

Let's Play the Exhibition!

Radiohead's KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Virtual Museums, and Games

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A MUSEUM EXPERIENCE?

In 1998, Ann Mintz stated:

“Media can deliver information; it cannot match the totality of the experience a museum provides. For this reason, a case can be made that there will never be a ‘virtual museum’ in the full sense of the word. High-resolution images, full-scale virtual reality, and rich links to other databases on the World Wide Web do not create a museum. A virtual visit to a museum is fundamentally a media experience, not a museum experience.”¹

“The museum experience is based on reality. This is the heart of the concept of museums. Monitors may be pleasantly hypnotic, but looking at a painting on a video screen is no substitute for the real thing. The real thing is more subtle, and more powerful. [...] On a video screen, [...] something is always lost when three dimensions are collapse into two.”²

Mintz argues that the perception of the museum as a public place is lost in the digital realm, where staff and visitors interact spontaneously with one another, where proportions and colors cannot be depicted realistically, and where the eyes

1 Mintz, Ann: “Media and Museums: A Museum Perspective,” in: Thomas, Selma/ Mintz, Ann (eds.), *The Virtual and the Real: Media in the Museum*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums 1998, p. 28.

2 Ibid., p. 33.

and brain process information differently in analog and digital space.³ Werner Schweibenz discusses the quote by Mintz above against the background of the “real-virtual divide” thesis that emerged in the late 1990s.⁴ Proponents of this argument attributed a special value to the museum and its objects for their material dimension, while they subordinated virtual media experiences to it.⁵ This argument shaped debates for years, and prejudices against the use of digital media in museums persist to this day. Schweibenz questions whether experiencing an analog exhibit, which may not be touched, is necessarily superior to a digital exhibition. He points out that the analog object in its physical materiality and the digital object as an information carrier have different qualities. They are not in competition with each other but can complement each other.⁶ Dennis Niewerth also argues against the “real-virtual divide” thesis and adds that objects do not stand on their own anyway but are opened up in exhibitions via the context created in each case and through “networking”—this is just as possible in the digital space.⁷

More than 20 years have passed since the “real-virtual divide” debate began. A lot has happened in the meantime. Today it can be said for sure that virtual exhibitions and museums exist and that they are here to stay. What exactly a virtual exhibition is, however, is still being discussed due to the lack of a specific terminology.⁸ Thus, the terms virtual exhibition/virtual museum or synonyms such as online exhibition/online museum and digital exhibition/digital museum are used to label various offerings, including websites, online collections, digitivals, 360° tours, VR and AR applications, apps or screen projections.

In addition, the fundamental debate about what actually constitutes a museum is constantly ongoing, resulting in definitions being updated every few years. A globally recognized definition is provided by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which last amended its version in 2007:

3 Ibid.

4 Schweibenz, Werner: “The Virtual Museum: An Overview of Its Origins, Concepts, and Terminology,” *The Museum Review*, August 11, 2019, https://themuseumreviewjournal.wordpress.com/2019/08/02/tmr_vol4no1_schweibenz/; Schweibenz, Werner: “Wenn das Ding digital ist...,” in: Andraschke, Udo/Wagner, Sarah (eds.), *Objekte im Netz*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020, pp. 18-19.

5 W. Schweibenz: “Wenn das Ding digital ist,” pp. 18-19.

6 Ibid.

7 Niewerth, Dennis: “Verstaubt, verzettelt, vernetzt,” in: Andraschke, Udo/Wagner, Sarah (eds.), *Objekte im Netz*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020, p. 32.

8 W. Schweibenz: “The Virtual Museum.”

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”⁹

Back in 2016, ICOM reopened the debate on a new version to review in the context of current developments in and demands on the museum. In 2019, a new proposal was drafted,¹⁰ but it has been under discussion since then and has not yet replaced the 2007 definition.¹¹ Since a definition of a digital museum in terms of an extension or a rethinking of the analog museum will always be rooted in this museum's definition, we are left with different approximations for a definition of the virtual variant at the moment. A shorthand version of the Virtual MultiModal Museum (ViMM), in reference to the 2007 ICOM Museum Definition, reads:

9 ICOM: “Museum Definition,” *icom.museum*, 2007, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

10 The ICOM Committee's 2019 Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) redefinition proposal states: “Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” (ICOM: “ICOM Announces the Alternative Museum Definition That Will Be Subject to a Vote,” *icom.museum*, July 25, 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>) The critical discussion of this proposal centers on the question of which aspects—including, in particular, the political demands—should be specified by definition and what of these should remain part of a mission statement. (Reifenscheidt, Beate: “Gegen Unverbindlichkeit und Politisierung: Zur Neudeinition der Museen,” *Wissenschaftskommunikation*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.wissenschaftskommunikation.de/gegen-unverbindlichkeit-und-politisierung-zur-neudeinition-der-museen-32389/>)

11 ICOM: “Chronologie: Überarbeitung der Museumsdefinition,” *icom.museum*, February 26, 2020, <https://icom-deutschland.de/de/nachrichten/112-chronologie-ueberarbeitung-der-museumsdefinition.html>

“A virtual museum (VM) is a digital entity that draws on the characteristics of a museum, in order to complement, enhance, or augment the museum through personalization, interactivity, user experience and richness of content. [...] Furthermore, a VM:

- can retrieve and deliver collections to end-users in limitless, simultaneous and remote locations.
- provide access to content that is otherwise inaccessible (in storage, lost, in private collections).
- combine objects across geographical distances from sister institutions or sites: *in situ* in remote locations, archaeological excavations, public sites and monuments.
- showcase objects that have no physical presence and are born digital.”¹²

These days, then, what are the possibilities of a virtual exhibition? And what distinguishes it from a ‘classic’ exhibition? What kind of art is especially suitable for virtual exhibitions? These questions are investigated below based on the example of the KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION by the band Radiohead.

THE KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION

To mark the 20th anniversary of their albums KID A (2000) and AMNESIAC (2001), the British rock band Radiohead released the KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION in 2021, a virtual exhibition that many players and critics compare to a video game. Since then, articles and reviews have been piling up on the Internet with titles like *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition Tests the Limits of Games in Fun, Simple Ways*¹³ or *Radiohead’s Interactive ‘Exhibition’ Pushes Music and Games Into New Territory*.¹⁴ Reviewers have made statements like: “I can’t wait to recommend this excellent

12 Polycarpou, Christiana: “The ViMM Definition of a Virtual Museum,” *ViMM*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.vi-mm.eu/2018/01/10/the-vimm-definition-of-a-virtual-museum/>

13 Leone, Matt: “Kid A Mnesia Exhibition Tests the Limits of Games in Fun, Simple Ways,” *Polygon*, November 20, 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/22792342/radiohead-kid-a-mnesia-exhibition-not-a-game>

14 Faber, Tom: “Radiohead’s Interactive ‘Exhibition’ Pushes Music and Games into New Territory,” *Financial Times*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/eb18c19a-d568-4436-991c-d4e302a3cdc0>

new art gallery—one that just so happens to bend the rules of time and space.”¹⁵ Or “[...] the *Kid A Mnesia* Exhibition is a really good example of how we could be experiencing traditional and impossible kinds of art exhibitions moving forward.”¹⁶ And “The Kid A Mnesia Exhibition argues that the next evolution of music could be gameplay.”¹⁷ Visitors seem excited. In the following, we will explore what makes this exhibition innovative and what it has in common with video games.

Project Biography

Radiohead are known for their experimental approach to music and equally so for crossing musical boundaries. Founded in 1985, the band distinguished itself early on with creative marketing strategies. These include not only diverse merchandise but are also characterized by a great interest in new and digital media, which the band has known how to use for decades. For example, they built up an online presence back in 1997 at the time of the release of their album *OK COMPUTER* (1997) and reconstructed that webpage for the 20th anniversary of the album. In the course of the album releases of *KID A* (2000) and *AMNESIAC* (2001), Radiohead published short videos on the Internet and on television, which they called “blips.” These mostly 10- to 30-second clips consisted of song excerpts and animated art designs of the albums. To accompany *KID A*, they also released a Java proto-app called “iBlip,” which made it possible to pre-order and stream the album.¹⁸ In 2007, they released their album *IN RAINBOWS* a few months before the regular sales launch exclusively via their own website according to the pay-what-you-want concept, which was still new in this context and thus anticipated platforms like Bandcamp.¹⁹ A few years later, in 2014, the band partnered with Universal Everything to implement their first app, titled *POLYFAUNA*, based on the

15 McLevy, Alex: “Radiohead’s Digital Kid A Mnesia Exhibition Is No game—It’s an Experience” *A.V. Club*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.avclub.com/radioheads-digital-kid-a-mnesia-exhibition-is-no-game-i-1848084577>

16 Tran, Edmond: “Radiohead Are Turning the Playstation into a Gallery,” *ArtsHub*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.artshub.co.uk/news/features/radiohead-kid-a-mnesia-exhibition-for-ps5-is-an-uncanny-experience-2493794/>

17 T. Faber: “Radiohead’s Interactive ‘Exhibition.’”

18 N.N.: “All Surprises: Radiohead and the Art of the Unconventional Album Release,” *The Guardian*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/may/02/all-surprises-radiohead-and-art-of-unconventional-album-release>

19 Ibid.

sounds and imagery of the album KING OF LIMBS (2011). Front singer Thom Yorke described the atmospheric audio-visual experiment: “It comes from an interest in early computer life-experiments and the imagined creatures of our subconscious. Your screen is the window into an evolving world.”²⁰ In 2020, a new version of the app was released titled POLY-FAUNA 2.

The following year, the band eventually made news with the KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION. Actually, the exhibition project was supposed to take place in London and afterward be shown as a traveling exhibition in several cities worldwide. Thom Yorke and the artist Stanley Donwood described their original idea as follows:

“It was going to be a huge red construction made by welding shipping containers together, constructed so that it looked as if a brutalist spacecraft had crash-landed into the classical architecture of the Victoria & Albert Museum in Kensington. This astounding steel carapace would be inserted into the urban fabric of London like an ice pick into Trotsky. Jutting up into the grey English sky.”²¹

After the exhibition concept initially failed to overcome architectural barriers at the Victoria & Albert Museum and then bureaucratic difficulties at the newly conceived exhibition venue, the Victoria Albert Hall, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to seal the project’s fate:²² “Our dream was dead. Until we realised... It would be way better if it didn’t actually exist. Because then it didn’t have to conform to any normal rules of an exhibition. Or reality. Much better.”²³

Radiohead decided not to produce new material for their virtual exhibition but to use existing artifacts.²⁴ On display are newly arranged, partly alienated, or previously unpublished recordings and variations of selected songs from the albums KID A and AMNESIAC, as well as artistic works by Stanley Donwood created at the

20 Cooper, Leonie: “Radiohead Launch PolyFauna App,” *NME*, February 11, 2014, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/radiohead-145-1238154>; N.N.: “Endlich Neues von Radiohead: die App ‘Polyfauna,’” *Rollingstone*, February 11, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.de/endlich-neues-von-radiohead-die-app-polyfauna-363369/>

21 Yorke, Thom/Donwood, Stanley: “Radiohead Explain the Story Behind the Creation of Its Kid A Mnesia Exhibition, Out Today on PS5,” *Playstation Blog*, November 18, 2021, <https://blog.playstation.com/2021/11/18/radiohead-explain-the-story-behind-the-creation-of-its-kid-a-mnesia-exhibition-out-today-on-ps5/>

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

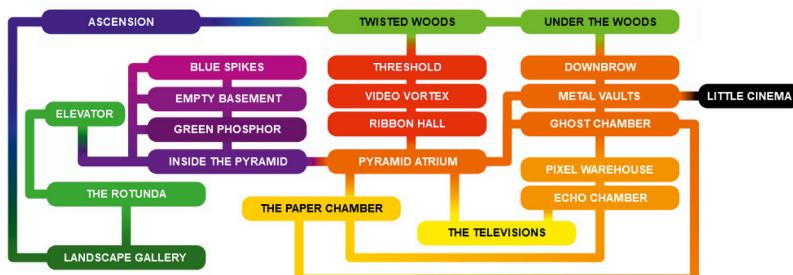
24 Ibid.

time of the albums. The free downloadable exhibition or game world was created in collaboration with Namethemachine and Arbitrarily Good Productions under the editorship of Epic Games.

Let's Play the Exhibition!

It's time for an exhibition visit (or playthrough) of the KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION. The following is a glimpse into the exhibition to show what Radiohead have brought to life through their project. The exhibition consists of 22 virtual rooms, which are not intended to depict concrete physical spaces. These spaces are almost continuously scored with sounds, music, or concrete songs as core exhibits presented alongside imagery or experimental visuals. The rooms are partly interconnected like in a labyrinth so that there is neither "the one" nor "the right" direction or route for a tour. We will visit selected rooms below with a particular focus on the topics of spatiality, interaction possibilities, and gaming mechanics.

Figure 1: The map of the KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

I start the game. The menu allows me to view and adjust typical gaming settings, such as sound, display, language, or controls. The movement options are simple: The exhibition can be navigated in first-person perspective (without a visible avatar) with the WASD keys and the computer mouse. Sprinting is possible; a right-click triggers a slight zoom function.

I find myself in a colorless forest; only a red light is visible in some distance. Once there, I have two options to continue: either I dive through a large hole into the root kingdom under the earth, or I enter a building that is barely visible from

the outside through a plain metal door. I choose the door as my entrance and am greeted by a text on the wall of a small entry area:

"There are doors in doors / and there are trapdoors / there are doors that open themselves / there are sliding doors and secret doors / there are doors that let you in and out / but never open / and there are trapdoors / that you can't come back from / KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION / this is not a game / take your time / you are at the beginning / so there must be an end / some places will make sense / some will never make sense / see you later"

Figure 2: The entrance area



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

Instead of an in-game solution for displaying information, there is a QR code next to the text that, ironically, has to be scanned from the computer screen with a smartphone. The QR code directs me to a project website,²⁵ which displays a room plan and shows some links. From there, a download link for the exhibition in the Epic Game Store can be accessed, as well as a key to the audio environment in the exhibition, a link to a web store with merchandise specifically for the exhibition, a link to the soundtrack, and there is the option to sign up for a newsletter.

Back in the game, the small entrance area is followed by a dark, long corridor lined with colorful picture strips, each of which seems to flow from bottom to top in an infinitely wide space. Nevertheless, I can move off the path between the strips

²⁵ The site can be accessed at the address: <https://kida-mnesia.com/>

of images without falling into the depths or being carried upwards. In the corridor, I meet black papier-mâché figures for the first time, which have something in common with the appearance of stick figures. Together with “modified bears” (Radiohead’s trademark characters) and other creatures, they keep crossing my path during the course of the game. All of these creatures usually react to my presence with brief eye contact or terse sentences that they mumble to themselves (or to me?).

Figure 3: The introductory text and QR code for the exhibition



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

I find room titles and the titles of the exhibited songs on several room transitions next to doors on the wall, where I also encounter the QR code described above again and again. Soon I walk towards the “Pyramid Atrium,” in the middle of which a narrow but very high pyramid rises into the air. Before I take a closer look at it, I turn off in the direction of a side room called “The Televisions.” On the walls of this room are piles of old television sets, most of which are running different sequences. However, these sequences are synchronized in between, and then all temporarily show the same images. Of the song being played in this room, the drum track, bass track, and vocals have been filtered out. Entering a permeable orange “column” in the center of the room, I hear the song’s ‘drum n bass’ track. In this room, I am also given the rare opportunity to interact with the environment by picking up a receiver in a phone box at the side of the room. Through

the receiver, I hear the vocal track of an alienated but also desperate-sounding Thom Yorke, belonging to the song that is exhibited in this room.

Figure 4a/4b: Views from the room called “The Televisions”



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshots by I. Hamm

Figure 5: The “Paper Chamber”



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

Next, I visit the “Paper Chamber.” In this large room, countless pieces of paper with drawings, sketches, and song lyrics flutter around. They hang on the walls and lie on the floor so that I have to walk over them to get to a floating circle of notes in the middle of the room. Suddenly a wind seems to blow through the room with its diffuse-looking walls. All the slips of paper from the floor, the walls, and the circle in the center of the room swirl around me, flying clenched into a corner of the room, only to return shortly thereafter to their former places in new

arrangements and with new motifs. I stay for a while so I can always see new motifs and formatting of the slips of paper. However, I have no influence on the speed at which the next 'gust of wind' renews everything again, and I have to hurry when looking at the slips of paper if I want to see different ones during a rest period. I step back into the "Pyramid Atrium." I circle the pyramid, climb inside, and find myself in a room so large from the inside that it should not fit inside the pyramid at all, judging by the outside appearance. Projections flicker on the interior walls, showing individual creatures, plays of shapes and colors. A minotaur walks around in the middle of the room but pays no attention to me as I head for one of three bar-shaped, glowing doors across the vast space.

Figure 6a/6b: The pyramid from the outside and inside



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshots by I. Hamm

Figure 7: Snapshot of the animated visuals for the song "How to Disappear Completely" in the room "Empty Basement"



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

Passing through a room titled “Green Phosphor,” with glowing green lines of a song running along its black walls and floor like computer code, I enter the dark “Empty Basement.” I walk along a corridor that seems to float in nothingness—and then, all of a sudden, I’m floating in the air myself. Three different songs are played in direct succession while I dive deeper and deeper into the three associated animated visuals or animated music videos. For the first and only time in the game, it is not possible for me to leave a room for several minutes.

Finally, I fly through a blue, tunnel-shaped mass back to “Inside the Pyramid” from where I came. Now it looks different here than before: an “Elevator” has appeared in the middle of the room. With it, I reach “The Rotunda,” an exhibition space reminiscent of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The circular gallery seems to wind endlessly up and down, while in the middle, some creatures fly towards the top. I follow the passage upward for some time and still see new paintings on the walls. After about five minutes, the images on the walls repeat, so I seem to have come to the end of a loop. I look around some more and discover that activating the zoom function with a right-click reveals additional information, namely the painting titles. Unlike in the “Empty Basement,” an exit from this gallery is possible at any time. The corridor that later leads me to the next room opens again and again in the wall with every turn I make in “The Rotunda.” Once in the “Landscape Gallery,” I look at two panoramic paintings alongside some modified bears.

Figure 8: “The Rotunda”



Source: Kid A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

Figure 9: A section of the panoramic view in the room “Ascension”



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

As I step closer, the paintings seem to fold away backward in three dimensions, giving me a more vivid view of what's being depicted. Finally, I arrive in a room titled “Ascension.” From a scaffold, I can view a large panorama. I'm walking along the scaffolding when suddenly—for the first and only time in this game—the perspective changes. Suddenly I'm no longer looking at the snowy peaks that were just in front of me, but at a wall of a large house, and I see myself from a bird's eye view. Although, up to this point, I seemed to have no body when I looked down at myself, I now realize that I am apparently not disembodied after all. From the bird's eye view and through the shadow that I cast on a wall, I discover that I am a minotaur. I run to the other side of the wall of the building, where part of the scaffolding lifts up and takes me to one of the upper floors.

Figure 10a/10b: The change of perspective and the shadow of the own avatar



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshots by I. Hamm

Figure 11: A possible end of the exhibition visit



Source: KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION, Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC, Namethemachine, LLC, 2021, screenshot by I. Hamm

Again, I walk down a corridor; this time, there are names on the floor—the “credi-tis” of the exhibition. At the end of the hallway, I get out into the open and find myself in the forest where the game began. A couple of modified bears stand in front of me to say goodbye and wave with a sign on which the QR code to the project page is once more displayed. I have arrived at a possible end of the game.

Spatiality

This tour with selected stations has shown the opportunities the virtual exhibition uses to create an immersive environment for Radiohead's music, to which it wants to provide a stage. In the beginning, the audience is told, “this is not a game,”²⁶ followed by “take your time,”²⁷ which suggests that this medium does not offer any typical game challenges. Nevertheless, certain mechanisms familiar through games are used. Gaming references include an options menu and the control system with a zoom function that can release additional information. Some of the exhibits can only be experienced in their entirety through interaction or are expanded in several dimensions. The routing is unconventional and similar to a

26 KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION (Epic Games 2021, O: Arbitrarily Good Productions LLC/Namethemachine, LLC)

27 Ibid.

labyrinth. Finally, the visitors discover ‘themselves’ in the form of the minotaur-avatar and are thus inscribed in the universe through which they move.

Particular significance, however, is attached to the way in which spatiality is handled. The audience must unlock accesses to some rooms by walking other paths, such as “Inside the Pyramid.” In the “Paper Chamber” or the “Empty Basement,” rooms can dictate the amount of time the audience has to contemplate the exhibits on display. These spaces change and, in some cases, allow the audience to question the boundaries between outside and inside. Impossible dimensions manifest themselves, in particular, in the pyramid, which is larger on the inside than on the outside, or in “The Rotunda,” which stretches ever upward and downward, displaying paintings repeatedly in a loop. In the “Empty Basement,” artworks literally unfold and surround the audience, completely absorbing them.

During these moments of visiting the exhibition, players are taken away part of their control over the space surrounding them and their possibilities of movement within it. Hans-Joachim Backe points out that by the age of two, humans learn what object permanence means and that changes in objects are partly permanent. In this way, an understanding of the world is formed that allows a feeling of certainty about an individual’s environment and the movement through it. If Euclidian rules are broken in games, this leads to a sense of destabilization.²⁸

“Non-Euclidean spaces in digital games exhibit additional spatial multistability: in them, navigational paths are not isomorphic with the perceived environment, and the objects change when interacted with or even just looked at.”²⁹

“Non-Euclidean games [...] undermine some of our most fundamental heuristics for meaning making, acquired in early childhood. They confront their players with environments that are not permanent, lack uniquely identifying traits, and thus make it difficult to even identify the starting position of the avatar, let alone to navigate through complex environments. Intentional movement becomes impaired, leading to a loss of agency. [...] By confronting us with spaces that withhold our primary cognitive achievement, object permanence, we are left with trial and error [...].”³⁰

28 Backe, Hans-Joachim: “The Aesthetics of Non-Euclidean Game Spaces,” in: Bonner, Marc (ed.), *Game | World | Architectonics*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, p. 163.

29 Ibid., p. 160.

30 Ibid., p. 164.

In the context of a virtual exhibition, the use of these spatial and movement elements may be surprising at first; however, these irritations contribute all the more to a sense of insecurity and anxiety that the songs on both albums and the artwork are also intended to express.³¹

Finally, in the context of spatiality, it is worth mentioning the use of the QR code, which appears several times in the exhibition. In a digital space, there would certainly have been simpler and more direct solutions for displaying information than a QR code. However, the use of the code on the walls or on signs mimics (or mocks) the experience of an analog visit to the exhibition, where the audience would naturally have had to scan the QR code. Using their smartphones, visitors can access the map to navigate the virtual exhibition first and then visit the museum gift shop later.

Context: Games and Virtual Exhibitions

“[W]e’ve built... something. We aren’t sure what it is,”³² Yorke and Donwood write about their project. The question of what we are dealing with here and how the exhibition can be categorized is indeed not so easy to answer. This is due to the fact that there are few comparable games or exhibitions. Well-known titles in the field of music games are, to name just a few, SINGSTAR (2004-2017), GUITAR HERO (2005-2011), ROCK BAND (2007-2010), and BEAT SABER (2018), in which the goal is to play music, keep time, and play a rhythm. Looking for games that focus on specific musicians, the list already gets shorter. Games like BRÜTAL LEGEND (2009) or METAL: HELLSINGER (to be released in 2022) each feature a few selected musicians and bands, in this case from the metal genre. In the open-world action-adventure BRÜTAL LEGEND, the main character Eddie Riggs fights his way through a bizarre heavy metal world where he must save enslaved humanity from demons. For this, he is equipped with an ax, his guitar, and a car. During the game, heavy metal songs can be found and listened to. Celebrities like Jack Black, Lemmy Kilmister, Rob Halford, Ozzy Osbourne, Lita Ford, and Tim Curry have participated in the game and lent their voices to the characters.³³ METAL: HELLSINGER is a first-person shooter and rhythm game in which the player will fight in eight hells. In doing so, he or she will have to coordinate combat actions

31 Yorke, Thom/Donwood, Stanley: *Kid A Mnesia*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd 2021, pp. ix-xvi.

32 T. Yorke/S. Donwood: “Radiohead Explain the Story.”

33 N.N.: “Brütal Legend,” *Steam*, https://store.steampowered.com/app/225260/Brutal_Legend/

as closely as possible to the music in order to amplify it and cause more damage. Music is being contributed by metal celebrities such as Randy Blythe, James Dorton, Matt Heafy, Dennis Lyxzén, Tatiana Shmailyuk, Mikael Stanne, Björn Strid, and Alissa White-Gluz.³⁴

Artists who have created their own games or who are the focus of a game have so far been the exception rather than the rule. Björk's app game BIOPHILIA (2011) allowed players to interact and experiment with elements of the ten songs from the same-titled album in different ways. The visual implementation remained abstract; the music was displayed in the form of a galaxy in which each song was represented by a star.³⁵ A different approach is offered with LAST DAY OF JUNE (2017), a puzzle game whose origin and story can be traced back to a comic by Hajo Müller, which in turn inspired musician Steven Wilson to write a song and ultimately produce a music video with Jess Cope. Based on the story of the comic, song, and music video, players have to try to direct the events of one day from the perspective of different characters in order to prevent a fatal car accident. Steven Wilson's music inspired game director Massimo Guarini to initiate the game's development. However, it is used as a score rather than as an interactive game element.³⁶

Looking at comparable examples from the perspective of visual art, the connection between artists, games, and virtual exhibitions seems downright contradictory. This applies especially to the field of media art or, even more specifically, to art games and game art. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the relevance and development of virtual exhibitions have once again increased within the museum scene as well as within the art market. König Galerie in Berlin, for example, featured two virtual exhibitions with gaming aspects as part of its 2020 program "The Artist is Online": Thomas Webb created EXERCISE IN HOPELESS NOSTALGIA (2020-2021), a virtual exhibition that was also a free-to-play online game. Users could explore a 1980s 8-bit-style world, 12 digital exhibits, and a story centered around

34 N.N.: "Metal: Hellsinger," *Steam*, https://store.steampowered.com/app/1061910/Metal_Hellsinger/

35 Schiesel, Seth: "Playing the New Björk Album, and Playing Along, With Apps," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/25/arts/video-games/björks-biophilia-an-album-as-game.html>

36 505 Games: "Making of Last Day of June: part 2—feat. Steven Wilson, Jess Cope & Hajo Müller (PEGI)," *YouTube*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBbyhpQIYz4>

the König Gallery.³⁷ In this context, personalities such as the gallerist Johann König or the curator Anika Meier also appeared as characters in the game, with whose help players could investigate riddles and pursue quests. Meanwhile, Manuel Rossner's work *SURPRISINGLY THIS RATHER WORKS* (2020), playable as an app, made the gallery spaces available, including an additional integrated art installation of his own, through which visitors can navigate with an avatar.

Countless other examples could prove that art and digital media, including games, as closely interwoven entities at this point. As a result, it is difficult to draw boundaries between them. These games and experiences are all ultimately very different from *KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION*, ranging from the controls to the interaction options to the objectives. They also demonstrate how diverse the possibilities are these days for new forms of presenting music as well as intermedial virtual exhibitions.

CONCLUSION: DIGITAL MATERIALITY

For Radiohead, an analog exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum or the Victoria Albert Hall would have certainly been a great success as well. However, music in particular, which has an ephemeral or digital and, in any case, atmospheric character, is almost predestined as a core exhibit for virtual exhibition formats. The *KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION* shows how digital components can be used not only to creatively exhibit soundtracks and make them accessible but also to bring to life a world of its own inspired by music. This is done in a way that would not have been possible under real-world conditions: Figurines of the universe of both albums are given form, language, and a place. Notes, sketches, and works of art of the Album Art find a new expression in the digital, which makes them interactive and surprising, free of the laws of physics. Music is embedded in a kind of installation art while simultaneously becoming an atmospheric experience through gaming mechanics.

As the definitions of museums are constantly renegotiated, the tasks and requirements of a virtual museum also change on this basis. In the context of digital transformation, the point is to recognize and embrace the possibilities offered by the development and application of information technologies in order to continually create new platforms, such as virtual exhibitions, that can encourage the

37 Prendes, Ana: "Insight: 'EXERCISE IN HOPELESS NOSTALGIA' and the virtual space KÖNIG DIGITAL," *Clot*, November 15, 2020, <https://www.clotmag.com/news/insight-exercise-in-hopeless-nostalgia-and-the-virtual-space-konig-digital>

audience to engage with a topic. To achieve this, games offer optimal connecting points and a great potential for innovative and interdisciplinary formats. The KID A MNESIA EXHIBITION shows that precisely these kinds of synergy effects can lead to creative, new exhibition forms. Analog exhibitions and digital ones can do different things. One is different from the other—but in their coming together, something new can emerge that is and does not have to be either one or the other.

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ROCK BAND (Harmonix 2007-2010, O: Harmonix)

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