

Beyond Gamification: Games Design as a Playful and Dynamic Methodology and Curatorial Intervention

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Keywords

museums, games, games design, participatory design, curatorial interventions

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper discusses games, play and design in the context of cultural and heritage institutions. It poses the question of what happens when museums invite their communities to design and play video games for and about museum collections, objects and displays. The aim of the paper is twofold. First, to unpack the current usage of games in museums by discussing the debate of gamification and serious games. Second, to propose new ways of employing museum games that expand their current application. I demonstrate what games and particularly games design as a playful and creative methodology and curatorial intervention can tell us about the role, authorship, meaning-making and agency of visitors.

Currently, museums face complex and severe economic, social and political challenges which shape the way they establish and build relations with different communities and identify their role as cultural institutions. Immigration, social injustice, political debates and activism are now topics that challenge museums to be more open, dialectic, playful and accessible. Museums are under increasing pressure to represent 'a plurality of lived experiences, histories, and identities' (Sandell and Nightingale 2012, 2). They are required to be participatory, inclusive and develop different partnerships with different communities. But these institutional challenges are not new. As the Museum Studies scholars, Sharon Macdonald and Fyfe Gordon (1996, 14) pointed out twenty years or so ago, museums since the end of the twentieth-century struggle to balance the nation-state and Enlightenment rationality against different and diverse classifications and representations. In the heart of this, key issues of curatorial authority, power, representation and visitors' meaning-making, authorship and agency play out.

Within this social, cultural and political context, museums have introduced digital games in their learning and engagement programmes, collecting video games and organising different play and design activities onsite and online. The aim of such playful museum activities is to engage and establish new relations with diverse and younger audiences. Museum research and practice have viewed games as a way to transform museums and promote more open, playful and participatory strategies. For many, games promise effortless, 'fun' and playful encounters with museums and heritage. As an important part of the contemporary and popular culture, games enable museums to include these new and alternative representations, classifications and voices. However, games practices in museums have attracted much speculation and debate. In this paper, I argue that although museum games practices' objectives and

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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aims are valuable, the way games are employed can be often perceived either as too didactic or as a marketing device.

Undeniably, digital games, play and design have been widely used as educational tools and assets for marketing, engagement and social participation in the museum site (Beale 2011). Museum practice and academia have mainly focused on the learning benefits and outcomes of games. Such games employment is often perceived as too instrumentalist that omits the expressive, dynamic and ambiguous nature of games. In addition to this, museums often employ a celebratory and descriptive approach to games presuming their learning and educational value. I explain that this approach simplifies what games are and conceals their complexity as cultural, dynamic and ludic objects.

I also argue that previous research on museums and games has mainly focused on visitors' play practices (Flynn 2004; Giddings 2015) exploring the different ways games' virtuality, spatiality and ludic aspects allow visitors to experience the past. While very little is known about museums and heritage visitors' games design practices and their connection to representation, meaning-making and agency. Many researchers (Flynn 2004; Giddings 2015) have highlighted the power of games to bring back to life the 'absent worlds' of historical and archeological collections. These games can reveal the cultural, historical and material contexts of museum collections and allow visitors to learn about the past on their own pace (Flynn 2007). Research on play in museums (Back et al. 2018) that focuses on agency and choice has reported how the act of playing allows museum visitors to interpret and actively narrate their own stories about the museum collections when they are given playful tools. Other games and play studies scholars have also discussed agency and how players actively co-create the games they play (Consalvo 2007; Hughes 1999; Murray 1997; Waern 2016). This paper builds upon this line of research and asks further questions about visitors' role and agency by focusing on and examining the act of designing video games and the connection between games design and agency, representation and meaning-making in the museum site.

I propose that the relation between museums and digital games needs to be reexamined, moving away from the trend of gamification and the notion of games as emerging pedagogy. But instead, I suggest moving towards the examination of games as representational and cultural artefacts that reflect and transform the context within which they are situated, played and designed (Bogost 2007; Salen and Zimmerman 2014). It is essential to further explore how and who designs games in the museum site expressing and attaching new representations and meanings to museum collections, displays and heritage. In addition to this, it is important to understand the epistemological implications of such practices. With this in mind, I propose to look at games design with visitors as a playful and dynamic methodology and curatorial intervention and explore what happens when visitors are given the design tools to create video games for and about museum collections. I argue that examining the complex processes that games design involves reveals how the visitors/designers approach, challenge and negotiate representation, meaning-making and agency as a response to 'the environment of communication' (Kress 2010). This offers a new way of looking at the relation between museums and games and the role and agency of heritage and museum visitors.

Drawing from data collected during two games design interventions in museums in the UK, I argue that visitors' games act as curatorial platforms. I explain that visitors-as-game designers push the boundaries of the official curatorial voice by proposing and adding new playful and dynamic layers of representations and meanings to the museum collections. However, the visitors/designers are not simply creatively reacting to the

museum curation, they also invite other visitors/players to enact and perform new playful rituals and encounter the museum collections and displays anew. In this way, visitors' games act as ludic curatorial interventions that reflect, challenge and transform the museum into a playful, participatory and dynamic space.

By focusing on games design as a curatorial intervention, this paper demonstrates that games in museums can make an important contribution to the museum-visitor relation beyond the established deployment of games for visitor engagement and evaluation of learning. In this way, this paper generates fresh insight into games, play and design in museums and furthers our understanding of creative applications of games and particularly games design in cultural and heritage institutions.

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