The politics of game canonization: Tales from the frontlines of creating a national history of games

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we provide insight into the politics of forming a national games canon by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, one of the biggest audiovisual cultural heritage institutions in the Netherlands. From a historiographical perspective, the paper investigates how different stakes and commitments of the different actors involved (the authors included) during the different stages of admission and selection are inherently connected. From a unique insider's perspective, we recognize that more pragmatic concerns around preservation and archival efforts of the Institute collapse with the socioculturally-driven aims of the canon as a history of Dutch games, a process we call the politics of acquisition.

Keywords

canonization, game preservation, game archiving, cultural heritage, politics, game museum

INTRODUCTION

In June 2018 we received an email with a relatively straightforward question: would we, as games scholars, be interested in participating in the development of a Dutch games canon. The question came from the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (hereafter Sound and Vision), which takes it as its role to preserve and exhibit the country's audiovisual heritage and with whom we had done other projects related to game archiving in previous years (Glas et al. 2017a; 2017b). The stated goal in the email was to bring together a group of experts to create a list of the "most important" Dutch games, which the Institute would then also try to include in their archive. Having been involved in the Institute's activities before, and drawn to the opportunity to be part of writing Dutch game history, we said yes. As soon as we entered the process, we realized the unique insider's perspective we were getting into the sociocultural and highly political minefield that is media canonization.

As Staiger has noted in relationship to film, canonization is far from a neutral process, and unsurprisingly so. During all the different steps in the process from admission to selection and reflection, different values, different motifs, and different arguments are at play, steering the final selection of works into a specific direction. This selection often reinforces dominant social, political, economic and cultural ideologies and has the potential to marginalize others (1985). Such issues become even more pertinent if they are linked to an effort to archive canonical games as cultural heritage by a national institute, since this positions games in the complex social system of institutions (like museums) and other actors (funding organizations, critics etc.) which are capable of legitimizing the medium (cf. Bourdieu 1993). This, in turn, is all the more interesting when realizing that the Dutch history of games is not necessarily well-known and does not necessarily stand in high regard with game critics and enthusiast. While there are several relatively recent international hit games, like those of Guerrilla Games (*Killzone* 2004; *Horizon Zero Dawn* 2017), or indie darlings like *Ridiculous Fishing* (Vlambeer 2013) or *Hidden Folks* (de Jongh 2017), few games are part of the national collective memory, especially when it comes to games before the mid '90s.

In this paper we therefore aim to investigate the different motivations and choices in the process of constructing a national games canon and the way in which these motivations and choices come from and result in a specific selection and valuation of games. As such, we lay bare the politics of canonization which were at play in the process of creating a games canon. Our findings are derived from participatory observation, various internal and external communication material, as well as interviews conducted with key members of the team responsible for creating the canon, and material gathered online (i.e. on the canon's eventual website and social media discussions related to the canon). The canon being part of the larger preservation strategy of the Institute, this approach allowed us directly engage with archivists to bring into view the "heritage preservation rationale" as an important part of a medium's history (Frick 2011, 7). When it comes to the actual creation of the canon, however, we were not external observers but active participants, and therefore partly responsible for its gestation. This also required some explicit soul searching on our parts. By looking at the politics of constructing a Dutch games canon, which makes claims about a specific national history of game culture, we adopt a sociocultural approach (cf. Bourdieu 1993) to games and situate our work in larger recent discussions on game preservation (Newman 2012; Swalwell, 2013; Nylund 2015; Newman & Simons 2018) and the related matter of museum presentation (Prax et al. 2016; Naskali et al. 2017; Nylund 2018) as well as game history in general (Huhtamo 2012; Guins, 2014; Suominen 2017). Our work here can be seen as a games historiography, an approach which aims to "make sense of how we write about the history of games, what kind of activity it actually is, and what are the narratives, interpretations or other 'discursive' rules that govern this kind of writing" (Mäyrä 2008, 32).

Staiger's previously mentioned work on the politics of film canonization provides us with an ideal structuring device for our arguments and findings. First, she discusses the Politics of Admission, "a politics of opening up the established set of arts to a newcomer" (1985, 4). In Staiger's case, the newcomer was film among the existing traditional arts. In our specific case, the newcomer is digital games, and the establishment is not art, but the traditional media which are already designated as important audiovisual cultural heritage (film, television, radio). Here, we look at the reasoning and strategies of Sound and Vision to include games in their archive, and how these efforts lead to a specific historiographical take on writing game history (Suominen 2017, discussed below). Second, the Politics of Selection trace the various rationales for selection, a necessity which usually comes with "a politics of inclusion and exclusion" (Staiger 1985, 8). Here we discuss the process of canonization we were

asked to actively participate in. Third, in what Staiger calls the Politics of the Academy, she calls for attention to the fact that "if those involved in making [...] canons did so in a social and economic context, so do we [as academics]" (1985, 18). Here we reflect back on our own role as researchers from a particular field (game studies) and our own particular situatedness (gender, age, etc.) in the creation of a national games canon. In the same way a canon can never be neutral, we as researchers are also knowingly or unknowingly guided by our own politics. More so, we discuss the perceived authority of our particular expertise. First, however, we situate the canonization efforts in the larger context of games historiography.

WRITING GAME HISTORY AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

As Mäyrä has pointed out, writing a history of games is not an easy task. Games' public status as a form of 'low culture' has resulted in a lack of professional historical research and the research that is done, is done primarily from a software industry and technology perspective rather than an art historical perspective. He also points towards a "lack of archives and museums dedicated to the preservation and documentation of digital games" (2008, 30-31). This latter situation has changed a bit over the past decade due to a greater awareness for the urgency of game preservation as well as increased activity within museums and heritage institutions to include games in their collections and exhibitions. It is not our goal here to explicate all the challenges still present in these efforts, or stipulate solutions (see Newman & Simons, 2018, for a good overview). Rather, we follow Mäyrä in that such archival and museum practices are important to tell the story of the history of digital games. In fact, in the various choices and efforts to archive and present digital games as part of their collections, such institutions are already laying down a first version of such a history.

As such, with the acquisition of early Dutch games from the '80s, and the subsequent creation and publication of a national games canon, it can be said Sound and Vision actively started to write its own history of Dutch games. A canon is, of course, a very specific way of presenting history, which Suominen argues is usually associated with what he calls an "enthusiast" genre, a specific historiography meta-model he identifies. "In the most extreme cases", he argues, such a style could be guilty of "fetishizing", which puts "games and their developers on a pedestal and consist of numerous anecdotes and electronic lore supporting the master narrative of innovative game development and developers, cultural consequences, and, sometimes, progress" (2017, 551). Being a national cultural heritage institute, which brings with it a certain degree of stature and weight, the aim was more ambitious than mere enthusiasm. According to the project lead, the goal was to show the "introduction and development of a new medium, its societal impact as well as the economic impact" (from interview). The enthusiast genre of game history writing is, however, only one of four historiographical meta-models Suominen distinguishes, the other three being defined by emancipatory, genealogical, and pathological approaches (2017, 548).

While Suominen would consider a canon as a typical feature of the enthusiast genre, the focus on the national perspective, and the fact that a heritage institution had grander ambitions, makes it arguably more of a genre 'blend'. We can begin with the emancipator genre, which as Suominen explains, foregoes the dominant narratives of game history. Such studies "aim to rhetorically challenge and unmask ''traditional histories'' and master narratives" by focusing on issues related to societal class, gender, politics, and ethnicity within gaming cultures (207, 552). Interestingly enough, Suominen also emphasizes geographical and cultural variations and regional developments as examples of historical topics which could deviate from the norm (ibid.). And indeed, gaming history by and large is written from a United States and Japan perspective, focusing primarily on industry developments related to large and

successful hardware manufacturers, publishers and developers, the hit games they produced, as well as their global impact. Usually, fewer attention is given to less significant (as in: commercially or culturally successful) countries and their industries. The Netherlands is seldom if ever specifically mentioned in international gaming histories, in the same sense that within film histories certain regions and nations remain ignored or undervalued (Frick 2011, 148).[i] From this perspective, a canon of national gaming history almost automatically means presenting games deviating from the more established, well-known, international history of games.

The effort to tell the story of the Dutch history of games from a heritage institutional perspective links up well to Suominen's third historiographical genre too: the genealogy. He refers to a change in game histories from a mere "chronicle era" (Huhtamo 2005) to a more dedicated "collection era" (Guins 2014) where amateur collectors are joined by professional historians and archivists. Here, the aims are "more scientifically oriented and more aware of methodological connections in the creation of genealogies" (Suominen 2017, 554). When such historical research goes into a full media archaeological mode, it moves into Suominen's final and most in-depth form of historical research with a strong focus on cultural context: the deep excavation or pathological genre (2017, 556-557). From such a media archeological perspective, one should not ignore the fact that "gaming is rooted in discursive formations and shared codes that are cultural and historical" (Huhtamo 2012, 30). It is this way of telling the story of the history of games which is recognized as missing in Prax et al.'s investigation of the Barbicon's touring GameOn 2.0 exhibition. According to the Barbicon, it's the "first major international touring exhibition to explore the vibrant history and culture of computer games"[ii]. According to Prax et al. however, their particular approach was too limiting to actually tell this story due to the lack of contextual aspects, saying that "for a theoretical and practical understanding of what gaming is" one needs "the temporal and spatial context in which these artifacts are made [as part of] a multidimensional and complete understanding of gaming" (2016, 15). To include the goals of a more genealogical or pathological approach in writing history is, however, more difficult in an archive or museum setting than in academic writing, with a host of practical and institutional concerns playing a part. Nonetheless, the multi-annual strategy plan of Sound and Vision, in which the plans to include games in the archive was unfolded (see below), the stated goals is to "archive and present" games as part of a new collection "in a media, transmedial and/or cultural-historical context" (2015, 8). This is also a good reminder that while Suominen looks at existing writing on game history, and Prax et al. looked at an existing exhibition, the efforts of Sound and Vision to 'write' a national history of games was, and largely is, in a process of becoming, with many of the genre characteristics mentioned above being primarily aims, not results.

Our work, thus, is not a study of an existing game history but one which investigates how the aims and ambitions of a cultural heritage institute to include games in their archive takes shape. As a historiography of this process, we more closely look at "the various *commitments* of the authors [in this case the cultural heritage institution, red.] and help to pinpoint the different perspectives in histories underlying these commitments" (Suominen 2017, 548: emphasis in original). The politics of canonization at play are, as we will show, key to this.

POLITICS OF ADMISSION: GETTING GAMES INTO THE ARCHIVE
According to Staiger, the first step in a canonization process, concerns the politics of admission. During this step, strategies are employed to argue why a new medium is worthy of attention among existing, established media. This means that before even thinking about which games to select for a canon, thought needs to be put into the

question: why games at all? Why do we think that these "new" media forms "ought to be included in the group of objects that the cultural elite terms aesthetic" (Staiger 1985, 5) or, in this case, a worthy part of our cultural heritage?

Parker notes that in the early days of games, discussions around the cultural value of games were uncommon and mostly focused on their instrumental merits (health or educational benefits) rather than their intrinsic (aesthetic) value (2018, 77). However, a growing industry, a demographic expansion of the gamer audience, the development of so called "blockbuster prestige games" (Parker 2015), and the rise of independent developers in the first decade of the 21st century gave a push to the cultural legitimization of the medium (2018, 77-78). During this time, the argumentative strategies for admitting games into the cultural field of established media, are manifold: "alignment with established forms, appeals to medium specificity, the identification of author figures, the notion that games are a synthesis of many art forms, and populist arguments that position games against high art" (2018, 90).

While in Sound and Vision's specific case, the aim was never to argue for games as art but instead for games as cultural heritage, it is interesting to see how some of these ploys are still used in the internal and external struggles for legitimization of games in general and the subsequent selection of games during the expert meetings (see below). However, and perhaps not surprisingly given the success of Dutch serious/applied games, making up roughly half of the national games industry (van Grinsven & Raessens 2015, 364), we also see more instrumental legitimization strategies being employed. In this section we therefore lay bare three different legitimization strategies employed by Sound and Vision for taking up games in their national cultural heritage archives, to see how these strategies start to dictate the parameters within which selection choices are made, cultural value is attributed to games, and history is written.

Within Sound and Vision's multi-annual strategy plans for the period 2016-2020, published in 2015, we can first see the ambition to broaden the scope of its archive to include new media forms including games. Here it is mentioned that the traditional media of television and radio (the Institute's core collection) do not reflect the "media heritage of the future" but that online and interactive media are key if the Institute wants to keep offering a "representative collection of Dutch multimedia productions" (2015, 8). New media forms like social media, web video, websites, video art, virtual reality pieces and, as should be clear, games, are specifically mentioned as the new objects to not just preserve and archive, but also exhibit in the Institute's museum space. Here, we see a key heritage institute making the claim that including games is now inevitable given the fact that these media are no longer niche products but have become an essential part of our media culture. It is in line with Jenkins' argument that games are "as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age" (2010). Furthermore, from a cultural heritage perspective, the focus on preserving a history of national game production aligns with the aim "to fill game historical gaps and increase historical knowledge and the production of a 'more complete' game historical narration" (Suominin 2017, 553).

Following Parker, this ploy can be seen as a populist one, as it emphasizes the widespread impact of games with a broad audience rather than merely its importance for a particular high-culture elite (2018, 97-98). As Jenkins has pointed out, "games have been embraced by a public that has otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art" (2010). For a cultural heritage institute already focusing heavily on media which are often associated with broad audiences (television, radio), including games in its archives makes a lot of sense. In spite of this though, as we will show below, reactions to the canon were mixed, as the selected games ultimately did not

appease those expecting only the greatest Dutch hits. This may well be due to the fact that a populist approach is inherently problematic if the source material arguably never reached mass recognition in the first place except for several high-profile, well-known games and developers.

Aside from the populist ploy, we can also recognize what Staiger has termed "the maturation ploy" in Sound and Vision's legitimation strategies (1985, 7). Often drawing on specific titles and developers, the idea here is that the medium has matured over the years to become an aesthetic force to be reckoned with. Interestingly, this strategy seemed to have been employed more in internal than in external communication. Even though archiving games was part of the ambitious multi-annual strategy plans, the game archiving and game canon lead later explained that within the institute, games were seen as surrounded by a "sense of superficiality, of not being serious", making it at times hard "to show that games are worthy of archiving" (from interview). Here it seemed that the canon itself was employed strategically, to show that a new medium has "taken some time to develop sufficiently so as to produce artful works" (Staiger 1985, 7).

While again an effective and understandable legitimization strategy, this maturation ploy caused another interesting paradox to arise. After all, in this ploy, early games, like early cinema can be seen as a "pre-history" which marks a point after which the medium and its national industry matured (Staiger, 1985, 7). But in this case, early Commodore 64 games from the '80s were very much a part, if not the main focus of, the institute's ambitions to start archiving games. Here, it becomes clear that the underlying goal of the whole endeavour was to instrumentalize the canon for the more urgent existing goals of game preservation and archiving rather than to emphasize the intrinsic value of games as cultural heritage. As two of the institute's staff members in charge of the canon explained to us later:

> The canon started from a different need. Not from an interest in a canon. We had started the archiving process with a focus on the beginning of the '80s with famous developers like Radarsoft and Davilex and tried to make our way up. But eventually this led to a rather accidental list of games that you know how to archive technically, have been able to trace down the developers from, or have been able to gain the rights to. And so then we started wondering whether this is actually the story we wanted to tell about the Dutch game history? (from interview).

The canon played two important roles then. First, it helped the institute to focus their archival attempts to a manageable set of canonical works, what Staiger has termed the efficiency rationale for a canon (1985, 8). And second, the canon provided the team with an air of prestige which they could subsequently use for both external acquisition attempts and to further bolster the internal aims of the Institute to incorporate new media forms in the archive.

So, a look into the Institute's archival strategies as well as larger national developments in preserving digital heritage shines a new light on the legitimization strategies employed. Here we see how the politics of admission are inherently tied up in a dialectical relationship with other processes like preservation and, as we've seen above, selection. The canon is put in service of the ambition to preserve older games, which in turn starts to determine certain selection criteria in the canon (see below), which in turn impacts the preservation strategies. In the end, this of course has significant effects for the way in which games are valued by the institute and how its writing of games history takes shape.

We also see this close connection between preservation and canonization happening in relationship to the "instrumental ploy". As noted above, the instrumental ploy was prominent in early legitimization arguments, emphasizing games as important for their educational potential or other positive impact (Parker 2018, 77). Yet, in the 2018 white paper from Sound and Vision, stating the urgency, legitimization and challenges of game preservation, games are specifically emphasized for their applied potential. Together with more circumstantial reasons (such as stating the size of the industry) the paper argues "that computer games have become an intrinsic part of the way in which people think about the transference of knowledge and skills" (de Vos 2018a, 3). In the Institute's first steps to preserve Dutch digital games, a selection of old Commodore 64 and MSX games from the mid '80s were acquired from developer Radarsoft. In the press release on the acquisition, it is specifically mentioned that several of these games were nationally successful educational ones like 1984's *Topografie Nederland* and *Tempo Typen* (Beeld en Geluid 2016). While this is again a valid legitimization strategy, it does steer the value of the medium in a specific direction. Here, games become interesting instruments for cultural practices, rather than interesting cultural objects in their own right. Furthermore, this ploy again shows how early preservation attempts start to feed into legitimization strategies and in turn selection criteria. This realization may well have fed into legitimization arguments such as those in the white paper and (knowingly or unknowingly) slipped into the selection procedure during later stages of the canonization process, as we will discuss hereafter.

POLITICS OF SELECTION: PICKING GAMES WITH AUTHORITY

When faced with a potentially large set of games to preserve, archive, and present to an audience, choices need to be made. As Staiger points out, a canon can bring with it efficiency: "once a set of texts is considered institutionalized, referencing those works is economical and brief" (1985, 9). It also creates order into apparent chaos and, perhaps the most political rationale for canonization, it allows for evaluative selection (1985, 9-10). Here, inclusion and exclusion takes shape, with some titles being "moved to the centre of attention; others, to the margins" of history (1985, 8). To provide insight into this process, let us first set the scene by explaining the process of canonization we were invited into.

Within the email which invited us to participate in the expert group to create the canon was a link to a longlist of close to 600 Dutch games, preselected by the institute, as a starting point to aid us in our decision-making process. The list was curated by the game preservation group in the years prior, and presented game names, their developer, and the year of release. The games on the list ranged from 1981 to 2015 (with the most recent years left open to include titles by ourselves) and released on many platforms both well-known (from Commodore 64 to PlayStation 4) to a-typical (like the CD-i player, or touch-table). We were free to add any game we wanted if titles would be missing. A definition of Dutch games was provided as well - "we consider Dutch games those which are (largely) developed by Dutch nationals, but also games which have the country as its topic or setting" - which left a lot of room to include or exclude borderline cases. The subsequently stated goal was not to make one personal selection of games we as experts would deem viable for inclusion in the canon but instead, the list was subdivided into five-year periods: 1980-1984; 1985-1989; and so onwards in order for us to select up to seven games from each period. Taken together, the results of the lists of all participating experts would be the starting point for discussions in the expert meeting during which the ultimate canon would be compiled with an aim to come to five games per period.

In a later interview with two of Sound and Vision's staff members responsible for the canon, it was explained that the purpose of the five-year periods was to "get a list of

games with an equal amount of entries spread out over the past forty years" so that it would be "a reflection of the Dutch history of games that takes into account certain developers, certain trail-blazing games etc.". Of course, the subdivision of the longlist into periods of five years makes sense as a way to spread out and diversify the canon but arguably only if or mostly when the games themselves are also spread equally amongst these half-decades. This was not the case. Certain time periods especially in the early '80s show only a handful of active developers with few major hits while more recent decades have seen a flurry of new developers creating internationally successful titles, both commercially and critically, on major platforms. Nevertheless, this attempt to spread titles out evenly over the course of game history has specific consequences for how selections were made. As we soon noted in our expert meeting, contemporary games were often legitimized for their commercial and critical success with the public at large, whereas older games were legitimized for a variety of other reasons.

For these older cases, focus was often put on significance of certain individual developers or game artists, stating things along the lines of "this person later came to make a whole bunch of interesting Amiga games", or "this is the first game from that audio designer who later made the music for popular title A". These strategies of legitimization are what Parker terms, "the identification of author figures" (2018, 90) which is a popular ploy to gain more recognition for games as a culturally valid medium. However, these strategies also tend to single out a limited set of works at the expense of other ones by focussing on a few "heroic auteur[s] whose genius transcends the mundane production context" (Parker 2018, 95). As such, this selection strategy also appears to be at odds with selecting on the basis of popular success and turned the canon into an interesting amalgam of recent well-known, commercially successful titles and more obscure niche games from the '80s. In Bourdieu's terms, this positions the selection of games somewhere in a twilight zone between "the field of large-scale production", legitimizing games on the basis of its public success, and "the field of restricted production" (1993, 115), legitimizing games on the basis of criteria established by a limited group of agents.

Here, the limited group of agents consist of the institute's employees who initiated and guided the process of canonization and the group of experts that were invited to participate in the selection process. When interviewing the game preservation team involved in the canon project, the members made no secret of the fact that they themselves had no personal affiliation with games. For example, the project lead told us that, while he did have an interest in games on a meta-level of them being a media phenomenon, since his teens he only incidentally played some games and currently he practically played no games at all. So, while the game preservation team was well-equipped to make a claim about why games should be included - admitted - into the cultural heritage archive of the collection, and had built up considerable know-how about preservation concerns and challenges, they relied on their network of people with repertoire knowledge when dealing with making a more specific selection of actual titles for a canon. This was not just a pragmatic decision but also one was aimed at giving more authority to the list. As one members of the institute's canonization team put it:

> We aimed to get a broader range of input for our canon. (...) From experts, or at least people who are familiar with these games... come from the world of games. That is what makes the difference between a list that you just personally put together and a canon which you aim to give more authority in this way (from interview).

The group of experts that were asked to give more authority to the list came from various sectors in the game world (collectors, designers, publishers, critics, researchers). But while some thought was put into the forming of the group of experts with a focus on spanning different functions related to the Dutch game industry, the final composition of the group turned out to be rather uniform: all participants, including us, were male, white, and of a similar age group (mid thirties to early forties). Although the reasons for the composition may have been pragmatic (e.g. availability during the day of the session and contacts in the Institute's network), it does lead to selecting games from an already privileged/dominant perspective within games culture. Giving works a canonical status from that perspective risks reinforcing "hegemonic notions of gender (and sexual orientation)" and "the cultural and economic dominance of one gender over the other" (Staiger 1985, 17). This may be especially problematic when it comes to games and its surrounding culture (and academy) which has been historically unwelcoming to women (cf. Vossen 2018).

Looking back at the final selection of games, we should face the fact that a more diverse composition of the group could have led to a more diverse or at least other selection of games. For instance, while there are Dutch games with strong female characters in the canon (most notably *Horizon: Zero Dawn*), there are few games present explicitly marketed at a female audience (an exception being *My Horse & Me,* W!Games 2007). Entirely missing are mobile and browser-based games aimed at casual audiences and often associated with female players, as well as LGBTQ games. Such perspectives and expertise was simply lacking. Furthermore, the inclusion of mid 80s erotic game *Yab Yum* (Tom Gerritsen 1985) should in hindsight have triggered more critical discussion to explore whether the game, or games in general reinforce problematic notions of gender - and whether such discussions should be an explicit part of a canon.

Furthermore, with an expert group having a strong representation of game collectors and retro-gaming buffs, it may not come as a surprise that selection discussions soon turned into continuous affirmation of each other's gaming capital (Consalvo 2007; Sotamaa 2010). Experts were often keen to share knowledge about relatively unknown designers or seemingly obscure facts to argue for the inclusion of certain games, which established bonds with fellow, like-minded people. This meant that experts often engaged in what Bourdieu has called a "mutual attestation of charisma" (1993, 123), continuously acknowledging, confirming, and extending on the factoids that were thrown around. The process had a specific impact on the final selection of especially the lesser known games in the ultimate canon. Basically, once one expert had suggested a title and thrown up a fun obscure fact about it, another expert would confirm the fact or build on it, thus leading the title to make its way onto a preliminary list. This process would repeat itself with a new suggestion and so on and so forth.

What we've tried to show here is that decisions or aims that at first may seem incidental, feed into one another and end up significantly impacting the selection of games, the value attributed to them, and their inclusion in the subsequent writing of history. The institute's ambition to have an even distribution of games over the different five-year periods, had an impact on the composition of the expert group which in turn had an impact on the way that games were selected and the rationales given. This was especially the case since the institute choose not to set specific selection criteria (due to their acknowledged lack of repertoire knowledge) and left much of the process up to the experts' devices. We would argue that this is why quite a few games made their way into the canon that turned out to be rather unknown with the public at large but do now, according to the Institute, play an important part in the history of Dutch games.

POLITICS OF THE ACADEMY: WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?

So how do we as game scholars fit into this discussion? Within the expert meeting we were just as excited to talk about games as the other experts. This is not to say that we want to discuss our pedigree as 'gamers' here or engage in a discussion on the aca-fan (cf. Bogost 2010). Rather, we want to reflect on what it means to be invited to participate in canonizing a medium that you also study from an academic perspective. As Staiger argues, politics play a part here too. Like film studies decades ago, game studies as a relatively new field was only recently admitted into the academy. Which also means it still needs to justify itself, with acceptance hinging "on the academic establishing an exchange-value by proving that her or his critical methodology, history, or theory is not only worth financial support but, in an era of a tight economy, worth it more than others are" (Staiger 1985, 18). Valorisation efforts like participating in a canon helps in this regard. Thinking back on what we contributed to the expert session, and which games we pushed for eventually even wound up in the canon, we can clearly see links to our own personal and institutional research agendas. These are games which were not commercial and in some cases even critical hits but for instance applied games for specific audiences like people with dementia (*Tovertafel*, Monobanda/Active Cues 2015) or sexually abused children (*Vil Du?*, YipYip 2016). Other titles could be seen as interesting game design experiments which show the potential of the medium like innovative ballet game *Bounden* (Game Oven 2014) or the augmented reality cards of *AH Dino Game* (Little Chicken/Samhoud 2017). For Staiger, the politics of the academy potentially lead to difficulties in including the marginal as it threatens the centre of power which supports the academy (1985, 19). Here, we think we actually made the case to include some otherwise marginalized games. Nonetheless, in hindsight these are also games which underwrite - which justify - that what we do research on as academics matters.

Ultimately, we were of course part of a larger group of experts with different backgrounds and in the end the organizing project group from the Institute had the final say in what wound up in the canon. As such, our contribution remained limited. Still, a certain sense of ownership and pride came over us with regards to the canon and we were looking forward to its eventual release. This would be the first moment the public could have a look at the li st. Upon release, various national media picked up on it but usually mostly announcing the canon's existence. Nonetheless, the canon's website offered insights into audience reactions.[iii] As the canon's website offered an "add your own memory" section for each game, we could see reactions trickle in ([link]). In the end, many of the games remain without comments, but of those games showing comments, a lot were positive ("I wish I could play this again", "oh, so cool this game is Dutch, I did not know!"). Many comments are memories of playing these games, often when the commenters were still young. Some of the most commented on games, like *RedCat: Rekenen* and *A2 Racer* (Davilex 1996; 1997), were famous '90s games a lot of commenters grew up with and therefore triggered a lot of nostalgia. Some commenters go further than adding memories, instead adding links to online emulators or making-of videos. And, as one could expect when releasing a canon, there are critical comments as well. Some of these are subtle: the only comment horse show jumping game *My Horse & Me* received is a link to game-rankings, which shows a paltry score of 39% positive reviews. Other comments are more on the nose. The inclusion of *Tetris*-inspired *Tricky Towers* (WeirdBeard 2016) is seen as "making the Dutch industry look bad". Indie roguelite game *Unexplored* (Ludomotion 2017) received the comment "what is this monster of a game doing here? If I show up with this at my games school they will look funny at me" and calling the canon a "mockery". About platformer *Action Henk* (RageSquid 2014) another commenter writes: "Never heard of this title. It seems it also did not sell at all. Who made this list?", to which a different commenter replies with "I also wonder where these people derive their authority from".

In these latter cases, the expertise of Sound and Vision and/or those responsible for selection are directly challenged.

The critical comments above line up with a reaction the Institute received through email after the canon was released which complained that "85% of the experts are unknown". In other words: how representative are these experts anyway? It would not be a stretch to say that these unknown experts included us. Valorisation efforts aside, game research can be at odds with, or even entirely unknown to, gaming culture in general. This not only shows that expertise about a contested topic like a canon of games is in the eye of the beholder, but also that who writes history, and for which audience, matters. What we, from our particular perspectives as experts found worthy inclusions, might mean nothing for someone who sees a canon about his or her favourite hobby of professional career being created by a group of perceived outsiders.

CONCLUSION: A POLITICS OF ACQUISITION

Creating a canon is not an easy task, as Prax et al. show in their analysis of the GameOn 2.0 exhibition. The canon on display there had "several obvious gaps": games with an adult age rating were missing to accommodate children visiting the exhibition, and games with a lot of hardware and software maintenance like PC games were also omitted (2016, 10). Practical concerns here apparently trumped content-related ones. Similarly, while Sound and Vision's canon might not have had a physical exhibition with all the associated practical issues, the choices underlying the canon's construction were very much influenced by pragmatic concerns. As we have shown, these concerns had to do with archiving and preserving games: how to make the claim that games should be part of our cultural heritage, and how to fulfil the aim to start a representative national archive. We discussed the politics of admission, selection and the academy which formed steps in the process to justify the canon. Due to the underlying, more pragmatic nature of the canon, we see a new politics as well: that of acquisition.

In the end, it turned out that the team responsible for setting up the canon never actually spend much time thinking about what the term "canon" would imply for those involved, and for the audiences it was reaching. As the project lead indicated: "the term canon, when thinking about it now, I'm not sure we defined well what we meant with that" (from interview). When asked whether or not the Institute had previously released any canons of other media in their collection the answer was no. A reason given was that they also perhaps never had to as they previously never had to "purposefully curate" a medium in an "already existing, well-filled media landscape" (from interview). Before they broadened the archive's scope to include new media forms, active acquisition was never a large part of the Institute's activities. Most television and radio broadcasts, the core of the Institute's archive, were automatically brought in by the broadcasters. Creating a canon now, he argued, allowed the Institute to "make its own selection" and to build up knowledge and expertise by doing so. This is what we mean with politics of acquisition: a canon which does not have as its main aim to showcase games and their history as a viable part of national cultural heritage, but as a tool to pursue acquisition-related goals.

While the acquisition efforts were justified, the chosen route of creating a canon might ultimately not have been ideal in telling the story of the history of Dutch games. The combination of calling the list a canon, the status of the Institute as newcomer in game culture, the decision to approach a specific group of experts, all influenced the particular history told, putting a disproportionate amount of attention on what a mainstream audience might consider nonessential titles. While arguments can certainly be made for the inclusion of each and every game in the archive of the Institute as part of the cultural heritage of the medium - and we were an active part of this

argumentation - by canonizing them the Institute consecrates them, to use Bourdieu's terminology (1993), putting them on a pedestal which goes beyond offering an emancipatory or genealogy perspective on the Dutch games industry.

EPILOGUE

Recognizing themselves that the premise of a canon might provoke reactions, upon release of the canon website, the Institute immediately asked visitors to not just leave memories but also provide missing titles. They got more than that: some did not just mention titles but wrote lengthy emails and even called the Institute to vent concerns about omissions. Insight into the anonymized reactions from visitors the Institute compiled revealed some obvious concerns, like the overemphasis on older games versus the much more prolific contemporary industry output, several well-known studio's whose games were not included, and the lack of attention for hardware and other non-game innovations. More interesting were comments on regional issues: too many games were featured from the main metropolitan areas of the Netherlands and the games industry associations within those areas versus game developers elsewhere in the country. Even within a small country, making a national canon of game can lay bare issues between perceived core and periphery. As mentioned before, the experts were also mentioned, and not just in terms of being largely unknown. Several commenters decried the size and composition of the group - too limited and too uniform. In other words, diversity and inclusion was suddenly on the table.

And so, three weeks after the release of the canon, the project lead posted a follow-up blogpost on the Institute's website. In it, he admitted they overlooked certain matters in their approach to the canon, leading to a selection which did not paint a representative overview of developments and those involved. The message was that the expert group as well as the amount of games in the canon itself would be expanded as the current canon "gave rise to a great deal of debate" (de Vos 2018b). Soon after, we got an invitation to participate in a "one-off" update of the canon, now with an extended group of experts and more focus on the last decade. The result, an expansion of the canon to just over 70 titles was announced on the Institute's website, and all titles received a brief explanation for their inclusion (de Vos 2019). The site also states that it will keep on expanding the archive with games and associated material like design-documents, press kits, and so on. For now, the politics of canonization appear to be over. The politics of acquisition continue...

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ENDNOTES

[i]When it comes to gaming histories, one exception is Donovan's work, where he mentions that except from larger European countries like the United Kingdom, France, (West-)Germany and Spain, "the only other European country to really have a major influence on video games in the 1980s was the Netherlands" (2010, 133). However, instead of being influential for making hit games, the Netherlands is mentioned here in relationship to the origins of the demoscene, where, among other programming activities, coding skills were employed to hack into commercial games to disable copy protection. In other words, the Netherlands is discussed as the "spiritual home" of the subcultural roots of software piracy of digital games (2010, 134).

[ii] The Barbicon's GameOn website can be found here:
https://www.barbican.org.uk/hire/exhibition-hire-bie/game-on-game-on-2-0

[iii] The Dutch Games Canon can be found here: https://gamescanon.beeldengeluid.nl