspired by "greybox"

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[13] To clarify my use of the term here, I am using "construction" to describe an understanding of something that is held by individuals or collectives, which may be communicated or imposed, but is inherently ambiguous. As was evident in the development of *Videogames*, construction is an ongoing process, and so a given construction is therefore subject to negotiation and compromise.

design methodologies of game development (Polianskaya 2018).[14] As I described in Chapter 3, this construction was a very purposeful directive within the brief given to the exhibition designers by the curators, who sought specifically to distinguish the exhibition's approach from previous videogame blockbusters: "The exhibition's design should reflect the progressive and contemporary approach of the show's thesis. It should not recall the aesthetics of pixel art/retro arcades used in past game-oriented exhibitions."

These constructions are not only localised from museum to museum, or from exhibition to exhibition – as I have established, constructions of subjects also vary from department to department, and from person to person. Constructions of a subject are inevitably mediated by each staff member's own personal experiences and professional agendas, and are therefore heterogeneous; at the V&A, tensions surfaced when different departments' constructions of videogames diverged, and were contested. One of the clearest examples of this could be seen in the *Videogames* gift shop, which was encountered at the end of the exhibition.

In stark contrast to the pointedly contemporary vision of videogames presented in the exhibition, its gift shop presented a vision of videogames obsessed with the past. On sale were posters of *Pac-Man* and smartphone cases made to look like the original Game Boy. While signage throughout the exhibition was typeset in a contemporary sans-serif font, signage in the gift shop was set in pixelated bitmap letters. Set up on one wall was a game console plugged into a large television where a variety of emulated Atari games could be played; even the television was adorned with a vaguely pixelated laser-cut frame. Where the exhibition sought to depict a diverse and inclusive vision of various videogame cultures, the gift shop's stock, which included things like six-packs of craft beer and *Space Invaders*-adorned business socks, had a vaguely masculine air – I once heard a staff member compare the exhibition shop to a London retailer which specialised in gifts for men: "It's all a bit 'Menkind,' isn't it?"

In organisational terms, these exhibition shops are managed by the V&A's Retail department, which belongs to a privatised arm of the Museum called V&A Commercial, and therefore they have a professional obligation to be profitable. In cynical terms, then, we can rationalise this broad construction

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14 In the vernacular of videogame development, "greyboxing" refers to a practice of designing levels or spaces with extremely rough and featureless geometry (i.e. grey boxes) to establish a sense of how a space might feel to inhabit or interact with, before any labour-intensive visual treatment is done, which allows for rapid testing and iteration.

of videogames: the Museum's retail spaces exist to sell products, and it is conceivable that these kinds of products – and methods of advertising – are those most likely to sell. Due to the professional distance of the department I was unfortunately never able to arrange an interview with Retail to discuss their processes for researching and stocking. The curators also felt this distance: they expressed dissatisfaction when asked about the outcome of the retail store, and were frustrated at how little they had been consulted regarding its development.[15] I don't want to suggest that one construction of videogames is any better or worse than another, though it seems fairly evident that these competing representations of videogames produced a jarring conceptual disconnect, complicating the idea of a unified or "canonical" construction of videogames within the Museum.

Representations of videogames aside, even some of their most essential and commonly understood characteristics – that is, their "common identity," per Star and Griesemer's definition of boundary objects – were contested in

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[15] I should note that the curators *were* consulted, but only in very limited contexts: they put the Retail department in touch with Chicago's VGA Gallery to source a range of giclée prints of contemporary indie games, and also provided a list of recommendations for the shop's book range.

how videogames were constructed throughout the museum. Take, for example, the concept of "interactivity," which is broadly agreed upon as a fundamental – or at least common – component of the definition of "videogame." Generally speaking, interactivity in exhibition contexts presents significant technical and curatorial hurdles, due to its durational nature and material constraints (Cook 2016). For these reasons, both the curators and the Exhibitions department made sure to employ actual interactive works selectively within the exhibition, believing that this would both allow for more meaningful interpretive engagement with the exhibited videogames, and ensure that all of the exhibition's works could be adequately maintained. Nevertheless, the exhibition was marketed by the Museum on the vague basis of its sheer "interactivity," as is common in the marketing of more arcade-like blockbuster videogame exhibitions (Reed 2019, 35).[16]

Similar tensions occasionally surfaced behind the scenes, too. Not long before the exhibition opened, the curators were in a meeting with a more senior V&A staff member, and found themselves needing to defend the installation of *Rinse and Repeat* by Robert Yang, which is a game set in a men's public shower room, where the player is asked to "scrub down" a showering "hunk." For its original release in 2015, Yang imposed rigid durational constraints on how it could be played, describing it as a game about "caring for someone, but on their own terms." Because the hunk would only visit the virtual shower room at a specific time each day over the course of a real-world week, the player would need to play it according to a specific schedule: "The game will only let you care for it at certain times, and it's up to you to make time for it. Like, I wanted players to literally make time for this game" (Yang 2015). In consultation with the curators, Yang developed a customised "exhibition mode" for the game's installation in *Videogames* which accommodated the reality of gallery display: the hunk now visited the shower room on an hourly schedule instead of a daily one. This allowed many more gallery visitors an opportunity to play the game, though it still presented the durational constraints which were integral to the game's conception. Yang (2018a) saw this as an acceptable compromise:

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[16] Once during the exhibition's run, at 4pm on a Friday afternoon, I was sitting with the curators in the Design, Architecture and Digital offices, everyone silently working, when an abrupt promotional announcement was made over the V&A's loudspeakers: "Did you know that *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* is the V&A's most interactive exhibition ever?" The announcement then implored visitors to book tickets for a future visit now, "as it's been busy in the afternoons." Both curators looked mortified; Kristian, head in his hands, said, "'Most interactive' – what does that even *mean*?"

"At any rate, I'm still satisfied with how inconvenient it feels for the average museum visitor, and it'd be cool if no one ever actually completes the game while it's on public display."

These durational limits had apparently flown under the radar of a particular senior staff member, whom I have chosen not to identify. During a review of the exhibition's text labels, the staff member realised only then that the game would be playable once per hour, prompting anxieties that this would create an unsatisfying visitor experience and impede "visitor flow." In the interest of providing a more accessible and less frustrating experience, the curators were asked if the timer could be removed altogether. To Marie, this represented a fairly clear-cut issue of curatorial ethics – she considered it fundamentally wrong to undermine the artistic premise of the game in the interest of a better overturn of visitors. The staff member eventually relented, but not without a convolved effort on the part of the core team. I remember watching with astonishment as the core exhibition team worked quickly in a coordinated flurry of activity: Kristian drafted a revision to the label text which explained the duration limits, as Marie combed through old emails with Yang where he stipulated why the timer was necessary; the label text draft was sent to Asha, *Videogames'*s editor from the Interpretation team, who quickly worked the text into a form that everyone was happy with; everything was compiled – the new label text and a thorough explanation of the conceptual core of the work – and sent to Ana, who forwarded it on to the concerned senior staff member. All of this happened within the space of an hour, just after everyone would've liked to have gone home.

Reflecting on this afterwards, Marie expressed disappointment at these kinds of miscommunications: "I'm just a bit surprised that these conversations are still necessary, at this point." Though the matter was resolved without significant changes to the exhibition, it seemed to have shaken the curators' confidence. If the V&A was purportedly so convinced of videogames' legitimacy as a creative medium, why were such fundamental interventions into the curatorial core of the exhibition, or the artistic core of the exhibition's games, considered appropriate?

Videogames as boundary

Building on my earlier accounts of the ways in which cooperative processes and systems of knowledge were standardised throughout the V&A, we can view the disjunctions which surrounded the exhibition as a failure to sufficiently standardise a unified construction of videogames. Though the

exhibition's thesis was quite specific, it was evidently not effectively communicated to other departments throughout the Museum by either the formal or informal modes of standardisation described earlier in this chapter.

These heterogeneous constructions might also complicate the answer to the "authorial puzzle" given earlier in this chapter. Macdonald (2002, 93) described the problem in the language of cultural studies, as a "disjunction between 'encoding' (the production of the exhibition) and the 'text' (the finished exhibition)." To extend this analysis a little further, I believe that the pertinent issue in the development of *Videogames* was a disjunction between the *text* (the finished exhibition) and its *paratext* (the marketing and communicative framing of that exhibition, by the Museum, to the public) (Genette 1991). Although issues of scholarly integrity and curatorial authority did not manifest within the *Videogames* itself, it seems that the clarity of the exhibition's "authorship" did not extend outside the gallery walls – beyond the explicit domain of the curator, the unstandardised construction of "videogames" seemed more or less up for grabs.

Star and Griesemer (1989) argued that when heterogeneous groups work together, the potential for disagreement and disjunction is a part of boundary objects' establishment as well as their function: "In conducting collective work, people coming together from different social worlds frequently have the experience of addressing an object that has a different meaning for each of them. Each social world has partial jurisdiction over the resources represented by that object, and mismatches caused by the overlap become problems for negotiation" (412). In the development of *Videogames*, the heterogeneous constructions of the exhibition's subject between various departments and staff – the "mismatches caused by the overlap" – were only rarely granted an opportunity to be candidly negotiated, resulting in a discordant vision of videogames, which complicates the expected role of boundary objects as a productive tool. This is not meant as an attempt to negate or disprove Star and Griesemer's theory, however. The establishment of "videogames" as an abstract boundary object undeniably facilitated productive work within the V&A, in the sense that the exhibition was able to be made at all. Though the Museum's varied constructions of "videogames" throughout the exhibition's development were inconsistent, and may have impeded that development, *Videogames* still opened on time. Star and Griesemer caution that collaborative work in heterogeneous environments can "resolve" participants' divergent motives and perceptions into concrete representations, but only in the way that "a fuzzy image is resolved by a microscope" (413). The representations may be clarified, but clarity is

separate to unity: "This resolution does not mean consensus. Rather, representations, or inscriptions, contain at every stage the traces of multiple viewpoints, translations and incomplete battles" (413).

Inscribed in the text and paratext of the exhibition were so many of these "traces" that the abstract concept of "videogames" – and the process of its construction – felt more like a battleground than a unifying boundary object. As I have described above, the concept of "videogames" satisfies Star and Griesemer's definition of a "boundary object" in many respects: it provided a useful shorthand for understanding the exhibition in broad terms, and therefore acted as a rallying point around which to work. However, I have also described situations where it magnified existing divisions between socioprofessional spheres, and exposed cracks in the V&A's otherwise standardised systems of knowledge and knowledge-construction. Another way of framing this problem is that "videogames," as an abstract and contested concept, was the boundary, in and of itself. In a 2010 essay Star clarified the 1989 study's definition of boundary: "Often, boundary implies something like edge or periphery, as in the boundary of a state or a tumor. Here, however, it is used to mean a shared space, where exactly that sense of here and there are confounded" (602–3). Indeed, for the overlapping socioprofessional spheres within the V&A, the vagueness inherent to the concept of "videogames" established a shared conceptual space where many of the space's particularities – such as its representation and signifiers, or its legitimacy as a creative medium – were contested, and those contradictions were exposed.

Arguably, this suggests that the notion of boundary objects does not apply to the system of organisation that I saw in the Museum at all, or that some other boundary objects must have been part of the Museum's actor-network in a way that I have not described. The latter is probably true to an extent, but I find the concept useful as a way to unpack the double-bound role of a constructed idea within an organisation, which appears to broadly agree on the "coincident boundaries" of videogames from a macroscopic view, but is revealed to be increasingly heterogeneous the more closely the construction is examined.

I introduced this chapter with two anecdotes which described, respectively, the problems which arise from the V&A's heterogeneous organisation, and the astonishing scale and complexity of collaborative work which happens in spite of that heterogeneity. This was compressed into a naive question: *how does anything get done around here?* In the following six months of fieldwork, as I traced the development of *Videogames*, I saw firsthand how things "got

done" at the V&A. Interdepartmental work is essentially heterogeneous, but as Star and Griesemer argue, that heterogeneity can be overcome by a thoroughly standardised system of processes and institutionalised knowledge, as well as the establishment of boundary objects, which allow for work towards concrete goals around concrete subjects, while still permitting differences in opinion and in constructions of concepts. If a boundary object's role within a heterogeneous organisation is not sufficiently standardised, however, tensions will either arise or be left unchallenged, producing undesirable outcomes. Though the V&A's thorough standardisation enabled the development of ambitiously complex exhibitions, unstandardised constructions led to competing visions of "videogames" in the abstract, and by extension of the exhibition itself. While videogames were in many ways a useful boundary object in the cooperative development of *Videogames*, just as often they represented a boundary whose terrain was contested, which hampered development and muddied the clarity of the exhibition's position within the wider Museum. Moreover, the V&A's rigid standardisation of its working methods produced an overwhelming tendency towards homogeneous strategies of display, which in turn constrained how videogames could be envisioned and materially explored, as I discuss below.

The V&A's exhibitionary regime

This chapter has taken the day-to-day development of *Videogames* as its focus. It used Star and Griesemer's (1989) theory of institutional ecology to explain how work was ordered within the heterogeneous V&A, and to understand a pernicious conflict between the Museum's standardised operation and the malleable cultural position of videogames, which exposed the inflexibility of this standardisation. Before concluding, it is worth exploring the less immediate ways in which the V&A's "machine" shaped the exhibition's outcome, through precedents set at the point of its earliest stages of development. These precedents bore their strongest influence well before my fieldwork began, and so this exploration is driven primarily by reflections from a retrospective interview conducted with Marie Foulston in 2022, three years after the exhibition had closed, which are quoted here at length.

The V&A's standardisation enabled the production of ambitiously large and intricate exhibitions, but more specifically it enabled the production of very particular kinds of exhibition, within a very particular mode of display. Throughout its history as an institution dedicated to applied design, the

Museum established a broad exhibitionary model through which to communicate that dedication, which was the display of physical objects – individual works which exemplified their cultural field. This focus has accordingly defined the Museum's material practices, which are centred on objects; today, the vast majority of the V&A's collections and displays are of tangible objects. In 2020, V&A Director Tristram Hunt wrote a column for *The Observer* in which he described objects as the crucial interpretive point-of-entry for a museum visitor: "the purpose of a museum is predicated upon dialogue and difference: the interaction between citizen and object, the journey into a web of histories, and then the flourishing of curiosity." Speaking to the role of the physical in the V&A's collections and work, Hunt (2020) wrote, "Digital provision will be an important part of the future, but there remains something magical about the aura of the real, authentic object."

This institutional emphasis on objects – specifically "real, authentic" objects – established certain limitations on how videogames could be displayed. The entrenched material practices of the V&A bounded the possibilities of display within *Videogames*, from the outset of its development. When I spoke with Marie, she reflected on the ways in which the V&A's systems poorly served videogames as a subject:

> For me, the thing that came off the back of this, and I'm trying to figure my way through at the moment, is – videogames as a medium, okay: they're ephemeral, they're complex, they're digital, they're performative, they're time-based. There's a whole range of complexities, a whole range of challenges about how you exhibit something that does not align, for the most part, with the models and the infrastructure and the processes and the approaches and the language of institutions such as the V&A – or any institution that's founded on a history of collecting design or a medium that is of a more traditional materiality. Everything that you do to exhibit fashion or ceramics, or anything that at least has a tangible thing at the end of it, a tangible singular physical thing – it's very different from what you need for videogames.

As a medium, many of videogames' most essential qualities are also its most slippery. In Chapter 3 I describe *Videogames* as a curatorial experiment, which sought to build new methods of displaying videogames within the gallery setting. The exhibition's object-led approach to conveying the practice of videogame design – where artefacts from the development of certain videogames were displayed in "constellations" in order to testify to a particular element that game's design – was a significant departure from

other methods of videogame display in the context of prior blockbuster videogame exhibitions, which tended towards an "arcade in the museum" approach that prioritised interactivity as the foremost means of interpreting each work. However, when put in context of the V&A's history and its past exhibitions, *Videogames*'s methodology was relatively orthodox. Where the exhibition was able to speak to the slippery aspects of videogames that Marie describes, this speaking was done in the language of the V&A: objects, wall texts, videos.

These orthodox display practices were defined by the Museum's history and remit as an institute of applied design, but they were perpetuated through its prescriptive methods of working. Earlier in the chapter I described how the Museum's formal standardisation, especially via utilitarian documents, functioned as a means of constraint – this constraint was exemplified in a document called the "object list," which was used from the early stages of an exhibition's development as a record of every object to be displayed, along with its physical properties. As Marie explained to me, this seemingly innocuous production tool exerted considerable influence over the material possibilities of the exhibition at its development's earliest stages.

> I genuinely believe you need a different approach, or an adjusted approach, to the way that you curate [videogames]. … For that, I think it requires different modes of exhibition, which might be that it impacts the physical space that you're exhibiting within, it impacts the way that you're exhibiting, and also quite critically impacts the process that you go through to create an exhibition.
>
> It was challenging to do that with *Videogames*, because … the thing that I come back to with this, for me, was always the object list. I've seen this across the V&A, the Smithsonian, the Design Museum, and several other institutions – everybody's object list is an Excel spreadsheet. And on that Excel spreadsheet are all of these columns and requirements that you have, for each of the individual objects that will be present within that exhibition. And all of the fields that you have on that object list are the dimensions, the height, the weight, the condition of the object. And you put a little photograph of the object so you know what it looks like. And it's just like... try to put a videogame into that format! It doesn't fit! What does it weigh? Errrr.

To empower genuine curatorial experimentation, methods of production need to be flexible, in order to serve ambitious authorial vision. Through tools like the object list, we can see how overly standardised methods invert this formulation, and work to dictate how that vision is constructed in the

first place, by anticipating and thereby determining a traditional model of display. In this way, the V&A's material practices bore their own kind of authorship over the exhibition. I mentioned earlier that there was no lingering "authorial puzzle" cast over the exhibition by the time of its opening, as *Videogames* seemed like a fairly direct and uncompromised realisation of its curators' vision. However, this frictionless transfer was only possible because that envisioning had itself been so heavily constrained at the outset.

> So [the object list], to me, was always this perfect example of, like – the system doesn't work. It's about the processes through which you curate an exhibition, where you cannot start with a list. With the object list, it's almost an expectation that – in an Excel spreadsheet – "Well, you're going to put about 200 things in here, aren't you?" And again, that idea, that there's going to be 200 discrete physical things that we're going to put on display. You can't start from that. You can't start from the idea of objects that you can put into a grid and tell me the size, scale and weight of them. And which order you might want to look at them in. Because no – it's ephemeral, time-based, digital mush.

Certain currents from within the V&A which confront its entrenched material practices suggest that the Museum's ability to engage with "digital mush" such as videogames are improving. The curatorial department in which *Videogames* was born – the Department of Design, Architecture and Digital – was central to a number of advances in the Museum's collection practices: in 2014, the department collected the iPhone game *Flappy Bird* as a born-digital object, and the Museum's first collected app (Volsing 2014); during my fieldwork, the department's Curator of Digital Design, Natalie Kane, was in the middle of a project to redefine the institution's digital collecting strategy, which enshrined digital design as a priority within the Museum's official collection policy (V&A 2019b). Like most forms of institutional redevelopment, this change was slow – Kane (2020) noted, "It took me and my colleagues almost two years to define what we see as digital design and how we understand it in relation to the museums and heritage sector." Nonetheless, it appears to have productively expanded the V&A's capacity to collect digital objects, and to have established a useful ontological framework in which the Museum can consider digital material as cultural heritage.

In spite of these advances to the Museum's collecting strategy, its methods of display do not seem to have kept up, especially within the rhythms of blockbuster exhibition-making. As Marie noted, the entire process of

developing an exhibition, per the V&A's standardised methods – how these processes were sequenced and carried out long-term, and how various aspects of exhibition production were divided, distributed, and therefore siloed across teams – precluded and stifled the capacity for experimentation that videogames needed.

> The place that you need to start from is a collaborative approach to curation, which brings together a range of different skills, and different attributes. Normally within a traditional exhibition process, things happen in a much more sequential, or "waterfall" method, where we start with the objects; then we bring in the architects, and they tell us how the objects are going to be arranged in a physical space; then we bring in the AV designers; then we bring in the sound designers; then we bring in the lighting. And it's like – actually, you need all of those skills and that mindset present at the beginning, to even begin to think about the way in which these works might exist within a physical space. … You need this different model of progressing through the way that an exhibition is designed and conceptualised. Because [by blurring] the line between what is an AV display, what is exhibition design, what is 3D design – that becomes the objects, it becomes the story that you're telling. It's not a container for the objects, as it perhaps more traditionally has been. And so that, for me, is the frustrating bit.

I raise these points to illustrate how methods at the V&A were standardised at multiple scales, and to different effects. As described in this chapter's earlier sections, the standardisation of component processes of exhibition development allowed the heterogeneous V&A to function cooperatively in its day-to-day work. Beyond these discrete methods, though, the inflexibility of this standardisation calcifies the tendencies of the institution into a rigid exhibition-making methodology, where exhibitions are produced in the same way and towards the same ends, regardless of the material or conceptual needs of a given curatorial subject, constituting a kind of overarching exhibitionary regime.

This exhibitionary regime is strongly linked to a broader concern related in Chapter 1 of this thesis, where I described the situation of videogames in the V&A as a square peg trying to fit a round hole. As I argued there, the V&A did little to reshape its own entrenched processes to accommodate videogames; instead, the inflexibility of its systems and material practices meant that any curatorial exploration of videogames could only be conducted within the bounds of the Museum's tried-and-true display methods. The V&A's exhibitionary regime enforced an orthodox approach

which overwhelmingly focused on the presentation and interpretation of videogame development through discrete displays of physical objects. Digital elements were certainly present, but they were displayed as discrete AV objects, and couched within the same object-first display logic that ran throughout *Videogames*, and indeed throughout all of the V&A's exhibitions, which presented objects as the foremost objects of study, explained didactically by wall text, and contained within an essentially ornamental exhibition design.[17]

As Marie notes above, a more collaborative approach to exhibition-making, wherein the constituent parts of gallery display – objects, AV, exhibition design, interpretive text – could be developed synchronously, would facilitate a more holistic and fluid model of curating. To effectively explore the most difficult qualities of videogames as a curatorial subject – as "ephemeral, time-based, digital mush" – requires a procedural flexibility that aims to foreground these elements from the beginning of development, not just through discrete objects but through a synthesis of spatial, physical, digital, and textual displays, designed concurrently and cohesively. A similar argument is made by curator Fleur Watson (2021) in her book *The New Curator*, where she explores an emerging mode of exhibition-making which she terms the "design as exhibit." Watson advocates for designed spaces which function as exhibits in and of themselves, developed through a process of deliberate cross-disciplinary inclusivity. "The *design as exhibit* … reflects the typically collaborative and multi-authored curatorial process of contemporary practice, which integrates the designer into the earliest conversations and explorations that generate the conceptual intent that will drive the project" (Watson 2021, 34, original emphasis). Watson notes that this approach runs counter to the typical processes and strictures of museological exhibition-making: "Embedding an exhibition's design within the very first explorations of its curatorial concept represents a departure from the usual 'silo' of the museum process. … In many museum and gallery contexts, the design is developed in isolation from the early stages of the curatorial process and then responds to a fixed object list or the collection of works, developing an aesthetic form or 'wrapping' for the exhibition. By contrast, the *design as exhibit* is mostly conceived, designed

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[17] This issue, wherein the process of institutional display necessarily constricts the material possibilities of curation, echoes similar issues within the curating of new media art – artist and curator Jon Ippolito (2008, 106–107) notes that the conventional production of wall texts in gallery displays "enfeebles conceptual and single-performance art" and "threatens to obliterate digital culture"; to Ippolito, the wall label reduces variable and immaterial work into something static and fixed, and he argues that "for digital culture, fixity equals death."

and developed well before the final material on display has been completely researched and established, let alone finalised" (34, original emphasis).

This returns to a central problem explored throughout this chapter, which is the rigidity of the V&A's systems of exhibition production. As I described above, some progress in the Museum's institutional capacity to engage with digital design is observable through advances in its collection strategy, which suggests some degree of flexibility and openness to change. Exhibition development, on the other hand – especially in the context of blockbuster exhibitions – actively resists this necessary flexibility due to its relentless pace. As I describe in Chapters 1 and 3, the public museum's desires for blockbuster exhibitions are symptomatic of a more general market orientation, wherein museums are compelled to produce large-scale exhibitions in order to meet the attendance targets around which their programming strategies are built. In the case of *Videogames*, and likely any given V&A exhibition of a certain scale, the large production budgets and tight development timeframes afforded to commercial exhibitions produces an institutional risk-aversion, which compels a severe hesitancy to diverge from its conservative-yet-reliable methods of working. The standardised methods of exhibition production within the V&A, meant to resolve the heterogeneity of its complex organisational structure, tend towards the production of essentially homogeneous exhibitions.

In this chapter I have taken a broad view of work in the V&A to construct a fairly general account of how exhibition-making at the Museum was standardised and complicated. In the following chapter I look at specific complications more closely, to provide more detailed accounts of the friction these problems created in the exhibition's development, and to connect those problems to larger museological, industrial, and political concerns.

6. Co-production, secrecy, and compatibility: Working with the videogame industry

Opening the black box

One of the central promises of *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* was that it would offer a rare insight into the typically hidden practices that constitute videogame development. In fitting with the V&A's history as a design museum, the exhibition positioned videogame development as a coherent design discipline through an emphasis on process; by arguing that the industry's obscuring of its processes has led to its underappreciation, the exhibition aimed to establish the medium's importance in the field of applied design by illuminating its hidden practices. In an interview at the press launch, *Videogames*'s head curator Marie Foulston introduced the exhibition in these "illuminatory" terms:

> Design is the lens through which we are looking at video games. Even if you play games and are incredibly literate sometimes the concept and the thought of what it takes to make a video game can seem like an impenetrable black box. These are designers and creators who have been so generous in opening up their hard-drives and notebooks, letting us pore over rare and unseen artefacts that really illuminate their design practices. (Foulston, quoted in Polianskaya 2018)

The promise to open the "impenetrable black box" of videogame development was ostensibly upheld, most explicitly in the exhibition's "New Designers" section. This section, located in a large hall at the entrance to the exhibition, functioned as its "flagship" display. It provided an in-depth look at the design process of eight videogames, and achieved this through displays of various development artefacts: concept sketches, notebooks,

video of early prototypes, and other objects – both digital and non-digital – which offered a visible trace of the process of videogame development.[1]

In exhibitions, an object's display is typically the result of a long professional collaboration between museum staff and that object's owner. Though the V&A housed its own collection of over 2.3 million objects, none of these were displayed in *Videogames* – every object within the exhibition entered the Museum through a formal loan agreement, the terms of which were negotiated with its owner, that is, a videogame developer or studio.[2] This is by no means unusual – Sue M. Davies (2010) notes that collaborations between museums and external stakeholders are an expected part of the "pattern" of temporary exhibition development, and these collaborations are typically so heavily negotiated through either party's professional needs and preferences that the process of exhibition development can be thought of as a form of "co-production." In describing the contemporary patterns of exhibition work, Davies draws upon a theory of co-production which was originated by Elinor Ostrom (1996), who defined it more generally as "a process through which inputs from individuals who are not 'in' the same organization are transformed into goods and services" (1073). In recent museum studies, the term has been used to analyse the emergence of "participatory" or "democratised" museum practices, wherein the museum visitor is empowered with a co-productive role via opportunities to directly shape elements of an exhibition (Barnes and McPherson 2019). However, I am interested in the term for how it characterises the interdisciplinary nature of traditional, non-

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[1] Kristian Volsing, *Videogames*'s Research Curator, gave a similar account in his introduction to this section at the exhibition's press launch: "As curators, we've had privileged access to studios across the globe. We've been really excited to be able to go in with their designers, and delve into their notebooks and their hard drives, to really find out exactly what goes into the process of putting together a videogame. This section of the exhibition really looks in-depth at process." See Chapter 4 for a more extensive description of this section of the exhibition and its aims.

[2] "Object" was the terminology used throughout the Museum to refer to delicate, valued, and typically one-of-a-kind artefacts which were either exhibited on loan or as part of the museum's collection. This term is distinct from "props", another type of exhibited object, which were more or less disposable and interchangeable; props were usually sourced and purchased by the Exhibitions department and were either donated or destroyed when the exhibition closed. Where objects were catalogued and handled very carefully, props were generally treated as much less valuable: when preparing loaned sketchbooks for display, for example, the Conservation team had to carefully construct custom perspex cradles so that they could sit open without being damaged; a "prop" book, on the other hand, could have its spine broken and pages glued down.

participatory exhibition work, and how it calls attention to what I have perceived in museums as a near-total dependence on external stakeholders, particularly in the context of the temporary exhibitions which are among the most visible and popular elements of public museum programming. Though museums do produce exhibitions which require relatively minimal external collaboration – for instance, exhibitions curated from existing museum collections – even these productions are dependent on and mediated by relationships with non-museum stakeholders such as contractors, sponsors, communities, and governments. While these external parties' role in the creation of exhibitions is typically highly particular, as opposed to the broader oversight of the curator and other internal museum workers, Davies (2010, 315) notes that this limited involvement in – and understanding of – the curatorial functions of exhibition development can significantly shape its outcome, and create problems during its planning.

Davies defines co-production in broad terms, as "a spectrum of activity across the production process, performed by a range of individuals and groups with a varying impact on the final exhibition," and attempts to identify "where in the process external parties are involved and the degree to which the activity is shared between museum staff" (307). A variety of the constituent processes which comprise exhibition creation are examined by Davies – conception of the initial idea, management and administration, exhibition design, visitor research, associated public programming, and core curatorial functions (312–15). In this chapter, I look specifically at the effect of external parties' indirect influence on certain curatorial functions – namely, object selection and interpretive framing – as well as the ongoing management of an exhibition's production, in order to understand how co-production manifests in supposedly non-participatory modes of exhibition development. I am wary that broadening or re-specifying the concept of co-production in this way may risk diluting its clarity and utility – my employment of the term in this looser context is meant as a minor provocation, to reset expectations of how exhibitions are authored, especially those in public museums. In the case of *Videogames* the exhibition development process was not "collaborative" in the traditional sense, in that the videogame studios whose games were exhibited were not granted any explicit opportunity to dictate the presentation of their games and loaned artefacts. However, the terms of those loans and display permissions were loaded with so many requirements and caveats that these studios were clearly able to exercise a tacit – but evident – influence on the final display of their games. These tacit influences were keenly felt by the core exhibition team, and mediated so many details of the finished exhibition to the extent

that I believe *Videogames* should still be considered a co-production per Davies' conceptualisation. In the previous chapter, for example, I described a meeting in which the display of a particular page of a *Bloodborne* development sketchbook required careful negotiation to accommodate the professional needs of various museum departments as well as those imposed contractually by the game's publisher. This co-produced decision is just one example among many – each complexly mediated in similar ways – that arose throughout the exhibition's development.

What, then, were the consequences of such a highly mediated development process on the finished exhibition? In a review of the exhibition published in the art magazine *Frieze*, Gareth Damian Martin (2018) questioned how effectively *Videogames* managed to fulfil its promise of opening the "black box" of game development, and magnified some of the industrial tensions that had surfaced in the finished exhibition. Though Martin praised the exhibition for its rare insights into commercial game development practice – including footage of an early development build of Nintendo's *Splatoon*, a feat "which, a decade ago, would have been unthinkable" – he acknowledged that these insights represented "a carefully negotiated window" and so were inescapably complicit in the industry's worst tendencies. For instance, the concept sketches from the development of *Bloodborne* were beautifully hand-drawn, conveying the gestural work of individuals that lay at the core of the game's making. However, Martin noted that the exhibition's labels elided this individuality: "Across the room, delicate pencil renderings of creatures from the opulently gothic masterwork *Bloodborne* (2015) lie in a glass case. Their skittering lines bring to mind the haunting work of Mervyn Peake or etchings of Eugène Delacroix, and yet they are credited only to 'Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc.', the artist absent from their own work." Martin described the same dynamic of erasure at play in the display of *Splatoon*, which game's pencil-sketched concept art was only credited to "Nintendo"; similar elisions were present in the displays of Naughty Dog's blockbuster title *The Last of Us*, as well as smaller games such as thatgamecompany's *Journey*, and Hello Games' *No Man's Sky*. If opening the "black box" of videogame development meant recognising and demonstrating the labour of game makers, the commercial videogame industry seemed to prefer it kept shut; as Martin observes, "The anonymity of the team leaves a power vacuum easily filled by the laser-targeted consumer-focus of corporate stakeholders." Clearly, the making of an exhibition like *Videogames* presented a very particular problem for its curators: how do museums collaborate with

commercial industries, while maintaining their curatorial independence and integrity?

In this chapter I aim to examine the ways in which the practices and ideologies of the commercial videogame industry interact with the practices and ideologies of the contemporary museum. The issues of authorship cited above is one consequence of the co-productive nature of *Videogames*'s development – my aim is to explore further tensions which emerged from the exhibition's co-production, and describe the differences in practice and ideology which produce these tensions.

This chapter is organised into two sections. The first section identifies and rationalises a tendency within major videogame studios towards secrecy and selective disclosure, and positions this tendency as incompatible with the aims of museums. The second section attempts to envision what compatibility might mean in the context of co-productive exhibition work: first by comparing the videogame industry's relationship to museums with the museum's apparently more comfortable, but deeply complicit relationship to the fashion industry; then by envisioning compatibility as curatorial integrity and capacity for criticality, and exploring how a dependence on external partnerships can impede an exhibition's critical potency.

Cultural logic and cultural heritage

In many cases, the interprofessional problems that arise in museum exhibitions of videogames are quite thoroughly precedented. Throughout the past few decades, the broad concept of an incompatibility between digital media producers and the existing structures of the cultural sector has been well discussed within the fields of museum studies, contemporary art theory and art criticism. These discussions arose as a continuation of – or response to – the mainstream emergence of technologically mediated contemporary art in the 1990s and beyond; as such, the most widely discussed tensions stemming from the introduction of digital media to the museum typically relate to the workings of contemporary art museums.[3] In her 2019 thesis, Emilie Reed traces a history of "challenging objects" which precede and presage the entry of videogames to the museum. As Reed notes, though the the difficulties of exhibiting videogames are frequently described as "uniquely challenging" for those institutions, the problems

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[3] This corresponds to an inclination in museum studies where critical analyses of museums – especially within the discipline of institutional critique – tend to generalise the concerns of the art museum as representative of all museums.

involved are not as novel as they might seem: "Videogames as a phenomenon are a unique convergence of popular culture, time-based media, software and hardware, and a surrounding culture of creators, fans, and players, but there are multiple precedents for how work dealing with these issues, and various combinations of them, which have been incorporated into exhibitions and institutional art collections using a variety of approaches" (66). Reed describes this "variety of approaches" to displays of performance and new media works in museums which pre-date and inform the institutional display of videogames, with reference, for example, to the participatory and performative Fluxus works of the 1960s and 70s, as well as the technological novelty of new media artworks (66–79).

In the case of the V&A – which is primarily a museum of applied design – many of these same tensions persist, especially those relating to the collection, preservation, and display of digital and time-based works. However, while the display of videogames in museums bears many of the same conceptual and technical problems as in the display of new media art, these problems are not the focus of this chapter. Rather, I am looking to examine the introduction of videogames to the museum not as a form of contemporary art, but as the product of a commercial industry. As I describe in Chapter 3, one of the most striking curatorial choices in *Videogames* was its extremely limited use of interactivity in the display of its games, instead presenting a variety of physical and digital development artefacts and non-interactive audiovisual displays in order to make the process of game development accessible to inexperienced audiences. As such, most of the curatorial difficulties encountered in the exhibition's development had relatively little to do with questions of interactive display methodologies. Instead, the most significant problems that I witnessed in my fieldwork stemmed from, first, the contested understandings within the museum of what "videogames" represented – as described in the previous chapter – and, second, the incompatibility between the commercial motives of the videogame industry and the cultural objectives of the V&A.

Before proceeding, I would like to establish two key terms that will inform the rest of this chapter's discussion. The first is the notion of a *cultural logic*. My use of this term was inspired by Rosalind Krauss's 1990 essay "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," in which she recognised a "radical revision" throughout major American art museums in the late 80s, which were becoming increasingly corporatised in accordance with the quickly accelerating commodification of the art market (7). Krauss acknowledges a debt to Fredric Jameson, whose 1984 essay – and subsequent 1991 book – *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late*

Capitalism established a definition of "cultural logic" as a tool for describing the process through which media and capitalism permeate postmodern life and ideology. Krauss's essay took a narrower focus – with a stated aim to "demonstrate the logic of what we see happening, now, in museums of modern art," (4) Krauss argued that the then-contemporary art museum had succumbed to an "industrialization" where artworks were considered "assets" and the museum's activities, such as its exhibitions and catalogues, were "product" (15). Krauss used the concept of a "cultural logic" as a loose analytical method to explain the process through which neoliberal capitalism had permeated and rationalised the activities of the contemporary art museum.

In this chapter I use the term "cultural logic" broadly to describe an implicit set of values and priorities which govern a culture's actions – namely, that of the commercial videogame industry, whose fundamentally capitalist cultural logic makes collaboration with museums difficult. With Krauss's illustration of the capitalist tendencies of the museum in mind, it might be expected that the videogame industry would fit quite comfortably within the museum's work – if the contemporary museum sees its exhibition objects as assets, shouldn't videogames, which are produced and marketed as commodities, fit neatly into that operation? This question compels a necessary distinction: Krauss's "industrialised" frame applies most readily to privately funded art museums, while publicly funded museums, especially those which are distanced from the commercial art market, work from outside of this logic – at least partially. Though funding cuts to public museums like the V&A mean that they are undeniably motivated by an audience-chasing market logic – as I describe in Chapter 1 – they are simultaneously committed to the preservation and display of cultural heritage, and many of the tensions I describe here emerge from the Museum's accountabilities as keepers of cultural heritage, and the conflicting accountabilities of its external collaborators.

This concept of *cultural heritage* – which can be understood most broadly as cultural property, both material and immaterial, which testifies to the past and is considered worth preserving – is central to the mission, service, and "constitution" of the museum (Hoelscher 2011, 200). UNESCO divides the concept into two categories: "tangible cultural heritage", which includes property both movable – paintings, sculptures, manuscripts, et cetera – and immovable, such as monuments and archaeological sites; and "intangible cultural heritage," which refers to "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills … that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage," and

encompasses immaterial testimonies of a society, such as oral traditions, performing arts, and rituals (UNESCO 2003). Museums typically relate to cultural heritage by positioning themselves as custodians and guardians of culture; they are dedicated not only to the preservation of tangible heritage, by keeping objects as close to their original condition as possible, for as long as possible, but also to the preservation of the interpretive context of cultural property, by recording and communicating the social role and value of that property.

Though I almost never heard the term used colloquially during the day-to-day development of *Videogames*, the concept of cultural heritage, and especially intangible cultural heritage, was foundational to the exhibition's thesis and to the mission of the V&A at large. The V&A's "public task" to care for cultural heritage via its collection, and ensure those objects are exhibited as a public service, is codified most rigidly through the UK's National Heritage Act of 1983, and this obligation is transmuted into museum practice in various explicit and implicit ways: the V&A's public task is reflected in its strategic plan, which describes the museum's aim to to "create a world class visitor and learning experience" across the its sites and collections, and to "deepen the relevance" of its collections within the UK; this strategic plan in turn establishes the museum's objectives around collecting, interpretation and visitor experience, through which exhibitions are accordingly developed (V&A 2018c). As a result, early internal pitches and briefs for *Videogames* stressed the exhibition's goals to position videogame development "as a design field in its own right," to "locate the medium in its social, cultural and political contexts," to "show videogames within the wider field of design history and relate the medium to disciplines

that the V&A already engages with" – in other words, to establish videogames as a legitimate form of cultural heritage.[4]

For the purposes of this chapter, we can understand the V&A's appointment as a custodian of cultural heritage as a kind of cultural logic in and of itself, in that it plays a significant role in how the Museum's activities are rationalised and carried out. Though the Museum is undeniably driven by significant commercial pressures and logics, which I have recognised elsewhere in this thesis, it is simultaneously beholden to its commitments to cultural heritage, and it is these commitments which produced frictions during the curators' negotiations with videogame studios. As described in the introduction to this chapter, the tendencies and logics embedded in the mainstream videogame industry make its practices incompatible to varying degrees with the work of the public museum. Before I describe these incompatibilities, though, I will first attempt to describe those embedded logics.

The cultural logic of the late capitalist videogame industry

In an essay written for the magazine *Real Life*, Daniel Joseph (2017) summarised the cultural logic of the videogame industry quite plainly: "If you look at games, capitalism stares back at you." Drawing upon earlier arguments made by Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter in *Digital Play* (2003), who identified videogames as "the 'paradigmatic' capitalist commodity of our era," Joseph (2017) describes both the production and consumption of videogames as ruthlessly, inextricably capitalistic:

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[4] This treatment of videogames and their development artefacts as sanctified cultural heritage was, every now and again, very funny: I remember a morning spent in the Conservation department with the curators, laying out the display case for Jenny Jiao Hsia's *Consume Me*, which included a few toys belonging to Hsia which were displayed as points of inspiration in her work. One of these was a cartoon egg yolk called Gudetama, which came in three parts: the toy's packaging, the Gudetama toy itself, and a tiny plastic egg that was loose in the box. The egg couldn't be displayed particularly well – slightly smaller than a pea, it rolled around awkwardly and wouldn't sit well with the toy in the display case, according to Conservation – so the decision was made to remove it from the display. Because this was an object on loan from Hsia, it was placed into a separate ziploc bag with nitrile-gloved hands, labelled with an object number, marked "NOT FOR DISPLAY," signed out of Conservation's care, and signed in to Exhibitions' onsite storage, where it was to be held for two years while the exhibition toured – once the tour was finished, the tiny plastic egg would be be safely mailed back to Hsia in New York. I was bewildered at the breadth and depth of bureaucratic fuss involved in keeping this tiny piece of plastic – which Hsia herself later told me she didn't realise existed – safe and pristine, as all important cultural heritage should be kept.

Video games are made with high-skilled labor, in line with the fetishization of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields; they conform to the worldwide division of labor where workers in the global north provide the high-skilled labor to develop the code while the material parts of computers are manufactured (and later dismantled) in the global south; and their digital nature makes them subject to different and increasingly pervasive forms of control. … In their production process and in how they are consumed, video games exemplify the material conditions of neoliberalism.

It is this process of commodification – the transmutation of a creative medium into a commercial product – that underpins the industrial production of videogames. With very few exceptions, capitalism pervades the videogame industry. This is not to say that videogames as a creative form are essentially capitalistic, but that the present circumstances of their production and consumption are; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2021, 374–77) have recently described this pervasion as "the subsumption of gaming by capital," although they argue for the possibility of "emancipatory currents within – and against – game cultures," suggesting that, through concerted effort, videogames may yet recover their "autonomy" from capitalism.

And certainly, there are clear traces of these "emancipatory currents" within and beyond the commercial videogame industry. Throughout this chapter I use the term "videogame industry" in a purposely ambiguous way, as a shorthand to refer to a global – but mostly Western – collection of major videogame development studios, especially those who produce videogames, which are marketed as commodities, for commercial release. This is, of course, extremely reductive: the videogame industry is not a monolith, and comprises an extremely broad range of developers in very distinct production contexts, many of which actively resist the capitalist structures ingrained in the practices of commercial videogame development (e.g. Klepek 2019). As Keogh (2023a, 3) notes, "'The videogame industry' as a concept, as a defined and distinctive area of commercial activity, only accounts for a small, particularly lucrative, and geographically concentrated aspect of gamemaking activity while failing to account for a much broader and complex range of gamemaking identities, cultures, and sites." I do not mean to imply that the values and practices of these large studios are representative of this wider diversity of practices. I would argue, however, that these practices are inevitably influenced by this capitalist logic, and subjected to it, to varying degrees. As I describe below, videogame

development in general is contingent on platforms and technologies which embody and enforce these commercial ideologies.

As it stands, neoliberal capitalism informs the practices of the videogame industry at seemingly every level, which has produced urgent and well-documented crises of labour (Pareene 2021; Woodcock 2016), ecology (Abraham 2022; Gordon 2020), gender (de Castell and Skarzius 2019; Nooney 2013) and race (Srauy 2017; Bulut 2020).[5] It should seem unsurprising, then, that this cultural logic has a variety of repercussions for museums interested in exhibiting the work of videogame studios.

Secret processes

A major component of this cultural logic, and perhaps the most significant impediment for the museum curator, is an industry-wide reliance on secrecy. The videogame industry habitually guards its practices from the public as a means of consolidating power and capital – in his book *Developer's Dilemma*, Casey O'Donnell (2014, 20) argues that the videogame industry's various quality-of-life problems are rooted in its "emphasis on secrecy, closed networks of access, and use of the state to discipline those networks." Building upon several years of fieldwork inside North American and Indian game development studios, O'Donnell connects videogame companies' vested interest in production control – initially intended as a means of quality assurance, to allow console manufacturers a way to exert control over which games were available on their platforms – to a more general equation of knowledge (of production and processes) with power and capital, which has been baked into the professional and legal structure of the videogame industry: "Thus, quality control disguises complete control. The game industry has always been a walled garden" (224). This habitual culture of secrecy is the same "black box" that *Videogames* attempted to open, and was the root of many problems encountered by the exhibition's curators throughout its development.

O'Donnell argues that the pervasive secrecy of the videogame industry "is in some respects an attempt by developers and the industry to hold themselves apart, as distinct from other industries," which lends the practice of game development an air "mystique or desirability" (39). Secrecy itself is not an invisible component of the industry's labour structure, but an essential part of how game-making is characterised to the public. In late 2018, as part of a promotional interview timed around the release of

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[5] This list is, obviously, non-exhaustive.

Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the game's writer – and studio's cofounder – Dan Houser stated this desire clearly: "Games are still magical. It's like they're made by elves. You turn on the screen and it's just this world that exists on TV. I think you gain something by not knowing how they're made" (White 2018). Whatever point about suspension of disbelief Houser was apparently trying to make, his comment read as a telling admission of an industry-wide desire to ideologically separate a commodity from the circumstances of its production. The comment was considered especially cruel and patronising, though perhaps unsurprising, in light of the repulsive labour conditions under which *Red Dead Redemption 2* had been produced, reports of which were emerging around the same time.(Good 2018; Schreier 2018). Like much of the videogame industry, Houser had a vested interest in keeping the workings of his studio secret, and keeping the "black box" shut.

This secrecy is felt by those on both sides of the industry: outside and inside. O'Donnell (2014) describes the tendency for game development teams to "continually take the same wrong turns" as an effect of a general unwillingness to disclose internal practices to other studios, especially when these practices are understood as "trade secrets" (78). This secrecy is formally enforced through contracts known as non-disclosure agreements, or NDAs, which legally prohibit workers inside the game industry – as well as those outside, such as journalists – from publicly or privately sharing details of the industry's practices, even within other networks in the industry. O'Donnell argues that the standardisation of NDAs as an industrial practice has created "an industry founded on and bounded by silence," where videogame developers "acquire a built-in paranoia about what can or cannot be discussed, resulting in a kind of constant self-policing" (205).

As described in the introduction to this chapter, the exhibition contained visible traces of the videogame industry's general desire to keep their processes and labour hidden. This institutionalised paranoia naturally produces difficulties during collaborations with museums – throughout the exhibition's development, the curators expressed a repeated frustration with how guarded the larger videogame studios were in their conversations. Certain studios were distant and incommunicative, but laid out very strict rules in advance about how their work could and could not be displayed; other studios were closely involved, and needed to approve their work's display at every step as the exhibition developed. In either case, the guarded attitudes of the large studios produced complicated bureaucratic strictures, and – as I describe in the second part of this chapter – much of the

exhibition team's time and professional energy was spent navigating these strictures.

This is not to say that secrecy is institutionalised in game development practices everywhere – as described earlier in the chapter, we can look to smaller-scale cultures of game development as examples of "emancipatory currents" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2021, 374–77) which present an alternative cultural logic to the protective attitudes of major studios. In a broad study of videogame production in Australia, Brendan Keogh (2021) notes that while the "intense level of secrecy and self-censorship" described by O'Donnell is an accurate understanding of the function of AAA studios and publishers in North America, Japan, and Western Europe, the less formalised field of game production in Australia subverts this (127–28). As Keogh describes, Australia's network of "small, often overlapping, teams; shoestring budgets; and a general lack of access to resources have radically restructured the formal videogame industry as one more porous with the broader informal field" which is characterised by its collaborative and open nature – at least relative to the AAA industry that O'Donnell described (128–29).

The capacity for openness and transparency in independent game development practice meant that, in the context of *Videogames*, games made at smaller scales tended to be less resistant to the process-focused goals of the curators. This was typified in the display of the work of Jenny Jiao Hsia, an independent game designer based in New York City, whose practice was already openly documented online via social media platforms – Hsia routinely posted pages from her personal sketchbook, rough diagrams, concept sketches, and short gameplay videos of works-in-progress to her Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr pages. In an interview, Hsia told me that this transparency was part of what initially interested the curators in including her work in the exhibition: "I remember having a Skype call with Marie, and Kristian as well. And we basically talked about how they liked how I post my work on the internet. I'm very open with my process. I post everything – from GIFs, to very finished polished stuff, to prototypes, to sketches in my notebooks... and yeah, I guess they took interest in that." The game featured in the exhibition – *Consume Me*, made in collaboration with AP Thompson, another New York-based developer – was still a work in progress when the exhibition opened, and remains so at time of writing – a fact which initially made Hsia uneasy. "I actually got really anxious and worried, because I didn't feel like I was making enough progress on the game for it to be part of the exhibition. [*laughs*] So I was like, 'Oh, I guess I have all of this material, these design notes, all these prototypes, but I don't

think I'm going to have a released game by the time the exhibition comes around.'"
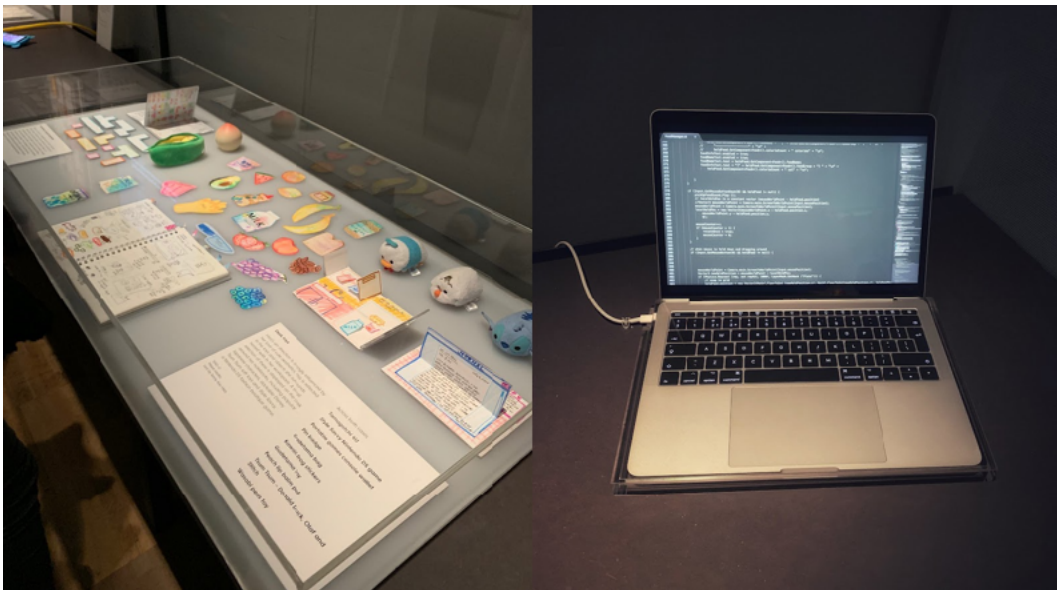
Ultimately, though, the lack of a finished "product" was relatively unimportant compared to the breadth of development artefacts available thanks to Hsia's extensive documentary practice, which dovetailed neatly with the curatorial goals of the exhibition. Though the *Consume Me* display contained two playable works, these were presented as prototypes – pieces of an unfinished whole. As with the rest of the New Designers section of the exhibition, the display's focus was on development artefacts, of which Hsia had plenty: Hsia's process and inspirations were demonstrated through an arrangement of objects lifted from the designer's bedroom; display cases filled with hand-drawn paper cutouts used for prototyping; and an array of toys which inspired her work. Next to these cases sat a silver MacBook Pro, a replica of the computer on which Hsia made *Consume Me*, which played a recording of Hsia's screen as she wrote and edited game code – the slow, incremental labour of game development presented in real time.[6] "I really

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[6] Code, in spite of its status as arguably the most ubiquitous "material" of digital game making, is among the least prevalent or visible artefacts of commercial videogame development – particularly compared to other artefacts such as concept art, as I describe below in "Process as promotion." This may be attributed to its essentially esoteric nature, i.e. it requires specialist knowledge to understood, but also because it has historically been treated as proprietary material by videogame studios, and therefore closely guarded (O'Donnell 2014, 177).

like how they're interested in the stuff surrounding the game; interested in that process as well," Hsia told me. "Because I do a lot of that, and I don't feel like there's too much of a chance to show that part at festivals and conferences. It's cool that people are interested in these knick-knacks that I have, or these notebooks. And that's a really good feeling, to know that people will look at that, and that it's worth looking at, you know? Being displayed. Because I feel like that's a big part of how I make stuff, and it's cool that it's not just the final product – it's also the process."

Though independent developers' relative openness makes their work generally more amenable to exhibition display, this does not mean that their work is immune to or strictly separate from the capitalistic cultural logic of the commercial videogame industry. Secrecy is embedded in the tools and platforms of the industry, and therefore felt by nearly everyone involved in the practice of game making. Though industrial and technological shifts within the cultural field of videogames have lowered the barrier to entry to the practice of game development, which in turn has given rise to a multitude of independent game development practices which are presented as "utopian" and "democratised" alternatives to the hegemonic structures of major studios, these alternative practices are largely dependent on the same platforms and technologies as AAA studios, which, rather than liberating independent developers, "reinforces existing market and gender inequities" and "introduces new gatekeepers and literacies of exclusion" (Whitson 2019, 1–2). The interdependent technological structure of videogame development means that game makers tend not to completely own their work; capitalistic systems of licensing and ownership are complexly entwined throughout game development practice at every level, regardless of independent game developers' good intentions or desires for openness.

As an independent game developer myself, I am deeply familiar with this "entwinement" with capitalistic platforms and technologies, and the effect of this on museum work. In 2022, the four-person videogame studio where I work – House House – collaborated with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image – which had partnered with two other Australian cultural institutions – to acquire our 2019 videogame *Untitled Goose Game* (ACMI 2022a). Though the four of us at House House were all happy to cooperate with the museum when they first contacted us, there soon emerged a variety of technical, legal, and practical difficulties which made collecting our game challenging – setting aside the conceptual challenge of defining what it means for a museum to acquire a videogame in the first place, which in our case constituted a corpus of development material as well as playable copies

of the game itself. For example: we were asked to share the game's source code, which in our case represented a large digital repository of files – code, 3D models, audio files, et cetera – which were compatible with Unity, a proprietary game development engine that we used to make the game. Because we were working in a proprietary engine, our source folder contained software and copyrighted material that we had a license to use ourselves but not to share. Similarly, the museum asked us to provide standalone builds of the game which could be stored – in other words, preserved – on their own servers, to ensure the game could be played in future; however, although we ourselves could create and send builds of the game for personal computers, builds of the game made for consoles including Nintendo Switch, Microsoft's Xbox One, and Sony's PlayStation 4 could only be run on proprietary "development kits," access to which was restricted by the companies which produced them – as distinct from consoles themselves, which were available to the public but could not run development builds.[7] Beyond these complex technical constraints, basic concepts of copyright limited what could be shared: our source repository contained copyrighted music which we had used early in development as a placeholder and later replaced, and certain assets in the game were stored with filenames that referred to legal trademarks – for example, "rubikscube.blend." Irrespective of our own openness and interest in cooperating with the museum in this case, we found ourselves inextricably embedded in the techno-capitalist systems of commercial videogame development in a number of ways, and were thereby complicit in its secrecy and closedness.

This produces a more complicated view of the secrecy endemic to videogame production. The institutionalised secrecy of the AAA videogame industry is evident, as is the corporate ideology which underlies it, but it should be noted that displaying or communicating the full breadth of work that comprises a creative practice is, in practical terms, much easier said than done. A variety of mundane social and technical factors make total transparency unrealistic and impractical. For example: during House House's discussions with the museum mentioned above, they asked if our Slack archive – the record of our internal messaging service – could be given to them to be collected, as an organic document of *Untitled Goose Game*'s development. We were naturally very hesitant to do this, given the sensitive information it might contain, but we also did not ourselves have the time to comb through the archive to offer an edited selection; in the end

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[7] "Build" in this context refers to a compiled instance of software which can be run as a standalone executable file.

we denied the request outright. Similarly mundane difficulties arose in the production of *Videogames* – Hsia explained to me that during the development of *Videogames* she moved out of her parents' house to a different part of New York City, leaving the majority of the *Consume Me* production artefacts in her old bedroom. "When [*Videogames*'s curators] first asked me for stuff, a lot of it was at my parents' house, in my bedroom. And after I moved I had to commute back and forth to my parents' house, to get the stuff together, and that was sometimes annoying. But, I don't know, it has to be done. So that was the most annoying part – just the tiny details."

Unremarkable predicaments like this, when accumulated, represent a significant barrier to the work of curating an exhibition like *Videogames*, as well as the broader project of making the actual labour of videogame development visible and coherent to a general audience. The practical difficulties that arise from "tiny details" like the one Hsia mentions are by no means unique to the production or exhibition of videogames – they are in some regards a simple fact of life. This does not mean that these mundane difficulties should be taken as inevitable, however minor or ubiquitous they may be. Though transparency always comes at a cost, other creative industries and practices have been able to offset or compensate for that cost, by familiarising themselves with the concept of cultural heritage, and developing practices which would allow them to collaborate more readily with museums. If Hsia had begun her work on *Consume Me* with the possibility of a major exhibition in mind, she might have adopted more rigorous archival methods to manage her development artefacts. If we at House House had known a museum would one day ask to collect our source repository, we might have been more careful in how we maintained it.[8]

This hews closely to the concerns of compatibility presented in the second half of this chapter, which argues that museological values and processes have not been sufficiently standardised within most forms of videogame development practice. To establish that incompatibility, though, I will first continue the examination of the role of secrecy in the practice of videogame

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[8] In all honesty, though, I should note that even after this experience with *Untitled Goose Game* we have not significantly altered our practices as a videogame studio to make them more museologically compatible. Apparently it takes more than one encounter with cultural heritage practices to remould our professional methods and values, which are already heavily moulded by the wider videogame industry we work within.

marketing, and how this was confronted by *Videogames*'s curators in developing the exhibition.

Process as promotion

Within the commercial videogame industry, secrecy serves not only as an institutional practice, but also as a promotional strategy. Zimmerman (2014) describes how this ingrained secrecy is paired with highly controlled methods of disclosure, and deployed as rhetorical devices that are integral to the cycle through which videogames are made, marketed, and released. Zimmerman frames secrecy as a rhetoric in order to explain how videogame studios relate to their fanbases, generating desire in their commodity through a process of selective disclosure, effectively "seducing" their audience via marketing tools such as teasers and previews (144). This cycle of secrecy and disclosure also applies to the way videogame studios represent their own processes to their audiences. When the development practices of major studios are made public, they tend to be shown in extremely controlled ways. Though they may offer glimpses into the practice of game development, these "disclosures" are typically so selectively edited that they are stripped of their critical potential as genuine insights, serving instead as marketing artefacts meant to promote the game and its studio. In his analysis of "making-of" film documentaries, film scholar Craig Hight (2005) describes the function and underlying agenda of these promotional artefacts:

> In the guise of presenting a production narrative, [making-of documentaries] in fact serve as extended trailers, with their release timed to coincide with that of the feature film they document. … there are no doubts voiced about the creative or (potential) commercial success of the film, no evidence of tensions (creative or otherwise) in its production, little if any exploration of the wider political or economic contexts of its production–in fact, nothing that would disrupt the corporate agenda of the studio that owns the film. (Hight 2005, 7)

In the field of videogames, studio-produced "behind the scenes" documentaries have grown into a common form of game marketing, and appear to serve a similar agenda to that which Hight observes in the film industry. Documentaries like these are one form of process-disclosure employed by videogame studios – others include published concept art, audio commentaries, or interviews produced in partnership with press outlets. These materials are commonly used to market videogames, though as Glas (2016) observes, they are just as commonly integrated into the games themselves as unlockable content; Glas (2016, 4) suggests that they

should be understood as paratexts, in that they inform the player's experience and interpretation of a game as a text, and "have become a recognizable part of the media ecology in which digital games are produced and consumed."[9]

Of these paratexts, concept art in particular is one of the most popular tools which game studios use to represent their work to the public. In the context of videogame development, concept art is commonly understood as static art which is made during the pre-production stage of development, in order to test and establish elements of a game's visual design before they are solidified in the game itself. Because of this, concept art has enjoyed a certain primacy as the essential vision underlying videogame production; Laurie Taylor (2013, 383) has noted that, "While videogame designers did not seek to create an underlying super structure through concept art, the combination of the concept art with the culture of videogaming led to the popular and industry approved belief that concept art was the 'real' of each videogame." Part of the popularity of concept art is likely due to its fungibility, as concept art is commonly used and reused in multiple textual and paratextual contexts, which has led to a broad familiarity of concept art's role in what Taylor (2013) calls "the paratextual apparatus" of videogames' development and release: "This meant and means that players are familiar with the concept art in all game previews, reviews, advertisements, and then the concept art gets repeated within the physical game packaging – from the game boxes to the game books to the sides of the arcade machines" (382–83). The ubiquity and intercontextuality of concept art as a paratext has meant that the practice has, to a degree, become a synecdochic shorthand for videogame production in general. McCrea (2020) suggests that concept art serves a structural purpose within

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[9] Though they are rare, there are exceptions to this – in 2023, the independent studio Double Fine Productions released a 22-hour documentary series chronicling the six-year production of their 2021 game *Psychonauts 2*, from its first inception until its final release. The documentary was praised from within the industry for its unvarnished honesty, showing "the everyday work of medium-scale commercial game dev in unprecedented detail: the creative high of successful collaboration as well as the ugly prototypes, gruelling bug fixes, and painful miscommunication" (Yang 2023). It was similarly well received by those in the games press, for whom this openness would seem relatively rare – Jason Schreier (2023), writing for *Bloomberg*, described it as "a rare and fascinating slice of transparency for an industry that usually guards its secrets like a dragon hoarding treasure." Implicit in this praise, though, is an acknowledgement of the considerable cost of this transparency: the "unprecedented detail" of the documentary was only made possible by keeping an entire video production team on the company's payroll – which the documentary itself depicts as extremely unstable – for six continuous years.

the broader ecosystem of game production and consumption: "the structure is not only of a production image, but an image of production."

I would argue, though, that concept art as it is typically instrumentalised by major videogame studios serves a very loosely instructive purpose at best. Though it may be useful as a demonstration of the gestural artistry that goes into the otherwise invisible preproduction stage of game development, concept art offers a very narrow and tidy view of a broad and messy practice. Concept art is so selectively disclosed to the public – only the most polished or interesting-looking works tend to be published by studios – that it produces an extremely limited vision of game development as a practice. In a sense, disclosures of concept art could be considered a performance of videogame development, in that they construct a romanticised but unrealistic vision of the work of game production. In other words, the promotional context in which concept art is disclosed indirectly hinders its potential for insight into the secret practices of the videogame industry.[10]

I would further argue that concept art, as a paratext, serves a legitimising role in the way that it constructs a cultural understanding of game production. Concept art is often compiled into "art books" that are published as accompaniments to a game's release, either as standalone products, or bundled with the games themselves and sold as "deluxe editions" or similar. Often titled in the common format of "The Art of *x*," these art books lend an air of prestige and legitimacy to their counterpart games by affirming a sense of authorship and artistic integrity within game development practice; Gray (2010) argues that as well as providing additional information to support the interpretation of a text, "paratextual frames can also prove remarkably important for how they assign value to a text, situating it as a product and/or as a work of art" (81). Concept artworks, along with other selective representations of process, therefore serve two connected purposes according to the cultural logic of the videogame industry: they perform an idealised vision of game production, which in turn valorises and legitimises the games themselves, and the circumstances of their production.

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[10] This selective disclosure has led to a widespread practice of concept art creation that adopts many of the formats and trappings of industrially produced videogame concept art while existing more or less independently to any game development process. This modified relationship – or lack thereof – between concept art and the finished videogame suggests that the paratext might be too limiting a frame through which to understand the role of concept art within game culture, which has become its own "autotelic" discipline (McCrea 2020).

Given this aura of legitimacy and the general perception of concept art as an "image of production," it seems natural that a museum exhibition dedicated to demonstrating the production of videogames would feature a great deal of concept art. In the case of *Videogames*, concept art was not actively sought by the curators, relative to other forms of process-documentation; however, these studios' privileging of concept art above other forms of process-disclosure meant that it was always the format most readily available. *Videogames*'s Research Curator Kristian described to me in an interview how this tendency affected preliminary conversations with studios regarding the availability of different forms of documentation:

KRISTIAN   So we'd put a deck together, a presentation to share with them in advance, so that they've got a concept of what we're trying to do here … and we'd say that we'd like to work with [them] as a studio to explore that. It was a bit of a learning process for us, to see what kind of material they'd be willing to share with us – so that changed over the course of talking to different studios, what kind of material would be available.

I mean, when you go through the space now, there's a lot of stuff that you see that's, like … prototypes, notebooks. All those kinds of things that get... I don't want to say repeated, but there are the same processes [during a game's development], but other people wouldn't necessarily share that they'd have that material for you. At first.

So, as we say, they all just want to show their concept art straight away, because that looks pretty. But they're never going to show you greybox designs, because they don't think that's what should be shown in an exhibition. And some places like [a videogame studio not in the exhibition], for instance, were much more... not secretive about it, but not forthcoming.

ME   Would you explicitly ask for [greybox designs]?

KRISTIAN   Yeah. In the end, we had a kind of wishlist of things that we thought should be part of the process, from having done so much research into how that size of studio works.

ME   And they'd just say no?

KRISTIAN   They'd just say "Well, we've got this concept art, but you're not going to be able to see anything else."

Invariably, concept art tended to be the material most readily offered by the curators' contacts at these major studios: even though many studios kept other forms of process-documentation in some capacity, these artefacts were not typically archived in a way that was easily accessible, and Kristian noted to me that many studios were reluctant to dedicate paid person-hours

to finding suitable exhibition material – calling to mind the "cost of transparency" described in the previous section. As a result, most of the games featured in the "New Designers" section were supported through the display of concept art in various formats: hand-drawn illustrations, digital paintings, scribbled thumbnail/storyboard images, colour studies, and so on. The display of Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us*, for example, featured a number of digital artworks reproduced on printed boards as well as screens. It is worth noting that most of the drawings reproduced in the display at the V&A, if not all, were also shown in Naughty Dog's *The Art of the Last of Us* artbook, published five years earlier (Naughty Dog Studios, 2013).

FIGURE 6.2.
Installation photo of The Last of Us *in* Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt.
© Victoria and Albert Museum.

I raise this point not to suggest that *Videogames* was in any way compromised for showing already-public work, or for not exhibiting a unique or "privileged" art object in these cases. I am, however, interested in highlighting this overlap in the context of the videogame industry's tendency to selectively deploy its development artefacts as a tool of promotion and legitimation, which raises troubling questions for museum curators working with videogame studios. If we consider videogame studios' disclosures of process as essentially uncritical marketing paratexts, should we consider museum exhibitions of that same work an extension of that capitalistic practice? Which aspects of these game studios' practices are elided through these exhibition displays? To what extent are museum

displays of videogames simply promotional paratexts in their own right? These are polemical and somewhat rhetorical questions, but I believe they are worth asking. My larger point here is not to condemn the V&A or its curators, but to describe the risks involved in industrial curation, and establish a certain paradox of praxis that defines collaborative exhibition work of this kind. In any case, it is clear that the V&A was uncomfortably entangled – and arguably complicit, as I discuss in the following section – in the videogame industry's capitalistic cycle of secrecy and disclosure.

(In)compatibility

Having established a sense of the cultural logic that underlies videogame studios' practices, I'd like to turn this chapter's focus towards the effect of this cultural logic on the work of museums in general, and demonstrate some of the consequences of these commercial tendencies as experienced by the exhibition team throughout the making of *Videogames*.

The development of *Videogames* was marathon-like, composed of very long stretches of strenuous but steady progress. This steady persistence, however, was occasionally punctuated by brief flurries of crisis, which would seemingly appear out of nowhere and be resolved just as quickly, without any significant effects on the exhibition's outcome, and leaving everyone a little more tired and rattled than before. One of these crises arose very suddenly about a month before the exhibition was scheduled to open, when a large videogame studio whose game was featured substantially in *Videogames*, asked to have the display – and any mention of the game – removed entirely from the exhibition.[11]

Development of this part of the exhibition did not require especially direct involvement from the studio, which here is pseudonymised as Studio A, makers of *Game A* – in the case of *Game A*'s display, all that was requested was formal permission from Studio A to include it in the exhibition. Marie

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[11] There are ethical considerations which restrict what can be discussed here – I cannot describe tensions which might compromise professional relationships between museum staff and their external collaborators. I should also note that, due to the highly private nature of most of the exhibition team's discussions with videogame studios, and the fact that my fieldwork took place late in the exhibition's development, well after most negotiations with studios had concluded, I do not have a great deal of firsthand experience of the interactions between the Museum and the videogame industry in general. As a result, my understanding of this relationship is relatively one-sided: informed by stories relayed to me after the fact by the curators, and inferred from what little interaction I was able to witness from the Museum's perspective.

had been in touch with Studio A's Creative Communications Officer over a year earlier to discuss *Game A*'s inclusion in the exhibition, and the CCO had happily approved the plans – informally, via email, but with enough interest and confidence for Marie to proceed with the concept and production of the display. Following that email approval, Studio A's CCO was replaced, and Marie was left without a contact. Two months before the exhibition was set to open, Marie had emailed again to recap the aims of the project; Studio A was uncommunicative. After a month of unreturned emails, the curators were eventually put in touch with Studio A's "brand manager," who was sent photos and a description of the current state of the display. A week later, the V&A finally received a conclusive response – though Studio A liked "the idea," they weren't sure that the display itself – which was still in development, and admittedly a bit rough around the edges – could be executed to their satisfaction. They also said that they'd require a formal agreement in place ahead of the exhibition approving the particular circumstances of their game's display, which they expected to be "very difficult" to arrange. They continued: "Hence, we will need to say no to being a part of this exhibition. We would love to keep in contact for future projects and see what we can do together in the future."

Through a few short and more or less polite sentences, a significant component of the exhibition seemed about to unravel. Setting aside the prospect of scrapping several months of work on the display and leaving a conspicuous gap in the exhibition, the *Videogames* team identified a number of flow-on problems: exhibition text labels mentioning *Game A* would need to be edited and reprinted; the exhibition's promotional posters, which included imagery from *Game A*, would need to be redesigned; *Videogames*'s accompanying publication, which contained significant references to *Game A* and its place in the exhibition, had already gone to print. Most significantly, the game's presence in the exhibition had already been made public in *Videogames*'s press releases and other announcements, which had been republished in various journalistic outlets. Beyond these logistical headaches, the crisis sparked deeper anxieties in the exhibition team: though many studios had been constant communication throughout the exhibition's development, others had been just as distant as Studio A – what if they suddenly asked to withdraw their games, too?

A few days later, the situation was resolved without a great deal of ceremony or drama, after the *Videogames* team met with the V&A's legal counsel and it was decided that the depiction of *Game A* in the exhibition did not legally require any permission from Studio A, on the basis of the UK's fair dealing laws. Since the contents of the display had not been directly provided by

Studio A, the legal counsel deemed the V&A's display as "a fair quotation of the media for the purposes of criticism and review." Notably, this decision was not communicated to Studio A; since no permission was required, the legal counsel recommended that the exhibition team simply cease communications with Studio A, and continue the development of *Videogames* as planned unless the studio got back in touch to contest the display. To my knowledge, it never did, and the exhibition opened as planned.

The ordeal felt revealing of a particular attitude towards the museum. On the whole, Studio A's response and general lack of communication conveyed a degree of indifference regarding its inclusion in the exhibition. Though the curators' first point of contact, the CCO, expressed interest in the exhibition, this interest did not seem to be shared by – or in any way communicated to – the rest of the organisation. Once that link to the organisation was gone, the curators seemed to have lost their only advocate within the entire studio, and it took a month of concerted emailing just to make contact again. That said, it didn't seem as though the studio was especially bothered by its game's inclusion in the exhibition, either; once the exhibition had opened, and the display of *Game A* was public, the V&A never heard from Studio A about it. To that studio, and several other studios contacted during the making of *Videogames*, involvement in this major exhibition by one of the world's largest museums seemed like a relatively insignificant prospect.[12]

This feeling of distance is not entirely surprising. Studio A, for example, is a large company with a well-known product which is already wildly successful by most commercial metrics. According to these metrics, it follows that it would have very little to gain, in material terms, from participation in an exhibition like *Videogames*. Nevertheless, its indifference feels at odds with the traditional system of cultural participation and inference of value that the museum offers. In Howard Becker's macroscopic study of the fine art industry titled *Art Worlds* (1982), he describes the museum as the "final repository" of traditional artworks,[13] in two senses: first in the sense that

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[12] It should be noted that this is not true of most other developers actually featured within the exhibition, who were selected for inclusion in part for their openness and interest in participation.

[13] Becker's text is by now somewhat dated, and the flows of cultural and economic capital within the Western art world have evolved since the early 80s. However, this conception of the museum and the function of this conception within the broader cultural sphere still holds – Chong (2010) describes it as "the idealized repository of art," whose reputation is "part of the sales flattery used by dealers and auctioneers to signal works of the highest aesthetic value" (19).

work which enters a museum collection tends to remain in that collection; and second: "When a museum shows and purchases a work, it gives it the highest kind of institutional approval available in the contemporary visual arts world; no more can happen that will make that work more important or allow it to add more than it already has to the artist's reputation" (117). A temporary exhibition like *Videogames* cannot offer its subjects that same "finality" in either of the senses which Becker put forward. For one thing, none of the works displayed in the exhibition were collected by the V&A.[14] In the second sense, the "institutional approval" provided by the museum is not typically a serious priority for major videogame studios. In an analysis of Becker's model as it relates to videogame exhibitions, Emilie Reed (2019) notes the relevance of this second point, which "acknowledges the feelings of cultural approval and improved reputation that gaming enthusiasts, creators and companies often refer to when discussing videogame exhibitions" (58). Though this cultural/institutional approval serves the commercial function of videogame studios, I suspect that this approval is much more commonly understood as a means of generating further economic capital, rather than an end in and of itself, in the "final" sense that Becker (1982) described. Though the legitimacy offered by a game's inclusion in the museum is valued by videogame studios, this value is constructed entirely within the scope of the videogame industry's capitalist cultural logic.

I am wary of retracing oversimplified distinctions between cultural and economic capital, or decisively placing museums and videogame studios on either side of that line. Museums have never been "purely" cultural institutions, and generate cultural and economic value synchronously (Rodner and Thomson 2013). Similarly, the videogame industry has an established history of mingling culture and commodity; using the example of the *Bioshock* series' popular construction as "prestige games," Parker (2013, 3) describes how game studios, driven by their profit motive, "must reconcile art and commerce in order to generate both economic and cultural capital." Museums and videogame studios each hold their own commercial and cultural aspirations, values and logics, which vary from

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[14] This is true of videogame exhibitions in general – with reference to Becker's text, Reed (2019) notes that "in the case of videogames and new media art, as well as newer art forms which are often not permanently acquired but instead included in temporary, traveling exhibitions, Becker's first point may not affect the works in question as strongly" (58). While there are notable exceptions to this – e.g. MoMA's well-publicised collection of 20 games in 2012–13 – this is still not "final" in the same sense as traditional artworks in that none of these games were produced with the gallery in mind.

museum to museum and studio to studio; my argument in this chapter is that the various tendencies of either organisation tend to be incompatible, and preclude – or at least impede – meaningful co-production when it comes to developing exhibitions.

In the previous chapter, I described some of the problems that arose from an insufficiently embedded or "institutionalised" understanding of videogames within the V&A; conversely, I suspect that many of the tensions which arise in work between museums and the videogame industry stem from that industry's poor understanding of, and lack of experience with, the cultural function of the museum. Per Star and Griesemer's (1989) theory of institutional ecology, as described in the previous chapter, videogame studios do not seem to have an effectively standardised or precedented process by which to work with cultural institutions such as museums. In the absence of this precedent, videogame studios fall back on their tendencies toward secrecy and promotion, which are counterproductive to the traditional aims of museums.

At the centre of this problem is a question of compatibility: what does it mean for organisations to work productively together? How can we explain it when they can't? In the context of a museum exhibition, there are multiple ways to define compatibility between the desires of the exhibition's curators, and the desires of its subjects. Here I will outline understandings of compatibility in light of *Videogames*'s development. First I describe *compatibility as complicity*, arguing that the ideal of an entirely frictionless collaboration between the museum and its industrial subjects requires curatorial subservience to the commercial preferences of the industry, as demonstrated through the recent history of fashion exhibitions. I then describe *compatibility as criticality*, suggesting that effective collaboration between museum and industry – which meets the needs of the participating industry while sustaining the independence of the curators in order to produce a critically engaged exhibition – will inevitably be negotiated via the kinds of frictions encountered in the production of *Videogames*.

Compatibility as complicity

The problems described above are, by and large, not unique to videogames; other media have faced similar difficulties regarding their entry to and acceptance by the museum. The history of fashion exhibitions in particular bears interesting parallels which can provide valuable context for understanding the more recent history of videogame exhibitions, and anticipates a possible future for videogames' place in museums. As I argue,

however, the compatibility between the work of museums and the fashion industry should be viewed with a degree of skepticism, as this relationship – which might be better understood as complicity – demonstrates the value of tensions and negotiation in co-productive museum work.

Like videogames, fashion had traditionally been considered a populist and commercial medium, and was therefore considered unfit for museum exhibition. Fashion was typically presented in museums as historical costume, enshrouded in an "aura of antiquarianism," and had "no audience beyond a few specialists" (Martin and Koda 1993, 3). As Anderson (2000) notes, fashion occupied a "precarious position" in the popular imagination, "between its status on one hand as a creative product of labour and an illustration of the good taste of its wearer, and on the other that invoked by its intrinsic relationship to the body, which solidly damned it as linked to the base, the sexual and most definitely the 'lower pleasures'" (373). This perception has changed gradually over the past 50 years or so, and the V&A in particular is noted as a major proponent of fashion as a "museological medium" in the early 1970s and beyond (De La Haye 2006, 129). Throughout the 1980s and 90s, shifts in governmental attitudes regarding the support of public museums prompted anxieties around visitor numbers and a re-examination of whom the museum was for – which I describe in Chapter 4; Anderson (2000) links the sector's adoption of an increasingly corporatised, audience-targeted market logic to the rise of fashion exhibitions in public museums. Though this rise was relatively swift, the way museums have contextualised and constructed different concepts of fashion has changed over the decades. In the case of the V&A's approach to exhibiting fashion, De La Haye (2006) notes that "in keeping with the museum's collection policy, the emphasis was firmly upon design and making," and that the Museum "did not concern itself with the lives of those women who wore elite fashion," only later beginning to engage the social role of fashion and textiles (129). This draws a further parallel between the histories of videogame and fashion exhibitions, where we can observe a similar progression in museological constructions of videogames as popular culture (The Smithsonian's *The Art of Video Games*), as design objects stripped of context (MoMA's *Applied Design*), and more recently as a creative discipline with a surrounding cultural field (V&A's *Videogames*).

Today, the work of museums and the work of the fashion industry are both deeply interlinked, and the processes and function of either world appears to be well understood by the other. As fashion has grown into a "museological medium" and been thoroughly naturalised in the gallery context, the museum has similarly been embraced by the fashion industry:

Skjulstad (2014), for example, argues that museums and their imagery have extensively shaped the contemporary branding strategies of luxury fashion brands, which draw heavily on the "mythic" reputation of the museum in their spatial communication. It has even become common for fashion brands to establish museums themselves, taking the roles of patrons of fine art and adopting the legitimating power of the museum (Skjulstad and Morrison 2016, 32). This interlinking of work extends beyond the operations of studios to encompass other parts of the fashion world, such as journalism – British *Vogue*, for instance, has a long history of reporting on most of the fashion exhibitions held at the V&A, and has gone further to regularly cover the private-view parties hosted within the Museum's galleries, which have become part of the social ecosystem of the fashion world (De La Haye 2006). Phenomena like the Met Gala – an annual event hosted by *Vogue*, which raises funds for the Met's Costume Institute at the opening of the Costume Institute's annual fashion exhibit – signify how integrated the contemporary activities of fashion studios, fashion journalism, and the museum have become.

There are, of course, some crucial differences which make the relationship between fashion and the museum less comparable to that between videogames and the museum: the contemporary entrenchment of fashion as a form of both high culture and popular culture (Rocamora 2001) suggests that the comfortable position of fashion in museums may be afforded by a demographic overlap, particularly along class vectors; videogame and museum audiences in general do not share this same overlap. However, if we consider the affinity between fashion and museums as the product of a much longer "convergence," as Anderson (2000) suggests, we could envision how one relationship might someday resemble the other.

As I have described, the development of *Videogames* seemed to be impeded by an essential incompatibility of both values and practices. A common factor in many of the frictions between the exhibition team and the game studios was a difference in understanding of what exhibitions are "for": promotion versus interpretation; celebration versus critique. Though I cannot speak about the values of the fashion world or fashion curators with the same experience that I can about the cultural logic of the videogame industry, each industry's practices are more readily observable. Generally speaking, the fashion industry appears to have developed methods of working which are directly compatible with the work of museums. The fashion house Dior, as an example, operates a dedicated "Dior Heritage" department which employs in-house historians, curators and archivists to maintain a collection of work which is made available to cultural

institutions. As a result, Dior is able to exert considerable control over its presence in museums, and by extension its own image and reputation – around the opening of a 2017 exhibition dedicated to Dior at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the institution's director Olivier Gabet remarked:

> Beyond its success and its extraordinary aspect, namely the largest retrospective ever devoted to Christian Dior, this event seems to exemplify the renewed interest from the houses for their own heritage. When, in 1987, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs organised a first Dior exhibition (on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of "The New Look"), around 90% of the pieces exhibited came from museum institutions or individuals, former clients for example. In 2017, the proportion was reversed: the vast majority came from the archives of the house. (Gabet, quoted in Bosc 2019; my translation, from the original French)

This active engagement with institutions, and apparent fluency with cultural heritage as a concept, belies a deeper interest in long-term brand management which Antonaglia and Passebois Ducros (2020) describe as a process of "heritagization," defined as "the result of an ongoing strategy focused on maintaining and promoting Dior's legacy" (129). By contrast, most videogame studios do not seem particularly invested in concretising their own cultural heritage in this way. None of the studios exhibited in *Videogames* employed dedicated cultural outreach teams – as a result, negotiations with these studios relating to the exhibition were typically conducted through PR representatives. Inevitably, the work of the curators was confined by, and filtered through, the secretive tendencies of the videogame industry. As is typical within those organisations, the curators were required to sign non-disclosure agreements with every major studio included the exhibition – and many who weren't – before they could even begin to discuss what material might be available for exhibition. These discussions were typically filtered through multiple departments in each studio, as Kristian described to me: "It was a lot of negotiation. [Studio B] are a very good example of that as well… they shared a giant PDF with us, of the kind of material that was there that they had ready to share – or that's what the artists in the studio would say, but then that would have to be cleared by the PR team, who'd then say, 'You can't show this; you can't show this.'"[15] Even if the developers of a given game were eager to showcase their process in the context of a museum exhibition, the ultimate decisions about what could and couldn't be shown tended to rest in the hands of each

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[15] Here I have pseudonymised one of the exhibition's participants – a large videogame studio – as "Studio B."

studio's PR department, whose staff acted as the curators' first point of access to the studio and final point of approval: "You'd get through one layer to the source. The source would be quite excited about the process, eventually, but then you'd have to go back out, and then [that excitement] gets kind of reduced again."

In certain cases, this guarded and combative posture made collaborations with certain studios entirely untenable, from the very earliest stages of production. In interviews around the exhibition's opening, Marie was frequently asked why specific games weren't included in the exhibition; after one interview, where she'd been asked why Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto* series hadn't featured, she privately expressed frustration that she was professionally obliged to answer questions like this diplomatically – as she put it, "by saying the usual line of: 'Well, we would have loved to show it but there wasn't room in this space, but that just leaves it as something for the Museum to explore in future work.' I'd love to answer honestly, just once, and say, 'They're not in the exhibition because their PR person was a horrible, mansplaining fucker which made them completely impossible to work with.'"

In rare cases, the "excitement" Kristian described was preserved throughout the exhibition development process, with relatively little mediation from PR departments. However, this eagerness to be involved carried its own complications. Kristian referred to their collaboration with Naughty Dog – which was "fully involved" in developing the exhibition's display of *The Last of Us*) in generally positive terms, though this relationship still involved extensive negotiation:

KRISTIAN   I mean, it's not *easy* working with them – there's a lot of negotiation, and a lot of ideas. And working with people high up in that company, who had certain ideas. Or they'd come up with something, and we would have to say no to them. So we'd have to say no to Neil Druckmann about things, and he's like… he's the president at Naughty Dog, now, I think?

ME   What kind of stuff were you saying no to?

KRISTIAN   We would talk about how we might present something, and then he would say something about how you might get somebody in from the studio to give their opinion, about what this means. And I would then have to step in and say, actually, we want to have a curatorial voice, that we're talking about this design process from a V&A point of view, not necessarily from an external expert in videogames who'll come in on top of us.

ME   So that was them almost getting so excited that they wanted to sort of pitch in, curatorially?

KRISTIAN   Yeah. Although I think in the specific instance I'm talking about, it wasn't even that he would want to [make his own curatorial contributions], but that he'd get somebody else, another expert in, on top of that. And I think that's fair enough, to an extent. Because, you know, they're the people that created this and we're working directly with them. But then you have to rein that in, when they get a bit "creative."

In light of the difficulties involved in co-producing *Videogames*, it is tempting to look at the relationship between the fashion world and the museum as a template for how industries and cultural institutions can work productively together. However, when considering the frictions described above between videogame studios and the museum, it is important to also consider what these frictions signify. The subsumption of museums and their exhibitions into the work of the fashion industry is by no means an aspirational model for the future of videogame exhibitions – though the interprofessional tensions which arose throughout *Videogames*'s development made the work involved more difficult than seemed necessary, these difficulties were indicative of a worthwhile struggle, which may be preferable to outright complicity. Fashion exhibitions are developed as such intimate co-productions that they are routinely accused of overt commercialism and complicity. Valerie Steele (1998) notes the fashion industry's reputation as "capitalism's favourite child," quoting a critic of an Yves Saint Laurent exhibition at the Costume Institute at the Met in New York: "Fusing the Yin and Yang of vanity and cupidity, the Yves Saint Laurent show was the equivalent of turning gallery space over to General Motors for a display of Cadillacs" (Storr, quoted in Steele 1998). Rodner and Preece (2015) describe a 2009 Louis Vuitton exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art as an "irrefutable commercial venture" which "[blurred] the line between advertising and art" (154). While acknowledging the exhibition's success in bringing large audiences into the museum, the authors argue that the blatant corporate complicity involved in the exhibition jeopardises the museum's legitimating power, effectively "selling out" the institution itself by handing its curatorial autonomy over to the fashion house: "While museums have never been pure, there is an element of public trust that what you are seeing in a museum is museum-worthy as decided by the museum personnel. If, however, they are no longer involved in the decision-making, then this trust is quickly eroded" (156). In the previous section, I suggested that videogame exhibitions ran the risk of being instrumentalised by their industrial subjects, serving videogame studios as an extension of

their broader promotional apparatus – apparently, this worst-case scenario has already arrived in the museum via contemporary exhibitions of fashion.

It would have been relatively simple for the curators to hand over control of each games' display to its respective studio, and allow them free rein over how their work was presented. Industry trade events such as E3 or PAX, where games are shown in promotional capacities to journalists, consumers and other developers, prove that the videogame industry is thoroughly practised in public display methodologies. Of course, the *Videogames* curators were reluctant to allow participating studios to dictate the terms of their games' display, and had to actively fight for the specific interpretive framing of each work; even generally positive working relationships, such as that with Naughty Dog, required the establishment and vigilant assertion of a curatorial "voice" to avoid a surrender to complicity.[16] Anderson (2000) notes, in the context of fashion exhibitions, that this process of negotiation may be inevitable in industrial curation: "It is undeniable that the motivations of designers to co-operate with curators in having their work displayed in museums are largely about prestige, self-promotion and profit. This, allied with the fact that fashion designers are understandably fiercely protective of their all-important brand image, presents curators with persistent and sometimes delicate realities to negotiate" (375). In other words, the subservient complicity between the fashion industry and museums represents something to be actively resisted, rather than a model for useful cooperation – the struggle itself is essential to co-productive museum work. As Anderson (2000) argues, "despite the complexities of this scenario, scholarly curatorial work must embrace an acknowledgement of this commercial character of the fashion industry" (375).

In *Videogames*, the window through which the hidden processes of videogame development were eventually displayed was certainly a carefully negotiated and ultimately limited one, but was nonetheless hard-fought. While the incompatibilities which characterised the relationships between the V&A and the videogame industry would certainly have been soothed by a stronger appreciation – on the industry's behalf – of the critical function of the museum, and of cultural heritage in general, I do not want to suggest that the museum should therefore submit to the kind of instrumentalisation

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[16] This vigilance can be difficult to maintain, and standing one's curatorial ground can bear serious consequences for museums – Steele (2008, 17) describes how a planned Chanel exhibition at the Met was either "cancelled or indefinitely postponed" due to the fashion house's then-creative director Karl Lagerfeld's "persistent curatorial interference," which resulted in Chanel promptly cancelling a planned donation to the Met of US$1.5 million.

which characterises contemporary fashion exhibitions. These frictions are preferable to straightforward complicity, and as I argue below, they should be understood as a necessary aspect of critically empowered museum work.

Compatibility as criticality

Earlier, I suggested that curators working with game studios faced a paradox: in order to demonstrate the hidden practices of videogame studios, museums need the cooperation of those studios, whose preference is to keep their practices hidden. Embedded in the problems of complicity discussed in the section above are deeper curatorial concerns – a problem of criticality. How do museums display videogames in a deep and incisive way, without normalising or perpetuating their worst tendencies? Or, to put it more generally: How can museums critically engage with an industrially produced subject, given that engagement is predicated upon cooperation with the industry? Does co-production preclude criticality?

Though there are exceptions, exhibitions of videogames have historically been critically disengaged from their subjects, functioning best as a celebratory showcases or overviews rather than as any kind of argument. In a review of the Smithsonian's 2012 blockbuster *The Art of Video Games* published in *The New York Times*, Seth Schiesel reflects that the exhibition's novelty was its primary appeal, describing the curators' complacency in understanding that "the big deal with *The Art of Video Games* was merely having a video game exhibition at the Smithsonian at all," which in turn led them to "strip from the show any strong point of view or deep sense of curatorial perspective and interpretation" (2012). Though Schiesel expresses an appreciation of the significance of the exhibition's basic existence, he laments its failure to critically engage with its subject: "*The Art of Video Games* is a sanitized, uncontroversial and rigorously unprovocative introduction to the basic concepts of video games – which was, quite clearly, the point." This idea of curation as "sanitisation" resonates with Robert Smithson's theory of cultural confinement, presented 40 years earlier in an essay published in *Artforum*:

> A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. … Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomised it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement. (Smithson 1972)

In Schiesel's view, the museum and its curators had nullified any sense of "triumphalism of video games as an art form" by placing videogames in the neutralising gallery space. Instead of presenting videogames as "the brash young cultural newcomer kicking in the doors of officialdom," the exhibition was said to represent "a humble penitent carefully putting on his least-threatening outfit and being allowed to take a place in the corner" (2012). Though Schiesel seems to be concerned by the same museological process of cultural confinement that Smithson recognised in 1972, I would argue that the commercial production context of many of the games featured in *The Art of Videogames* meant that they were "reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise" long before the museum was involved. Perhaps we can consider the videogames displayed in that exhibition to be doubly confined.

This safe and uncritical mode of curation presumably suits the commercial interests of videogame studios quite comfortably – Reed (2019) refers to a press release from Irrational Games in response to the news of the inclusion of its game *Bioshock* in *The Art of Videogames*, which "describes the inclusion as an 'honor,' while including a plug for *Bioshock Infinite*, the most recent entry in the series" (41). It is easy enough to understand how the culturally confined legitimacy offered by blockbuster exhibitions would encourage videogame studios to work with museums, given that these exhibitions are unlikely to inhibit those studios' promotional strategies. Given the degree of complicity and permission required to exhibit videogames, displays which critically engage with the underlying politics and ideologies of commercial videogames are relatively rare. In her 2019 thesis, Emilie Reed documents the "dissonant display" of *America's Army* – a videogame published by the US Army primarily as a recruitment tool – in the 2004 exhibition *Bang the Machine: Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts*, held at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The exhibition featured a number of works made by independent artists – rather than commercial studios – that were overtly critical of military intervention, including C-LEVEL's *Waco Resurrection* (2004), in which players inhabit the resurrected body of cult leader David Koresh to defend against the besieging US government; and Janek Simon's *Carpet Invaders* (2002), "a mod of *Space Invaders* realized as a floor projection that replaces the graphics with motifs from Afghan rugs and images of modern weapons"(Reed 2019, 28). Alongside these artists' games and their explicitly critical political perspectives, *Bang the Machine* presented *America's Army* in apparently "neutral" terms, akin to the "sanitized" display mode of *The Art of Video Games* later recognised by Schiesel; the game was presented via "4 arcade-style consoles, a simulation of a stone

wall similar to the walls in the game, and a video on the making of the game" (Chapman 2004). Reed (2019) notes this as one of the key differences in exhibitions of artists' games, which were usually curated around strong political themes, as distinct to exhibitions of commercial videogames, which "tend to be framed as exemplary for their technological or creative qualities, with little examination of their political positions" (30). However, the seemingly innocuous – if incongruous – placement of *America's Army* alongside more explicitly political works presented it in a decidedly critical light, as Adam Chapman (2004) recounts in a review of the exhibition:

> [*America's Army*] is presented without the overt hand of the curator (i.e., there is no curatorial statement describing the reasons for the inclusion of the project), and so it could, conceivably, be read as a recognition of the massive amounts of money and work dedicated to the game. However, given the context in which *AA* is featured, this viewer found it impossible to see the project in a non-critical light. Indeed, several gallery patrons expressed shock at the presence and existence of the project. As I watched the video on the making of the game and then played the game itself, I felt both disturbed and disgusted.

Presuming that the affect produced by the juxtaposition of works – as described in Chapman's review – was a deliberate curatorial decision, we can look at the case of the *America's Army* display as an example of an exhibition critically exploring the underlying politics of proprietary work while still satisfying the demands of its proprietors. Reed (2019) paraphrases a reflection from an interview with the exhibition's curator, Henry Lowood, who "noted that the representatives of *America's Army* who he had to negotiate the display with primarily focused on the graphical and technological advancements of the game above any other themes" (29). Though *America's Army* was displayed in ways which emphasised these qualities, it seems apparent that these representatives were not fully informed of the critical context in which their work was depicted during these negotiations. The curating of *Bang the Machine* appears to have been a careful balancing act, conducted with equal measures of critical integrity, pragmatism, and guile.

This curatorial tactic – of skirting the boundaries of curatorial ethics in order to display proprietary work in a critical context – requires a canny understanding of said boundaries. Crucially, it also requires a willingness to compromise working relationships, which may not suit the collaborative goals of the public museum. At the V&A, every co-productive relationship

with external stakeholders was something to be fostered and maintained, in order to preserve the possibility of future co-productions – to cite the V&A's strategic plan again, the Museum defines "collaboration" as one of its core values, describing itself as "an empowered team, working together to achieve our vision, by building productive relationships with each other, our partners and our public" (V&A 2018c). Only rarely did museum staff display a readiness to forsake these largely hypothetical long-term relationships for the short-term sake of the exhibition; generally, the *Videogames* team tended to be overly generous in consulting videogame companies to seek permission for the works' display, even where these displays did not legally require this permission – as in the case of Studio A described at the beginning of this section.[17] This tendency stemmed from the attitudes of the Exhibitions team, who managed the formal aspects of these relationships, as well as each exhibition's tour to other institutions after their closure at the V&A – their caution was partly motivated by a professional desire to protect this touring potential, in order to pre-empt any contingencies which may arise at other venues and countries.

The complicity through which *Videogames* was developed – among other factors, which I discuss at the end of this chapter – contributed to a curatorial voice which was overtly celebratory of videogame creation and culture – as noted by Martin (2018) in his *Frieze* review cited at the beginning of this chapter, the displays offered genuine insights into the videogame-making process, but the conditions of each games' display meant that these insights were presented in polite and complimentary terms, eliding much of the invisible labour and flows of corporate power which effect that process. However, this is not to say that *Videogames*'s curators were blindly complicit in praising major videogame studios, or were happily instrumentalised as marketing tools. The exhibition was quite discursive and critical, especially relative to other blockbuster exhibitions – particularly in the "Disruptors" section, which explicitly aimed to spotlight many of the critical discourses which surround and compose the socioculture of videogames. However, this exhibition design – with an entire room dedicated to these complex discourses – meant that criticality in *Videogames*

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[17] Compounding this issue is the fact that Marie and Kristian were both employed at the V&A under fixed-term contracts, which were to last until around the time of the exhibition's closure. As I discuss in further detail in Chapter 7, this was standard practice at the V&A when hiring specialist curators for temporary exhibitions, who would work under the tenuous prospect of future work at the Museum which depended in part on the successful reception and production of the exhibition. The precarity of these curators' positions therefore meant that their calculus of acceptable risk would be very different to someone in a permanent institutional position.

felt siloed. Though it represented a substantial and essential part of the exhibition as a whole – it was by no means a cursory sidenote or token gesture – this critique of the videogame industry was both conceptually and physically walled off from the otherwise optimistic and celebratory outlook of the exhibition.

This walling-off of criticality cut both ways. In late June, less than three months before *Videogames*'s opening, the exhibition team were finalising a selection of games to be featured as part of the exhibition's display of the UCLA Game Lab's *Arcade Backpack*. As its name suggests, the *Arcade Backpack* was a portable arcade machine – a laser-cut plywood case containing a laptop and a set of arcade-style controls, which was mounted onto a backpack and toured through crowds at a number of public parties and videogame industry events throughout the 2010s. The *Arcade Backpack* was typically presented at these events with a rotating selection of work made by students and staff from the UCLA's Game Lab – a research centre within the LA-based university that approached game development through the context of fine art practice. For its exhibition in *Videogames*, staff from the Game Lab had selected a list of works to be displayed, which would be playable on the backpack in the exhibition's final room, the neon-lit "Players_Offline" section, as a kind of display-within-a-display; that morning in June, Marie was on the phone with Ana from Exhibitions, reviewing the list. One game, which here is pseudonymised as *Game B*, had fallen under their scrutiny – a game which I will not describe except to say that it was vulgar in its presentation, explicit in its content, and bleak in its tone. It was also – in Marie's opinion, as well as mine – a really striking and unique work of art, and absolutely worthy of exhibition on its own merits.

Unfortunately, an individual game and its merits had to be judged against its effect on the exhibition as a whole, and indeed the V&A as a whole. The issue with *Game B* was not that it was necessarily too provocative for the exhibition in general – *Videogames* already depicted graphic violence via FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* and intimate sexuality via Robert Yang's *Rinse and Repeat*. In these cases, though, these depictions served an analytical purpose within the broader interpretive framework of the exhibition, and this purpose could be communicated via "didactics" – text on walls and plaques accompanying the works on display, carefully composed by the curators along with the Interpretation department. Marie's concern, in the case of *Game B*, was that there was no way to contextualise its provocative elements through didactics. There was a paragraph of wall text displayed for the *Arcade Backpack* itself as its own creative project, but the exhibition design which dictated the backpack's display – which had already been

finalised, and could not be modified without drastically affecting the exhibition's increasingly inflexible production schedule – did not spatially allow for further descriptions of each of the individual games which comprised the display-within-a-display.

FIGURE 6.3. *Installation photo of the* Arcade Backpack *in* Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt. *© Matteo Bittanti, used with a CC BY-NC 2.0 license.*

Marie and Ana each voiced a concern that without this crucial interpretive context, the provocative work might elicit complaints from unassuming audiences. This itself was undesirable per the Museum's metrics for evaluating an exhibition's success, but the concern ran deeper than the prospect of negative visitor feedback. The deeper anxiety that this situation presented stemmed from what Marie described as her responsibility to display the work respectfully. Considering the tone of the room that the backpack was to be displayed in – the bright and noisy arcade space at the end of the exhibition, which was by its design and tone family-friendly – audiences would not be analytically equipped nor emotionally predisposed to digest the provocative nuances of the game. "In the space that it's in, it's just going to be too easy to take it out of context," Marie told Ana over the phone. Ana agreed, and recommended, on behalf of the Exhibitions department, that the game not be shown. However, she acknowledged that it wasn't Exhibitions' call to make – like most of the difficult decisions relating to the exhibition, this was up to the Curator of Videogames.

A decision was needed fairly quickly, and Marie and I discussed the problem a few times throughout the workday. She told me that she had faced similar problems before, outside of the Museum, putting together events with her London-based curatorial collective the Wild Rumpus. While organising one of their annual parties held at the Game Developers Conference, the Wild Rumpus wanted to show the game *Hurt Me Plenty* (2014) by Robert Yang, which Yang (2014) describes as "a short game where you spank the heck out of a dude and learn about how BDSM communities attempt to formalize consent / caring." Marie told me that they had decided to withdraw the game from the exhibition more or less at the last minute, because they felt that they couldn't exhibit it responsibly – there was no way to present this work about sex and consent in the context of that party without making it feel frivolous. The Wild Rumpus didn't want to risk exposing this game to a public who hadn't been equipped by the curators to take it seriously – Marie told me that it felt a little too easy to envision "a bunch of drunk dudes" at this videogame industry event yelling homophobic slurs at Yang's work. It's nice to know – at least in Yang's case – that Marie eventually found a way to exhibit his work responsibly, to a properly equipped audience, through *Videogames*.

Though she was nervous that UCLA's staff might perceive this as censorship, Marie ultimately decided not to include *Game B* in the *Arcade Backpack* exhibit. I helped her draft a response to be given to the Exhibitions team to communicate to UCLA – it was late, and Marie and I were the only two left in the curatorial office, and she called across the room

for help finishing and rephrasing sentences. It was slow work – we were both much too tired for it – but evidently important to her that it be treated seriously. Eventually Marie's position, and by extension the V&A's, was properly composed:

> We want to ensure that we present all work in the exhibition respectfully. Any content in the exhibition that deals with complex or controversial subject matters we feel should be shown in a way that ensures the context for the work is present and that the physical space and works it is shown alongside doesn't undermine it. … Sadly, we don't feel comfortable showcasing the game on the backpack within this space and feel it would be potentially irresponsible of us as curators to present the work in this setting.

She sent the email, and another tiny chapter within the development of the exhibition, which arose at 11:30am that morning and was now finalised at 7:30pm, was open and shut within the span of a day. It was another small but complexly mediated compromise which, to me, was then beginning to seem typical of curatorial work within the V&A. We packed up and went home.

It's a disheartening reality that the pressures and risks inherent to the development of public exhibitions – especially those developed within institutional contexts – mean that radical works are the first to be withdrawn from the public eye. I relay the account of *Game B*'s exclusion from the exhibition not to rationalise or advocate for these kinds of elision, but to describe the institutional system in which they arise. In this case, the choice to remove a work from the exhibition was a blunt one, but it was the only solution readily available that could satisfy both the production demands of the V&A and the curator's duty of care. I wouldn't argue that this removal of the work was itself an ethical or unethical decision – it's that the institutional conditions of *Videogames*'s production meant there were no other choices available. Underlying the tension presented here is a collision of curatorial ethics and institutional procedure.

Earlier, I described the pursuit of criticality in co-productive exhibition development as a balancing act. This is a little too simple, though – critical curation is not a straightforward calculus where the complicit legitimation of a problematic industry can be counterbalanced by the inclusion of more radical works. Though the selection of works is an essential aspect of the curatorial profession, the scale and operational complexity of the museum exhibition exacerbate a number of factors, both mundane and ideological, through which this seemingly simple act of selection is constrained. Critical

curatorial practice demands sensitivity; constructive responses to the ethical dilemmas which arise in the course of exhibition-making require flexibility and autonomy. However, the rigidly standardised structures of museum work directly inhibit that autonomy, and therefore inhibit the critical potential of exhibition displays.

To curate critically is to curate ethically, and to curate ethically demands a capacity to curate practically. The realities of co-productive exhibition-making mean that even while working outside of the capitalist logic of industry, tensions of this kind will inevitably be encountered and require negotiation. Though outright complicity as described in the previous section is clearly undesirable, this does not mean that working with more critically engaged collaborators will be frictionless. Regardless of context, tension and negotiation should be an expected and potentially fruitful facet of co-productive exhibition work.

"What's expected"

In the end, we're left with further questions. Given the difficulties and compromises involved in depicting commercial videogame development, why include these major studios in the first place? If co-production is such an impediment to critical curatorial work, why bother with it at all? From her background as an independent videogame curator, Marie herself had many existing ties to far less commercialised and more experimental corners of the Western game development scene – and though these relationships to noncorporate collaborators bore their own co-productive tensions, they were certainly less disruptive and troubled by the "incompatibility" of those relationships with major studios. What drove the exhibition's engagement with the AAA videogame industry?

After the exhibition opened, I asked Marie whether this focus on the more mainstream and recognisable titles felt like a concession:

ME   [The early stages of *Videogames*'s development] sounded like a very open process, where you were following your whims. But how much were you also conscious of the fact that you're also working within a museum that has its own… not agenda, but its own interests and focuses. How much did you have to wear a "museum hat" when you were doing this?

MARIE   Well, it's funny because I think a museum hat actually comes not from – the thing that I felt the pull towards – is not… for the same reason this couldn't ever be the combat and violence exhibition, it

needed to be broad.[18] The pressures about what the exhibition was going to cover were something that I consciously felt: that this is not an exploration of things Marie finds weird and wonderful, because that's way too niche. I don't feel conscious that there was pull towards, "How do you make this feel museum-y?" – it was more, "How do you speak to a bigger audience?"

So it was: "Okay, these small games are great, but we need big AAA titles in there. We need blockbuster games within this." Not that it's a compromise, but I was pulled towards spaces where I wouldn't naturally be curatorially inclined. Not in that "it's an institution," in that conventional, objects-in-a-case, stuffy sense – it's that, no, we're a big, huge platform and we need to reach a big, huge audience. And that will also be expected or anticipated, that those works – as Kieran [Long, ex-Keeper of Marie's department] always used to say – when those works are in the exhibition they elevate the other ones as well, the smaller independent ones.

ME   So it's almost this sense of public responsibility.

MARIE   Yeah. It's about what's expected. And I think, reading the space, it's like – what is the context for this show? It's a space that has quite a broad remit. And it just feels – yeah, I agree that naturally, the show needs to be that, in this space.[19] It can't be some niche exploration.

There are unavoidable realities to be acknowledged regarding the expectations of an exhibition of this scale and budget. In cynical terms, we can assume that "what's expected" of a blockbuster videogame exhibition is that it needs to support the commercial aspirations of its museum; including well-known and well-liked videogames in the exhibition – and, by extension, its marketing material – is a promising way to draw a crowd and sell enough tickets for *Videogames* to justify its substantial production budget. However, we can recall that the V&A was in a sense using the exhibition to plant a stake in the ground regarding the cultural situation of videogames: it was making a case for videogames to be understood as both a

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[18] Here Marie is referring to *Videogames*'s prehistory as a proposed exhibition about violence in videogames, as described in Chapter 4.

[19] Here Marie is referring to the physical gallery space in which the exhibition was hosted: Gallery 39 and the adjoining North Court. Early on in the development of *Videogames*, it had originally been slated to be shown in the much smaller Porter Gallery, which would have significantly affected its scope and specificity, as Marie explained: "If it had been at the Porter Gallery then yeah, you could've explored this specific niche, or this specific angle. Like, there was one concept – one of the original thoughts I'd had was really just exploring this idea of 'rebellious videogames' that was much more niche and DIY and focused on independent designers. So this is all disruptive work, none of this is AAA – I think that would work in a Porter Gallery, or could potentially work in a Porter Gallery, but perhaps wouldn't work as the first exhibition, and at that scale, for the V&A."

complex design medium and a significant form of cultural heritage. In order to demonstrate and preserve this significance as cultural heritage, the V&A needed to communicate videogames' general relevance. Though it was not explicitly codified anywhere, beyond a vague commitment in the Museum's strategic plan to "Focus and deepen the relevance of our collections and ideas in the UK" (V&A 2018c), there seemed to be a universally held expectation within the V&A that, as a public museum, its exhibitions and activities ought to be accessible to a general public. Following the definition of cultural heritage, given in the introduction to this chapter, as property which "testifies to the past," the V&A's long-term establishment of videogames as cultural heritage would require a preservation of not just the games themselves, but also a record of how they were popularly experienced as well as produced. The inclusion of AAA videogames in the exhibition was more than just a lure through which to either (cynically) sell more tickets or (less cynically) expose a general audience to more artistically valuable niche works. If mainstream, industrially made videogames represent the most visible and popular manifestations of videogames as design or culture, it follows that a cultural heritage institution ought to account for this – as difficult as that may prove to be.

This returns us to the question of how effectively *Videogames* accomplished its aim to open the "impenetrable black box" of videogame development. If the V&A wished to situate videogame development as cultural heritage, we should judge it, at least in part, by how fully it was able to "testify" to the circumstances of videogame production. Though *Videogames* was successful in that it presented a compelling and wide-ranging introduction to the practice of game development to a general public, the combined pressures of the public institution and the secretive culture of the commercial videogame industry meant that this introduction was a necessarily limited one. While its depiction of less corporatised modes of videogame practice were generally less limited and more evocative, its displays of AAA videogame development were tangibly effected by those games' studios' stifling cultural logic – its testament was therefore an incomplete one.

As described in the first part of this chapter, the curation of *Videogames* was defined by a paradox of praxis which seems more or less inherent to co-productive exhibition-making: the curators' dependence on videogame studios directly precluded their ability to fully represent those studios' practices. I suspect that unless the commercial videogame industry radically loosens its protection of its intellectual property in order to help situate and preserve its work as significant cultural heritage, or public museums become more comfortable with, and interested in, critically depicting industrial

practices without those industries' permission, the paradox will persist. Until then, the question of how to curate an exhibition of videogames which engages deeply and honestly with the process of commercial videogame production – including the unvarnished parts of that process that the industry would prefer kept secret – remains open.

In Chapter 4 of this thesis I described the bicameral nature of the contemporary V&A, which is simultaneously committed to its duties both as a cultural heritage institution and as an underfunded commercial enterprise; by a similar token, the type of co-productive exhibition work seen in *Videogames* would always need to satisfy both the commercial desires of industries and the cultural objectives of the curators. Though the videogame industry is separated from the museum by a gulf of unfamiliarity arising from incompatible values and logics, we should not take for granted that this gulf will simply disappear with time as more videogame exhibitions are made – this familiarity is established through deliberate intermediary work, which is the primary responsibility of the museum curator, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

7. Unfamiliar videogames: Curation as cultural intermediation

The previous two chapters have described an exhibition whose development was troubled by problems of translation. In Chapter 5 I described how an institutional unfamiliarity with videogames within the V&A produced tensions within the organisation, and muddied the Museum's vision of the medium and of the exhibition itself. In Chapter 6 I described how the videogame industry's general inexperience with the cultural aims and function of museums led to compromises within the development and final state of the exhibition. In either case, these difficulties arose from a mutual heterogeneity between the Museum and the videogame industry, separated by a gulf of inexperience and unfamiliarity. As the Museum's first serious engagement with videogames, *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* represented a site of tension, where these crucial differences in values and practice were made to meet, representing what Callon (1984) referred to as an "obligatory passage point" – a funnel which forces heterogeneous actors into cooperation, and anticipates a need for these actors to translate their differing needs into coherent action. In the development of *Videogames*, the burden of this "translation" fell primarily to the exhibition's lead curator, Marie Foulston.

Through an attempt to understand the work of curating *Videogames*, this chapter presents a call to re-examine the role of the curator, particularly in the context of exhibitions whose subjects are unfamiliar to their institutions. The work of curating has traditionally been understood as relating to the care and interpretation of objects (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 138), and more recently as a mediator between works and their audiences (Paul 2008, 65). Within the socioprofessional field of the museum, however, curation increasingly demands a great deal of internal negotiation and familiarisation. One of the primary duties of the contemporary curator is

that of interprofessional translation and value construction, both inside and outside the institution. Their work, in other words, is that of *cultural intermediation*: work which takes place "between, but apart from, other actors and sectors within a field of cultural production" (Perks et al. 2019, 18).

My aim is to draw attention to a largely invisible dimension of backstage curatorial labour that seemed especially prevalent in the production of *Videogames*. Throughout my fieldwork I found that – in addition to their typical outward-facing work – *Videogames*'s curators were additionally required to: (a) construct and embed an understanding of videogames within their organisation; and (b) facilitate a longer-term project of cultural intermediation between the videogame industry and the public museum. My intent in this chapter is to articulate the practices which formed this intermediary work, and determine the source of this institutional demand.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section outlines a theory of cultural intermediation, and within this context establishes Marie's intermediary position between the V&A, the cultural field of videogames, and the Museum's audiences. The second and third sections explore the intermediary work required to translate a coherent construction of videogames to the public and the V&A, respectively. The final section describes the afterlife of the exhibition, exploring its legacy within the institution and the waning of the V&A's interest in videogames, and thereby questioning the ultimate consequence of this intermediary work in context of the Museum's labour practices. Through all of this my intention is to clarify the situation of, and challenges to, the work of the curator inside an institution whose staff are generally unfamiliar with that curator's specialism.

There is a conspicuous absence within this chapter, and within the thesis as a whole – I do not account for the effect of the exhibition on the videogame makers featured within it. The omission of these practitioners' voices should not be taken as a judgement of their relevance or agency within the work of videogame curation and exhibition-making; as I explore in the concluding chapter of this thesis, museums are crucially inattentive to the needs and values of the broader ecosystem of videogame development, and this inattention should be an urgent concern for museums seeking to engage with videogames as a subject. My own inattention to the experiences of the developers featured in *Videogames*, and the exhibition's effect on their work, can be attributed to the limited boundaries of my fieldwork: in the six months I was afforded to study the making of *Videogames* I chose to focus

on the work and experiences of the people within the V&A. In Chapter 6 of this thesis I offer some account of the intermediary outreach of the curators to the videogame industry, and explore how they translated and reconciled the differing needs of both the videogame industry and the museum in order to realise the exhibition. However, this is for the most part a one-sided account from the point of view of the curators. A serious study of the experience of videogame exhibitions and other museum projects from the point of view of videogame developers – articulating the labour required to participate in these projects, exploring whom this work ultimately benefits, and examining how the intermediary work of curators shapes the practice, and the field, of videogame production – remains an underexplored and necessary avenue for future research, as I will argue further in Chapter 9 of this thesis. In the meantime, this chapter serves as an articulation of the essential interposition of the videogame curator within the professional structure of the museum, and an examination of the issues that arise within that backstage setting.

Theorising the curator as cultural intermediary

Marie's role at the V&A as the Museum's first and only Curator of Videogames meant that she was working at the interstices of multiple social and professional spheres. In the preceding chapters I described the divergent values and practices inside the Museum as an organisation, as well as outside the Museum as it interfaced with the videogame industry. The making of *Videogames* demanded that Marie navigate the varied practices of these actors and make their divergent values sensible to one another, while simultaneously constructing a representation of videogames that would be sensible, and valuable, to a general public. The fundamentally interstitial role of the Curator of Videogames – which sat at the boundaries of the Museum, the industry, and the public – suggests that much of the professional practice of museum curation, at least in contexts of exhibitions of creative industries, extends beyond conventional definitions of curatorial activity and ought to be understood as a process of cultural intermediation.

This section presents a broad outline of the concept of cultural intermediation in order to explain why I find the concept – or certain aspects of the concept – valuable as a means of complicating and expanding traditional understandings of the responsibilities of the museum curator. This is by no means a comprehensive history of cultural intermediation as a concept; rather, I have attempted to assemble a small collage of references which articulate the intermediary process and its value, in order to establish

some kind of heuristic by which the efficacy of museological engagement with videogames can be measured.

In-between-ness

The origin of the concept of cultural intermediation has been attributed to Pierre Bourdieu, in context of his 1984 sociology of the then-contemporary French economy of cultural production and consumption. The term has been associated with his recognition of a "new petite bourgeoisie" in the same text: a term which described a new class of worker which "comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation … and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (Bourdieu 1984, 359). Bourdieu positions cultural intermediaries as "need merchants," who act as tastemakers and therefore matchmakers between producers and consumers (243) and benefit as "sellers of symbolic goods and services who always sell themselves as models and as guarantors of the value of their products" (365). Identifying production and consumption as discrete fields, Bourdieu positioned cultural intermediaries between the two – acting as a "transmission belt" – which would effect the symbolic meanings of cultural goods, thereby legitimating their consumption (365). Though this initial coining of the term has been highly influential, cultural theorist Keith Negus (2002) describes Bourdieu's original framing of the concept as limited and under-demonstrated: "Bourdieu does not expand on his analysis of this group in any detailed way, and it is rather surprising that there is no real sense of the work of cultural intermediaries in his studies of artistic and literary production" (503). Instead, Negus observes that the work of developing and illustrating Bourdieu's idea via empirical research has fallen to other researchers. Noting that the concept of cultural intermediation marks a productive shift away from "unidirectional or transmission models of cultural production," Negus locates the core strength of the concept of cultural intermediaries in its recognition of the value of "workers who come *in-between* creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption)" (503).

This *in-between-ness* is, in part, why I find the concept of cultural intermediation so useful for interpreting the task of the museum curator. With respect to the curator's relationship to the museum's public, Negus's (2002) description of cultural intermediaries – whose work finds them "continually engaged in forming a point of connection or articulation between production and consumption" (503) – concords with, for example, the stated curatorial aim of *Videogames* to "demystify" the means through which videogames are produced, as explored in Chapter 6. This also

accounts for the social function of the museum at large: as described in Chapter 5, the V&A positioned itself as a pedagogical instrument which aimed to "enrich people's lives by promoting research, knowledge and enjoyment of the designed world to the widest possible audience" (V&A, n.d.a). This is compatible with the notion of interpretation as used within the V&A and within museum studies scholarship – ICOM's *Key Concepts of Museology* synonymises interpretation and "mediation," wherein interpretation is characterised as "the mediation between the museum public and what the museum gives its public to see; intercession, intermediate, mediator" (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010, 46). In a general sense, the V&A's mission to make design sensible to the public is a strategy of cultural intermediation; its exhibitions, including *Videogames*, are therefore intermediary devices through which the Museum can "continually engage" its articulation between production and consumption.

Value construction

Though the in-between-ness of the cultural intermediary is helpful for understanding the position of museums within a wider network of cultural production, I also want to specify who personally performs this work, and to what end. More recent scholarship on cultural intermediation has questioned the term's usefulness in answering these questions in specific ways, given its conceptual flexibility – Jeremy Wade Morris (2015) notes that beyond its origins with Bourdieu as a means of characterising an emerging middle class, "the term's definition [had] stretched," to the extent that "almost anyone in the chain of cultural production qualified as a cultural intermediary" (449). In an attempt to correct the "overly-inclusive, analytically-neutered" reputation of the term, Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews re-specified the concept in a 2012 paper which framed the core task of the cultural intermediary as one of *value construction* (552).

There are always many actors – both professional and non-professional[1] – within chains of cultural production, all of whom shape the symbolic

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[1] In order to illustrate the "stretching" of Bourdieu's term, Morris (2015, 449) lists deployments of the term to interpret the work of "graphic designers (Soar, 2002), television buyers (Kuipers, 2012), ratings companies (Childress, 2012), bartenders (Ocejo, 2012), record producers (Hennion, 1989), fashion designers (Skov, 2002) and even workers in roles not immediately thought of as creative or cultural, such as the accountants at record labels (Negus, 2002)." He also notes the term's usage in increasingly ambiguous occupational contexts, "with the proliferation of amateur blogging, podcasting, citizen journalism and related practices that have extended the curatorial capabilities traditionally limited to cultural intermediaries to a much larger group of individuals" (449).

meaning and physical form of the product of those chains in some way. Smith Maguire and Matthews call for a "differentiation" of cultural intermediaries from other actors within commodity chains by virtue of their position as experts and legitimators (552), which is used in their practice of "framing" goods as legitimate to end consumers (554). Though they stress that this is still a "most generic rendition of what cultural intermediaries do," Smith Maguire and Matthews suggest that cultural intermediaries should be defined through their relationship to cultural legitimacy, which they concurrently "make, and are made by" (552, 553). This helps clarify the intermediary position of the curator, whose role is defined not only by their situation between multiple social and professional spheres, but also by how they construct value between these spheres. At the V&A, this value was constructed in small concrete ways – such as convincing videogame studios of the value of working with museums – as well as in broader and more abstract contexts – such as defining videogames in general through the exhibition's thesis, thereby legitimising the medium to the Museum's public. This relationship to value distinguishes the curator from other actors within the professional ecology of the museum – the logistical responsibilities of the V&A's Exhibitions staff, for example, meant that they were more or less defined by their in-between-ness, conferring on a day-to-day basis with multiple parties inside and outside the Museum. They were not, however, "made and made by" cultural legitimacy. Exhibitions' work, though vital, did not directly shape the exhibition's construction of videogames – which was the explicit responsibility of the curator – nor did the position of Exhibitions staff really depend on their ability to "frame" videogames in a specific way.

On the other hand, a curator's position within the V&A was contingent on their specialist expertise and ability to demonstrate that expertise both inside and outside the institution. As I describe towards the end of the chapter, in the case of the making of *Videogames* this contingency was not merely symbolic, but bore serious professional consequences for the curators due to the precarious circumstances of their employment – once the exhibition closed and the curators' fixed-term employment contracts came to an end, its lacklustre performance – at least relative to the ambitious visitor targets imposed by V&A Directorate – played a significant role in determining the future of both the curators, and videogames as a medium, within the V&A.

Backstage intermediation

In the broad ecosystem of videogame production, cultural intermediaries such as curators play an important role in defining what is legitimate and how it is legitimated. The practice of non-museological videogame curation contributes to the ongoing formation of value within videogame development communities, which poses an existential challenge to public museums wishing to engage with videogames. Per Smith Maguire and Matthews's (2012) definition of cultural intermediation, facilitators of games events, festivals and showcases "make, and are made by" the legitimacy they offer to the communities of videogame practice within which they exist. This legitimacy and value is only achieved through specific, considered organisational work that is attentive to the needs of those communities (Love 2018, 71), which – in my experience as a developer as well as through my fieldwork – is not typically practised by public museums.

In their 2017 article titled "Megabooth: The Cultural Intermediation of Indie Games," games production studies scholars Felan Parker, Jennifer R. Whitson, and Bart Simon provide a detailed illustration of the function and impact of the Indie Megabooth – an exhibition space which showcased independent videogames within larger videogame industry conventions and conferences. In their paper, Parker, Whitson, and Simon consider the value offered by the Megabooth by positioning both its organisers and the space itself as cultural intermediaries, acting as "a crucial broker, gatekeeper and orchestrator of not only perceptions of and markets for indie games but also the socio-material possibility of indie game making itself" (1). The authors explore the work of the Megabooth through its interposition within the commodity chain of videogame production and consumption, and how it serves the needs of videogame makers through two intermediary channels. In its public-facing capacity as an exhibition space, the Megabooth connected games from small independent development teams, who typically lacked a marketing budget, to a mass audience of games conference attendees, legitimating these games by virtue of the Megabooth's reputation as a curatorial enterprise. Behind the scenes, however, the Megabooth was engaged in a variety of largely invisible operations and actions – the authors articulate the tendency for the Megabooth team to act as matchmakers, "arranging introductions and meetings between specific indies and powerful cultural/economic gatekeepers such as platform holders, publishers, press, pop culture 'influencers' and investors" (13). These activities are presented not as an ancillary to or side-effect of the Megabooth's exhibition work, but as a core function of the enterprise, which required a great deal of highly coordinated emotional and affective labour to maintain (14). In creating

these opportunities, the Megabooth furthers the professional careers of its exhibited game developers; meanwhile, the Megabooth's prominence as a tastemaker meant that its exhibitionary work and messaging "explicitly cued audience reception, evoking language such as 'creative', 'inventive' and 'quirky' to actively promote the idea that indie was the most aesthetically valuable and interesting sector of the game industry" (7). Per Parker, Whitson, and Simon's analysis, the Megabooth thereby contributed to the construction of both the professional ecosystem and the cultural meaning of independent videogame development.

The article's fundamental question is fairly straightforward: What does the Indie Megabooth achieve? (15) The authors' conclusion is that although it was most well known for its public role as a curator and tastemaker, in which it ascribed legitimacy and value to specific games and developers, reinforcing the popular image of "indie games" amongst the public, the Megabooth's most important contribution to indie games as an industry and community is through its backstage brokerage activities: organising sponsors, working with conference organisers, and matchmaking between developers and publishers. Though it is known for its intermediation between indie developers and the public, the Megabooth's less visible role as intermediary between indie developers and the larger games industry is described as equally important, if not more so.

Beyond their general contribution towards understanding the role of intermediaries in the cultural production of videogames, Parker, Whitson, and Simon's (2017) article is especially relevant to this chapter's analysis for how it reframes the "end user" of intermediary work. In focusing on the "layers of emotional and infrastructural labour" performed by the Megabooth staff as a cultural intermediary, the authors offer a useful emphasis on "the influence of intermediaries on upstream production and distribution processes, in addition to the more commonly described downstream consumption practices" (10, 3). In other words, the article accounts for the Megabooth's intermediation of the cultural production of indie videogames, rather than just their commercial consumption. Owing perhaps to its origins in Bourdieu's focus on habits of consumption and taste, cultural intermediation is often described through a notably commercial lens, examining how cultural objects are represented as commodities, within a broader economy of consumption. Though Negus (2002) notes that cultural intermediation generally represents a shift away from "transmission models of cultural production" from the 1970s and 80s whereby many described the making of cultural objects "in terms of analogies with assembly lines, or 'filter flow' systems, tracing the movement

of 'raw materials' from creative artist to consumer" (503), the concept is nonetheless most commonly deployed to make sense of culture's formation as commodity. Cronin and Edwards (2021) note that most scholarship on cultural intermediaries assigns them a task to "suture together the realms of culture and economy," and focuses generally on "the circulation of capitalist and consumer ideologies in the context of consumer culture" while evading deeper political analysis (4). In this chapter I am less interested in describing the museum curator's influence on how cultural products are represented and consumed than I am in understanding how the intermediary work of the curator: (a) constructs and embeds an understanding of videogames within their organisation; and (b) facilitates a longer-term project of cultural intermediation between the videogame industry and the public museum. Marie's work as Curator of Videogames should therefore be positioned within a broader structure of intermediary work and workers within the videogame industry – such as the Megabooth – and within the museum sector. If we think of the work of museums – exhibition-making and beyond – as a form of cultural production, then I am trying to understand how the interactions of the curator within the institution ultimately affect and animate that production.

Another aim of this chapter is to reframe what the curator is "in between" – I speak to cultural intermediation as much as a process than as a position, and define the curator's intermediary position not through an active, conscious process of intermediation, but rather through their situation between disconnected worlds. The role of the Curator of Videogames at the V&A was not just a selector and gatekeeper, but also a facilitator and translator between the cultural ecosystem of videogames and the professional ecosystem of the Museum – and, crucially, between various actors inside the Museum. Though the exhibition itself undeniably legitimated videogames to the public in an abstract way, much of Marie's work in constructing a perception of videogames as coherent and valuable was for the benefit of the institution itself – a process which I will explore in the sections that follow.

Making *Videogames* public

The format of the museum exhibition is by its nature a collision of disparate worlds. Curator Paula Marincola (2007) writes that exhibitions are "strategically located at the nexus where artists, their work, the arts institution, and many different publics intersect," and describes them as "the prime transmitters through which the continually shifting meaning of

art and its relationship to the world is brought into temporary focus".(9). The rest of this chapter is devoted to tracing the "strategic location" of *Videogames*, and identifying how it brought meaning into focus. In her role as Curator of Videogames, Marie acted as the connective tissue in between three divergent groups: the museumgoing public, the videogame industry, and the professional ecosystem of the V&A itself. The curation of *Videogames* positioned Marie as a crucial point of filtration who could interface fluently between the Museum and the videogame industry, helping to understand the heterogeneous needs and expectations of either world and allow cooperative work to occur, in order to present a coherent vision of videogame production to a general audience.

Just as Parker, Whitson, and Simon (2017) asked what the Indie Megabooth's intermediary work achieved, this chapter aims to explore the outcomes of the curation of *Videogames* beyond the simple fact of the exhibition's opening. What did the curation of *Videogames* achieve? What was the effect of this intermediary work? In the following two sections I explore the exhibition's impact on two of the groups identified above – the public and the V&A itself. The public museum curator working with a subject unfamiliar to their institution will inevitably have to fight multiple battles on entirely different fronts. Through this exploration I am looking to clarify how the curator serves these two groups through different methods and to different ends.

Phantom publics and audience advocacy

Though I will argue that the curators' intermediary efforts saw its clearest impacts behind the scenes of the V&A, this is not meant to imply that the public were a minor consideration in the development of *Videogames*. As I describe in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the contemporary V&A was deeply concerned with its relationship to its audiences, motivated by both a pedagogical impulse and ever-present commercial pressures. This was also true of its curators, whose publicly stated goal, described in Chapter 6), was to articulate the intricacies of videogame production to a general audience – opening the "black box" of videogame development. This accords with the contemporary "new museological" understanding of museums, curators and their relation to society: Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes that museums have grown past their definitional relationship to their objects and collections and have come to be defined "more than ever by their relationship to visitors" (138); Kreps (2003) expands on this redefinition to argue that curators now use objects primarily as a means of relating to their audiences.

Approachability and relevance to a general audience was a significant factor in the development of *Videogames*, and influenced the selection of works and display strategies employed in its final form. The exhibition balanced a selection of relatively obscure independent games with higher-profile and higher-budget titles. As Marie expressed in an interview quoted in the previous chapter, *Videogames* would not be "an exploration of things [she found] weird and wonderful, because that's way too niche" – the exhibition featured blockbuster works in part to "speak to a bigger audience." This was not just an imperative from the Museum, but part of what interested Marie in curating more generally. "I've always been really interested in translating videogames and stories into public spaces," Marie later told me of her ambitions as a curator. "I think one of the things that I'm drawn to is problem solving. Of finding a really interesting story, or concept, and working out how you communicate or translate that into a public space, so that people understand it in a different way – become aware, or suddenly look at it in a different way."

How, then, was this broad view of videogames encoded into the exhibition and presented to the audience? In *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*, Sharon Macdonald (2002, 157) describes an exhibition's invocation of a "phantom public" throughout its development, who are an exhibition's hypothetical or idealised audience. These "spectral or virtual visitors" are imagined in order to inform practical matters of spatial and informational design, but also how visitors might relate to the exhibition more abstractly; in the case of Macdonald's ethnography, she examined how the Science Museum's development of an exhibition about food attempted to contribute to a general public understanding of science (157–58). *Videogames* was similarly designed for the benefit of an imagined public, in terms of both its overall curatorial aims and its concrete details. The envisioning of hypothetical audiences was a standardised practice at the V&A, as a formal museological strategy as well as part of the tacit methods which comprised daily work. In the regular production meetings which comprised so much of the work of making *Videogames*, decisions relating to the exhibition's content were frequently made by imagining how they would affect or be accessed by a hypothetical visitor. I recall, for example, meetings spent scrutinising the unbuilt exhibition's floor plan to identify areas with longer expected "dwell times" to anticipate potential bottlenecks in visitor flow; another meeting involved a half-hour debate to try and agree on how

best to instruct visitors on how to make the player-character of *The Graveyard* sit down on a bench.[2]

It should be noted that while the thesis of the exhibition was established by Marie as well as Kristian, this framing of videogames for a "phantom public" was not exclusively the task of *Videogames*'s curators. This responsibility of taking the raw materials of an exhibition – the exhibition's aims, objects, text, et cetera – and carefully refining them, in order to effectively convey a particular construction of videogames to the public, was distributed throughout the Museum in a variety of professional contexts. The V&A's Interpretation team, who guided the writing and editing of the exhibition's interpretive text, are especially crucial in working out how best to encode an exhibition's offerings for public consumption. Asha, the Interpretation Editor assigned to *Videogames*, described her position in the development process to me as an "audience advocate" – she was there to negotiate with *Videogames*'s curators to ensure that a hypothetical visitor could feel engaged and comfortable. She was careful to explain to me that this did not mean that she was there to reductively simplify the content of the exhibition so that it could be maximally accessible to every visitor; rather, the job of Interpretation was to "thread the needle of accessibility" – to simultaneously avoid alienating newcomers and patronising experts. Asha was clear that the V&A fully expected that a large portion of visitors to this exhibition would be "gamers," which I'd heard elsewhere – there was a sense that a major demographic of this exhibition would be people who were already "bought in" on videogames as a subject, and so there was especially less need to hold most visitors' hands through the exhibits, though they still needed to cater for a broader and presumedly intelligent audience.[3] In other words, their job was to shape the curators' text into a clear and coherent informational hierarchy that could be followed

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[2] Abbreviated list of proposed instructional captions:
   "Walk to the bench and wait a moment to sit down."
   "Use the joystick to head towards the bench and wait a moment to sit down."
   "Walk to the bench and rotate the joystick to turn around and sit down."
   "Once you're at the bench, turn around and don't press any buttons to sit down."

[3] This echoes the recommendation of the Museum's official document "Gallery Text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide," which reports that "41% [of visitors] had completed a university degree or equivalent qualification," and 25% had a postgraduate degree or equivalent. "From this we might assume that our visitors tend to be well educated. This is in part true, but the one most important thing to remember is that they are unlikely to be educated in the subject you are writing about" (V&A 2018d, 8).

throughout the exhibition space, through processes of writing, design, and then extremely detailed editing.

This editing was a highly collaborative process between the curators and Interpretation, with further oversight from Exhibitions to ensure that all proposed changes were logistically feasible. Interpretation meetings were typically very long and mentally tiring – I recall one meeting with Marie, Kristian, Asha, and Ana from Exhibitions, which involved working through every piece of didactic text in the exhibition's first section, "New Designers," to digest and incorporate various bits of feedback which had come in from other parts of the Museum, as well as generally proofread and edit where needed. With every piece of text printed in a large stack – over a hundred in total – we worked through the pile gradually over a span of three hours, as Asha scribbled notes on the prints. Most text panels were marked up in some way: sometimes to clarify certain facts; other times for readability.[4] Some examples of changes proposed:

- Asha noted that the titles supplied for Jenny Jiao Hsia's works were very long and descriptive, and asked if they could be shortened so as not to bombard the viewer with long sentences of large-type title text. Some time was spent trying to backtrack and figure out who originally wrote them before Ana recalled that they were supplied by Hsia in her loan agreement, likely written as a straightforward description without an understanding of the intended display context. Shorter titles were drafted, to be sent to Hsia by Ana for approval.[5]

- The head of the Museum's Research department took issue with text describing the architecture shown in a piece of *Bloodborne* concept art as "Victorian Gothic" – though this was the language used in the game's marketing copy, it's not actually accurate. Kristian, who wrote the first draft of the panel text, said he was happy just to describe it in vaguer terms.

- A senior staff member from V&A Commercial had suggested that the large panels which introduced each displayed game with factual information – title, developer, year of release, et cetera – could also list that game's total sales figures to date. This was considered to be a

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[4] A significant portion of Interpretation meetings were spent collectively trying to think of alternate phrasings or synonyms for particular words – writing wall-text at the V&A was guided by an almost superstitious fear of using the same word twice in a given paragraph.

[5] For example, a paper prototype that was originally titled by Hsia as *Weighing scales scene interstitial (an advert that appears in a separate browser window while you wait for a webpage to load)* was retitled with permission to *Weighing scales scene advert.*

slightly odd editorial overreach from the Commercial team, and Marie met it with a firm "no" – she argued that studios are typically hesitant to make that information public, and they don't want to reduce any games' success down to its commercial performance anyway.

Towards the end of the editing session, everyone was a little delirious. It was an hour past the scheduled end of the meeting, and everyone had started moving more quickly through the stack of texts, no longer scrutinising anything with the same critical rigour as two hours earlier. Every now and then a problem was met with a tired groan – "it's too hard to care about this anymore."

In the end, though, this agonisingly fine-grained work had a profound impact on the final exhibition. After *Videogames*'s opening, I heard several staff praise the exhibition's "flow," referring to its ability to lead audiences through its displays in a steady and cogent manner. This was occasionally expressed in derisive comparison to an exhibition running concurrently to *Videogames* in the gallery next door – *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up* – which, though extremely well-attended, was considered somewhat confusing in its interpretive approach, and generally difficult to follow.[6] This was attributed in part to the fact that its interpretive elements had been outsourced to a freelance editing company, who reworked its text in isolation – as a result, the muddled flow and confusing hierarchy of information led to severe bottlenecks in the exhibition space as crowds lingered around large constellations of text panels. In the case of *Videogames*, however, the team's persistent attention to its interpretive framing, informed by the clarity and specificity of the curators' vision, resolved the exhibition into a coherent intermediary device.

Public outcomes

Beyond the outcomes of this detail work, though, it is ultimately quite difficult to holistically assess the impact of *Videogames* as an intermediary device. Measuring the impact of museums on their publics and on society at large is a deeply complex research process (see Mileham 2021) which is well beyond the remit of this project. Given the methodological scope of my research, much of my understanding of the reception of *Videogames* outside the Museum, and the intermediary framing of videogames it provided to its audiences, has been informed by responses in the press, academia, and on

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[6] One gallery attendant, responsible for guiding visitors through the exhibitions, described *Frida* to me with exasperation: "It's a beautiful exhibition, of course, but it's a complete mess."

social media.[7] Multiple reviews of the exhibition praised its provision of a complex construction of videogames which was still accessible to newcomers. Suzie Thomas's (2019) review in *The Museum Review* reflected that although many of its attendees seemed to already be engaged with videogames and thus "clearly felt served by the exhibition and its topics," *Videogames* provided "enough information and explanation for the outsider to this world to feel that the exhibition is intended for all." Thomas also emphasised the strength of the exhibition's use of voices to remind audiences of the people who make and play the games on display; this emphasis was echoed by Gareth Damien Martin (2018), whose review for *Frieze* noted that although the exhibition replicated some of the videogame industry's worst tendencies regarding the anonymity of its labour, *Videogames* was compelling for its refocusing of the medium through a humanistic lens: "'*Design/Play/Disrupt*' is not about to dismantle this orthodoxy, but it admirably provides, through acknowledging the importance of the design process of individual creators and teams, an access point for thinking of games as processes which are run by people, not code."

Responses from within the professional sphere of videogames – game makers, specialist press, and so on – were generally positive. Covering *Videogames* for *Kotaku UK*, Laura Kate Dale described it as "an exhibit I could take my mum to and get her to understand a bit more of the maturity of the industry I work in," and praised it for "how well it in places managed to show games off as more than what the general public might expect them to be" (Dale and Stanton, 2018). One of the exhibition's participants, game developer Robert Yang, praised the simultaneous depth and accessibility of the exhibition in an account of his visit:

> When I revisited the exhibition a few days later, I got to witness a dozen British grandparents patiently watching the opening of the 2017 *League of Legends* Finals. As they watched these preppy teenage nerd gangs cruise each other in an eerie forest, swearing brutal merciless East Asian nerd revenge upon each other, all these little text pop-ups annotated and explained what was happening in the video.
>   Maybe that's also what feels different with this exhibition: the understanding that there's so much to explain and unpack and evoke. Most other exhibitions often leave it at "*Minecraft* wow!", or omit the cultural and social aspects of games entirely. I mean, this show still only spends like 3 minutes on

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[7] This is obviously quite a tenuous and ad-hoc methodology in and of itself. The responses to the exhibition quoted in this chapter are each coming from highly specific positions, and I am cautious about their generalisability towards a broader public impact.

e-sports, but that's still 3 minutes more than anyone else.
(Yang 2018b)

This calls attention to both the curatorial aspirations of the exhibition and the mode of those aspirations' delivery. In recognising the effect of "all these little text pop-ups" – which were composed through a similar process of collective copyediting as described above – Yang is gesturing toward a larger process of cultural intermediation: how the curators' construction of videogames – a significant design discipline with its own complex cultures of play and spectatorship – was written into the exhibition and then received by audiences.

While these responses convey a sense of the effect of the exhibition on the public's understanding of videogames, I am hesitant to extrapolate from them too eagerly. The response to the exhibition was broadly positive, and is assumed to have been successful to some extent in furthering a public understanding and legitimation of videogames as a cultural product, but this sense of success is highly abstract. In the course of my research I have seen very little materially tangible evidence of *Videogames*'s reverberation in the public beyond its opening, attendance, and immediate response. This is not to say that the exhibition did not make an impact – as mentioned, measuring the impact of the exhibition on the public conception of videogames would be a much more involved sociological undertaking, well beyond the scope of this thesis. With this in mind, I can only really account for the most visible and immediate traces of the exhibition's public legacy, which are few and far between but nevertheless extant.

Institutionalising videogames

In order to facilitate the outward-facing work of representation – research, selection, display – that characterise the curator's role during the development of exhibitions, the scale and complexity of the public museum as an organisation produces a demand for constant internal negotiation and articulation. During her tenure at the V&A, Marie was tasked not only to develop *Videogames* as a temporary exhibition, but also to define the Museum's position on videogames more generally and impart that definition throughout the organisation through intermediary labour. With this section I will attempt to describe the process of – and obstacles to – *Videogames*'s curators' intermediary efforts to "institutionalise" videogames inside the V&A.

When I first began this project, long before I had gone "behind the scenes" of any museum, my research was driven by a fairly naive enquiry: *How do*

museums understand videogames? The question was necessarily vague, and compelled by my own sense of confoundedness when facing the public museum as an institution, in all its mystifying opacity. Before I entered the V&A, the motivations behind its engagement with videogames seemed inscrutable, and I wanted to understand where this interest was generated and how it guided the exhibition's development. Through the course of my fieldwork, as I grew more familiar with the V&A as an organisation, my question was not so much answered as it was slowly dissolved until it felt essentially nonsensical, and was eventually forgotten entirely as I became preoccupied in my attempts to keep up with the day-to-day work of making the exhibition. The question occurred to me again on the eve of the exhibition's opening, when V&A Director Tristram Hunt (2018) published an editorial in the *Evening Standard* titled "Why there's room for both Da Vinci and *Minecraft* at the V&A," which could be read as a kind of manifesto for the Museum's ongoing interest in videogames:

> As the leading encyclopaedia of art, design and performance, our mission is to showcase ingenuity to spark the imagination of tomorrow's artists and designers. Video games – with their fusion of art and technology – are long overdue such recognition.

Reading the article, I found myself struck by a feeling of disillusion. Before my fieldwork began, this would have been an incredibly exciting and pivotal point of data for my research: a clearly articulated explanation of how and why the V&A was working with videogames, written by the Director himself. After five months behind the scenes, though, this stated interest in videogames rang hollow – this felt less like an earnest defence of the position of videogames within culture, and within the remit of the institution, and more like the straightforward reproduction of prepared marketing copy. The editorial was transparently written around the same handful of bullet points that formed the basis of *Videogames*'s curatorial thesis: it rejected the notion of justifying videogames' significance through its commercial performance; it hailed new design possibilities prompted by recent technological changes; it deployed the same quote – "Games are operas made of bridges" – that was displayed at the exhibition's entrance. These were the same talking points I'd heard from Marie and Kristian at the exhibition's press launch back in April, and in various meetings, documents and presentations since.

In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I outlined a rough genesis for the V&A's interest in videogames. There was never any top-down institutional demand for a videogame exhibition specifically; *Videogames* emerged from the V&A's

Design, Architecture and Digital curatorial department, specifically from then-Keeper Kieran Long, as part of a more general push from then-Director Martin Roth for the Museum to pursue contemporary design and digital subjects. Marie was hired to define the institution's interest in videogames as a subject through this exhibition's thesis, which would position the medium in context of the V&A's history as a design museum. Rather than trickling down from its senior staff, the V&A's interest and institutional framing of videogames had bled upwards from its curators through a largely invisible process of cultural intermediation. In developing *Videogames*, Marie was not only curating an exhibition – she was also developing an institutional understanding of videogames as a museological subject, which was intended, at least initially, to be used as an ideological basis for future exhibition and collection work, as part of a broader push for the exhibition to engage more deeply in digital design and culture.

In order to produce a coherent exhibition which could function as an intermediary device, Marie had to construct the value of videogames, not only for the sake of the public, but also for the benefit of the V&A itself. This was part of the explicit standardisation of the Museum's exhibition development process: amongst other points, an early design brief outlining the "key objectives" of *Videogames* described an aim "[t]o introduce videogames as an area of digital collecting that the V&A is keen to engage with in future" as well as "[t]o expand and build relationships in the videogame industry." This long-term interest was part of the Museum's public messaging, too – a press release from *Videogames*'s announcement quoted the Director describing the exhibition as "building on our active interest in videogames" and expressing the V&A's eagerness to "investigate this exciting and varied design field." (Tristram Hunt, quoted I. Taylor 2018)

Within the day-to-day toil of exhibition production, the long-term intermediary task of embedding a deeper understanding of videogames within the Museum was not an urgent or even conscious priority for the Curator of Videogames – certainly not within the six months of exhibition development I saw, which was focused largely on practical problem-solving and logistical coordination between departments. However, so much of the interdepartmental work of making *Videogames* relied on a common framing of the medium and its communities – as I have described in Chapter 6) – that this intermediary work was not only necessary, but also to some extent unavoidable. Though establishing a familiarity with videogames at the institutional level was in some sense a fairly abstract or theoretical pursuit, a great deal of the daily work of the *Videogames* team was shaped by, and

responsive to, different staff members' familiarity and unfamiliarity with the exhibition's subject. In introducing videogames to the V&A as an institution, the curators were also required to introduce videogames to a number of individual staff members in order to facilitate the interdepartmental work required to produce an exhibition. In this section I mean to frame this backstage work – to embed a familiarity of videogames at the V&A, both at the individual and institutional level – as serious and significant cultural intermediary work, and one of the core activities of the curator working in a specialised field of expertise.

Videogame literacies

This intermediary work was necessitated by the fact that the V&A, in general, lacked a familiarity with videogames as an exhibition subject. Though nobody was ever derisive or dismissive of the Museum's engagement with the medium as far as I saw, many staff confessed a lack of familiarity or interest in videogames generally, the consequences of which I discuss below.

Videogames are a very complicated form of media – both in terms of technical complexity but also in terms of the enmeshed cultures that surround it – and so different forms of understanding and expertise were required to work with games in the context of developing an exhibition. Materially speaking, videogames are a fragile technological medium, and many staff such as AV technicians, exhibition designers, and the Exhibitions management team needed a familiarity with the varied technical properties and requirements of the exhibitions' games in order to perform their job effectively, ensuring that the works present in the gallery were functional and interactable and could withstand the high turnover of players that comes with public display. Beyond this technical complexity, which is typically hidden from a game's end user, videogames can be difficult works to interface with even at face value, both cognitively and bodily – as Keogh (2018) writes, "Videogames require a competency that is at once a learned physical behavior and a means of 'reading' and engaging with the videogame's semiotics" (90). Understanding how videogames are played and discussed was central to several roles relating to the exhibition – this kind of literacy, inclusive of both the immediate experience of videogame play and the broader textual elements of given works, was especially important to a department such as Interpretation, whose staff needed to not only understand these concepts but also make them legible to a less literate exhibition visitor.

This lack of these institutional literacies around videogames is, of course, what prompted Marie's hiring in the first place. The intermediary task of familiarising the V&A's staff with videogames, and thereby defining what videogames meant to the V&A as an institution, was not a conscious part of the curators' daily work, but rather an ever-present challenge which suffused and informed this activity. In the anecdote in the previous section describing the work of editing the exhibition's interpretive wall texts, for example, I described a moment when the curators were asked by a senior staff member to include the sales figures of each work on display, which they rejected. This refusal was, in a sense, an act of construction – another tiny step in the gradual push towards a common understanding of how the exhibition and the V&A valued videogames: for their complexity as a design medium, rather than their ability to generate capital.

While this gap of familiarity was typically latent, it was occasionally encountered in more obvious ways. In early August, about a month before the exhibition opened, the *Videogames* team – the curators, along with staff from the Exhibitions and Interpretation departments – ran a kind of ad-hoc playtest of the exhibition's "interactives" in the basement of the Museum's Henry Cole wing. On a series of hastily wired monitors and keyboards, phones, and custom-built arcade cabinets made by Scottish studio We Throw Switches, ten of the playable games due to feature in the exhibition – as opposed to the many other games which were shown through non-interactive displays – lined the walls of the fluorescent-lit room.[8] A posting on the V&A's intranet invited all Museum staff to drop in to preview the games and leave any thoughts on notepads placed by each setup.

The stated purpose of the playtest was to see if newcomers to the exhibition would be able to intuit how to interact with these works based on their accompanying text panels developed by the curators and Interpretation. In addition to a notepad for immediate feedback, this was an opportunity for the *Videogames* team to observe how people would interact with these games when encountering them "cold." This was an ad-hoc process for the Museum, with no real analogue nor precedent – though so much of the exhibition's development was conducted according to the V&A's established exhibition-making process, this playtest was prompted by a recognition by

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[8] The ten games featured were: *The Graveyard* by Tale of Tales (2008); *how do you Do It* by Nina Freeman et al. (2014); *Rinse and Repeat* by Robert Yang (2015); *A Series of Gunshots* by Pippin Barr (2015); *Enviro-Bear 2000* by Justin Smith (2009); *Queers in Love at the End of the World* by Anna Anthropy (2013); *QWOP* by Bennett Foddy (2008); *Breakup Squad* by Catt Small (2016); *Consume Me* by Jenny Jiao Hsia (unreleased); *Line Wobbler* by Robin Baumgarten (2015).

the *Videogames* team of the technical fragility and cultural ambiguity of the works featured. Though it was not the explicit intent of the *Videogames* team, the presentation of these games to the V&A's internal staff would also confront the multilayered unfamiliarities of the wider institution – many staff had little to no prior experience playing videogames, so this playtest would serve as an introduction to the exhibition as well as the medium itself.

FIGURE 7.1. *Playtesting the exhibition's interactives in the basement.*
© Marie Foulston, used with permission.

The invitation drew a mix of staff from a broad range of departments. Many staff seemed curious about the games but unsure of how to interact with the hardware before them, or were otherwise nervous about playing games in this public setting. I watched several staff approach and gingerly press a few buttons before stepping away. One person lingered around the cabinets for a while, seemingly interested in spectating others but hesitant to touch anything themselves, until one of the Exhibitions team beckoned them over to play *Consume Me* – "this one's about counting calories!" – at which they made an excited noise and hurried over. Several staff were more comfortable and confident in approaching these machines; these more "literate" staff generally skewed younger, and tended to be closer to the professional orbit of the exhibition – for example, staff who were directly

working on *Videogames*, as well as their close colleagues who were more familiar with the content of the exhibition, such as other curators from the department of Design, Architecture and Digital. Evidently the work of making the exhibition had begun to acculturate certain parts of the Museum's staff to the distant world of videogames, though this process was incremental and abstract.

The cultural intermediary as bottleneck

Most commonly, though, the V&A's departments and staff members' lack of literacy manifested as what I would describe as an anti-literacy – an active apprehension or aversion to videogames which created issues during the exhibition's development. Videogames as a subject were in no way derided or scorned by Museum staff, but certain departments appeared to be regularly paralysed by what they perceived as a lack of experience with games as a subject, which resulted in a general lack of agency or proactivity regarding certain aspects of the exhibition. In various internal meetings, I would regularly hear staff preface suggestions or questions with "I'm not a games person, but–"; I noticed a broad sense of anxiety from Museum staff across various departments that they weren't properly equipped to speak about games authoritatively.[9] This is understandable – the cultural and technical complexities of videogames can be intimidating and alienating, resulting in a sense that an interest in games signifies, or requires, an identification with the "gamer" subculture, which self-identified outsiders are quick to exclude themselves from (Shaw 2011). The heavily gendered hegemonic culture which permeates mainstream videogame play compounds this; as Keogh (2018, 77) notes, this intimidating complexity is central to contemporary videogame design and play: "The competencies demanded by videogames … are both fundamental to their expressive ability and exclusionary of anyone not able to obtain those competencies."

The relative singularity of their expertise left the curators as the sole authority on videogames across the whole Museum. As a result, a huge amount of work had to be filtered through them, and most initiative for exhibition-adjacent programming and other activity still had to originate from the curators. In this sense, the curators' intermediary position created a kind of informational and operational bottleneck – since nobody else in the Museum could fulfil this intermediary role, a sense of inertia

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[9] Marie once bemoaned this preclusionary tendency of the Museum's staff when talking about videogames: "I wonder if the embroidery curators go into marketing meetings and get told, 'You'll have to excuse me because I don't know much about medieval embroidery.'"

accumulated in other departments, and the curators were typically required to instigate any kind of videogame-related activity beyond the exhibition itself. The curators were therefore required to perform a great deal of work beyond their official remit; Marie would occasionally express frustration that this lack of proactivity from other departments created an expectation that the success of the exhibition rested entirely on her and Kristian, even after they'd offer other departments recommendations. In an interview published in the journal *ROMchip*, Marie described this internal intermediation:

> We, as curators, would go out to different departments. As the exhibition spooled up to opening, all the departments plugged in. Me and Kristian would go out and do our song-and-dance routine, this perfectly perfected overview of the exhibition, so people could understand the concepts. That would give them enough to start developing programs, and we did that with the Learning team. They developed workshops and programming that ran along the exhibition, but because of the scale of the V&A, it was never as collaborative a process as I would have wanted it to be. That's not just true of Learning. It was true of the other departments. That's not a reflection on the people in those teams. It's a reflection on the scale of the institution. (Foulston, quoted in DiBella 2020)

Since other departments lacked the confidence to act as intermediaries in the curators' stead, opportunities for broader programming and partnerships seemed to fall through the cracks unless Marie and Kristian were personally directing things, though even that was not always sufficient.

> We also had ambitions to make the exhibition space more active. A museum's role is not just creating exhibitions … We had these ideas that the Players_Online section, with a big screen, could become an event space where we'd hold tournaments. Maybe we'd get speed runners in and do events during the run of the exhibition. None of that materialised. (Foulston, quoted in DiBella 2020)

The bottlenecked access of the Museum to the videogame industry meant that relatively few relationships between the two were evident beyond the works in the exhibition itself. When *Videogames* opened, it was accompanied by a fairly tame program of events which were largely disconnected from the videogame production practices that were represented in the exhibition – instead, a handful of workshops were run by creative technologists and craftspeople – which seemed more in keeping with the V&A's remit as a museum of applied arts – as well as a series of introductory classes on game design run by a visiting game designer.

This intermediary mode of curatorial labour – building relationships between various external stakeholders and internal Museum staff, as well as between various groups within the organisation – was by no means unique to the development of *Videogames*. This kind of work, attributable to the essential *in-between-ness* of the curator, is a crucial aspect of any curatorial project, even those whose subjects are more comfortably established within the operations of a given institution. Exhibitions inevitably require intermediation. However, I suspect that there was something distinct about the situations of Marie and Kristian, as the sole intermediaries in such an expansive backstage network: the particular demands of their backstage position extend beyond the definitions of cultural intermediation explored above, and may better be described as a kind of *intra-mediation*.

The uneasy position of videogames as a highly specialised subject within the V&A compounded the complexities of this intermediary work, and had a multiplicative effect on all associated labour. In Chapters 1 and 5 I described the imposing rigidity of the Museum's standardised systems of exhibition production – the V&A's "exhibitionary regime" – which limited the experimental horizons of the exhibition, and its possibilities of display. The effect of the curators' intermediary position, which made all work relating to videogames an uphill struggle of some kind, may explain why the exhibitionary regime was so difficult to contest. Ultimately, the unfamiliarity of videogames within the V&A restricted the creative ambitions and accomplishments of the exhibition and its associated programming.

Critical isolation

Beyond these day-to-day operational difficulties, the institution's unfamiliarity with videogames may have hurt the exhibition in less immediate ways. In an interview, Marie expressed a concern that *Videogames* had not been internally subjected to the same critical rigour usually granted to V&A exhibitions.

> All the way through, I had this anxiety of: are people not pushing back because they feel that they don't know this space well enough? And as such they don't feel confident enough to critique or to interrogate it, perhaps in the way they would subjects where they feel like they're perhaps on more solid ground, or there's other people who share that expertise in the institution.

I'd heard a few off-the-record stories about exhibitions whose curatorial content had been seriously questioned and intervened with at various stages of development: by the V&A's Exhibition Steering Group at the proposal

stage; by senior curatorial staff at the later development stages; in one particularly stressful case, by executive staff from the V&A's Commercial arm, several weeks after an exhibition had opened. *Videogames*, for the most part, experienced very little of this kind of internal critique.

This was true even from the curators' colleagues within the Design, Architecture and Digital department. Though they were broadly supportive of the work of Marie and Kristian, the other curators within the department seemed to lack both the requisite knowledge in videogames as a subject, and the self-assurance to critically discuss the exhibition's content in spite of this, which meant that the exhibition was curated in a kind of critical vacuum, at least relative to more tradition museological subjects such as architecture and contemporary design. This is not to say that the department was entirely unhelpful – the curators appeared well supported on more general aspects of exhibition-making, such as questions of exhibition design, or display methods, or navigating the complex organisational politics and procedures of the V&A. The videogame-specific aspects of the exhibition, however, felt comparatively unchallenged, as Marie related:

> If you're working on an architecture show here, you have so many people who have experience in architecture … [within the Department of Design, Architecture and Digital] you have all these people who have this awareness. Even if they're not architecture specialists, they know things; they know the core history; they know the core things about that design medium. For videogames, the only thing people would say to me a lot of the time is, like – "Oh, I don't play games, I'm not a gamer," and that's kind of where it ends. Because videogame design is so disconnected from other fields of design.
>
> This comes back to that anxiety that I had, about: "Are people not interrogating this enough, because they don't feel confident enough?" What would this exhibition have been like, still maintaining that control and that creative leadership, but being in a space where that would have been challenged? In a space where you can bounce ideas off of people?

According to Marie, the strongest concern anyone in the Museum expressed about the exhibition was its original title, *Rebel Videogames*: "I have people expect a narrative where the museum pushes back against it, but the biggest pushback was just about the title, to be honest. Never really about the content." The intermediary position of the curators, as the only source of expertise on the subject within the organisation, meant that their work was challenged in many small ways but rarely critically examined at the

conceptual level. This culminated in a feeling of insecurity on Marie's part by the time the exhibition opened:

> Knowing that this exhibition was trying to do something different, I was expecting more pushback. And the lack of pushback made me consider: is that happening because people don't feel confident pushing back? Even if we are doing something radically different, is it going to have been interrogated enough to hold up to scrutiny? Because this is the first exhibition I've worked on at this scale, and I've never worked in an institution before, so I'm expecting that I need to be beaten around a bit more, to have the exhibition moulded into something. … I could see other exhibitions that had much more pushback than ours, which made me think – is it because we're doing everything perfectly? Or is it because you're too scared?

This complicates a point made in Chapter 5, where I argued that the development of *Videogames* had been relatively pleasant and frictionless due to the V&A's thoroughly standardised exhibition-making process. The lack of critical attention paid to the exhibition – a productive friction that is typical of exhibition development at the V&A – suggests that *Videogames*'s developmental smoothness may ultimately have been to the exhibition's detriment. Though the V&A's exhibition-making procedure was thoroughly standardised, its critical interrogation methods seemed more poorly codified, and so an exhibition as large – and expensive – as *Videogames* was produced more or less under the radar of the V&A's senior staff, and largely independent of the community of critique afforded to other exhibitions.

The exhibition as intermediary device

In spite of the unfamiliar position of videogames within the institution, and the impediment this had on the exhibition's production, I noticed that the intermediary labour which was once the sole remit of the curators gradually became shared by other staff. Very late in the exhibition's development, it was clear that a small handful of staff – those who were very close to the making of the exhibition – had adopted some confidence, to varying degrees, in talking about videogames with a clear sense of authority. This process had begun before my arrival at the V&A; at the time of his hiring as the exhibition's Research Curator, Kristian was a keen videogame player, but had a comparatively limited understanding of the processes of videogame development and the structure of its industry. Through working towards Marie's vision for the exhibition, and while both were working under the guidance of the department's Keeper, Kieran Long, he quickly

became sensitised to these methods and was thereby empowered to act more independently as an intermediary, particularly when reaching out to videogame studios – as he described to me, "It was interesting finding out how difficult it was to speak to certain studios, and how forthcoming some were, and some weren't. And Marie obviously had a bit more of an idea [than me] of what that might be." The Exhibitions department also became well versed in the attitudes and sensitivities of the exhibition's featured game developers due to their frequent communication with these participants, empowering them in more limited capacities to act as literate intermediaries, for instance when detailing the technical demands of the exhibition's interactive works to the Museum's AV technicians, or when explaining to the Conservation department how certain developers required their loaned sketchbooks to be handled and displayed.

This ability to contribute to the work of making the exhibition did not require a pre-existing interest or expertise in videogames – just a willingness to engage with it like any other exhibition subject. When I spoke with Asha, *Videogames*'s assigned Interpretation Editor, she was upfront with me that prior to working on the exhibition she had almost no experience playing videogames, even on a casual basis. This was never a major barrier, though – researching unfamiliar subjects was all part of the job; her last exhibition before *Videogames* was *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics*, which featured another creative medium about which she initially knew very little. Though she began work as a total outsider to videogames, the demands of her role meant that she gradually grew more familiar with the medium, its production, and its surrounding discourses – her professional proximity and access to Marie and Kristian meant that she was able to have the complex concepts of the exhibition – and others more tangentially related – introduced and explained to her, which was then built upon by her own process of independent research. Her acculturation to videogames was deliberate and methodical: as unfamiliar concepts or works arose in the development of the exhibition she'd make note of them and then later watch videos or read texts to fill in these gaps in her understanding. This wasn't just a matter of establishing an expertise in order to ensure the factuality of the exhibition's interpretive elements – to Asha, it was important to understand the critical discourses which informed the exhibition in order for it to communicate its points responsibly. She described, for instance, her "deep dive" into the mid-2010s misogynistic online harassment campaign known as Gamergate – although the exhibition touched on these events in a relatively limited capacity, Marie stressed the sensitivity of the issue to the Interpretation department, which Asha took seriously, and committed

serious time to researching its history and underpinning ideologies to ensure that the exhibition approached it with a sense of care and responsibility. The Interpretation department's established editing process ultimately showed that a lack of familiarity with videogames as a subject was not a uniquely significant obstacle to staff whose role explicitly guided them to confront those unfamiliarities – it was only when this process of learning and acculturation was not explicitly codified in the work of other staff that the "anti-literacy" I described above became an issue. Nevertheless, Asha's highly conscious research showed how the exhibition's development, led by the work and expertise of the curators, could act as a vector through which to establish a base of understanding of videogames within and throughout the institution, at least at the individual level.

One afternoon, a few weeks into *Videogames*'s run, I visited the exhibition and made conversation with some of the staff invigilating the galleries. The exhibition's spaces were staffed at all times by three security guards, as well as four gallery attendants. Gallery attendants, employed by the Visitor Experience department, wore bright V&A lanyards and polo shirts and were meant to be approachable points of contact for visitors to the Museum's galleries, and were accordingly trained with an overview of the subject matter of each exhibition through introductory presentations run by the curators prior to opening. Security staff, who were employed and managed separately by the Security department, were comparatively withdrawn from the public – dark-suited and radio-equipped, they were charged with maintaining the safety of the V&A's displays, buildings, visitors, and staff. Though they were instructed on some of the technical contents and requirements of the Museum's exhibitions, they were not given the same formal training as Visitor Experience staff regarding the cultural context behind each show. Regardless of these divisions of labour, though, the two roles' duties inevitably overlapped within the real-life bustle of the gallery space. One security guard – a middle-aged woman who spoke with a strong Eastern European accent – told me that she had never been particularly familiar with videogames before working on the exhibition. "I'm old," she said, "and I don't play games like this." In spite of this, she found herself regularly needing to help visitors interact with the various works on display, so she had begun to spend time in the gallery space before it opened at 10am each morning to familiarise herself. "I spent a lot of time trying to figure out the game with the bear – you know this one? – so that I could

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help people to play it."[10] Through this (presumably unpaid) after-hours autodidacticism, she had developed a new appreciation and understanding for videogames as a medium. She told me about some visitors who had walked through the space the day before, who seemed to be cynical of videogames generally, and who were talking loudly about how games were "evil, because they they ruin children's minds, because they cause addiction." She was very dismissive of this viewpoint: "This is an art and design museum, and these things are art and design!" She spoke exasperatedly of watching these visitors approach the display for Jenny Jiao Hsia's *Consume Me*, which featured smartphones covered in cases depicting anime teddy-bears, which were hung upside-down from the ceiling by their braided charging cables. She told me, shaking her head in frustration, "I couldn't believe it – they came to the phones, you know, hanging with rope from the ceiling? And they pointed to them and said, 'Look, it's just like a noose!'" She sighed heavily. "They just *did not understand!*"

Throughout its development, the process of making the exhibition had necessitated a kind of slow, accretive spread of familiarity with videogames throughout the Museum. This familiarity stemmed from the direct intermediary work of the curators, in tightly circumscribed professional contexts – only when roles and tasks specifically demanded it. By the time the exhibition had opened to the public, the bottleneck had widened: it had become its own intermediary device, enabling the spread of institutional videogame literacy and empowering further intermediation more or less independently of the curators. The intermediary work of making the exhibition was not just for the sake of the exhibition itself, but to establish a durable enough construction of videogames that the Museum at large could perform its own independent intermediation – in small ways, like a security guard teaching visitors how to play a particular game, or in larger ways, like the editorial article published by the Director arguing for the significance of videogames as a medium, as mentioned at the beginning of this section. In a sense, Marie's introduction of videogames to the V&A could be understood as the intermediation of a larger and longer-term process of intermediation.

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[10] The security guard was referring to Justin Smith's *Enviro-Bear 2000*, a car-driving game which employed a fairly baroque control-scheme – where most driving games abstracted their controls onto a gamepad (one button to accelerate, another to reverse, a joystick to steer, etc.), *Enviro-Bear 2000* was almost exclusively controlled by a trackball embedded in the game's arcade cabinet, moving an onscreen hand/cursor, which was then used to manually interact with the various components of a pixelated dashboard.

After *Videogames*

Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum on September 8, 2018, and closed five and a half months later on February 24, 2019. Through the course of its run, it was visited by a total of 138,829 attendees (V&A 2019, 3). Though it was successful critically – five stars in *The Guardian*, four stars in the *Evening Standard* (MacDonald 2018; Fishwick 2018) – journalistic praise appeared to be valued fairly modestly within the Museum, at least to its leadership; as I described in Chapter 5, visitor targets were the V&A's primary benchmark for success, and by this benchmark *Videogames* was not a success.

The details of the V&A's targets for its exhibitions are confidential – suffice to say that *Videogames*'s total attendance fell significantly short of its original target. It's important to note that this was a target rather than a forecast: as I learned, this figure was reverse-engineered by executive Museum staff based on the V&A's total annual visitation goals, as well as the cost of producing the exhibition; in other words, the visitor target was calculated based on what the Museum wanted, rather than being a rational projection of what it expected. The final attendance figure of 138,829 was comparable to other exhibitions at the Museum around that time,[11] but *Videogames*'s scale as well as the V&A's evident desire for growth meant that it was working towards an incredibly ambitious target. Late in the exhibition's 25-week run, this target was adjusted to just below the final number of attendees, which compounded my own impression that these visitor targets were essentially arbitrary; in spite of the adjustment and this arbitrariness, the exhibition's failure to meet its original target appeared to harm its reputation internally.

The underperformance of the exhibition manifested inside the V&A through a variety of mostly latent signals, but in ways that seemed unambiguous to most staff. The most obvious of these, of course, was the exhibition's performance against its target, which was reported weekly in a single-page "KPI Dashboard" document – which also tracked visitor numbers-versus-targets for other exhibitions, total museum visitors, donations, membership statistics, usage of the V&A's cloakroom, et cetera – via posts to the all-staff intranet. Whenever I visited the gallery floor, *Videogames* seemed to be well-trafficked but never particularly busy, and downright sparse in comparison to the exhibition next door – *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, which presented a collection of personal artefacts and

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[11] See Chapter 8 for further discussion of *Videogames*'s performance relative to other V&A exhibitions.

clothing belonging to the Mexican artist – which was crowded with visitors every day from opening until close of business, and buttressed by a winding queue of even more visitors awaiting entry. Speaking with a Visitor Experience staff member at the empty entrance of *Videogames*, I asked how the exhibition had been going: he replied, sheepishly, "The most positive thing I can say is that it's been steady." I sensed some degree of desperation in the V&A's marketing strategies for the exhibition, too. A post on the V&A's Instagram account tried to engage visitors via the augmented-reality game *Pokémon Go*: "Find a PokéStop in the V&A and get 50% off standard tickets to Videogames #DesignPlayDisrupt! Simply show a screenshot at the ticket desk to redeem". Late-afternoon announcements over the Museum's loudspeakers, advertising *Videogames* as the "the V&A's most interactive exhibition ever!" made the curators cringe; they said that this was the first time they'd ever heard the loudspeakers used in this promotional capacity, and seemed embarrassed by this clear announcement to the entire Museum that the exhibition was underperforming.

Notably, there was never any explicit admonishment or disappointment expressed to the curators by the V&A's senior staff. Before *Videogames*'s opening, a different exhibition had similarly underperformed, and I'd heard stories of quite extensive and invasive intervention from senior staff from V&A Commercial – as mentioned above, in "Critical isolation." This intervention involved demands for a range of changes to various aspects of the exhibition, which had apparently stemmed from a directive by the V&A's Director, Tristram Hunt, that the Museum should be more "authorial" and firm in its interpretive voice; since this exhibition was somewhat speculative and open in its curatorial thesis, this ambiguity was seized upon as the crucial mistake which led to a poor visitor turnout. In the shadow of this backstage controversy, Marie told me that she expected a similar degree of scrutiny after *Videogames* opened, but this never eventuated: though there were presumably many discussions about *Videogames*'s performance at the executive level, this was never brought to the curators as a problem to solve – the field of critical silence which surrounded the exhibition throughout its development seemed to extend to its opening and reception, and it was generally left alone.

The life cycle of most large museum exhibitions does not end once they close. Most of the exhibitions produced in-house at the V&A are then re-mounted at other institutions as part of the Museum's touring program. This is an essential part of the calculus behind the production of exhibitions – since they typically cost much more to make than is returned through ticket sales in their initial run, these costs are offset by packaging and

renting exhibitions out to other venues, both locally and internationally, often for many years after it first opened. The Barbican's exhibition *Game On*, for example, has been on tour continually since its opening in 2002, arriving at its 30th venue in late 2021; touring allows blockbuster exhibitions a "long tail" of profit which, ideally, return their production costs several times over.

Videogames's tour – and its tail – was very short. After closing at the V&A's South Kensington location in February 2019, it travelled north to the recently opened V&A Dundee in Scotland, where the exhibition saw its second run from April to September. There had been plans for the exhibition to travel to a third institution in China in late 2019, and a fourth institution in Australia in 2020, and it was intended to continue its tour beyond these, but the exhibition never left the UK. Negotiations with the institution in China became strained for reasons I could never ascertain, and eventually it dropped its plans to host *Videogames* at short notice. Then, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, and the V&A – along with nearly 95% of the the world's museums – closed its doors for most of the year (ICOM 2021, 6). Rather than being postponed, all of the exhibitions' tour plans were cancelled outright – with such an uncertain future ahead, venues were now cautious, and unwilling to make the financial commitments necessary to host the exhibition. This was not true of some of the Museum's other toured exhibitions, but as Ana – who managed the exhibition's tour in her role as Exhibition Manager – described to me, "the nature of the show" meant that it was ill suited for display in a post-COVID world: in terms of basic hygiene, the fact that the exhibition featured so much interactivity was a concern – "it was just too much touching." Beyond that, there was a perception that videogames as a subject "moves really fast," which meant that by the time museums could hypothetically reopen, the exhibition might seem out of date. As Ana put it, "it was a lot of uncertainty for the venues to commit to with that type of project, thinking four or five years ahead." With the exhibition's contents sitting in storage in London, and only a skeleton crew of staff to "hold the fort" as most of the V&A's staff had been put on temporary furlough, Ana told me that in early 2021 a decision was made to "disperse" the exhibition: meaning, to declare the exhibition finished and to return all of its loaned objects to their original owners. This marked the end of the exhibition. I don't know exactly how profitable *Videogames* was for the V&A, but given its blockbuster production scale and drastically abbreviated tour, it can be safely assumed that – at least in financial terms – it represented a net loss for the institution.

Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt now belongs more to the V&A's past than its present. With all of the intermediary work required to familiarise the Museum with videogames described in this chapter in mind, a question looms over this thesis. What is the legacy of *Videogames* in the V&A? Having spent the preceding chapters describing the life of the exhibition leading up to its opening, in this final section I will trace its afterlife – informed primarily by interviews with the core V&A team conducted well after my initial fieldwork, I mean to explore the outcome of this intermediary work by examining the vestiges of the exhibition after its closure. Through this, I characterise the legacy of *Videogames* within the V&A as essentially ephemeral, which demonstrates the limitations of bottom-up cultural intermediation without top-down support; as I describe below, in spite of the work of the curators to establish a space for videogames within the V&A's remit, this form of long-term advocacy is ultimately contingent on an interest in the subject from the Museum's senior staff, which had largely dissipated by the time of *Videogames*'s closure.

What remains?

Once the exhibition was formally ended and its objects finally dispersed, the years of immaterial intermediary labour behind *Videogames* were dispersed along with it.

In material terms, exhibitions do not seem to leave many traces within the institution after their closure. Though the production of exhibitions creates an enormous quantity of physical and digital documents,[12] these material traces do not seem to be used by or useful to the operations of the Museum once an exhibition has finished. Rather, the role of these documents within the V&A after their exhibitions' closure is primarily archival – stored digitally on the Museum's intranet and then largely ignored as the cycle of exhibition production continues. One exception to this is the "wash-up" document, which is meant to encode the various learnings from an exhibition's development into a list of concrete recommendations for future exhibitions; *Videogames*'s wash-up recommendations were primarily operational in nature, intended to streamline generic exhibition development processes, and did not seem to anticipate or guide any further work with videogames as a subject.

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[12] *Videogames*'s production generated many digital files in various formats and for different purposes – primarily Microsoft Word documents and Excel spreadsheets – stored across multiple shared drives accessed via the V&A's intranet, which totalled approximately 197 gigabytes as of October 2018.

The position of videogames in the V&A after the exhibition was therefore fragile and highly contingent. In the absence of any documented mandate or encoded procedure, the legacy of a temporary exhibition is ultimately sustained through the presence, interest and autonomy of individual staff members. The question of *Videogames*'s legacy within the V&A is directly tied to the position of cultural intermediaries inside the institution – people who can argue for the relevance of videogames within the Museum's remit, and continue the work of "institutionalising" the subject which was ostensibly begun by the exhibition.

Unfortunately, the labour conditions which underpin curatorial work at the V&A undermine its long-term intermediary capacity. Marie and Kristian each left the Department of Design, Architecture and Digital in 2019, not long after the exhibition closed: Kristian found a new role at a satellite of the V&A, as I will discuss in the following section, and Marie left the institution altogether to work as a freelance curator.

These exits came as no surprise to the curators. The position of videogames within the public museum as a specialist subject makes the position of the videogame curator a precarious one, as it is for specialist curators in general. Marie was hired at the Museum in order to fill a gap within the institution's curatorial knowledge, but this expertise was needed on a strictly limited basis – she was employed under a fixed-term contract which was due to end within a few months of the exhibition's opening, shortly before its closure. This was a common practice within the V&A, and especially within the department of Design, Architecture and Digital, whose exhibition subjects seemed to be particularly narrow in their focus, relative to other departments. Major curatorial projects on relatively niche topics such as *Videogames* necessitated the hiring of specialist "guest" curators who were employed at the Museum for 3–4 years to develop an exhibition and were then dismissed once the exhibition was open and stable enough to be toured, making room for the next round of curators and exhibitions. This work of developing large exhibitions on specialist subjects had historically been the responsibility of the Museum's permanent curatorial staff, but as far as I could tell these staff now tended to be preoccupied with longer-term projects such as acquisitions, collection management, and institutional policy development. Though exhibition curators were sometimes able to pivot their fixed-term exhibition contracts into ongoing work elsewhere in the Museum, often through a series of further fixed-term contracts, many did not – in my time at the V&A in and around Design, Architecture and Digital, two of the department's temporary curators left the institution permanently after their exhibition closed, and one curator joined to develop

a new exhibition, beginning the process anew. The department, and the V&A as a whole, seemed to churn through curatorial staff by design.

In a published dialogue on curatorial labour, architect and curator Marina Otero Verzier casts the professional instability of curating as cruelly ironic, given the extensive intermediary work required.

> I would say that the labour of the curator is often quite precarious. "Curator" is a strange label that gives some sort of prestige and yet, at the same time, it's a kind of a precarious prestige: working endless hours, generally under pressure, often without a long-term commitment or decent salary, and having to perform and dance across intellectual, social, media and institutional spaces. The curator has to talk, write, research, as well as charm people and take care of their outlook. (Verzier, quoted in Watson 2021, 199)

The looming precarity of curatorial labour reframes the extensive intermediary work involved in making *Videogames*. In introducing videogames to the V&A, Marie was required to "perform and dance" between many videogame studios, individual makers, architects, and audiovisual designers; between different publics; between cultural journalists, videogames journalists; between various departments, and hierarchies, and committees within the V&A – all towards a goal of producing an exhibition that would begin a longer-term engagement and institutional understanding of a new creative medium and industry. All of this work was done without the promise of long-term employment, and certainly without a particularly compelling salary: a community-sourced spreadsheet of anonymously submitted museum staff salaries collated in 2019 listed multiple Assistant Curator salaries at the V&A around £22,000 per year, and a Curator's salary as £27,000 per year – significantly lower than equivalent positions at institutions such as MoMA in New York, where Curatorial Assistant positions paid between US$51,000 and US$67,000, equivalent at the time of writing to approximately £44,000 to £58,000; at ACMI in Melbourne, Curator positions paid AU$85,279, equivalent to approximately £50,000 (Fisher 2019).

With the V&A's habit of curatorial churn in mind, its ambitions to establish a foundational knowledge of videogames felt hollow. After Marie's and Kristian's contracts expired, there was no longer a Curator of Videogames at the Victoria and Albert Museum. This prompts an obvious question: if the V&A wanted to extend and deepen its work with videogames, as expressed in its public messaging and internal objectives, why let go of its primary source of expertise on the subject? The obvious answer: because, by the

time the exhibition closed – and arguably before it even opened – the V&A was largely uninterested in videogames as a subject.

In 2022 I interviewed Marie and Kristian separately and asked them each about this institutional intent for the exhibition to pave the way for further work with videogames. During my time there in 2018 I'd taken for granted the V&A's stated ambition to work with videogames more deeply, though as I spoke with the curators four years later I found myself second-guessing this assumption. Both Marie and Kristian felt that the institution's interest in videogames had waned by the time the exhibition opened, and neither seemed to have been particularly surprised by this in the moment. Marie reflected that the V&A's interest in videogames was always tenuous:

> I think for the press, and the conversations, even internally, about what that exhibition was going to do for the V&A, was that it was seen as the beginning of making a statement: that this is how we set ourselves up for collecting. This is how we set ourselves up for having videogames be something that people associate with [the V&A] as an institution, in regards to exhibitions and collections and work. … But – I felt a little bit like it was going through the motions of what you were supposed to say.

Kristian relayed a similar sentiment, describing the idea that the exhibition would have led to a serious engagement with videogames as "the most optimistic outcome" among the various possible futures for the exhibition. Whatever ambitions the curators may have had to extend the work begun with *Videogames*, they were always constrained by the fixed-term nature of the exhibition and their contracts. The prospect of "institutionalising" videogames within the V&A was ultimately out of the curators' hands. The frantic exigencies of daily museum work, coupled with a lack of commitment or interest in the subject from V&A leadership, meant that the early ideals of the exhibition to begin a long-term engagement with videogames as a subject were never guaranteed, and in retrospect felt more like platitudes.

> [We'd say,] "Oh, this will be the beginning of something," … but you're also acutely aware that, actually, that ambition is tethered to people who have the ambition to fight for the resources that are required to make that sort of swerve. And so it was stuff that we talked about as an institution, and it was stuff that went into the press releases, and it's stuff that you talk about anecdotally, about what the exhibition is going to do. But then in practice, you realise that everybody is just busy, and pulled in so many different directions, and with different resources. And then you also lose the people at a senior level

that are lobbying for that work, or have the ability to direct resources to that sort of work.

This quote from Marie brings two important points into focus. The first is that it affirms cultural intermediation as a conscious practice rather than an incidental byproduct of the profession of curating. In an organisation whose workforce is "pulled in so many different directions," a latent enthusiasm for a subject like videogames is not enough to cement its place within the Museum's remit; institutional change requires proactive and persistent cultural intermediation. The second point relates to the resources required to practise this cultural intermediation. Both curators recognised their work as being contingent on, and ultimately limited by, genuine interest in the subject from V&A leadership. *Videogames* was born from the impetus of the department's former Keeper, Kieran Long, but after he left the V&A, his replacement did not carry the same interests. As Kristian put it, "There were, at a certain point, leaders like Kieran, who would be pushing that. But because he left then that person wasn't there anymore. So it was never a priority after that." Marie described a similar chronology of the rise and fall of videogames within the V&A, which she believed began with former Director Martin Roth's interest in digital design:

> Within the museum, the thing that shifted was, obviously we've talked about this before, there was the massive change at the senior management level, that Martin Roth was no longer the Director. … The thing that made this exhibition happen was people starting new jobs, and being able to get this stuff done. And having energy and excitement behind them. And that came from Martin Roth, and then it filters down to Kieran Long, and it also filters down I guess to myself and other people within the department. …
>
> During the [development] of the exhibition, Martin left his directorship, and then passed away. Kieran also moved away from the institution. And you bring in with that a different Director, and you bring in with that a different Keeper of the department. And they just have different objectives and interests, and it was not in that space.

During its development and opening, *Videogames* felt to me like the V&A dipping its toe in the water of an unfamiliar medium. Though the expertise and intermediation of specialist curators can be enough to open an exhibition, the work of embedding and maintaining an institutional familiarity with a new subject – of enacting real change – requires a long-term commitment from an institution's leadership. Without a top-down vision to support serious institutional continuity, it seems that museums will only ever produce relatively shallow or precursory investigations into new

subjects that can never deepen. Through this program of sporadic curatorial engagements, the museum is merely dipping its toes into the water, over and over and over.

After *Videogames* was dispersed, very little of the work done in making the exhibition – including the extensive cultural intermediation required to familiarise the V&A with videogames as a subject, and to familiarise the videogame industry with the work of museums – had seemed to persist as a durable part of the Museum's disciplinary remit. The exhibition had come and gone, and while its making had been heavily shaped by the strictures of the institution, it had been granted little opportunity to reshape the institution in return.

What comes next?

To sustain their presence within museums, new media need cultural intermediaries. With Marie gone from the V&A in 2019, Kristian now working in a much smaller branch of the Museum, and with *Videogames*'s original instigator Kieran Long having left years prior, there remained nobody inside the V&A with the interest or resources to advocate for videogames' continued position within its remit. The future of the medium at this point was uncertain.

Structural shifts within the organisation introduced deeper uncertainties. In early 2021, after a year of severe financial strain brought on by the pandemic, the V&A announced a drastic restructure of its curatorial departments, which would involve a reorganisation of these departments' remit as well as cuts to 20% of the Museum's curatorial staff as part of a larger cull of the V&A's workforce, which was reported as losing 140 out of 980 staff members (Cocks 2021; G. Adams 2021a). As part of these cuts, the Department of Design, Architecture and Digital (DAD) was dissolved entirely. Some staff were made redundant, and others were dispersed throughout the institution into various other departments. As Kristian explained to me, "They split DAD up completely. They got rid of that side of things. So there's no contemporary collecting department anymore. … It was all quite traumatic, frankly." After the restructure there remained four curatorial departments: Decorative Art and Sculpture; Performance, Furniture, Textiles and Fashion; Art, Architecture, Photography and Design; Asia. Notably, the restructure contained no department with a dedicated interested in digital design, which was a fundamental aspect of DAD's remit. The restructure prompted outspoken fears among V&A staff that the Museum's curatorial integrity would be threatened – an article published in

March 2021 cited current and former staff who feared an overall "brain drain" as a result of the loss of curatorial "figureheads": "longstanding, knowledgeable staff who could not be easily replaced" (G. Adams 2021b). Kristian expressed a similar feeling of loss regarding the closure of DAD, which placed the position of digital design within the V&A at risk: "I guess, in some ways, it felt a bit like: 'That was an experiment, and that's finished now, and we'll go back to the old way.' Which is what has happened. ... DAD was formed to think about collecting digital and collecting contemporary design in a way that other departments weren't. Now they've been dispersed."

In the wake of this restructure, it is difficult to foresee where videogames now belong at the V&A, within its remaining curatorial departments' objectives and purviews. Nearly every part of the V&A's relationship to videogames had originated within DAD, which had informed how it was positioned within the Museum's remit: as a complex and contemporary digital design discipline. Wherever videogames might re-emerge within the V&A's remit, it would be inside an altogether different disciplinary frame.

Encouragingly, the V&A's relationship with videogames has not ended with the exhibition's dispersal. After Kristian's contract on *Videogames* ended in 2019, he was brought on to the curatorial team of the V&A's Museum of Childhood – a smaller branch of the V&A located in the East End of London which specialised in objects and displays for children – who were then beginning a large-scale redevelopment which would overhaul its galleries as well as its mission, renaming itself as the Young V&A. Kristian was hired to help renew the Young V&A's permanent displays, which had existed for decades, in Kristian's words, as "toys in glass cabinets," where "kids would play in the sandpit while their parents wandered around feeling nostalgic"; the renewal sought to refocus the Young V&A's pedagogical approach towards displays that were designed explicitly for children and young people, aiming to engage them with art and design across three permanent exhibition spaces, which were titled Play, Imagine, and Design. This role seemed extremely wide-ranging compared to the relatively narrow task of developing an exhibition like *Videogames*: curating these permanent galleries meant working across many disciplines, and developing display methodologies for drastically different age ranges; as Kristian put it, the different galleries were designed for "engaging zero- to two-year-olds with art and design, engaging eleven- to fourteen-year-olds with art and design, and then everything in between. It's quite a weird concept." Within this broad scope, space had been made for Kristian to continue his work curating videogames – in the Play section, he was tasked with developing a

dedicated games gallery. This gallery, scheduled to open with the rest of the Young V&A in 2023, was designed for an audience between 8 and 14 years old, and, like the rest of the Young V&A, was broadly pedagogical in its aims. Its small selection of games – comprising both digital games as well as boardgames – would be framed as case studies intended to introduce children to concepts such as game mechanics and genre: "getting them to make connections between different games and how they have similar mechanics – about how you can work in a genre and use rules as building blocks." The display would be a long-term fixture of the Young V&A – rather than the five-and-a-half-month run of *Videogames*, the Young V&A's games gallery was intended to stay open for three years, though Kristian said he expected these displays to exist for much longer than that, given the work and funding required to redevelop them.

The work and working conditions of curating permanent displays seemed very different to the development of temporary exhibitions. However eventful the making of *Videogames* was, its moments of stress were counterweighted by extended periods of downtime and furnished by a blockbuster budget that afforded the curators some degree of autonomy and ambition; the redevelopment of the Young V&A seemed direly under-resourced, both in terms of budget and personnel. Speaking with Kristian in late 2022 – after he'd been working on this project for four years, through a pandemic, on a shoestring budget and with relatively little downtime – he sounded tired. Beyond issues of resources, this games gallery was subject to what sounded like a fairly rigid set of curatorial mandates: it needed to feature games makers from the local community in East London; it needed to represent a diverse range of makers within a global context; it needed a mix of large-scale developers alongside individual creators. In order to fit within the pedagogical schema of the Young V&A broadly, the display was also meant to advocate for play as an important aspect of childhood

development.[13] Finally, the games gallery needed to be both legible to and appropriate for an audience of children aged 8 to 14, which further restricted what could be shown and discussed. These mandates sounded quite restrictive, but it sounded as though, as long as they were met, Kristian was afforded quite a lot of independence in his role as a curator: "I'm quite left to my own devices to come up with this. The main thrust was that there has to be a games bit, and it has to be local and global, and diverse. And then everything else is left to me." Though this games gallery was a small part of Kristian's overall purview as a curator within the Young V&A, he had managed to use this space to continue the work he'd begun in *Videogames*, and expressed a particular fondness for it: "It's a tiny piece of the puzzle, right, but this is the bit that I did. And I'm really proud of that. Everything else has had a lot of people's input into what it should be – this is my baby."

In curating this space within the Young V&A, Kristian was not only extending his practice as a curator of videogames – he had also sustained his position as a cultural intermediary between the Museum and the videogame industry. When I asked Kristian if he knew of other work being done within the V&A around videogames, his answer was fairly blunt: "My understanding is that people here aren't having those conversations, about games." He could be confident in this because the same problem of bottlenecked expertise, described earlier in the chapter, that arose in the development of *Videogames* had followed him to the Young V&A – if there were serious plans to showcase videogames as a curatorial subject in the V&A, he'd have heard about it.

> It's quite interesting – because I am now the games expert in the museum; if somebody is interested in games they will come and ask me. The same as with the materials that we're showing

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[13] The Young V&A in general seemed heavily invested in advocacy as a curatorial method, which was new to Kristian: "That was interesting in terms of content, because there's a definite push for everything advocating for play as an important part of [childhood] development, but also then advocating for videogames as an important part of play. And the way to do that is to try and talk about the good qualities that videogames bring out in people – the notion of empathy, and stuff like that, has come up quite a lot. [*laughs*] Not from me! These are directions that I was led down by our Director."

This particular framing of videogame play as an unambiguous social good – particularly as a means of evoking empathy – is ideologically loaded in a way that I am deeply skeptical of but ill-equipped to unpack, given the scope of this chapter and the fact that I have not seen the Young V&A's games gallery in its finished state. See Ruberg (2020) for an extended critical analysis of the purported relationship between videogames and empathy.

from other [curatorial] departments, in the Young V&A, we'd
go and speak to them about the works, because they're the
people that know the most about it.

He described, for instance, being contacted by the V&A's Curator for
Korean Art – who was then developing *Hallyu! The Korean Wave*, an
exhibition on the emergent popular culture of South Korea – whom
Kristian put in touch with Riot Games so that they could potentially feature
League of Legends in the exhibition. Even at this small branch of the
Museum, nine kilometres away from his previous office in South
Kensington, Kristian was still acting as the primary point of contact as
questions relating to videogames arose elsewhere in the institution.[14] The
extent of the V&A's expertise in videogames as a subject, and professional
connections to videogames' community of production, now seemed to
reside in a single staff member. Kristian was now the final link in a chain of
cultural intermediaries which began with Kieran Long in 2013 and was
sustained by Marie until her departure in 2019. Given the impermanence of
videogames' position within the V&A's remit discussed in the section above,
Kristian's continued employment as a curator and cultural intermediary
may be the most concrete answer to the question of what remained of
Videogames after its closure. In the absence of any serious commitment from
the Museum's directorate to continue its work with videogames, and a lack
of long-term enshrinement within the institution's remit, the future of
videogames at the V&A seemed to depend on Kristian's continued ability to
act as a cultural intermediary.

The work of cultural intermediation is itself heavily mediated by its
organisational frame. When working on *Videogames*, Marie and Kristian
were positioned in between the cultural sphere of videogame development
and a curatorial department which focused on digital design. Now at the
Young V&A, Kristian's in-betweenness had been redefined, which altered
videogames' position within the V&A's remit. There was no longer room in
the existing departmental structure for a framing of videogames as
contemporary digital design; videogames at the V&A were now featured
most prominently through the filter of the children's exhibition. This is not
itself problematic, though it does bring the V&A's positioning of videogames

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[14] Kristian noted that some interesting games-adjacent work was being done at the
V&A East, a new V&A site currently under construction in the East London
borough of Stratford. However, he saw this work, which seemed to be more
focused on interactive new-media art, as distanced from his own curatorial
aspirations in displaying videogames as a distinct field of cultural production:
"They've employed a researcher to help with how they present game stuff. But it's
not games. It's art that's *like* games, basically."

closer in line with other institutions' and exhibitions' tendency to appeal to children and families as their primary audience (see, e.g., Eklund, Sjöblom, and Prax 2019, 9). In any case, Kristian seemed to find this to be a limiting curatorial framework in which his own aspirations – to explore videogames as a significant design medium and field of cultural production – were not fulfilled:

KRISTIAN It's also a bit funny, for me, because I'm really proud of this. And I'm a big cultural advocate for videogames. But we're still putting it in a museum that is definitely for children, with their families. It's not for any lone adults to come and see. Whereas I would really like to advocate for videogames being one of the most important cultural touchstones of where we are today. So it's like – hopefully this is a small start, and it's something that at some point can be expanded a bit more, perhaps. That's my hope.

ME Well, yeah, I hope that there's – not to say that you're wedded to the V&A – but I hope that there's room for that at the V&A in future.

KRISTIAN I mean, they should be; it's ridiculous to not engage with it. It's trying to be a museum of – it was born as a museum for engaging industries with design, and if we just ignore one of the major industries of the present and future, then that would just be… it'd be stupid.

The future of videogames inside the V&A had stabilised, but within a new institutional frame. It was now curated for a very different audience, and with very different resources, though hopefully in a more durable container: while *Videogames* was lavishly funded and much more curatorially ambitious, all of this expensive work seemed to evaporate not long after its run had ended; the Young V&A's games gallery was being produced on a severely limited budget and under more restrictive curatorial guidelines, but was guaranteed a longer institutional life as a permanent fixture of the Museum.

With an aim to reappraise the work of specialist curators inside public museums, this chapter has described the curation of *Videogames* as dependent upon processes of cultural intermediation required to familiarise the V&A with videogames as a subject. Earlier I asked what *Videogames* achieved for the V&A. In tracing its development and afterlife I have concluded that although the extensive cultural intermediation performed by the exhibition's curators was necessary, the V&A's lack of strategic commitment to new curatorial subjects meant that the much of the outcome of this intermediary labour – working relationships with the videogame industry, capacity to translate an complex cultural medium into

a coherent curatorial subject – were dispersed from the Museum along with the exhibition. If the exhibition achieved any kind of embedded expertise within the V&A, that expertise seemed to be contained within the people that worked directly on it. With Marie gone, Kristian now remained the institution's sole cultural intermediary of videogames; the legacy of *Videogames* was therefore contained within this one overworked and under-resourced curator.

Cultural intermediation is necessary for museums to begin engagements with new subjects, but effective long-term intermediation demands top-down institutional support. Although a curator can perform the bottom-up work of cultural intermediation required to translate a new subject like videogames into something sensible to the institution, they cannot propel further work without support from that institution's leadership. Given the precarious financial circumstances of the V&A, and the impact this has on its employment practices, it appears that blockbuster exhibitions may not be a particularly useful means of broadening and deepening a museum's remit, as these exhibitions are inherently ephemeral and subject to the ever-shifting tastes and strategies of museum leadership. With this in mind, it is possible that the Young V&A's games gallery will be permitted to expand the Museum's remit – in spite of its small scale and budget, and separation from the V&A's flagship site – by virtue of its permanence. Given the evident disinterest in the subject from the Museum's Directorate, and the commercial underperformance of its only major engagement with the medium, it is just as easy to imagine that videogames may never outgrow this modest space. Within such a tightly constrained system of production and resource-allocation, the advocacy of curators as cultural intermediaries can only achieve so much. Like any other subject, the position of videogames at the V&A will ultimately be determined by those above, rather than those below.

8. Conclusion:
   Institutional desires

This thesis sought to explore what videogames do for, and to, public museums.

Through its ethnographic approach, this research has assembled a collage of granular perspectives on the work of making an exhibition of videogames in the public museum setting, which broadly address the question of what videogames do *to* museums. I have argued that videogames challenge the social and material infrastructures of public museums, in a number of specific professional contexts. In Chapter 5 I described how the cultural malleability of videogames conflicted with the heterogeneous makeup of the V&A, resulting in divergent understandings of what the medium – and, by extension, the exhibition itself – should represent. These divergences stalled the typically smooth methods of exhibition production at the V&A – methods whose thorough standardisation was used to homogenise the work of a deeply heterogeneous organisation – which in turn revealed these seemingly stable processes as inflexible and brittle. This incompatibility stemmed from a sense of the V&A's inexperience with videogames as a subject; in Chapter 6 I reversed this view, to examine the evident unfamiliarity of museum practice to the commercial videogame industry. Here the capitalist logic of the videogame industry, which compelled a mode of promotion built on secrecy, fell into direct opposition with the curators' aims to expose the production methods of videogames. As I argued there, this dynamic seeks to instrumentalise videogame exhibitions into the marketing apparatus of videogame studios, requiring purposeful communication and constant negotiation by the exhibitions' makers. Chapter 7 deepened this emphasis on curatorial negotiation, as a necessary yet onerous task that was central to the overall work of making a videogame exhibition inside of an institution in which videogames were largely

unprecedented. Here I sought to reframe the role of the curator inside public museums as a cross-cultural and interprofessional translator, especially in the context of new exhibition subjects. In this chapter I articulated the curatorial labour behind *Videogames* as internal cultural intermediation, as the curators worked to build a coherent institutional knowledge of videogames that could continue beyond the exhibition itself; ultimately, though, this knowledge proved fragile, as enthusiasm for videogames as a subject appeared to wane in the wake of the exhibition's opening.

Through these perspectives, videogames have served as a useful frame through which to reveal more general fractures within the institution – this thesis has repeatedly described the curators' work with videogames as troubled by the overwhelming inflexibility of the V&A as an organisation, produced from a need for efficiency and profitability as demanded by its market orientation. Videogames do two things to museums, then: they challenge, and thereby reveal.

In this conclusion to the ethnography I will attempt to synthesise some of the discrete ethnographic insights of the thesis into a larger speculative argument about the situation of videogames at the V&A – and within established cultural institutions more generally – in order to address the question of what videogames do *for* museums. In the introduction to this thesis I inferred, somewhat cynically, that videogame exhibitions are the product of museums' desire for new and larger audiences, considering the market logics that motivate museum programming. This remains an inference: given the hierarchical distance of Museum leadership from the V&A's curators, and their inaccessibility throughout this fieldwork, the directorial motivations behind *Videogames* will always be somewhat opaque. In any case, it is clear enough that the exhibition failed to meet the targets established by the V&A – more generally, it seems that videogames as a curatorial subject are ill served by the commercial desires of the marketised public museum. As I will argue below, the exhibition was undercut by its blockbuster format and budget, which precluded the curatorial agency required to subvert the V&A's exhibitionary regime and more deeply engage videogames as a subject. This call for experimentation and depth bears serious stakes that extend beyond the display of videogames – given museums' growing dependence on all-or-nothing blockbuster exhibitions, new forms and scales of exhibition are an urgent necessity for the sustainability of public museums in general.

I want to return to a metaphor invoked in the introduction to this thesis, where the situation of videogames at the V&A was described as a square peg in a round hole. The preceding chapters have repeatedly testified to an apparent incompatibility between the intricacies of videogames as an exhibition subject and the blunt methods of exhibition-making at the V&A, though I would like to expand this notion of incompatibility somewhat. This research has explored this problem through on-the ground fieldwork, observing where videogames were forced to fit into the institution's rigid processes; as I have argued, this effected a kind of homogeneous display methodology, which limited how videogames could be exhibited and envisioned. If the big argument of this thesis is that the Museum's professional systems troubled the development of *Videogames*, and substantially limited its eventual shape, then the institutional strategies which surround and direct this professional work bear some critical speculation. To clarify, I believe that the problem of the square peg and the round hole holds true at two different scales – in the day-to-day work of exhibition's making, but also in its place within the V&A's broader strategy as a cultural institution and as a commercial enterprise.

Videogames was the product of a shifting set of institutional desires. In Chapter 4 I described the V&A's market logic which effected an increasing dependency on large, expensive shows that would attract large crowds of visitors. Like any major exhibition, *Videogames* needed to be a blockbuster. In terms of cultural heritage, the exhibition was a part of the Museum's curatorial turn towards digital and contemporary subjects, per the imperative of then-Director Martin Roth. The exhibition also needed to be an introduction of the subject of videogames: both to the Museum's public, and to the staff of the V&A itself. This was an important and preconditional aspect of the exhibition's approval – in Chapter 3 I described an earlier iteration of the exhibition that explored violence in videogames, which was turned down on the grounds that this focus was too niche; the V&A's first engagement with videogames needed to cast a wider net and present a more general vision of the subject. *Videogames* was therefore defined by a kind of breadth, both in its budgetary scale and its curatorial scope – it took the exhibitionary format of the survey show, designed to reach a wide audience, and to present an equivalently wide selection of games. In my view, this breadth ultimately diminished the scope of exploration available to the curators, and produced fatally ambitious performance targets that set the exhibition up to fail.

While I am hesitant to ascribe the outcome of *Videogames* to any single cause, it feels like the exhibition was undercut by its survey format, which

resulted in a broad but necessarily shallow exploration of videogames – expressed through rigidly conventional display methods – in order to feel approachable and introductory to a general audience. This same hunch was expressed by Marie, who had witnessed similar apprehensions to engage narrowly with videogames from other museums:

> I hazard a very heavily educated guess as to why [*Videogames*] didn't bring people in, and we've talked about it before, but I think it's that survey shows were not the way to go. … Museums always tell themselves, "Oh, we have to do a survey show to introduce the audience to it." And I'm like – no you don't; the mass majority of the public aren't paying attention to what exhibitions you've done. People already know this subject! Go in and approach it. Every institution seems to tell itself that, and I don't buy it. "We need to start at the beginning!" No, you don't.

The V&A believed that its first serious engagement with videogames needed to be a general one in order to introduce the public to the subject. As Marie points out, though, the public are broadly aware of videogames as a subject already – just as they would be with fashion or architecture – and are uninterested in keeping track of the V&A's exhibition history. The broad introductory approach to the exhibition seemed to work against its blockbuster aspirations. It should be noted that the V&A's most successful paid exhibitions all took a monographic focus on cultural brands, or on singular creatives who were effectively brands themselves: in descending order of attendance, sourced from the Museum's annual reports, these are *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* (2019); *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2015); *Mary Quant* (2020); *Pink Floyd: Their Mortal Remains* (2017); *David Bowie Is* (2013); and *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up* (2018). Though there are obvious commonalities here in terms of medium and subject – three are fashion designers, and nearly all made extensive use of dress in their displays – it is evident that the kinds of exhibitions that the V&A and its public are eager for are not medium-wide surveys – other exhibitions which were led by subject rather than name, such as *Opera:*

Passion, Power and Politics (2017) or *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* (2015), drew modest attendance figures closer to *Videogames* than to brand-led shows.[1]

And yet there was apparently no real possibility for a monographic videogame exhibition within the V&A's exhibition strategy. Following *Videogames*'s closure, Marie pitched an exhibition to the Museum's Exhibitions Steering Group based around a detailed exploration of the work of a well-recognised and historically prolific individual videogame studio, which would build on the work began in *Videogames* but permit a deeper dive, and would – presumably – more closely resemble the monographic blockbusters that the V&A and its audiences desired. As Marie put it, the exhibition was rejected on principle, based on fears it would be viewed as a marketing exercise.

> I think they just see it as different, that you're suddenly entering into this advertorial marketing space. It's this really odd thing – why is it okay to have an exhibition on Dior, and to celebrate its success as a label, when it is a commercial brand? I don't see why that is any different than looking at a games company that has potentially had just as long a historical legacy. It's a design company; it just operates in a different medium and in a different space. And so all the baggage of videogames comes plonking back onto the space – and suddenly it's, "Oh we can't do that, because it's advertising."

Just as the V&A's systems and processes could not be adapted to accommodate videogames, neither could the attitudes and cultural values of its leadership. My argument here is not that a monographic exhibition in service of a commercial brand would have been ideal – as I argued in Chapter 6, the contemporary situation of fashion in the public museum might model a compelling future for videogame exhibitions, but it is a decidedly compromised one. Instead, I mean to highlight a disjuncture in how museum directorate imagine videogames relative to other cultural industries. The same logics that permitted a monographic fashion exhibition

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[1] This appetite for recognisable brand names was borne out in some of the more avid responses to *Videogames*, too – in my search for public reflections on the exhibition in online videogame communities, I found that the most positive and visible responses were from the fanbases of individual games, who seemed drawn to the exhibition for their respective games' displays alone. The most exhaustive documentation of the exhibition I ever saw, for example, was on a fan community wiki dedicated to *Bloodborne*, which avidly described the contents of the game's display at the V&A – I found similar responses from the fan communities of *Splatoon*, *No Man's Sky* and *Kentucky Route Zero* (see Bloodborne-Wiki 2018). It seems clear enough that, for these attendees, *Videogames* already *was* a monographic show, just a very small one encased within a larger exhibition.

could not be applied to a monographic videogame exhibition. We return again to the metaphor of the square peg and the round hole, which pervades the institution's approach to videogames at both the procedural level and the strategic level. In general it appears that the institution did not know what to do with videogames.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the life and death of *Videogames* at the V&A, I think it's this: in order for videogames to find their place in cultural institutions, deeper and longer-term engagements beyond the formal and methodological constraints of blockbuster exhibitions are needed. The history of videogame exhibitions suggests an institutional appetite for the medium as a kind of blockbuster-fodder – where they have been successful – especially in the case of the Barbican's *Game On*, but also in ACMI's *Game Masters* and the Smithsonian's *The Art of Video Games* – they have succeeded by capitalising on the medium's spectacle and broad marketability. Under this exhibitionary frame, there is little capacity to imagine videogames beyond its commodified, mass-cultural form. In an essay on the contemporary dominance of what he terms the "entertainment economy," media theorist Norman M. Klein (2005) comments on this diminished imaginary capacity within culture more generally: "We all essentially live inside the stomach of the 'entertainment' dragon. As a result, it would be near impossible to generate an avant-garde strategy in a world that feels increasingly like an outdoor shopping mall." Though *Videogames* was intended as an experiment in videogame display, its curatorial possibilities were subsumed by the blockbuster demands of its budget and production methods.

If a critical exhibition strategy for videogames is to survive in the public museum, this approach is ultimately untenable. As others have argued, the display strategies and histories of new media art bear productive comparison to the curating of videogame exhibitions (Reed 2019; Oulton 2019). Accordingly, videogames have inherited many of the same reputational issues that have haunted new media art's position in the minds of museum audiences as well as museum staff. In *Beyond the White Cube*, curator Christiane Paul (2008) describes how the overwhelming spectacle of contemporary digital entertainment has skewed the expectations for museum audiences approaching digital works in the gallery: "The neo-baroque digital entertainment industry, with its ever bigger, better, and more sophisticated special effects, has helped to create a society of digital spectacle that needs to satisfy its consumers' unending demand for the next level of attractions. New media art, with its link to digital technologies, is often subjected to similar demands. … Art resides in the realm of sculpture

and painting; new media need to entertain" (Paul 2008, 72). The blockbuster format is ill-suited to explore videogames with the critical nuance that the subject requires; it can only envision videogames as mass entertainment.

This portends an existential problem for public museums as a whole: the unsustainability of blockbuster exhibitions altogether. In a recent op-ed in the Dutch newspaper *NRC*, Meta Knol (2020), then-Director of Museum De Lakenhal, an historical art museum in the Netherlands, reflected on the closure of a well-attended blockbuster exhibition of Rembrandt paintings.

> Now people excitedly ask about how successful it was: "How many visitors did you get?"
> Well, there weren't enough.
> But there were many. So many, that on some days it wasn't possible to properly view the exhibition. Everybody was crowding around the paintings, looking over each other's shoulders, greedily taking photographs. … There was so much to see. Initially, the museum had envisioned time slots of 75 minutes, but practice showed that people took a lot longer. Content-wise, the exhibition was a great success. Reviewers and visitors had high praise and many reported having unforgettable experiences.
> And yet, this was the last time. Because it really can't go on.

Although Museum De Lakenhal's exhibition was maximally attended, and critically well received, Knol declared that blockbusters of this scale were now unviable for museums like hers, as the "astronomical" costs of production were now totally standardised – inflated by insurance premiums, the couriering of loaned works, and the mounting of lavish marketing campaigns. We can see in the case of Museum De Lakenhal an example where the marketised public museum's prioritisation of attendance numbers above all else reaches its inevitable saturation point.

> That's the perverse system in which we are slowly entangling ourselves. A system in which Dutch museums bid against each other with large, money-guzzling blockbusters that require more money and more visitors every time, and where success is only measured in revenue and visitor counts. It remains unclear where the ceiling of this visitor potential lies. It's a symptom of the most stubborn ailment of our time: growth addiction. (Knol 2020)

In view of waning state support and rising operational costs, there are evidently limits to how large and how well attended an exhibition can be. In 2020 these limits were brought into sharp and urgent focus with the

pandemic, which evacuated museums globally and rendered metrics of attendance-as-success suddenly useless (K. Brown 2020). While this forced interregnum might have inspired museums to re-examine their exhibition strategies, most museums chose to "resist the crisis" and hoped "to return to their old ways" (Jurčišinová, Wilders, and Visser 2021, 30). Even after these museums reopened, visitation was still drastically reduced, leading to speculation that museum attendance had reached an unavoidable plateau (Small 2022; Cheshire 2023). Through its total dependence on blockbusters, the marketised museum is eating itself.

Since her tenure at the V&A, Marie has continued working as an independent curator and creative director. In 2020–2021 she produced and directed a documentary titled *The Grannies* – a short film featuring a group of players who recorded their experiences inside *Red Dead Online*, the online multiplayer component of 2018's *Red Dead Redemption 2*. The video depicts the players' escape from the authored world of the game via exploiting a glitch, and their subsequent exploration of the unauthored – or at least unsanctioned – landscape beyond, composed of jagged geometry, floating boulders, low-resolution textures, and an endless ocean below the fragile terrain. In 2022 the documentary became the basis of *Out of Bounds*, a small exhibition hosted at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, where it was exhibited as a large-scale two-channel installation.[2] The exhibition was a major success for ACMI – over its four-month run, *Out of Bounds* was visited by 67,818 people, which made it the best-attended exhibition held in that space to date. Beyond these metrics, though, the exhibition achieved within its small scale and budget something akin to the curatorial aspirations of *Videogames*. In their exploration of the strange digital landscape depicted in *The Grannies*, the players – who were all videogame developers themselves – speculated that they were encountering artefacts of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s making, described at the exhibition's opening as "the detritus left over from the hurricane of the game's development" (MacLarty, quoted in Foulston 2023). *Out of Bounds* presented a compelling and evocative depiction of the material construction

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[2] *Out of Bounds* was developed out of an exhibition design proposed by Marie for the experimental videogame festival *Now Play This*, which commissioned *The Grannies*. *Now Play This* was to be held at Somerset House in London in 2020 before the pandemic forced the festival online. The exhibition at ACMI was curated by Jini Maxwell, and displayed *The Grannies* in its originally intended format alongside works made by two of the players featured in the video in response to their experiences in the game: a series of screenshots and text repurposed from tweets posted by Kalonica Quigley; and *Red Desert Render* by Ian MacLarty, an experimental game about exploring a procedurally generated landscape.

of videogames, while also abstractly documenting aspects of both its making and its playing. *The Grannies* was able to present a gentle critique of the corporate logic of the videogame industry, which stifles and precludes the kind of expressive play shown in the video and erases the human labour that produces games, which point was underlined in a companion essay written by Marie and published by ACMI (Foulston 2023). Pointedly, *The Grannies* – and by extension *Out of Bounds*, and by further extension ACMI – was able to express this critique within a documentary context that did not require the cooperation – and resultant compromise, as I argued in Chapter 7 – of *Red Dead Online*'s creators Rockstar Games.

FIGURE 8.1.
Installation photos of The Grannies *in* Out of Bounds *at ACMI, 2022.*
© ACMI.

It is hard not to think of Marie's work on *The Grannies* as a counterpoint to the making of *Videogames*: within a much smaller scale and budget, through a much narrower curatorial focus, *Out of Bounds* seemed to evade all of the most egregious constraints of the V&A's exhibitionary regime. What's more, this limited scope produced an exhibition that exceeded the benchmarks for success set by its institution. It is worth keeping in mind how these benchmarks are established in the first place – the blockbuster ambitions of the V&A that shaped *Videogames* were a product of decades of waning governmental support; conversely, ACMI is more generously supported by state funding, and therefore it is less reliant on ticket revenue.[3] It should also be noted that this exhibition was part of a sustained institutional effort to engage seriously with videogames; though ACMI hosted two blockbusters in 2008 and 2012 with *Game On* and *Game Masters* respectively, videogames' presence in its programming schedules receded until around 2018, when its enthusiasm for the subject was renewed – and recorded, in a manifesto from ACMI's then-CXO and now-CEO Seb Chan, titled "Why we care about videogames" (Chan 2018). Since then, videogames been central to the museum's work – it has hosted videogame exhibitions, live performances, panel discussions, and other ancillary events; it has collected production artefacts from a number of local videogames; it has commissioned work from local developers; most significantly, it has permanently employed a curator with deep expertise in videogames as a cultural subject. Significantly, none of this recent work has taken the form of a blockbuster exhibition – instead, the museum has worked purposefully to integrate videogames into its operation through a program of thoughtful, small-scale engagements. Successful exhibitions like *Out of Bounds* are only realised through an institutional logic that values videogames as cultural heritage; the marketised museum is compelled instead to envision videogames as a means of satisfying visitor targets. The position of videogames in the public museum is determined by what museums want from them, and what museums want is determined by their position within their cultural economy.

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[3] In the year ending March 31, 2019, 39.22% of the V&A's total income that year was governmental Grant-in-Aid; compare this to ACMI, which received 77.33% of its revenue in the same financial year from government grants (V&A 2019; ACMI 2019). This was somewhat rebalanced after the pandemic – the V&A's 2022 report shows that 59.42% of its income was from Grant-in-Aid, compared to ACMI's governmental support, which constituted 80.03% of its revenue (V&A 2022; ACMI 2022b). This renewed support – which was granted as a countermeasure to the sharp loss of income due to the Museum's closure throughout the UK's various lockdowns – does not appear to have drastically reshaped the V&A's exhibition strategy, however.

A sustainable approach to the integration of videogames in the museum requires a willingness to engage with videogames more deeply, more freely, and perhaps more cheaply, beyond the all-or-nothing stakes of the blockbuster. The pursuit of attendance above all else is destructive to both the cultural aims and the commercial longevity of the public museum in general, as I have described above. New models and methods for exploring curatorial subjects are needed, then – not just to display videogames, but to display anything at all.

9. Recommendations for further research: Interdependent videogame development

The first time I met Marie Foulston was through an email in early 2014, a little under a year before she was employed by the V&A to curate *Videogames*, when she was working as an independent curator co-organising *That Venus Patrol & Wild Rumpus Party*: a one-night party, run by the London-based curatorial collective Wild Rumpus – which Marie co-founded – and the independent videogame website Venus Patrol. The event had been held annually for two years prior in a bar in the Mission District of San Francisco, to coincide with the Game Developers Conference as an informal satellite event, and featured a lineup of playable games and DJs. By 2014, *That Party* was well-renowned amongst a certain demographic of GDC's attendees – the Western independent game development scene, or at least a particularly visible subset of that scene – and enjoyed a reputation within that subset as cool and in-demand; in 2014, the first round of tickets was released before the lineup was announced and sold out in less than 30 minutes.

About a month before the party, my three collaborators and I – who had only recently begun working under the studio title of House House – were contacted by one of Marie's co-organisers, asking if they could include our game *Push Me Pull You* in their lineup. At the time, we had been working on *Push Me Pull You*, our first game, for about three months, begun more or less as an experiment to see if we could make a game together; we did not have particularly ambitious expectations for game development as a creative practice, much less as a career. We were, however, relatively well aware of the loose community of primarily North American independent game developers we all followed on Twitter; as such, we had enough of a sense of the social and cultural capital that surrounded GDC, and *That Party* in particular, that when the invitation to be included came through, we were

surprised, bewildered, and overjoyed. Compelled by the opportunity to have our game played by a bar full of game developers whose work we had long admired, we spent a turbulent few weeks working hard on *Push Me Pull You*, trying to get it to an exhibition-ready state.[1] Though we lacked the resources to attend *That Party* ourselves, we were excited to watch from afar – via Twitter – as our game saw its first real entry into a videogame scene which we'd previously considered ourselves "outside."

In the wake of *That Party*, we received tweets and emails from game developers we admired telling us how much they'd enjoyed our game, and a number of journalists who had played the game at GDC wrote generous coverage of *Push Me Pull You* in the weeks that followed (Orland and Machkovech 2014; Matulef 2014; Serrels 2014). Though we'd already experienced some degree of success sharing animated GIFs of the game online, and made a handful of connections within our local scene in

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[1] By "exhibition-ready" I mean "stable and sensible enough to be played in a room that we ourselves were not in." Earlier playtests of *Push Me Pull You* had made us confident that the game was enjoyable, but in its early state it was likely to crash during play, or confuse players due to a lack of contextual information. Since our experience making *Push Me Pull You*, we still consider this "exhibition-ready" state a useful benchmark for how we produce our games.

Melbourne, Australia, *Push Me Pull You*'s reception at *That Party* marked a significant shift in our own trajectory as game developers. Two years later, when *Push Me Pull You* was commercially released on PlayStation 4 and we had more firmly established ourselves within a community of game development, we heard from a number of people who had first encountered it at *That Party* in 2014.
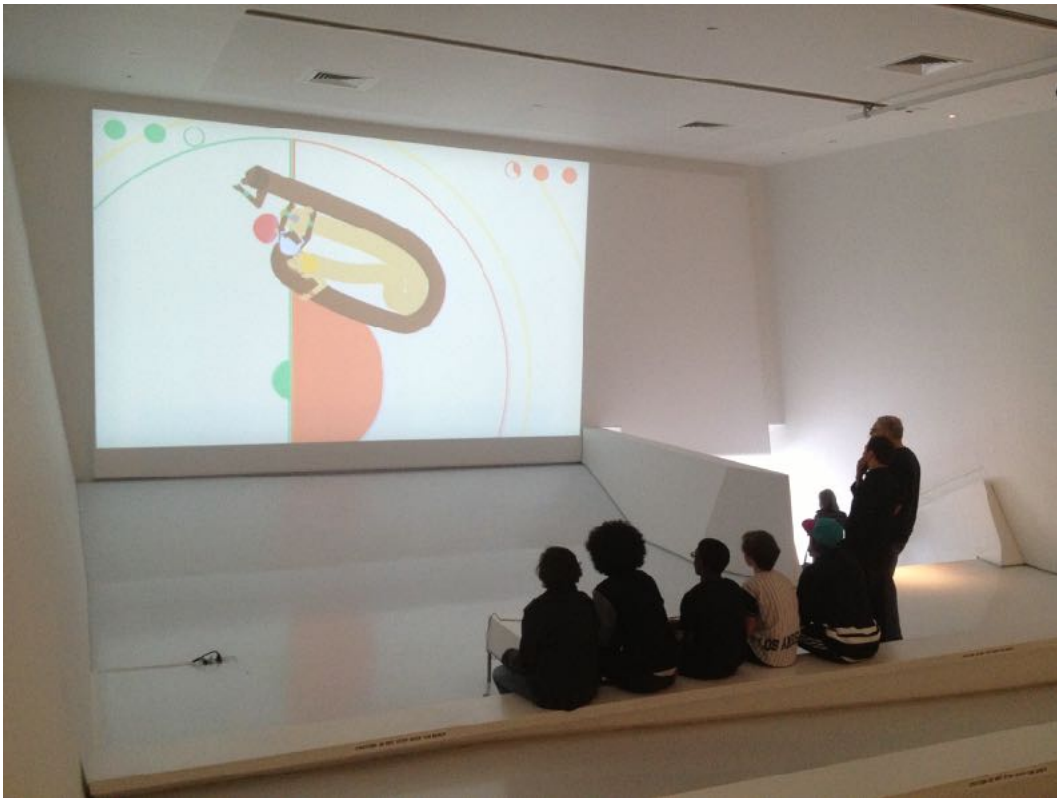

FIGURE 9.2.
Push Me Pull You *played at the Museum of the Moving Image, March 2015.*
© Museum of the Moving Image.

Throughout its development and beyond its release, *Push Me Pull You* was exhibited widely in a variety of venues and contexts: festivals, parties, warehouses, bars, cinemas, public squares, and – of relevance to this thesis – museums. Our first exhibit in a museum was, by the traditional standards of the art world, a big deal: to fill a gap in its programming schedule, we were invited by the Museum of the Moving Image, based in Queens, New York City, to display our game in its video screening amphitheatre throughout the month of March 2015. The museum had some history dealing with videogames – most notably it hosted the arcade retrospective *Hot Circuits* in 1989, and had served as host to the independent games festival Indiecade East in 2013 and 2014 – although MoMI's Associate Curator of Digital

Media described the display to us as an "experiment," since they'd never shown a single game as its own exhibit before, nor hosted interactive work of any kind in that space.

At the time, I was struck by how underwhelmed I felt at the prospect of the exhibit. Though there was something abstractly gratifying about seeing our game exhibited in the vaunted context of a white cube gallery space, I mostly recall a vague sense of bemusement – before I made games, I had trained as a fine artist, and I remember thinking that if I were still making art, seeing my work displayed in a museum like this would be a major career achievement. Now, as a game developer, it was difficult to determine what a museum display like this should mean. Comparing our relative apathy at this display to the total elation prompted by an invitation to *That Party*, it seems puzzling that a one-night party would be so much more exhilarating, and legitimating, than a month-long exhibit in a major public museum. Arguably, this could just be a matter of habituation: though the MoMI exhibit was only a year after *That Party*, we had shown the game at a handful of festivals in that time, and were generally more assured of our own position within the independent videogame scene than we had been a year before. A more subdued emotional response might therefore be expected – however, there were distinct material outcomes to each display, too. In the wake of *That Party*, we received an influx of warm responses and professional opportunities: connections to journalists, contact with platform holders, and invitations to display the game in other events, all of which furthered the development and reputation of our game. Throughout the run of the game's display at the Museum of the Moving Image, and since, we never heard the exhibit mentioned by anyone. Beyond an email from the curator letting us know that the display had been "a huge hit," and some attached photos of the game being played in the museum space, we never really saw any evidence of its existence, nor felt any sense of the display's impact beyond the confines of the gallery walls.

I make this comparison not to express any particular displeasure with our first museum experience – we were flattered to be asked, and perfectly happy with the conditions of our game's display. Rather, I am interested in raising a potentially troubling question for museums regarding their relationship to the independent videogame scene, and to similarly distant communities of practice: what value or legitimacy do museums currently provide to videogame developers? Certainly, public exhibition played a significant role in the development and promotion of our first game, but the most valuable of these tended to be those which would introduce the game to others within our community – as in the case of *That Party*, each display

at an industry party or festival would typically lead to further opportunities and further establish our position within our network; similarly, displays of the game at public conventions and trade shows introduced our game to new audiences of videogame players. In this context, public display seemed to act as a conduit, connecting us to valuable new audiences and legitimising the game within our community. Museum display, on the other hand, felt more like a terminus: though the game was displayed fairly widely at multiple museums, none of these exhibitions seemed connected in any way, or formed part of a unified trajectory of museum display. While these exhibitions were outcomes or reflections of the legitimacy we'd been granted within the videogame sphere, they did not seem to meaningfully contribute to that legitimacy themselves.[2]

As it turns out, independent videogame development is not independent at all. Our work on *Push Me Pull You*, and subsequent career, was actively shaped by the interdependent relationships that comprised our surrounding field – with local game developers, collaborators, journalists, government funding bodies, and so on. Within this network of interdependence, independent curators and festival organisers played a crucial role in our formation as game developers: as described above, their exhibitions functioned as conduits which connected us to others within our network, and connected our game to new audiences; conversely, exhibiting games like ours allowed these curators to establish their own position as custodians and tastemakers. In practising this intermediary work, these videogame curators were not only offering value to various parties within a community

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[2] I am speaking here in fairly normative terms regarding our values as videogame developers, which hewed closely to that of other independent videogame makers within our community of practice. In doing so I want to be careful not to suggest that museum exhibitions ought to be more readily instrumentalised according to the capitalist logic of the videogame industry – which tendency I have already critiqued in Chapter 6 of this thesis – nor do I wish to discount the value of symbolic capital within the cultural ecosystem of videogame production. Rather, I mean to call into question any expectation of symbolic capital offered by museum exhibition which is not actively attentive to the needs of its exhibited practitioners.

This is not to say that straightforward museum display is entirely devoid of potential material or symbolic value, but that this value is tenuous and defined by its broader cultural context. In the case of the MoMI exhibit, for example: we later cited this experience as evidence of our game's cultural impact when applying for production funding through a state government grant, which we eventually received – however, the extent to which this kind of symbolic capital actually influenced the application's outcome was entirely opaque, and the market ideology which underpins Australian cultural policy (see Keogh 2023b) suggests that museum exhibition would bear somewhat minor consideration relative to more concrete proof of commercial potential.

of practice, but were also actively constructing and affirming its identity and culture.

Museums are therefore facing a challenge that I do not believe they recognise. Though exhibitions of videogames are valuable for the platform and purported legitimacy which they provide, there is an evident capacity for museums and their workers to perform more effective cultural intermediation. In the interdependent context of videogame development, museum display in itself offers limited or perhaps unrealised value.

Like any cultural practice, videogames deserve the support and protection of cultural institutions, and the question of how this support could be effected is a complex one. The limits of my ethnographic fieldwork meant that the voices of videogame developers have been largely absent from this thesis, and so a continuation of this work ought to account for these omitted perspectives and desires. Recently, the academic field of game studies has seen an emerging breadth of empirical research focused on how videogames are made, which have converged into a discrete subfield of "game production studies" (Sotamaa and Švelch 2021); this diverse body of work, which rigorously explores the systems of capital which shape the practices of videogame development, offers valuable methodological tools to more deeply understand how game makers encounter cultural capital via museums. What is the experience of videogame developers when working with museums? How do museological exhibitions of videogames benefit videogame developers, both symbolically and materially? These questions are under-explored, and coherent answers are needed if we are to envision new ways for museums to meaningfully participate in the cultural production of videogames.

Looking at the history of major videogame exhibitions generally, and at the V&A's *Videogames: Design / Play / Disrupt* in detail, it feels as though there is a dearth of opportunity for deep and interesting work around videogames within institutional contexts. One of the broadest takeaways from this thesis is that the economic conditions of the contemporary public museum actively diminish and squander the potential for serious, long-term cultural work afforded by their institutional position. This is not to dismiss the possibility of a healthy relationship between videogames and museums altogether, though. In *After Institutions*, contemporary art curator Karen Archey (2022, 109) defends the productive potential of the work of cultural institutions, in spite of their contemporary failings: "Since its inception, the institution has always mounted exhibitions, collected artworks and artifacts, and acted as a repository for ideas. This, itself, is rife with chance and

opportunity. That these core operations remain intact centuries later is a testament to their strength in purpose within society." Part of the project of envisioning a constructive role for public museums within the making of videogames would be to more deeply explore the "chance and opportunity" that these traditional museum operations could foster, wherein museums could support and produce the cultural field of videogames as well as represent it.

Of course, the prospect of a productive relationship between museums and videogames is not entirely speculative. Just as there are many scales of videogame production, there are many scales of videogame exhibition. At smaller scales, there are many examples of independent galleries or festivals doing compelling and constructive work, and which are deeply integrated within the field of videogame production – however, these practices are typically constrained by a precarity of their own, and therefore do not permit the same kind or long-term curatorial research, nor do they offer the same material resources, that larger institutions can provide.[3] At this larger institutional scale, there are a number of cultural organisations working productively with videogame makers beyond the production of blockbuster exhibitions. In my own local context, to give one example, ACMI in Melbourne – as described in the previous chapter – has recently broadened its engagement with videogames, through small-scale exhibitions, public talks, commissions of new work, a monthly "Women & Non-Binary Gamers Club," and various opportunities for local videogame makers to present their works-in-progress both to the public and to other makers. While these engagements feel broadly positive to me, their impact remains ambiguous; again, further work is needed to trace the effect of these museum practices upon their participants, and upon their local field. For now, we can understand this program of work as a compelling template which may be ported to, and elaborated by, other cultural institutions, other localities, and other fields of videogame production.

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[3] Examples of independent videogame-focused galleries include Babycastles in New York, LIKELIKE in Pittsburgh, or the VGA Gallery in Chicago. Though these galleries' exhibitionary work is typically more radical and open than those of their institutional counterparts, their material constraints – shoestring budgets; volunteer labour – tend to limit their potential scale and reach. Unlike Marie's position at the V&A as Curator of Videogames, these projects are generally not anyone's full-time job; the founder and Executive Director of LIKELIKE, Paolo Pedercini, describes the gallery as "a side project of a side project" which operates out of his garage, and as so wholly defined by its constraints as to only be replicable "in the sense that you can try to shape a project entirely around your personal, material and logistical limitations. Around your access to resources and skills. And around your social context" (Pedercini 2019).

There are many possible institutional futures for videogames. If we are to conceive of a constructive role for museums and gallery display in the interdependent field of videogame development, we need to imagine alternative models to the hegemony of visitor targets and blockbuster exhibitions, and alternative ways for videogames to exist within and alongside cultural institutions. Public museums, if properly supported by their cultural economies, and thereby properly supportive of their local communities, can helpfully shape the production of videogames by providing new and sustainable contexts for videogame development. In properly recognising and supporting videogames as living cultural heritage, museums could, if not emancipate games from capital altogether, at least establish new avenues for videogame production and reception external to the existing apparatus of the commercial videogame industry and its platforms.

Having now explored the question of what videogames do to, and for, museums, it is worth inverting these prepositions to form a new line of enquiry: what could museums do to, and for, videogames?

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Appendix

In accordance with the thesis submission requirements of RMIT University, I have appended to this document two letters which granted ethics approval for the human research conducted for this project by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network.

College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN)
College of Design and Social Context
NH&MRC Code: EC00237

Notice of Approval

Date:	**29 June 2017**
Project number:	**CHEAN A 20848-04/17**
Project title:	**'Examining the Contemporary Position of Videogames in the Museum'**
Risk classification:	**Low risk**
Chief investigator:	**Dr Emma Witkowski**
Status:	**Approved**
Approval period:	From: **29 June 2017** To: **22 May 2019**

The following documents have been reviewed and approved:

Title	Version	Date
Risk Assessment and Application form	3	26 June 2017
Participant Information and Consent Form	3	26 June 2017
☒ Confirmation Letter	1	26 June 2017
Response to CHEAN	1	26 June 2017

The above application has been approved by the RMIT University CHEAN as it meets the requirements of the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (NH&MRC, 2007).

Terms of approval:

1. **Responsibilities of chief investigator**
   It is the responsibility of the above chief investigator to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by CHEAN. Approval is valid only whilst the chief investigator holds a position at RMIT University.
2. **Amendments**
   Approval must be sought from CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project. To apply for an amendment use the request for amendment form, which is available on the HREC website and submitted to the CHEAN secretary. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.
3. **Adverse events**
   You should notify the CHEAN immediately (within 24 hours) of any serious or unanticipated adverse effects of their research on participants, and unforeseen events that might affect the ethical acceptability of the project.
4. **Annual reports**
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. Annual reports must be submitted by the anniversary of approval of the project for each full year of the project. If the project is of less than 12 months duration then a final report only is required.
5. **Final report**
   A final report must be provided within six months of the end of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
6. **Monitoring**
   Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by the CHEAN at any time.

7. **Retention and storage of data**
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data according to the requirements of the *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research* (section 2) and relevant RMIT policies.

8. **Special conditions of approval**
   Nil.

In any future correspondence please quote the project number and project title above.

Dr Scott Mayson
Deputy Chairperson, College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN A)
RMIT University

cc: Dr David Blades (CHEAN secretary), Mr Michael McMaster, Dr Douglas Wilson.

Notice of Approval

Date:	**4 December 2019**
Project number:	**CHEAN A 20848-04/17**
Project title:	**'Examining the Contemporary Position of Videogames in the Museum'**
Risk classification:	**Low Risk**
Investigator(s):	**Dr Emma Witkowski, Mr Michael McMaster, Dr Douglas Wilson**
Approval period:	From: **26 June 2017** To: **1 December 2020**

I am pleased to advise that your extension request has been granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (DSC CHEAN), as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Ethics approval is extended until 1 December 2020.

Terms of approval:

1. **Responsibilities of investigator**
   It is the responsibility of the above investigator/s to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by the CHEAN. Approval is only valid whilst the investigator/s holds a position at RMIT University.

2. **Amendments**
   Approval must be sought from the CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project including approved documents. To apply for an amendment please use the 'Request for Amendment Form' that is available on the RMIT website. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.

3. **Adverse events**
   You should notify HREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

4. **Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (PISCF)**
   The PISCF and any other material used to recruit and inform participants of the project must include the RMIT university logo. The PISCF must contain a complaints clause.

5. **Annual reports**
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. This form can be located online on the human research ethics web page on the RMIT website.

6. **Final report**
   A final report must be provided at the conclusion of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

7. **Monitoring**

Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by HREC at any time.

8. **Retention and storage of data**

The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

Please quote the project number and project title in any future correspondence.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network, I wish you well in your research.

Mr Kevin Anslow
(Acting) **DSC CHEAN Secretary**
RMIT University