Jeux vidéo aux Musées de la civilisation : témoins du changement social

Video Games at the Musées de la civilisation: A Sign of social change

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VIDEO GAMES AT THE MUSÉES DE LA CIVILISATION: A SIGN OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Video games are part of contemporary culture, contributing to the integration of technologies in the different areas of our lives. They are modifying our entertainment practices and influencing various sectors of society. Their entry into the Musées de la civilisation is helping to update the game and toy collection and testifying to their growing social and cultural impact, in keeping with the institution’s cultural project. A new method was chosen to develop this collection, namely a public appeal for contributions, which promoted citizen participation and fostered intangible cultural heritage. The future development of this collection nonetheless raises questions about its conservation and its public presentation.

Keywords: video games; collection; museum; social change; gamification; participation

INTRODUCTION

Video games are an extremely popular form of entertainment which are nourished by various cultural sources, but which, in turn, also influence various sectors of society (Clais 2011). They represent an inescapable component of contemporary culture and, in fact, have become the subject of a new field of research – game studies – that is bringing together researchers from such varied disciplines as art history and communications.

The present day interest of museums for video games likewise contributes to its legitimization as a marker of our society. Founded in 1997, the Computerspielemuseum (Video Game Museum) of Berlin is a pioneer in the field, with its collection of over 22,000 video games, 300 consoles, and 10,000 magazines, as well as arcade-games and other spin-off products. England will be inaugurating its own museum dedicated to video games in March 2015, the National Videogame Arcade. New York City’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) opened up its collection to video games in 2012. Travelling video game exhibits are currently circulating on the international museum circuit, such as Game On (2002), put together...

Recent programming of the Musées de la civilisation included *Game Story* (April 24, 2013 to April 6, 2014), which was an adaptation of *Game Story – Une histoire du jeu vidéo*, produced by the Réunion des Musées nationaux – Grand Palais, in collaboration with the Musée des arts asiatiques Guimet and MO5. COM, a French association of video game collectors. This exhibit traced the technical and aesthetic evolution of this media since the 1970s. It presented 84 playable games and 250 objects (excerpts from films, comic books, products, etc.), revealing numerous cultural influences (Figures 1-2). This exhibit started us thinking about the relevance of integrating video games in the Musées de la civilisation’s collection. These questions came up in a context where our Museums were giving considerable thought to the direction that their future collection endeavours should take, with a growing awareness of the need to bring certain sectors up to date, in keeping with the institution’s cultural project (Laforge and Toupin 2012).

**VIDEO GAMES AND THE MUSÉES DE LA CIVILISATION’S CULTURAL PROJECT**

The collection mandate of the Musées de la civilisation is to “to ensure the preservation and development of the ethnographic collection and other representative collections of our civilization” (National Museums Act, section 21.1). Underlying an ongoing development of our collections that is in step with our society’s evolution is the notion of representativeness. The inclusion of video games was accordingly justified by a comprehensive reading of our society. This reading was informed by the five themes at the basis of the Museums’ cultural project, namely: nature and the environment, our way of life, power and social structures, exchange and communication, and creation and innovation.

Video games are at odds with the first theme, nature and the environment. They participate in the advancement of new technologies in our lifestyles, as opposed to a so-called natural environment. This technological progression can be felt both in the public and private sectors, that is in our way of life. Video games are modifying entertainment practices and are gaining more and more fans. While games
on consoles and computers are still popular, mobile platforms such as smartphones and tablets are contributing to the increasing number of players. According to the Entertainment Software Association of Canada (Association canadienne du logiciel de divertissement 2013), 59% of Canadians play video games. Men make up 54% of this group and women, 46%, the average age being 31. The industry has 1.2 billion players at the planetary scale, of whom 500 million are playing on smartphones (Breton 2013).

The video game industry is lucrative and growing, which brings us to the theme of power and social structures. With sales of some $70 billion in 2013, it represents the largest cultural industry in the world (Breton 2013). The Province of Québec has more than 8,750 professionals working in this industry. The 97 different companies employing them are concentrated, for the most part, in Montréal. This makes Québec the third biggest creation and production centre in the world, behind California and Japan (Entertainment Software Association of Canada 2013).

While video games are first of all a form of entertainment, it is interesting to consider them from the angle of exchange and communication. Video games can be a way of socializing, because in spite of the stereotype of the solitary player, they are often played among friends or family members. Online games, including massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), bring together players from around the world. Furthermore, video game culture is community-based and there are numerous Internet sites that allow information to be exchanged.

The growth of serious games is a strong industrial trend that is increasing the influence of video games on society. Serious games have other goals than simply entertaining players, pursuing, for example, pedagogical or communication objectives. Game applications are developed in all different sorts of fields, “from diabetes prevention to Highway Safety Code awareness” (Maheux and Morin-Simard 2014: 21). Some games even try to provoke social change, such as Half the Sky, a game developed by Frima, a Québec company which is attempting to make players more aware of women’s rights issues around the world.2 This tendency is part of a phenomenon of the gamifying of society, defined as “the adaptation and reuse of play mechanisms that foster a desire to participate, be the best and, consequently, be competitive” (Maheux and Morin-Simard 2014:15, our translation). Gamification is moreover at the basis of marketing strategies using reward systems and media interactivity.

Finally, video games naturally fall under the theme of creation and innovation, since they lie at the crossroads of artistic creation and technological innovation. They combine images, sound, and interactivity to give rise to an overall impression known as “gameplay” (Clais 2011). Since the arrival in 1972 of the first mainstream game, PONG, video games have evolved enormously. The image has gone from monochromatic rectangles to very elaborate high definition, 3D. The electronic sound effects have been replaced by original compositions. The control buttons have been replaced by body movement sensors (Clais 2011). The environment has been perfected to such an extent that it is now being associated with the 10th art, a status that is nonetheless the subject of some debate. According to Lynn Hughes, who holds the Concordia University research chair in Interaction Design and Games Innovation, “video games are like cinema: they can be very commercial, very experimental, or somewhere between the two” (Rettino-Parazelli 2013). And whether they are considered as simple games, cultural objects, or works of art, video games, like books, can now be borrowed from public libraries in Québec.3

Given all the above, video games represent a major cultural phenomenon in Québec and around the world, a fact which should be reflected in the Musées de la civilisation’s collections.
COLLECTING VIDEO GAMES

This first major initiative to collect contemporary objects provided us with a chance to experiment with new work methods. We could have asked for donations from video game companies and collectors or bought used consoles and games. Instead, we made a public appeal for contributions. This approach was better suited to our institution, given that citizen participation is a key element of our institutional identity.

The type of objects we were searching for, that is mass-produced contemporary objects that can still be found in many households, lent themselves well to a public appeal. This method, which had several advantages, provided yet another occasion to strengthen our relationship with the local population and make the Museums’ conservation mission better known. It also allowed us to document the origin and use of the objects collected. Finally, even though our collections are largely developed through donations (often unanticipated), this approach gave the Museums a more proactive role.

Putting together a coherent collection required that clear limits be set at the methodological level. We had to determine which objects to acquire among the thousands of consoles and video games put on the market in the last 40 years. As a museum dedicated to social issues, we favoured consoles and video games that were essential from a sociocultural angle, that is the most popular in Québec and around the world, without forgetting to include aspects of technological and aesthetic innovation. Experts at the laboratory for video game teaching and research at Université de Montréal were asked to check and complete the list of objects, as well as to provide a chronological representation and balance between the various game categories (adventure, fantasy, sports, role-playing, puzzle solving, strategy, etc.). The resulting list of 23 consoles and 74 games was obviously somewhat subjective but was nonetheless based on a rigorous analysis by these specialists.

New technologies facilitated the subsequent steps. The publicity campaign invited people to go to the Museums’ Internet site to consult the list of consoles and games we were seeking, the selection criteria to be respected, and the donation form to be downloaded. Once filled out, forms were to be returned by e-mail and accompanied by photos. The forms comprised an open-ended question asking the potential donors to tell us about the objects they were proposing.

Once the selection was completed, 54% of the desired objects had been acquired, that is 14 consoles and 38 games, complete with commentary (Figures 3-6). Though concise, the commentaries opened up a window onto the social impact of video games. The following example illustrates the importance of the game Tetris in a young girl’s life:

I get all sentimental about Tetris [Gameboy 1989]. First of all, it’s one of the only games that I played wherever I went. Tetris was a travelling companion during family holidays, in the school bus, in the waiting room at the dentist’s, in my bed before falling asleep, or on the TV with the NES version. What’s more, Tetris was a family game in our house: my mother, father, two brothers, and I all played. We had lots of fun challenging each other and trying to beat our records. (Jessica Moreau-Roberge, our translation)

In short, citizen participation made it possible to establish a core video game collection that was enhanced by its own intangible heritage, namely the associated social use and cultural habitus. The method tested here proved to be quite conclusive and added to the strategies we have for developing our collections.
NOW WHAT?

In the next few years, the Musées de la civilisation shall have to further explore these questions and adopt a position regarding the preservation and the public presentation of its video game collection.

The consoles and games acquired through our public acquisition had to be in a working state. Keeping these objects working was a challenge in itself, as it usually is for electronic devices in general, since they progressively break down even when they are kept in the best possible conditions. Andreas Lange, curator at the Computerspielemuseum, has thought long and hard about this problem. After years of involvement in research groups for the conservation of digital devices, Mr. Lange and other specialists have come to the conclusion that emulation is the only way to preserve these games’ features in the long-term (Pederson 2010). Emulation consists in simulating hardware features by using software, for instance simulating a game console’s controls on a computer. Since the video game industry is not greatly concerned about game preservation, it was player communities that first became interested in archiving through emulation. However, emulation represents a type of copying and is forbidden by virtue of copyright (Zainzinger 2012). The industry’s cooperation will be a major issue in ensuring the long-term survival of video games.
When MoMA set out to collect video games from an interactive design angle, it looked at conservation from another perspective: by trying to obtain the source code from the companies that created them (Antonelli 2013). The acquisition process, which is based on a relationship of mutual trust, is slow, and there are now 21 games in the collection. Even when a company refuses to hand over its code, the Museum maintains a relationship with it in the hope that it will someday change its mind.

Given the social approach of the Musées de la civilisation, the material nature of the objects remains important and the original apparatuses must be conserved. We cannot however ignore the essential question, which is, “Can the game still be played?”

Another difficulty that the Museums will have to deal with resides in the tendency toward the dematerialization of console games in favour of online games. Downloadable, mobile games already represent 50% of the sales of the video game industry and are growing quickly, in particular due to the popularity of games intended for social networks and smartphones (ministère de la Culture et des Communications, France 2012). Documenting this evolution will require that our infrastructures and conservation methods be adapted, a requirement that is also making itself felt with the arrival of digital archives.

These conservation issues are closely linked to the public presentation potential of this collection. Noting how excited players became about the exhibit Game On, the sociologist Nick Prior (2006) stated that museums are moving towards postmodernity, a society based on consumption, entertainment, and shows. Though we shall not explore this statement here, it was obvious that the public particularly enjoyed Game Story precisely because it had more than 80 games that were playable on period consoles (with the exception of two emulators) that were lent by the collectors association MO5.COM. However, providing access to the intangible essence of games, their “gameplay,” was rather demanding. It required that consoles, joysticks, and cartridges be regularly maintained and sometimes replaced. It goes without saying that all these manipulations – on the part of the public and technicians – are contrary to the basic principles for conserving museum objects. Text, objects, screen images, and emulators are some of the different ways to create a video game exhibit, but to what extent are they capable of providing an authentic video-game experience?

CONCLUSION

In short, the arrival of the games in the Musées de la civilisation’s collections is in keeping with the institution’s mission and cultural project. These tangible and intangible traces are a testimony of the many social changes underway. They are bringing the game and toy collection up to date and documenting the growing influence of a young medium on our society. Experimenting with new ways of developing our collections – namely, a public appeal for contributions – has provided us with food for thought about the collecting of contemporary objects. We must however continue to reflect on these issues if we are to properly conserve and publicly present video games and, ultimately, electronic media.

NOTES

1 In Québec, the Department of Art History and Cinema Studies at Université de Montréal offers a minor (since 2011) and a master’s (since 2013) in video game studies. The Communications Faculty at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) likewise proposes a master’s in video games and gamification (since 2014).

2 Games for change is a non-profit organization based in New York City whose mission is to “facilitate the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts” (http://www.gamesforchange.org; accessed August 15, 2014).

3 Even though the legal deposit of video games is not required in Québec, video game companies established in Montréal – Ubisoft, Eidos-Montréal, Electronic Arts (EA), and Warner Bros. Games – give video games to the Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec.

4 Mandatory criteria: in good condition, in working order, and with a comment written about the object. Optional criteria: the original box, booklets, and other original box contents.

5 A few loans from video game companies in Québec City – Ubisoft, Beenox, Frima – rounded out the selection.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


