On Chainsaws and Display Cases

Exhibiting Video Games

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PROLOGUE: THE CHAINSAW CONTROLLER

The Chainsaw Controller is a strange artifact. Released in 2005, this merchandise item for Capcom's survival horror classic RESIDENT EVIL 4 (2005) is, as the name promises, shaped like a small chainsaw covered in blood splatter and, also as the name promises, actually a functional PlayStation 2 controller (Fig. 1).[1] The Chainsaw Controller can accordingly be used to play RESIDENT EVIL 4, a video game that, at first glance, seems to fulfill every cliché: It celebrates the brutal fight against hordes of zombies using genre-standard weapons, like a shotgun, a rocket launcher, and, of course, a chainsaw. At a second glance, however, RESIDENT EVIL 4 proves to be a rather subversive (art) work by placing numerous high culture artifacts in its generic game world, which are then used in elaborate, sometimes self-reflexive puzzles. Thomas Hensel has dedicated a small monograph[2] to RESIDENT EVIL 4's art historical references and reflections—from Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (late 1470s or early 1480s) to Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509-1511) and Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrecht's Still Lifes (around 1660/1670).

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1   The chainsaw controller was produced by NubyTech in two versions, a red one for the Playstation 2 and a yellow one for the Nintendo GameCube. Both versions were released in limited editions of 50,000 units each.

2   Hensel, Thomas: *Nature morte im Fadenkreuz. Bilderspiele mit dem Computerspiel*, Trier: Fachhochschule Trier 2011.

Figure 1: Resident Evil 4 Chainsaw Controller (2005)

Source: Marx, Peter W./Neuhausen, Hubertus: *Schätze der Universität zu Köln*, Cologne: Greven Verlag, pp. 60-61

A certain self-reflexive quality also characterizes the Chainsaw Controller. The playful short-circuiting of the virtual chainsaw in RESIDENT EVIL 4 with a real chainsaw shape shows how unsuitable a chainsaw (or 'chainsaw') actually is for controlling a video game. The supposed increase in realism turns out to be a breach in the aesthetic illusion of the game world when the already comically exaggerated depiction of violence on screen is superimposed with the awkward swinging of a bizarre miniature toy chainsaw in front of the monitor. The integrated sound chip further amplifies this effect: When the chainsaw is activated in the game, the controller emits a pitiful engine noise.

The Chainsaw Controller has yet another level of meaning. It musealizes itself by squeezing into a (too) small display case. Display cases serve important functions in museums. In addition to protecting the exhibited artifact, they determine a certain way of showing and viewing:

"The space behind the transparent panel is [...] a showing space. In contrast to a perspective picture space, this space does not open up into the imaginary depth of the picture but is

directed at the gaze of the viewer who stands in front of it. The space remains flat; it is delimited by a background against which the object is presented. The object itself is meant to enter the viewer's gaze; it is meant to show itself. [...] Behind the glass panel, it is given free space."[3]

Following Krzysztof Pomian's museological theory, the display case turns the Chainsaw Controller into a *semiophor*. Semiophores are "two-sided objects: they have a material and a semiotic aspect,"[4] they are "objects without usefulness [...] that represent the invisible, that is, that they are endowed with meaning."[5] Inside the display case, the controller is no longer usable as a controller. Its practical value as a technical artifact for controlling video games dwindles in favor of its function as a sign carrier. It stands for something, represents something.

However, what does the chainsaw controller represent? In Pomian's theory, the meaning of a sign carrier emerges primarily through the museum context and can thus vary considerably—for example, as a metaphorical construction in an art museum or as a synecdochic representation of other cultures in an ethnological museum.

"When situating games in the gallery or the museum, they are read through the context of those institutions. Shown as contemporary art, they are examined for their aesthetics and cultural engagement. If they are displayed within a science museum, there is a tendency to examine them as technological artefacts. When displayed in the context of galleries dedicated to the moving image, videogames are frequently seen through the lens of cinema, framed by knowledge of cinematic conventions."[6]

Admittedly, the question of the exhibition context seems nonsensical in the case of the Chainsaw Controller since the musealization is only pretended. The fact that the Chainsaw Controller actually became an exhibition object in museums several

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3   Spies, Christian: "Vor Augen Stellen. Vitrinen und Schaufenster bei Edgar Degas, Eugène Atget, Damian Hirst und Louise Lawler," in: Boehm, Gottfried et al. (eds.), *Zeigen. Die Rhetorik des Sichtbaren*, Munich: Fink 2010, pp. 258-288, here p. 275, my translation.

4   Pomian, Krzysztof: *Der Ursprung des Museums: vom Sammeln*, Berlin: Wagenbach 1998, p. 84, my translation.

5   Ibid., p. 50, my translation.

6   Stuckey, Helen: *Play on Display. The Exhibition of Videogames in the Museum*, Master Thesis, Swinburne University of Technology 2010, p. 61.

times is part of the irony of media history and will be addressed again at the end of this essay.

One last argumentative loop should suffice to conclude this introduction: It is, of course, an inadequate description that the Chainsaw Controller is an object in a display case. Rather, this is a fight between an object and a display case from which the saw blade has already forcibly made its way out. It almost seems as if the chainsaw is trying to free itself from its semiophoric status and reclaim its use value. However, this description does not apply either because it is not a chainsaw but a Playstation 2 controller… Preliminary conclusion: The Chainsaw Controller shows what it is and what it is not by pretending to be something else, a chainsaw and a musealized object.

The question of whether this makes the Chainsaw Controller a self-reflexive (art) work, a silly merchandise item, or simply a slightly dysfunctional Playstation 2 controller is one that each viewer/collector/gamer must answer for themselves. The semiophoric quality of the Chainsaw Controller that is of interest for this introduction is primarily its grotesque yet quite pointed representation of the difficult relationship between video games and museums—or simply: that video games (and their paratexts) seem uncomfortable being squeezed into display cases.

DIGITAL MEDIA AT THE MUSEUM

Current approaches to museum practices as well as museum studies are increasingly characterized by questions of digitization. On the one hand, there is technological optimism. On the other, there is skepticism with regard to new digital media and a tendency to return to 'the original' and 'the material.' Digitization thus frequently leads to renegotiations of original and copy and of concepts such as aura and authenticity.[7]

These discourses revolve primarily around two aspects: the digitization of objects (or entire collections) and the presentation of these objects with the help of digital media in the museum space or in the form of virtual exhibitions.[8] Far less

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7   Cf., e.g., Niewerth, Dennis: *Dinge—Nutzer—Netze: Von der Virtualisierung des Musealen zur Musealisierung des Virtuellen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2018, pp. 50-82.

8   Cf., e.g., Geipel, Andrea et al. (eds): *Das digitale Objekt zwischen Depot und Internet*, Munich: Deutsches Museum 2020; for a more extensive overview cf. Kohle, Hubertus: *Museen digital. Eine Gedächtnisinstitution sucht den Anschluss an die Zukunft*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2018; Baur, Joachim (ed.): *Das*

often, these discussions are about exhibiting and collecting digital—born-digital or natively-digital or digital-first—objects, i.e., objects that have not first been created by digitizing a 'material original,' e.g., video games. Admittedly, these somewhat clumsy conceptual differentiations already point to considerable problems of a more fundamental distinction between digital (or virtual?) and material objects. Further debates, however, cannot be elaborated on here.

Considering video games primarily as software (as program code), it can be argued that their content is transmedial, that is, to a certain extent, "detached from a specific material substrate."[9] Yet, video games are nevertheless not conceivable—and certainly not exhibitable—in an immaterial form. The question of the materiality of digital objects is thus at best shifted to the question of which *version*, which 'material incarnation' of a digital object is on display.

MEDIUM EXHIBITION

This essay, therefore, does not deal with (video) games or gamification as educational tools for museums but with video games as exhibition objects. How can the 'old' "medium exhibition"[10] be used to approach 'new' digital media? Such a question regards exhibitions first and foremost as a "medium of knowledge transfer."[11] This coincides with an "understanding of the medium exhibition that goes beyond the depiction of scientific knowledge to become a genuine medium of knowledge in its own right."[12] While exhibitions often tend to "let objects remain

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Museum der Zukunft: 43 neue Beiträge zur Diskussion über die Zukunft des Museums, Bielefeld: transcript 2020; Mohr, Henning/Modarressi-Tehrani, Diana (eds.): *Museen der Zukunft. Trends und Herausforderungen eines innovationsorientierten Kulturmanagements*, Bielefeld: transcript 2022.

9   Schröter, Jens: "Das ur-intermediale Netzwerk und die (Neu-)Erfindung des Mediums im (digitalen) Modernismus. Ein Versuch," in: Paech, Joachim/Schröter, Jens (eds.), *Intermedialität analog/digital*, Munich: Fink 2008, pp. 579-601, here p. 586, my translation.

10   Lepp, Nicola: "Ungewissheiten—Wissens(v)ermittlung im Medium Ausstellung," in: Staupe, Gisela (ed.), *Das Museum als Lern- und Erfahrungsraum. Grundlagen und Praxisbeispiele*, Cologne/Vienna: Böhlau Verlag 2012, pp. 60-68.

11   Ibid., p. 61, my translation.

12   Lepp, Nicola: "Transdisziplinäres Ausstellen," in: ARGE schnittpunkt (ed.), *Handbuch Ausstellungstheorie und -praxis*, Cologne/Vienna: Böhlau Verlag 2013, pp. 193-194, here p. 193, my translation.

in a mere coexistence,"[13] it is crucial to "develop a visual argument through composing and positioning objects in relation to each other."[14]

"Knowledge transfer is then no longer the presentation of an a priori truth, but an involving, performative act of questioning and exploring knowledge in and with things, which takes place in the exhibition space." [15]

Such a perspective on the medium exhibition even allows to draw further parallels between the spatial-medial functions of the museum and those of video games:

"'Virtual space' is not just the domain of video games and virtual reality applications. Rather, it is the model of thought we use […] to reify information. [...] This means that the conditions of digital knowledge transfer must be treated *architecturally* and the specific situations of knowledge transfer *curatorially*. This irony is inevitably part of the diagnosis of the state of the museum in a digital-technologized world: The museum fears for its future at a time when its expertise and competencies should be more valuable and in demand than ever." [16]

In recent years, video games have developed into a popular mass media phenomenon, yet the public perception of video games still fluctuates between skepticism and euphoria, *Killerspiel* and *Kulturgut*.[17] Accordingly, it seems all the more important that the exploration of video games takes place not only within sub- and expert cultures or in the academic ivory tower but also in other social spaces, such as museums. Even more, especially against the background of an unstable public perception of video games, exhibitions seem to be particularly

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13 N. Lepp: "Ungewissheiten," p. 61, my translation.

14 Ibid., my translation.

15 Ibid., p. 64, my translation.

16 D. Niewerth: *Dinge—Nutzer—Netze*, p. 404-405, emphasis in original, my translation.

17 An inadequate, less catchy translation of this very German terminology would be: between 'violent games harmful to minors' and 'culturally valuable artifacts.' Cf. Wimmer, Jeffrey: *Massenphänomen Computerspiele: soziale, kulturelle und wirtschaftliche Aspekte*, Konstanz: UVK 2013; Beil, Benjamin: "Loading... Game Studies und Medienkulturwissenschaft," in: Bartholdy, Björn et al. (eds.), *Games studieren—was, wie, wo? Staatliche Studienangebote im Bereich digitaler Spiele*, Bielefeld 2018, pp. 53-70.

suitable for this task, as "spaces of possibilities in which insights are generated, and new knowledge is investigated."[18]

VIDEO GAME EXHIBITIONS I: BEGINNINGS

The cultural history of video game exhibitions presents itself as a confusing field, as there have been few cases of institutionalization (specialized museums etc.) so far. In most instances, video games find their way into museums in the form of (smaller, rarely larger) special exhibitions. As a result, research on video game exhibitions is similarly convoluted and still quite sparse. Besides James Newman's standard reference *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*,[19] which is primarily devoted to the preservation of video games, two monographs stand out: Raiford Guins' study on North American arcade history *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*[20] and Helen Stuckey's dissertation *Remembering Australian Videogames of the 1980s: What Museums Can Learn from Retro Gamer Communities About the Curation of Game History*.[21] While the two studies are similar regarding the time frame, they not only address different geographic areas but also pursue quite different epistemological goals, as Stuckey herself points out:

"Guins' focus on how museums treat the material history of the videogame is in contrast to my concern with the more intangible history of videogames. My core concern is to capture the history of videogames that is not represented by objects. I explore how videogames were experienced and shared as cultural objects, their meaning within particular communities, and the many distinct and individual stories they generate."[22]

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18   N. Lepp: "Ungewissheiten," p. 63, my translation.

19   Newman, James: *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*, London: Routledge 2012.

20   Guins, Raiford: *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2014.

21   Stuckey, Helen: *Remembering Australian Videogames of the 1980s: What Museums Can Learn from Retro Gamer Communities About the Curation of Game History*, Dissertation, Flinders University 2016.

22   Ibid., p. 8.

Beyond these two more extensive studies, the history of video game exhibitions remains an academic patchwork and, in most cases, a research desideratum.[23]

The first video game exhibitions can be found as early as the late 1980s. In 1989, the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York City opened its *Hot Circuits* exhibition, which featured a collection of playable arcade machines,

"presented not as historical artifact or technological advancement, but as living culture […] *Hot Circuits* retained many of the contextual elements that would have been present if encountering the games on display in an arcade. The cabinets were preserved in full, and visitors were given a set number of tokens (and could purchase more) to play the machines."[24]

A second historical milestone was the traveling exhibition *Videotopia*, launched in 1996, which was dedicated to the technological history of video games and later became part of the collection of The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. It is only since 2009, however, that video games have become an independent collection area at The Strong through the founding of the International Center for the History of Electronic Games (ICHEG).[25]

In 1997, two major exhibition projects opened in Germany: *ZKM_Gameplay* at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien in Karlsruhe (ZKM, Center for Art and

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23 Cf. Schwingeler, Stephan: *Kunstwerk Computerspiel*, Bielefeld: transcript 2014; Giddings, Seth: "SimKnowledge. What Museums Can Learn from Video Games," in: Henning, Michelle (ed.), *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Media Vol. 3*, London: Wiley Blackwell 2015, pp. 145-164; Naskali, Tiia et al.: "The Introduction of Computer and Video Games in Museums—Experiences and Possibilities," *HAL-Inria* (2017), https://hal.inria.fr/hal-0 1455255; Grace, Lindsay: "Heuristics from Curating and Exhibiting Game Art in the 21st Century," in: *Proceedings of Eighth International Conference on Digital Arts*, Artech 2017, pp. 101-108; Hensel, Thomas: "Kunst," in: Beil, Benjamin et al. (eds.), *Game Studies*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2018, pp. 379-387; Reed, Emilie M.: "Exhibition Strategies for Videogames in Art Institutions," in: *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4(2) (2018), pp. 103-135; Hawranke, Thomas: *Modding—Künstlerische Forschung in Computerspielen*, Dissertation, Bauhaus Universität Weimar 2018.

24 E. Reed: "Exhibition Strategies," p. 106; cf. Slovin, Rochelle: "Hot Circuits: Reflections on the 1989 Video Game Exhibition of the American Museum of the Moving Image," in: Wolf, Mark J. (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game,* Austin: University of Texas Press 2001, pp. 137-154.

25 Cf. World Video Game Hall of Fame: *A History of Video Games in 64 Objects*, New York: Dey St. 2018.

Media) and the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin (Computer Games Museum). While *ZKM_Gameplay* has undergone several relaunches and can still be visited in Karlsruhe today, the Computerspielemuseum had to close its doors in 2000 for eleven years and was only accessible online until its reopening in 2011. Several other European countries have also established smaller specialized museums, e.g., the Vigamus—Video Game Museum of Rome (since 2012) and The National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham (since 2015).

The first major, internationally visible exhibition project was the traveling exhibition *Game On*, which began in 2002 as a collaboration between the Barbican Centre in London and the National Museum of Scotland. The exhibition made (and is still making) an ambitious attempt to exhibit the complete history of computer games from the 1960s to the present in the form of 120 mostly playable artifacts.[26] *Game On* is a long-lived exhibition project that continues to tour the world. Thereby it is interesting to observe that the format of the traveling exhibition has changed not only the museum context but also the exhibition itself again and again:

"Despite being developed as an art and design exhibition for the Barbican contemporary gallery spaces, as the tour developed *Game On* was embraced more by the science museum sector that not only had the galleries to accommodate such a vast exhibition but were also less daunted by the exhibition's technological demands. In this context the artwork became not only less relevant to the exhibition experience but often incongruous."[27]

Another breakthrough for video games as exhibition objects came ten years later. In 2012, the special exhibition *The Art of Video Games* opened at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC; also, in 2012, the Museum of Modern Art in New York began adding video games to its applied design collection.[28] This entry of video games into important museums continues, e.g., with the exhibition *Videogames: Design/ Play/Disrupt* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London; in this case, however, again only as a temporary special exhibition (2018/2019).

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26   In a revised version of the exhibition entitled *Game On 2.0* (2010), the number of games even increased to 150.

27   H. Stuckey: *Play on Display*, p. 48.

28   Raiford Guins has undertaken two quite critical tours of the video game exhibitions at the Smithonian and the Museum of Modern Art: R. Guins: *Game After*, pp. 277-288; Ferranto, Matt: "No Paraphernalia, No Nostalgia: Decoding MoMA's New Video Game Galleries," in: *Design and Culture* 7(2) (2015), pp. 203-223.

A first look at the various projects reveals two thematic focal points, two types of exhibitions: Most projects are general (or panoramic) exhibitions on the technological history of video games. Furthermore, several exhibitions function as museal nobilitations and canonizations of video games as works of art, albeit with sometimes very different perspectives:

"*The Art of Video Games* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, e.g., emphasized visual effects and the creative use of new technologies, while the Museum of Modern Art focused primarily on the design of player behavior but also on the elegance of code."[29]

The two major long-lived video game exhibitions in Germany also illustrate these tendencies. The Computerspielemuseum focuses primarily on the technological history of video games as popular mass media by presenting an essentially chronological overview of video game hardware and software. *ZKM_Gameplay*, in contrast, emphasizes media-artistic works. The exhibition in Karlsruhe thus simultaneously points to the fluid boundaries of video games and media art—the other focal point of the ZKM's collection— as it includes many objects from the field of artgames and game art. Artgames are experimental, playable video games that are often not distributed commercially but created primarily or even exclusively for the presentation in museums and galleries or at festivals.[30] Game art refers to artworks derived from video games and artistically reflects motifs from popular commercial games. Game art is usually not playable (or interactive in any form).

VIDEO GAME EXHIBITIONS II: DIFFERENTIATIONS (IN GERMANY)

Whereas the early days of computer game exhibitions were characterized by thematically broad (or fuzzy) "general exhibitions,"[31] in recent years, there has been a trend towards "more original and special theme exhibitions."[32] Thereby the

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29   T. Hensel: "Kunst," p. 379, my translation.

30   Artgames can furthermore be distinguished between artists' games, i.e., games programmed by artists themselves, and artistic game mods, i.e., modifications of commercial games. Cf. S. Schwingeler: *Kunstwerk Computerspiel*; Sharp, John: *Works of Game. On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2015; T. Hawranke: *Modding*.

31   T. Naskali et al.: "The Introduction," p. 236.

32   Ibid.

number of exhibitions has grown significantly, which is why the following discussion focuses primarily on the German museum landscape of the last five to ten years. In addition to the permanent exhibitions in Karlsruhe and Berlin, more than half a dozen smaller and larger special (and traveling) exhibitions could be visited.

The exhibition *Rainbow Arcade* (2018/2019) at Schwules Museum in Berlin (Gay Museum) presented a queer history of video games; *Extralife* (2015) at the Kunsthaus Nürnberg (Art Gallery Nuremberg) focused on video game fandom; *Digital Games* (2017/2018) at the Ludwig Forum Aachen was dedicated to the field of indie games; the traveling exhibition *Game Masters* (2016/2017)[33] at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg (MK&G, Museum for Arts and Crafts) revolved around video game artists and designers; a similar thematic focus was offered by *Game Designers & Software Artists* (2019) at the Schriefers Design Collection of the University of Wuppertal.

Besides a thematic diversification, a tendency toward intermedial reflections could be observed, e.g., at *Film und Games: ein Wechselspiel* (2015/16, *Films and Games: Interactions*) at the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt am Main (German Film Museum); the exhibition *Im Spielrausch*[34] (2017/18) at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst Köln (MAKK; Museum of Applied Arts Cologne) compared the worlds of video games and theater; *Bretter, die die Welt bedeuten*[35] (2018) at the Kölnisches Stadtmuseum positioned video games within the cultural and social history of board games; *Obumbro. SchattenKunst ComputerSpiel* (2018/19, *ShadowArt VideoGame*) at the Museum Ulm confronted video games along the leitmotif of the shadow with a whole range of other media, from literature to paintings to films and installations.

What seems striking is that all these projects still mainly understood themselves as introductory exhibitions, despite their concise and highly diverse themes.

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33   Curated by the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in 2012.

34   A direct translation of the exhibition title is difficult, since the German word "Rausch" could be translated as frenzy, intoxication, rapture or rush. The title is an allusion to Roger Caillois' concept of Ilinx, which in German is associated with the term "Rausch." Ilinx is part of Caillois' famous four forms of play: Agon (competition), Alea (chance), Mimicry (mimesis or role playing), Ilinx (vertigo). Caillois, Roger: *Man, Play and Games*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 2001 (1958).

35   The exhibition title cannot simply be translated as "boards (or planks) that mean the world." "Bretter, die die Welt bedeuten" is a quote from Friedrich Schiller's poem *An die Freunde* (1803, *To the Friends*) and colloquially refers to the theater stage. Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" would therefore be a suitable translation—though not for the play on words of the exhibition title.

Even more so, they tended to preface their exhibition objects with various statements—ranging from justifications to apologies—as to why video games are now worthy of exhibition. However, this does not seem to be a peculiarity of German museums. The blockbuster exhibition *Videogames* at the Victoria & Albert Museum also greeted its visitors upon entering the exhibition space with a strange classification of the video game as a combination of bridges and operas—leaving unanswered where exactly bridges and operas are to be found on the spectrum of art and technology (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt, Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2018/2019), entrance to the exhibition
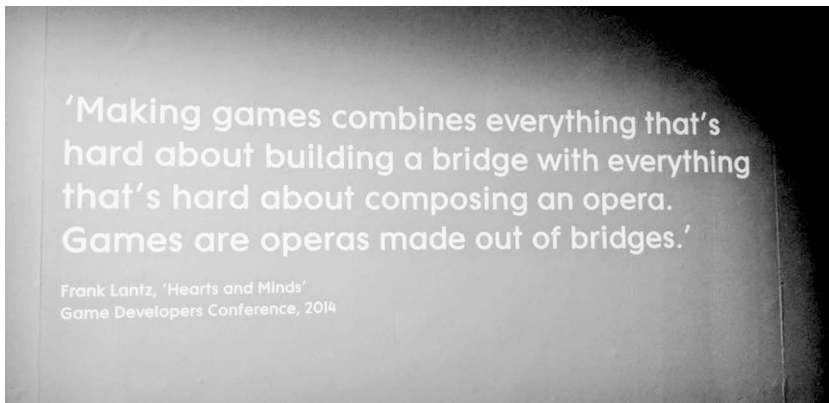
Source: Photo by B. Beil

Furthermore, the supposed focal points of the different exhibitions turned out to be quite broad categories upon closer inspection. Besides vague (and sometimes somewhat arbitrary) foci on older and newer video games, there were hardly any historical delimitations to be found. The *Rainbow Arcade* Exhibition, e.g., was titled *Queer Video Game History 1985-2018*.[36] In addition, no exhibition was dedicated to a single artist, even though the history of video games has already produced several prominent game designers and auteurs.[37] However, these findings

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36 A counter-example is the exhibition *Game Designers & Software Artists. Inszenierung und Selbstverständnis der Künstler/innen bei Electronic Arts, 1983-1988* (Staging and Self-Image of Artists at Electronic Arts)—though its narrow focus on five years and on a very specific selection of games seems no less unusual.

37 On an international level, the only exception is the retrospective *The Game Worlds of Jason Rohrer*, which took place at the Davis Museum (Wellesley College) in 2016.

are not entirely surprising in view of the comparatively young media history of the video game as an exhibition object.

VIDEO GAME EXHIBITIONS III: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

More interesting than the differences of the individual exhibitions seem to be, in many cases, their similarities, which not only resulted from thematic settings but were significantly determined by practical aspects, especially by a certain resistance of video games as exhibition objects. Video games are an interactive mass medium, and therefore, people expect to be able to *play* a video game— even in a museum.[38] Thus, all of the exhibitions mentioned attempted to make at least some of their objects playable, although the numbers varied considerably: from a single playable artifact at the *Spielrausch* exhibition in Cologne to over 100 at *Game Masters* in Hamburg. However, such numbers ultimately reveal little of how successful a gaming experience was implemented in curatorial as well as practical terms.

In Cologne, the game PROUN (2011) was exhibited, a game of skill with a simple set of rules and controls that can be learned quickly. In addition, the game was modified for the exhibition context to keep it always playable.[39] PROUN's graphic design is heavily influenced by neoplasticistic shapes and colors, so it was no coincidence that the game monitor was placed between two Mondrian lithographs (Fig. 3).

By contrast, the playable objects at the *Game Masters* exhibition included numerous commercial games (e.g., SYSTEM SHOCK [1994], Fig. 4), which offered much greater challenges, both practically and curatorially.


Nevertheless, the category of the artist (or auteur) often plays an important role, especially in the art museum. Cf., eg., Baumgärtel, Tilmann: *Games: Computerspiele von KünstlerInnen. Ausstellung im Hartware-Medien-Kunst-Verein*, Frankfurt a.M.: Revolver 2003.

38 The popularity of the concept of the participatory museum is likely to reinforce such expectations. Cf. Simon, Nina: *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0 2010.

39 This was done, among other things, by locking configuration menus and by a regular automatic reset of the game progress.

"Once you move past the era of the early arcade games, where most game interfaces are easily understood, players are almost inevitably faced with learning complex rule systems and the demands of mastering the game's interface."[40]

Figure 3, 4, and 5: Im Spielrausch, Museum für Angewandte Kunst Köln (2017/2018); Game Masters, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (2016/2017)
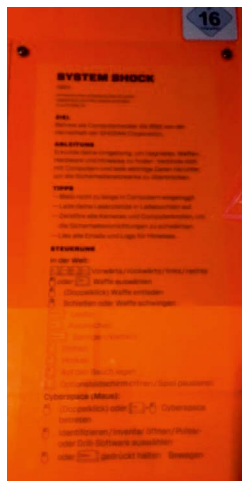
Source: Photos by B. Beil

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40   H. Stuckey: *Play on Display*, p. 67.

The *Game Masters* exhibition attempted to make its objects (more) accessible through a dedicated, enthusiastic staff, specially trained for this exhibition, and through detailed object labels, which explained the game objectives and rule sets, as well as the interface and controls, and in some cases provided additional tips and strategies (Fig. 5). Nevertheless, the appeal of many exhibition objects was likely to have been largely lost on most visitors if they were not already familiar with a game.

Moreover, the question arises whether a brief play session changes the experience (or appreciation) of a game as a museal object at all, even or especially if an exhibited game was already known to a visitor. Brendan Keogh, who visited *Game Masters* in 2012 at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, recounts his rather ambivalent playing experience:

"I looked at the SYSTEM SHOCK machine and realized that, truly, there is nothing I could tell you about SYSTEM SHOCK that I could not have told you before I played it. […] It is undeniably great that anyone can walk into ACMI and play SYSTEM SHOCK. But is playing an old game enough? Especially if that game relies on a story or other systems that can't possibly be fully explored in five minutes of play? What is it that is culturally significant about games? How do we share that? How do we preserve it? […] You just can't comprehend a game like SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS [2005], SYSTEM SHOCK or METAL GEAR SOLID 4 [2008] in a 5-minute go in a gallery. It's like trying to understand the significance of Moby Dick from reading a single page of it."[41]

The preceding paragraphs can by no means be reduced to the argument that the *Spielrausch* exhibition has handled the interactivity of video games better than the *Game Masters* exhibition—it has only made things much easier for itself regarding the selection of its exhibition objects. PROUN is a particularly accessible exhibition object, not only in terms of interactivity but equally because of its intermedial qualities, which are quite easy to convey curatorially. However, it represents only a tiny facet of video game culture.

Of course, this discussion is not at all unfamiliar to museum research. In science museums, much of the machinery on display cannot be actively operated by visitors, and in the exhibition spaces of film museums, usually, only short clips or even just still images are shown, and rarely full films. The argument made here is, therefore, not that video games confront museums with entirely new challenges. However, certain limitations in the sensory and interactive experience are

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41   Keogh, Brendan: "Mastering Game Exhibits," *Unwinnable* (2012), https://unwinnable.com/2012/07/10/mastering-game-exhibits/#.U5U12vmSx8E

particularly evident in this case, be it because video games are technically complex and extensive or simply because they are still unfamiliar exhibition objects for museum visitors.

This can even lead to a discouraging or frustrating experience in the exhibition space that counteracts the museal knowledge transfer, as Prax, Eklund, and Sjöblom discovered in interviews with visitors and the exhibition staff at *Game On 2.0* at the National Museum of Science and Technology in Stockholm (2013/2014):

"An exhibition that relies on play as the central way to communicate about games requires gaming literacy on the side of the visitors. In other words, it does not communicate well with those who do not know how to play.

'*Game On* is very confirming. If you are a computer gamer, you go in there and you see all the stuff you played and you can play. If you are not a gamer, you go there and you look at these games and it is very hard. You get confirmed in your view that this is hard and not for you.' (Interview with exhibition staff)

As the quote shows, an exhibition that focuses on play runs the risk of losing the ability to open up games as a part of culture and their relevance for understanding life today to new demographics and groups who have not been gamers before. It might even re-affirm their prejudices of games not being for them."[42]

Against this background, it may be no coincidence that many current video game exhibitions deliberately problematize the aspect of interactivity—or more precisely, the lack of it—by intermedial comparisons that utilize the "epistemological potential of the medium exhibition."[43] A curatorial key point of the *Spielrausch* exhibition, e.g., was that not only video games, but also theater are ephemeral media. 'The theater' is not found in the written text of its performance, just as 'the video game' cannot be reduced to the lines of its program code. Therefore, the *Spielrausch* exhibition did not focus on theatrical performances and gameplay but rather on the popular culture and media-historical environment of both media as well as interconnections with other older and newer playful practices. Artifacts surrounding theater and video game cultures were exhibited, from masks and

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42 Prax, Patrick et al.: "'More like an arcade'—The Limitations of Playable Games in Museum Exhibitions," *Museum & Society* 17(3) (2019), pp. 437-452.

43 N. Lepp: "Ungewissheiten," p. 63, my translation.

puppets to playing fields and stage machinery to merchandise and artistic reflections.[44]

Figure 6: Bretter, die die Welt bedeuten, Kölnisches Stadtmuseum (2018)

Source: Photo by B. Beil

COMPUTER GAME EXHIBITIONS IV:
PRAISE OF THE DISPLAY CASE

While it seems quite common that many works of art must be protected from museum visitors by display cases, barriers, or the watchful gaze of the museum staff, there is seemingly nothing more depressing than a game (machine) behind a glass panel, whether it is a digital gaming platform or a pinball machine at the Kölnisches Stadtmuseum (Fig. 6). Of course, many game machines are protected by display cases or barriers for good reasons. After all, they are rare and fragile artifacts whose material existence is threatened by a steadily dwindling supply of

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44   Cf. Beil, Benjamin et al. (eds.): *Im Spielrausch. Streifzüge durch die Welten des Theaters und des Computerspiels*, Glückstadt: vwh 2017.

spare parts and technical expertise for repair and maintenance. Moreover, most (video) game platforms in museums were originally intended for private use and do not have the fundamental robustness for daily play in public spaces.[45] In this sense, the argumentation in the case of the 'imprisoned' pinball machine can also be turned around: By architecturally or curatorially preventing interaction with the pinball machine, the artifact (again) gains the attention, perhaps even the appreciation of museum visitors as an important object worth preserving.

Figure 7: Computerspielemuseum Berlin (2017)

Source: Photo by B. Beil

Looking at a PONG machine from 1972 at the Computerspielemuseum Berlin—behind a barrier (Fig. 7)—one might argue that a PONG machine is no longer needed to play PONG nowadays. PONG has been ported to countless systems and is therefore playable on almost every common computer hardware. Via a software

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45   T. Naskali et al.: "The Introduction," p. 230.

emulator,[46] even the 'original PONG' can be played—if one wants to reduce the digital artifact PONG to its program code. In this way, the digital object, just like the digitized one, evokes questions about its materiality. In many cases, an emulated version comes quite close to the original game but still does not achieve a gaming experience identical to the original. The graphics may look similar, but they are usually adapted to a new screen technology and resolution; the sound effects play from modern speakers, and the interface and control schemes are modified for the new platform.[47] In the context of a media nostalgia discourse, emulated games thus illustrate the motif of "the impossibility of mythical return"[48] in the sense of a never authentic reproduction of the original gaming experience. This effect may be much more evident with older artifacts such as the first PONG machines than with contemporary game consoles, but it is ultimately only a matter of time before current gaming hardware also achieves the status of a rare and fragile historical object.

In the museum context, the presentation of game hardware can become a form of historiography through the medium of exhibition. In her writing on the museum's media-cultural history, Michelle Henning asks the question: "Do television and computers make sense when removed from their living room and office habitats; or the newspaper from the cafe or the train?"[49] The answer, in this case, would be: Yes! By detaching an exhibition object from its everyday media environment—making it a semiophor—a form of historicity and especially a historical connection of hardware and software becomes visible.[50]

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46   Emulation is the execution of the original program code—in more or less unchanged form—with the help of a special program that simulates an (usually older) computer architecture on a (usually newer) hardware system.

47   Cf. Camper, Brett: "Retro Reflexivity. La-Mulana, an 8-Bit Period Piece," in: Perron, Bernard/Wolf, Mark J. P. (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, London: Routledge 2009, pp. 169-195.

48   Cf. Svetlana Boym's often-cited definition of nostalgia: "Modern Nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values." (Boym, Svetlana: *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, NY: Basic Books 2001, p. 8.)

49   Henning, Michelle: "Museum Media. An Introduction," in: Henning, Michelle (ed.): *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Media Vol. 3*, Wiley Blackwell 2015, pp. xxvii-lx, here p. lv.

50   Noteworthy in this context is the special exhibition "Wie die digitalen Spiele in unser Leben traten" (2015, "How digital games entered our lives") at the Computerspielemuseum, which embedded historical arcade game machines and game consoles

Figures 8 and 9: Game Masters, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (2016/2017)
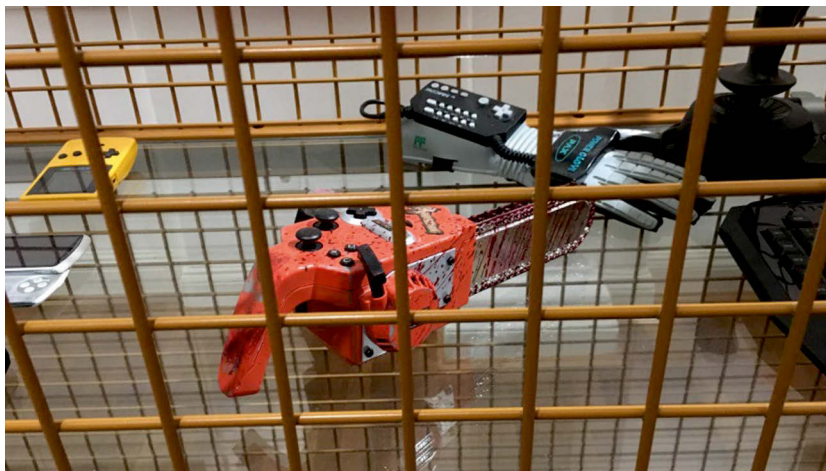
Source: Photos by B. Beil

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in various 'walk-in dioramas.' One part of the exhibition space was modeled after an arcade and hosted various machines from the 1970s and 1980s, another exhibition area resembled a hobby room from the 1980s, and a third a living room from the 1990s.

EPILOGUE: DISPLAY CASES, AGAIN

Back to the beginning: The Chainsaw Controller was on display in several museums, including the *Game Masters* exhibition in Hamburg and the *Spielrausch* exhibition in Cologne—interestingly, by using very different forms of presentation. In Hamburg, the controller was exhibited without its own display case. Unfortunately, it is not known whether this was a different version, or the display case was removed for the exhibition, or the collection piece was simply incomplete. The object's label did not reveal anything either; it simply read: "RESIDENT EVIL 4 Chainsaw Controller (J 2015)." However, the Chainsaw Controller did not have to present itself entirely without a display case. It was located on a narrow orange lattice shelf (Fig. 8), which in a way reflected the exhibition location: The Museum for Arts and Crafts, whose collection focuses on design and applied art. Art museums usually avoid display cases, and if a display case is necessary (for protection or conservation reasons), it is usually designed to be as plain and unobtrusive as possible—after all, "works of art [...] must present themselves [...] as aesthetic objects."[51] In contrast, the focus of the presentation at the *Game Masters* exhibition seemed to be on categorizing and grouping the objects on display (similar to a natural history museum). Indeed, the Chainsaw Controller is in good company: Right next to it, the infamous PAX Powerglove (Nintendo Entertainment System, 1989) is shown, and on an adjacent shelf, the Donkey Kong Bongos (Nintendo GameCube, 2003) are on display (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9, left in the background). This form of presentation places the Chainsaw Controller within a media history of quirky, often slightly dysfunctional input devices.[52] In this way, the absence of its own display case seems (perhaps) consequent.

In Cologne, the Chainsaw Controller was also on display in a museum for design and applied art, yet, the special exhibition *Im Spielrausch* more closely followed the traditions of an art museum. Most of the exhibition objects were presented as aesthetic objects. Classification and categorization mainly took place in the form of intermedial juxtapositions, as in the case of the above-mentioned PROUN-Mondrian combination. Thematically, the Chainsaw Controller was part of the last section of the *Spielrausch* exhibition with the focal point "Rausch,"[53] along with other artifacts, including PROUN and the absurd experimental game

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51   C. Spies: "Vor Augen Stellen," p. 266, my translation.

52   Cf. Witzmann, Hannes: *Game Controller: vom Paddle zur gestenbasierten Steuerung*, Boizenburg: vwh 2007, p. 55-61; Strank Willem: "Plattform," in: Beil, Benjamin et al. (eds.), *Game Studies*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2018, pp. 173-200, here pp. 190-193.

53   Cf. footnote 34.

Goat Simulator (2014), which was shown in the form of a montage of gameplay clips.[54] The Chainsaw Controller was located directly opposite the monitor on which Proun could be played and was presented (with its own display case) in a display case made of plexiglass. This 'second' display case, like most of the other display cases at the *Spielrausch* exhibition, was unobtrusive in design. However, while the other display cases could more easily fulfill their task of creating a "space of showing"[55] by directing the visitors' gaze towards the works of art, the Chainsaw Controller's own display case inevitably drew attention (back) to the second display case. Thus, the double display case resulted in an exaggeration of the object's dysfunctionality (in the sense of a semiophoric removal of its use value)—or rather: the second display case completed the musealization that was already initiated by the Chainsaw Controller itself.

This comparison of two presentation forms does not intend to determine which way of exhibiting the chainsaw controller—and which semiophoric quality—seems more appropriate; rather, it seeks to demonstrate the variety of exhibiting strategies. Furthermore, it seems questionable whether a similar appreciation of the Chainsaw Controller within the exhibition space—that is, beyond this essay—was even accomplished by museum visitors. Perhaps, in Hamburg, the Chainsaw Controller was not even recognized as a Playstation 2 controller but simply mistaken for a miniature chainsaw. Perhaps, in Cologne, the artistic potential of its own display case was not valued because the double display case overemphasized the self-reflexive aspects of the artifact. Perhaps, in both cases, the associated gaming experience was simply missing, or at least a basic knowledge of what Resident Evil 4 is and how it might feel to control the game with a miniature chainsaw—neither in Hamburg nor in Cologne Resident Evil 4 part was of the exhibition. However, this criticism should not diminish the merit of the two exhibitions because this merit consists above all in continuing to write the media history of the Chainsaw Controller: "Museums add new moments to the biography of video games."[56]

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54   Cf. B. Beil et al.: *Im Spielrausch*, pp. 63-71.

55   C. Spies: "Vor Augen Stellen," p. 275, my translation.

56   M. Ferranto: "No Paraphernalia."

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