

LET'S PLAY GAME EXHIBITIONS: A CURATORS' PERSPECTIVE

Jesse de Vos

Curator of New and Interactive Media, Netherland Institute for Sound and Vision, Hilversum

René Glas

Assistant professor, Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University

Jasper van Vught

Assistant professor, Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University

Abstract¹

The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision is home to The Experience, a museum exhibiting the history of media in the Netherlands. For ten months in 2016 and 2017, The Experience hosted a temporary exhibition entitled *Let's YouTube*. During the *Let's YouTube* game month, we programmed a ten-day exhibition with a focus on video games as Dutch cultural heritage. The games were selected along two axes: popularity in the Netherlands, and made in the Netherlands. To connect this exhibition to the YouTube theme, we used *Let's Play* videos as a contemporary phenomenon to engage younger visitors with "old" and often obscure games. For the *Let's Play* installation, we selected games from our archives, produced in the Netherlands, and to which we had made agreements with the makers about the rights for online distribution. Over ten days, approximately 5,100 people visited the exhibition, mostly families with children, the museum's target demographic.

Introduction

"This is so cool!" a ten-year-old boy shouts to his younger brother and "dabs" at the camera. Of course, many kids find playing video games cool, but in this case the excitement is noteworthy: this boy is playing an obscure Dutch Commodore 64 game from the 1980s. In fact, these brothers have been playing it for more than ten minutes, commenting on both the game and their play while doing so.

Museums that exhibit video games as a contemporary art form and an essential part of our

¹ This article was first published in: Funk, Tiffany. (ed.) *VGA Reader*. Version 1.1.2017. <https://www.videogameartgallery.com/education>

audio-visual cultural heritage seem to face a relatively straightforward task: make the exhibition *playable*. However, to encourage visitors, both young and old, to look beyond the surface of video games as just a fun, ephemeral activity, is a challenge. Here, a museum's mission to reconstruct history, invoke critical reflection, and create a deeper understanding of the world and a visitors' place in it requires a more elaborate approach. Making playful exhibitions is an increasingly popular practice in the museum world. [1] But if games *themselves* are the focus of an exhibition, play can and should be much more than just a way to draw in audiences.

Here we aim to present one way of engaging museum audiences at a deeper level with video games: the use of *Let's Plays* as part of video game exhibitions. In our own exhibition of classic Dutch games at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, entitled *Let's Play!* (see abstract), visitors were invited to sit down and capture their gameplay on video while commenting on their engagement with the game in progress. [2] Here, we share both our findings through four main arguments for the practice of recording *Let's Plays* in a museum context, as well as the process of exhibiting these recordings as part of a game exhibition. Through this process, we argue for a more prominent place for play as a reflective act which should be part of any effort to exhibit video gaming as art, as culture, and as shared cultural heritage.

The What and Why of Let's Play Videos

In less than a decade, *Let's Play* videos (LPs) have been thrust to the foreground as a prominent way to record and present gameplay. Several dedicated LP channels have among the most subscriptions on YouTube. In contrast to videos that offer game instructions or show off gaming prowess, an LP video generally offers a looser approach to play where failure, creativity, exploration, and transgressive play come to the fore, accompanied by running commentary by the player. The combination of commentary and an approachable playing style provides a sense of vicarious play to the viewer—a sense of being part of the experience. [3]

In our project, we created an LP setup as part of an exhibition centered around a nascent archival collection of Dutch games from the 1980s and 90s. The LP installation consisted of a chroma key setup, a Commodore 64 console, as well as webcams and a personal computer (PC) for recording gameplay. [4] With consent from both the participants and the original creators of the games, the recording sessions were also streamed live and made accessible on YouTube. [5] A few different strategies were tested as part of an internship project headed by research assistant Hugo Zijlstra. Sometimes visitors were only given minimal instructions on how to play and were simply encouraged to comment on their experiences. In another case, visitors were

asked a few scripted questions by the museum staff supervising the exhibition. Staff asked about the perceived age of the game (e.g. “Do you think this game is older or younger than your parents?”), the difficulty of the game (e.g. “Is this game harder than the games you play these days?”) and, with older visitors, questions pertaining to memories (e.g. “Do you remember the first game you played?”). We also encouraged interaction, reflection, and enjoyment by inviting visitors to play together rather than by themselves to see what the social element would add to the situation of playing these older games. [6]

Based on these experiments working with LP videos, we distilled the following four lessons learned about the potential of LPs in a museum context.

1. LP exhibitions are inviting and engaging.

Given their popularity, LPs have the potential to act as a kind of recruitment and engagement tool in museum exhibitions. Especially for younger generations, making and watching LPs of video games is already recognized as a pleasurable experience in and of itself. In our exhibition, we found that younger visitors were especially motivated to partake in making an LP, thereby following in the footsteps of their heroes on YouTube. Furthermore, their familiarity with the form allowed these visitors to engage in the technical aspects of these recordings without detailed instruction. Although we anticipated younger visitors to be well-adapted to actively commenting on existing material and make it their own—aligning with a larger participatory aspect we expect of youth culture—these visitors often required guiding questions from museum staff to break long stretches of silence. [7] Familiarity with the phenomenon therefore does not always make for skilled LP-ers, but a little push usually helped.

Although drawing an audience is not the only task of a museum, in our experience, prolonged interaction is a precondition for further engagement. LPs can play a role in achieving this precondition. We noticed that while visitors of the exhibition spent an average of less than two minutes with “retro” games in their regular playable setup, the videos recorded at the LP setup are on average close to ten minutes in length. It seems that in this case, LPs added an extra satisfying layer of “show-and-tell” to the gameplay experience, whereby players did not only enjoy seeing their own imposed effect on the virtual environment of the game, but also enjoyed seeing themselves perform actions imposing that effect. Seeing oneself play puts players into a double feedback loop whereby enjoyment was experienced by having agency not only in the game space, but also in making a video.

2. LP exhibitions invoke reflection.

A second reason to employ LPs in the exhibition of games is that engaging with games in this manner seems to invoke more reflection on both the game, its context, the experience of play, and the visitor as player. If we acknowledge games to be capable and meaningful art forms, it is desirable for the museum to encourage players to reflect on games within culture, as well as games *as* culture.

We noticed that the promise of a potential audience to one's playing encouraged players to, with a little nudge and guidance, try and be as articulate, original, and funny as possible. This meant that our LP-ers were pulled out of the more immediately satisfying feedback loop of ludic progress and gaining high-scores (i.e., playing to win). Instead, they took note of the way that these games constructed narratives or made references to other media and the world around us. So, rather than engaging with games as a self-contained and self-referential system that distinguish between successful and unsuccessful player actions, our LP-ers came to recognize the broader cultural phenomenon of gaming, acknowledging its existence within a longer tradition of game and media development within a Dutch historical context.

Furthermore, we observed that the potential of being seen whilst playing, as well as seeing oneself play on the screen, made play a more performative act. This performativity also led to more self-reflection, heightened by the fact that players tended to put far more time into the *Let's Play* setup. For example, several of the visitors commented on their own potential to cope with the difficulty of the game and noted how their own game literacy level had significantly changed over the years. The challenge for curators will be to see how LPs can contribute to the specific ways in which their museum presents a space for self-reflection—where visitors can reflect on the world and their place within it.

3. LP exhibitions connect people across generations.

Third, we observe that the activity of recording LPs in a museum setting fosters intergenerational connections amongst visitors. Because we invited visitors to record LPs in groups of two or more, the activity also became inherently social. Given the fact that mostly younger generations were familiar with the LP phenomenon, we encountered many videos in which younger visitors introduced the format to their parents or grandparents. In return, the (grand)parents would tell their memories of the older games on display to their (grand)children, thus encouraging the transference of oral history. These conversations covered a range of topics, varying from the aesthetics and technology of the game in relation to current games, to anecdotes of first being introduced to various games and consoles.

4. LP exhibitions highlight games as multifaceted experiences.

Seeing LP videos by different age and cultural groups does more than highlight similarities and differences between varying playing styles. Streaming or providing other means of access to LP recordings helped further exposure of the exhibition material beyond the walls of the museum. LP access allowed both visitors and non-visitors to vicariously engage with the games through the recordings, repeatedly, and for longer periods of time while allowing viewers to learn from the reflections of the LP-er.

Furthermore, due to their minimal instructions and focus on commentary, LP videos provide insight into different ways of playing, meaning-making, and creating aesthetic experiences players recognize while engaging with a game. Like other interactive media, there is no one way of engaging with a game's rules or fictional world. Every play-through results in a potentially different experience based on the affordances of the game—how much agency players receive to explore a game's rules and goals—and the proficiency and preferences of players. Through watching LP videos either on screens within the exhibition or through streaming video, visitors can better understand video games as complex processes rather than mere static object. As digital media scholar James Newman explains, visitors get “a clear sense of the range of potential playings which a given game might support,” and “gain insight into the performances, observations and techniques of others.” [8] Being able to compare one's own take on a game with these other, sometimes wildly different potential playings adds new interpretative frames to the games on display during an exhibition as well as a visitor's own relationships in understanding such frames. A game developer's perspective can be added here, too: during the *Let's Play* exhibition, many LPs were shown in which the original creators played their own games while commenting on the creative processes behind the games. These LPs offered new perspectives on the games' aesthetics and other design choices.

Conclusion

When dealing with video games, we insist the role of museums move beyond the core traditional tasks of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting games as culturally valuable artifacts by engaging visitors in critical reflection on the cultural phenomenon of video games. The LP can be a vehicle for this type of engagement, invoking reflection on the games presented, facilitating social exchange of experiences, and stressing the complex, multifaceted nature of games. The performative, self-reflective nature of commenting on a museum object while being able to interact with it, and making recordings of such sessions as part of its exhibition, might be an approach holding potential far beyond digital game exhibitions.

Notes

1. See also: Katy Beale, *Museums at Play. Games, Interaction and Learning* (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2011).
2. The *Let's Play* exhibition was part of an ongoing joint research project between the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision and Utrecht University, focusing on game preservation of Dutch games as part of the national audio-visual cultural heritage.
3. René Glas, "Vicarious Play: Engaging the viewer in Let's Play videos," *Empedocles – European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication*, Vol. 5, Issue 1-2: Special Issue on Short Film Experience (2015): 86.
4. Chroma key, also called a green screen, enables filtering out the background and replacing it with, in this case, gameplay footage.
5. A sample of the recorded videos can be seen on the YouTube channel "Let's Play @ Beeld en Geluid": <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3WKTWXRZ1cwr9J4ampq5g>.
6. For a full reflection on the *Let's Play* exhibition, see Hugo Zijlstra, *Let's Play! Exhibiting video game history and play at the museum* (Hilversum: Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision/Utrecht University, 2016) available at: <http://publications.beeldengeluid.nl/pub/472/>. For more elaborate results of the *Let's Play* research project, see: Glas, René, Jesse de Vos, Jasper van Vught and Hugo Zijlstra, *Playing the archive: Let's Play videos, game preservation and the exhibition of play* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017).
7. See: Mizuko Ito et al., *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009).
8. James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2012), 62.

Bios

Jesse de Vos works at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision as a curator and researcher of new and interactive media. His current topics of interest cover the preservation and presentation of games and websites. He was the lead curator of the *Let's Play* exhibition in 2016.

Dr. René Glas is assistant professor at Utrecht University, specializing in the field of game studies. Both within and outside of academia he is involved in projects dealing with video game culture and its history, play as a method to investigate this culture and history, and game literacy.

Dr. Jasper van Vught is assistant professor at Utrecht University, also specializing in game

studies. He is part of the Centre for Digital Games and Play in which he focuses on game theory and methodology, video game ethics, and the history and preservation of games as art forms.