

The Institutionalization of the Nokia N-Gage as a National Symbol: From Corporate and Fan Heritage to Public Cultural Heritage

Niklas Nylund

Finnish Museum of Games, Vapriikki
Tampere, Finland
niklas.nylund@tampere.fi

Tom Apperley

Canterbury Christ Church University
Canterbury, UK
tom.apperley@canterbury.ac.uk

Heikki Jungman

Finnish Museum of Games, Vapriikki
Tampere, Finland
heikki.jungman@gmail.com

Olli Sotamaa

Tampere University
Tampere, Finland
olli.sotamaa@tuni.fi

ABSTRACT

The Nokia N-Gage was mobile phone developer Nokia's unsuccessful bid to enter the handheld gaming market in the mid-2000s. Developed mainly in Finland, it has been regarded as a commercial failure, a "Finnish console," and the starting point for the widely successful Finnish mobile game industry. This article explores how these conflicting discourses were turned into an exhibition for the Finnish Museum of Games/Suomen pelimuseo. It examines how a (failed) gaming and telecommunications product such as the N-Gage becomes cultural heritage and what kinds of views are highlighted in its institutionalization. In a shift from brand heritage and corporate interests toward a broader cultural understanding of the N-Gage as national heritage, we recognize a critical need for distance and reflexivity. Frameworks sensitive to institutional power help make the polyphonic and contradictory voices of relevant stakeholders heard. The research thus provides critical frameworks for museum practice and shows how corporate brand heritage is only one starting point when the past becomes heritage.

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Keywords

Critical Play, Dark Heritage, N-Gage, Nokia, Reflexive Curation, Stakeholder Power Positions

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the processes of turning conflicting discourses related to the Nokia N-Gage handheld gaming device into an exhibition for the Finnish Museum of Games/Suomen pelimuseo (which was subsequently exhibited at the Museum of Technology, Helsinki and Computerspielmuseum, Berlin). When a product and brand with a conflicting discourse such as the N-Gage is institutionalized as cultural heritage through museum exhibitions, particular perspectives are often highlighted in the process. We use reflexive curation methods to consider and present polyphonic voices in the exhibition to open the exhibition to include more than the 'official' voice of Nokia. This institutionalization of the N-Gage takes place through a joint research and exhibition project of the Finnish Museum of Games and the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University. This article draws on the authors' background in game curation and perspectives from museology, platform studies and media archaeology while highlighting the importance of reflexive curation and stakeholder management methodologies.

In Finland the N-Gage is a contested national symbol which regardless of its commercial failure and overwhelming negative reception from critics is still employed in various redemptive and recuperative narratives. In the process of developing the exhibition these recuperative narratives have often been at the forefront of our dialogue with stakeholders. We argue that the institutionalization of the N-Gage needs to be approached with reflexivity and critical distance. While the recuperative narratives are a part of the larger story of the cultural significance of the N-Gage, it is also crucial that the exhibition highlights other perspectives. Institutionalization is not just about preserving brand heritage and corporate histories of production and sales. To establish a broader cultural understanding of the N-Gage as general and national heritage we suggest that institutionalization frameworks must be particularly sensitive to what Butler (2013) describes as the "power positions" of the stakeholders. Through attentiveness to power positions institutionalization processes can support the emergence of polyphonic and even contradictory voices. In this article we present an exploratory framework for museum practices research: critical play (Flanagan 2009). While Flanagan (2009) conceptualizes critical play as a mode of intervention that disrupts and interrogates cultural systems, our approach extends this work by applying it to the institutionalization of technological heritage. We use critical play to support diversity among polyphonic and conflicting viewpoints, foregrounding how perspectives from differing power positions can be included, heard, and represented in heritage-making processes.

The article begins with a discussion of the conflicting discourses of failure which describe the N-Gage. We then introduce how we have developed our approach to reflexive curation and how we have implemented it in the processes of developing, and engaging stakeholders for the N-Gage exhibition. In the final section we consider how the contestation failure has shaped our approaches to curating the exhibition, focusing on identifying 'cultural' failure alongside economic and technological failure as a factor that we wished to highlight in the exhibition. We also reflect in our active

role in shaping the exhibition and the passage of the N-Gage into heritage and consider how to include polyphonic perspectives on the device.

THE CONFLICTING DISCOURSES OF THE N-GAGE

The Nokia N-Gage was Finnish mobile phone developer Nokia's unsuccessful bid to enter the handheld gaming market in the early to middle 2000s. The release of the original N-Gage on 7 October 2003 was met with enthusiasm, but sales were much lower than what had been anticipated (Fahey 2004). The upper management of Nokia admitted that the N-Gage was a commercial failure a year after its initial release and gave it until November 2005 to live up to sales expectations (Fahey 2004). The sales expectations set by Nokia were not realized, and subsequently the device was discontinued on 24 February 2006 (Evans 2005). Nokia had shipped 3 million N-Gage units by 2007 (Stone 2007), although it is unconfirmed how many of these were sold to members of the public. Nokia continued to use the 'N-Gage' brand for their multi-device mobile gaming platform until 2007. After the production of the devices was discontinued, they continued to have niche interest from collectors, fans, and hobbyist developers in Finland and elsewhere (Jungman 2024).

In discussions in the gaming and popular press the market failure of the device is attributed to two reasons. Both are implicitly based on Nokia's relative inexperience in the digital games market. First, the Nokia had difficulty challenging the dominance of Nintendo in the handheld video game market. This inexperience that Nokia had in the games industry meant that the N-Gage was released without exclusive titles. Nokia instead focused on commissioning 'ports' and redesigns of already popular games. Two examples are *SonicN* (Demps 2003) and *Tomb Raider* (Ideaworks3D 2003), which were both versions of existing popular games that had been redeveloped for the N-Gage that were both crucial in Nokia's promotion of the device (Fahey 2003). The digital game industry often emphasized the uniqueness of the games which would be available when (or shortly after) a new device was launched; new or unique games were an important way to generate interest in a new gaming platform or device. For many contemporary critics of the N-Gage the decision to not have unique launch titles meant that there was no driving reason for consumers to purchase the system (Heinonen 2017, p. 67). Furthermore, this decision tied the reputation of the N-Gage to its ability to reproduce the graphics and controls of the console, arcade, or PC experience of the 'original' games.

Second, the N-Gage's technical usability was widely critiqued. A key issue was that when switching between game cartridges, users had to switch off the device's power and remove the battery, since the game cartridge slot was located below the battery (see: Jungman 2024; Jungman et al. 2026). This was considered a deal breaker to many potential customers accustomed to the ease of operation of Nintendo devices (Ahonen 2003). Adding multimedia and game technology to a mobile phone sized device also meant that Nokia designers had to compromise the N-Gage's phone features; the phone speaker and microphone were moved to the top edge of the device, which meant that users had to hold the device in an uncomfortable and unusual sideways position to speak and listen. This design element, together with the device's unusual 'taco shell' shape, gave rise to the early viral phenomenon of 'sidetalking,' where people shared photos of themselves or others holding random objects sideways to their ear (Rainisto 2003; Jungman et al. 2026).

Some of the shortcomings of the N-Gage device were resolved with the release of the redesigned N-Gage QD in 2004, just six months after the release of the original. The N-Gage QD was a more ergonomic device that fixed both the issue of sidetalking and removing the battery to change game cartridges (Laaksonen 2004). Nokia also established contractual relations with new Finnish gaming studios RedLynx and Bugbear Entertainment to develop original games exclusively for the N-Gage. This led to Finnish-developed titles such as: *Pathway to Glory* (RedLynx 2004), *High Seize* (RedLynx 2005) and *Glimmerati* (Bugbear Entertainment 2005). While these original games were both too few and too late to spur the sales of the N-Gage (Heinonen 2017, p. 68), they did receive a positive response from critics.

In Finland, some people celebrate the N-Gage because of its local significance to Finland, Tampere, and the Pirkanmaa region. It is regarded as a uniquely “Finnish console,” a rarity in a field that is almost totally dominated by US and Japanese products (cf. Nicoll 2019). The Finnish mobile game development industry has also achieved global recognition through games such as *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009) and *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2012), leading some people involved with the industry reconsider the device as the “foundation for the mobile game ecosystem” (Neogames 2021, 9). The N-Gage has become a reference point for those in the Finnish mobile gaming industry looking to cite a spectacular failure that made these later successes possible (Kerr 2015). This position was held by the great majority of our research participants from Nokia and N-Gage game developers. The N-Gage then, is not only a commercial and design failure, it is also a national symbol amid conflicting discourses with differing power positions.

REFLEXIVE CURATION

In the institutionalization process we are concerned with how a (failed) gaming and telecommunications product and brand such as the Nokia N-Gage becomes cultural heritage, and what perspectives are highlighted in its institutionalization. During the processes of institutionalizing the N-Gage we recognized a critical need for distance and reflexivity to develop a curatorial framework(s) that is sensitive to the power structures at stake, and highlight the polyphonic, even contradictory voices of all the relevant stakeholders.

The concepts of ‘curation’ and ‘curator’ are traditionally seen as frameworks by which to understand the care of collections (Golding, 2013, p. 20) and the research concerning them (Wells, 2007, pp. 7-8). But curation can also be used as a “metalevel term” that includes an “editorial” choice on what to include and what to exclude in collecting (Potter, 2017). Curation in this context is about deciding ‘what’ to preserve and ‘how’ to preserve it (Rugg & Sedgwick, 2007). The process by which curators become conscious of their actions in producing meaning, has shown that museum exhibitions are far from neutral conveyors of knowledge, but rather discursive practice in themselves (O’Neill, 2016, p. 19). Situating the curator as an ideological actor has made the processes of exhibition curation more transparent, and subsequent research has focused on the choices that curators make in their work and on marking out the parallels between curation and everyday use of social media (Groys 2010; Potter 2012) and gaming platforms (Apperley 2015; Apperley & Parikka 2018). In the art world, the curator has become the quintessential “auteur,” and the choice of what and how to display has become the most central question in their work (O’Neill, 2016, pp. 9-11).

This tendency to “demystify” or “deconstruct” the multiple and varying ways art exhibitions produce knowledge and how they exist as discourse has highlighted exhibitions as ideological spaces. The field of museum practices research (MacLeod, 2001) is interested in understanding the relationship of the work being done in museums and how museums are informed by “communities of practice” (Hakamies, 2017, p. 142). However, most work on curatorial reflexivity is in the context of art exhibitions (Reinikainen & Dahlqvist, 2016, p. 72). Reinikainen and Dahlqvist (2016, p. 76), in their reflexive work, note how they as curators become very aware of their role as gatekeepers during the processes of curating. In this project we have been inspired by their interest in “studying inwards” (2016, p. 70), through reflection on the choices they have made and the insights they have gained when curating an exhibition. In this project, the curatorial process itself constitutes the primary autoethnographic material. The article documents and analyses our own decision-making, negotiations, and positional reflections as they unfolded, and is therefore both a product of and a window into the reflexive practice we describe.

For an exhibition on the N-Gage located in Tampere part of the challenge for curators was managing how stakeholder participation will also shape the exhibition. Reflexive curation also entails a sensitivity towards the “power positions, processes, and tensions between stakeholders” in heritagization. Butler (2013), in her work on reflexive museology considers the relationship of stakeholder participation and reflexivity. She identifies how multivocality and polyphonic curatorial practices can be an effective means for destabilizing the master narratives in place in many traditional museums. However, Butler notes that this assumes an ideal visitor who does not actually exist, real everyday visitors might very well fail to grasp the subtle meanings of exhibitions which offer multiple and potentially conflicting viewpoints. Consequently, she highlights how such approaches to curation can easily result in misunderstanding. Reflexive approaches to curation can potentially work to alienate the visitor groups it has tried to include, without community participation with stakeholder communities that have symbolic ownership rights over the material that is displayed (Butler pp. 176-177). Reflexive curatorial practices can ameliorate this issue by adding a participatory agenda into the design. By assuming a plural audience and by meaningfully interacting with these audiences, exhibitions can effectively confirm that stakeholder interests are satisfied, and that the curated content is multivocal. Focusing on the reflexive curatorial process highlights museum exhibitions as places where visitors are active participants in the knowledge-generating process, not where knowledge “flows” from the artworks and objects into visitors’ mind (O’Neill, 2016, p. 10).

The reflexive curation framework helped us to better understand our position as a part of the power structures related to the N-Gage. We felt that we shouldn’t shy away from engaging with the ‘dark heritage’ (Biran et al. 2011; Nylund et al. 2021) of the device, even if these elements stemmed from decisions made in marketing to reach the intended target group. Yet it was difficult to approach this in a manner that was clearly constructive and not condescending. To tackle this issue, we conceptualized the exhibition as both polyphonic and playful. We wanted to present multiple voices and narratives, while highlighting and critiquing the different power positions of these voices in a playful way that encouraged open play between the perspectives. This approach to “critical play” we introduce to the curation process and exhibition approaches play as a form of paidia or open play that supports visitors’ playful, yet critical, engagement between the Nokia N-Gage, and problematic aspects of early 2000s game design and promotional cultures.

In our project, we use critical play to describe a curatorial mode that brings conflicting stakeholder perspectives into deliberate, open-ended juxtaposition. Building on reflexive curation and informed by our autoethnographic engagement with the process, critical play treats contradiction, discomfort, and uneven power positions not as problems to be resolved but as productive elements of interpretation. It provides a framework for presenting dark heritage, recuperative narratives, and everyday user accounts in a manner that invites visitors (and ourselves) to navigate these tensions playfully yet critically. As such, critical play operates simultaneously as a curatorial strategy for the exhibition's polyphonic treatment of the N-Gage. Our use of critical play aligns with Flanagan's (2009) account of play as a site of intervention that exposes the cultural and political assumptions embedded in technological systems. While her work focuses on design practices that subvert player expectations, we draw on this to frame curatorial work as a similarly generative space where conflicting perspectives, ambivalences, and failures can be held in productive tension.

METHODOLOGY

This section reports and reflects on the historiographic methods of the joint research project. Following what has been called the "inward turn" in curation (Reinikainen & Dahlqvist 2016), we consider the rationale and processes of creating the N-Gage exhibition. Through embedding self-critical and self-reflexive autoethnography practices in the curatorial process, we focused on the N-Gage exhibition in a manner that is more concerned with a power sensitive historiographic reading of past events. The reflexiveness of "studying inwards" clarifies our role in producing official knowledge through the exhibition, and our relationship and power positions with the other stakeholders involved in the research and exhibition.

Historiographic material related to the N-Gage was gathered into a joint research database co-managed by museum and university researchers. The material included informant interviews with 14 informants who worked with the N-Gage in various positions (either at Nokia or as game developers working on N-Gage games), as well as several existing popular accounts of the N-Gage. In addition, the database contained a plethora of ephemeral sources, such as photographs of N-Gage related events, the actual physical N-Gage devices and their games, as well as various marketing materials. Formalizing the database cast the institutionalized narrative of Nokia concentrating its efforts on Finnish game companies into dubious light, as it was made clear that only a small number (5 out of 60 or 8%) of realized game projects had a palpable connection with Finland.

Our approach combines a power sensitive historiography with self-reflexive autoethnography, modelled as an iteration of the double hermeneutic spiral defined by Giddens (1984). Because we are interested in examining the power structures and potential biases related to the heritagization of the Nokia N-Gage—and how heritage organizations can "reflect on their practices and whether their reflection on the reflections (i.e. their reflexive practice) is supported by learning and changing" (Antonacopoulou 2004, p. 50)—the research is a form of "mutual interplay" (Giddens 1984, p. xxxii) between the researchers and the other stakeholders involved in historicizing the N-Gage. The self-reflective autoethnography helps us to critically analyze the historiographic material in the research project and decide on what to

present in the exhibition, and how that material can be framed in a way that encourages critical play.

Work on the joint N-Gage research/exhibition project started in the summer of 2019 as part of the Museojamit project funded by the Board of Antiquities (Jungman et al. 2019). It began with a collaborative event between the Finnish Museum of Games and selected N-Gage informants at Tampere's Vapriikki Museum Centre. Participating informants included R&D experts, game developers and game producers. The main themes covered were the informants' personal reminiscences of their role in the N-Gage project and what the device's importance is from a contemporary perspective. Part of the event involved participatory design: informants were asked to brainstorm on what they would like to see in a future exhibition on the device.

During the Fall of 2019 university researchers and museum curators recognized the potential for cooperation on a joint research and exhibition project on the N-Gage that expanded on the work done at Tampere's Vapriikki Museum Centre, and preliminary plans for cooperation were developed. This led to a joint database of N-Gage games in October 2019 that included physical copies from the collections at the Centre of Excellence of Game Culture Studies and the museum.

The cooperation between the university and museum partners was formalized in a meeting in January 2020, where a joint project plan was laid out. Plans were made to host a second informant meeting in May 2020, but this was later canceled due to the Covid pandemic. In the Fall of 2020, a small amount of Covid-related municipal funding was secured from Smart Tampere. The funding made it possible to start planning for a webinar in January 2021 and organize collected research materials into a systemic research database. At this time the research database included informant interviews as well as a comprehensive list of ephemeral materials provided by the informants. Initial discussions with the Nokia archives indicated a breadth of interesting materials, but pandemic-related restrictions and the lack of a permanent archivist made it impossible to pursue this avenue further.

We initiated the reflective process through a reflexive curator discussion. In the curator discussion, participating curators were prompted by a discussant to verbalize the choices and viewpoints they thought would be relevant for making an exhibition and reflect on what kinds of stakeholders and ideas had been exempt from the discussions so far. The discussion also highlighted several potentially conflicting perspectives important for developing a polyphonic voice for the exhibition, including the significance of Nokia in Tampere and the Pirkanmaa region and the prominent role of Nokia in building Finland's digital economy. Curators noted that Nokia is so woven into the fabric of Finnish society that it is difficult to deal with its history from a distanced critical viewpoint, as people feel a palpable personal and professional connection to the brand.

The curators also recognized that the informant interviews conducted with designers would need to be supplemented by everyday accounts from users, which could be gathered online. It became clear that a participatory design agenda, such as had been used previously by curators at the Finnish Museum of Games, would be difficult to implement because Covid and other factors made it too difficult to reach people who had held high-ranking management positions. Curators also acknowledged that some

failures in Nokia corporate culture, and certain elements of the N-Gage's marketing, might be discomfoting for participants.

In August 2021 another informant meeting in the form of a webinar was organized. Many of the same informants from the 2019 event attended, joined by university researchers. Discussions addressed hardware design, game production, and wider societal impact. As a participatory design exercise, informants were asked to choose between potential themes and frameworks for the exhibition. Most identified the device's importance to the later success of the Finnish mobile game industry as a key theme. They also emphasized contextualizing the N-Gage relative to competing devices of the era and providing insight into the production conditions for N-Gage games.

DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing Failure

A key issue that emerged in the reflexive process was how 'failure' was understood in multiple ways and recuperated by some stakeholders. Among technology historians, the discussions of success and failure focus on how failure is shaped by technological and economic factors (Gooday 1998, p. 269). In our work with the Nokia stakeholders from the R&D teams and game developers working with the N-Gage, the two issues of technology and economy also featured prominently in the narrative of failure and the narratives which recuperated the N-Gage. Reflexive discussions within the collaborative team identified that an important additional perspective was users' experiences of the N-Gage, particularly as such voices potentially offer perspectives which are outside of the identified focus on technology and economy. Our examination of archival materials gathered from contemporary Finnish newspapers and magazine solidified this consideration. As the documentation of the contemporary reception illustrates that most of the discourse on the N-Gage involved evaluation of the device's usability and convenience alongside discussion of its functionality (technological perspectives) and sales and profitability (economic perspectives).

How the N-Gage's technical failure is articulated by stakeholders is straightforward. The stakeholders acknowledged that Nokia's lack of experience in the gaming device market was a key factor. This highlighted the desirability of the exhibition conveying an understanding of the paradigm of product development that Nokia worked in compared to that of their main competitor in the mobile game console market, Nintendo. For example, Nintendo product development timelines were very different from Nokia, as Nintendo brought a new hardware product to market in a much longer multi-year cycle compared to Nokia which often released multiple pieces of new hardware each year. The speed of the Nokia production cycle is exemplified in the rapid release of the newly developed N-Gage QD less than a year after the first version of the console. The QD fixed many design flaws which may have been already anticipated in Nokia's development process, but which were not solvable in the timeframe allowed to get the N-Gage ready for market. Nokia operated in an environment of rapid iterations which made many small changes to the design, while

Nintendo lent more towards the game industries hardware 'generations' when a design remains more-or-less consistent for many years, with only slight variations.

How the technological heritage of mobile game development was understood by the game developer stakeholders is focused on the recuperative narrative that celebrates the impact that the N-Gage had on the local mobile gaming industry in Finland and that industries' international success. By including this voice, we aim not to question the 'truth' of such a claim, but to put this power position in play which other voices in the exhibition and create a space for critical play among the polyphonic voices. Our archival research reveals that Nokia corporate decisions did impact mobile gaming in the Finnish game industry. Two companies were founded by former Nokia employees just to make games for the N-Gage, and other companies in Finland were contracted to design prototypes and features that were never released. This not only gave many game development professionals in Finland their first experience on how to (or how not to) make mobile games but also established the legitimacy of the sector as an area for development which required specific experience and skills. In hindsight, with the benefit of understanding the significance of the mobile sector both globally and to local game developers, the emergence and dominance of this story illustrates how the designation of failure is negotiated over time between different actors (Arsenault 2017, p. 3; Apperley & Parikka 2018). We suggest that critical play will enable the exhibition to communicate this open negotiation to museum attendees. Furthermore, while the investment in mobile gaming from Nokia had an important impact in Finland, much more investment was made overseas in countries as far away from Finland as Japan and Australia. To create a space for voices that both affirm and challenge the predominant story of eventual success is crucial for the polyphonic vision of the exhibition. By drawing on perspectives beyond the local, the exhibition can concretize the uniqueness of the experience of the N-Gage to Finland (and Tampere and the Pirkanmaa region) and connect this to other localized experiences of the device where such factors are not present.

Cultural failure

We are also concerned that the emphasis on the technological failure of the N-Gage downplays some of the more culturally oriented decisions made about how the device was conceptualized, brought to market, and promoted (Jungman et al. 2026). Lipartito (2003, pp. 53-54) notes that failures do not result solely from poor design, glitches, and errors, they also stem from expectations, social values, and the resistance of different social groups. Above, we have noted in agreement with stakeholders, that Nokia's organizational outlook was vastly different to that of rival gaming companies. We suggest that this outlook shaped the technical development of the N-Gage, and as a further consequence this meant that Nokia understood the cultures of gaming in a peculiar way. Nokia conceptualized the market and audience for the device as male dominated. This was markedly different from Nintendo their major rival in handheld

gaming devices who primarily marketed their devices (Gameboy, Gameboy color, Gameboy Advanced and eventually Nintendo DS) to children.



Figure 1: Cover image of *Glimmerati* (Bugbear Entertainment 2005).

The palpable orientation of the N-Gage towards an assumed audience of male gamers is evident both in the software that Nokia commissioned, and in the promotion and marketing of the device both within Finland and globally. These materials catered to the edgy and toxic masculine elements in gaming cultures by using sexist advertising which relied on visual content which presented woman's bodies prominently. For example, *Glimmerati* (2005) a street-racing game developed by Finnish company Bugbear Entertainment adopts many sexist visual conventions from car cultures, including the logo of the game itself being the silhouette of a naked woman (see: figure 1). The launch of the device at the E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) trade show in Los Angeles in 2003 involved the initial retail price being announced by a model removing her shirt to reveal the price written on her body (see: figure 2). Compared to the family friendly advertising of the Nintendo platforms it was apparent that Nokia were trying to appeal to a distinct audience who may have been more sophisticated and discerning in their relationship to gaming products than Nokia anticipated. Their approach suggests that they underestimated the difficulty of attracting the male and adult-oriented audience sector they had identified as their target audience.



Figure 2: Promotional worker at E3 2003 launch and price announcement of Nokia N-Gage (Photo Credit: Eric Manch/The Next Level).

Within a few years of the cancellation of the N-Gage mobile gaming devices had transformed the game development sector and become major part of the games industry. While other factors certainly contributed to the success of the mobile market for games, the N-Gage diverged from successful gaming platforms and mobile devices on which app games could be played in two crucial and related ways. First, Nokia focused on recreating an experience of 'high adrenaline' PC gaming which they saw as almost entirely appealing to male gamers. Second, consequently it ignored casual games, which were important for broadening the market for games by appealing to women gamers (Jungman et al. 2026; cf. Chess 2017).

This failure by Nokia to recognize changing trends in gaming cultures is difficult to capture in the exhibition in a manner which does not open individuals to ridicule. From a contemporary perspective, some of the advertisements and promotional strategies come across as simplistic, highly sexist, offensive, and generally antiquated. While a voice from the promotional decision-makers is lacking in the exhibition we do have these archival objects which can be exhibited. However, there is potential for other stakeholder groups to feel that a close critical engagement with these materials is a criticism and reflection on them. To ameliorate this possibility, we provided context that illustrated how Nokia played into a dominance construction of the game audience and utilized promotional and advertising strategies which were then common in both the games industry and mobile phone industry. The N-Gage was not conceptualized 'outside of the box,' and this absence of vision and risk from decision-makers at Nokia meant that it was presented in a manner that was considered prudent without the benefit of hindsight.

THE ROLE OF CURATORS

Recognizing, and reflecting on, the role that we play through the decisions we make in deciding what is 'inside' or 'outside' the scope of the exhibition has been an important part of the institutionalization process. By asking ourselves why we collect artifacts related to the N-Gage and what we want to achieve by this practice, we are also asking what kind of a role an exhibition on the N-Gage plays in Finnish society (c.f. Kreps, 2003, p. 47; Cannon-Brookes 1984, p. 115), and ultimately what we consider that society to be. Curating cannot really be separated from the culture that is doing the collecting (Smith 2006, p. 160). In the case of the Nokia N-Gage for an exhibition in Tampere the impossibility of this separation is very real. When we talk about the N-Gage it is inextricably linked to our homes, places of work, personal networks, and friendships.

There is also friction between the various stakeholders as we are shifting the N-Gage from brand heritage to national cultural heritage. The power positions of the stakeholders have been important throughout the project. For example, Smart Tampere, one of the key enabling funding stakeholders, required that we consult the original developers while preparing the exhibition. For Smart Tampere this element is what makes the exhibition "true" and not just a "story." This view is based on a popular understanding of history but also reflects a concern with protecting the "integrity" of Nokia (but not necessarily the N-Gage) brand and Tampere's past and present reputation as an 'innovation city.' Both Smart Tampere and the Finnish Museum of Games are in rapidly changing policy environments which require the organizations to embrace change. The growing relationship between the museum and Smart Tampere is built on a mutual desire to create more participatory public works that include citizens as stakeholders. The exhibition is not "compromised" but the

museum and the funder will come closer to each other, and their mutual participatory goals, through the discussion.

The exhibition aimed to interact with museum visitors in a “critically playful” way. The process of nostalgia often creates a non-critical presence for dark heritage (Nylund et al. 2021). The critical playfulness of the exhibition is utilized as a way of engaging with the legacy of the N-Gage as a whole, and to not only deal with selected aspects. Critical playfulness puts the harmful and non-progressive aspects of the past in context, providing the exhibition visitor with contextual tools of engaging with elements such as the sexism and militarism present in the production and marketing of the N-Gage and its games. It provided an environment where visitors can see past events and past value systems while reflecting how values (to a greater or lesser extent) have changed. As such, the exhibition did not hide or sidestep the negative elements of early 2000s culture, it highlighted how dark heritage needs to be considered when exhibiting game cultural phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Our experience with the Nokia N-Gage exhibition highlights how challenging it is to institutionalize conflicting discourses without appearing to value one perspective over the others. In the processes of becoming cultural heritage through museum exhibitions particular perspectives are often brought to the forefront. In the case of the N-Gage exhibition we associated this with how we recruited our stakeholders from people with experience working on or with the N-Gage for whom there was something at stake in producing a recuperative narrative. The recuperative narratives which focus on the technological innovation on the device and the economic investment in the Finnish mobile games industry are an important part of the larger story of the cultural significance of the N-Gage. However, it is also crucial that the exhibition highlights other voices, thus we also included perspectives from everyday N-Gage users, from the early adopters through to contemporary artists.

Our approach demonstrates how the concept of critical play (Flanagan 2009) can be extended into curatorial and heritage practices. By treating the exhibition itself as a critical-play intervention into the contested histories of the N-Gage, we demonstrate how reflexive curation can mobilize playful juxtaposition, discomfort, and contradiction to foreground the power dynamics that shape technological memory. Critical play supports diversity among polyphonic voices and differing power positions. This exploratory framework for process of institutionalization into heritage is aimed at including, voicing, and representing multiple—even contradictory or conflicting—voices. We argue that the institutionalization of the N-Gage needs to be approached with reflexivity and critical distance. The reflexive curation methods we introduce are aimed at supporting an exhibition that fosters inclusive approaches to participation and presents polyphonic voices to that public rather than just the ‘official’ voice of Nokia or even a group of curators.

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