Let's Play!

Exhibiting video game history and play at the museum

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Abstract / Executive Summary

In line with moving towards a more multi-media institute – rather than focusing solely on the more traditional media channels of radio and television – the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision has decided to take up games in the existing collection. Next to collecting, or archiving, presentations are also made to the public through the NISV museum. An example is the Let's Play exhibition, which ran from the 12th to the 20th of November 2016. Existing game exhibitions focus on games in context (history), games as activity (play), or games as digital objects. It has been suggested that the most successful gaming exhibitions deploy a multi-modal approach and use a combination hereof. The Let's Play exhibition focused on all three elements; by presenting original hardware and titles, having them playable, and allowing for context through the use of paratexts (e.g. interviews and Let's Play videos with developers). Although the goal was to present Dutch game history specifically, the exhibition featured many more foreign consoles and titles. This was due to the fact that Dutch game history of the '80s and '90s (i.e. titles produced in the Netherlands) is somewhat limited, and to provide visitors with more chances to play. Despite low turn-up rates on weekdays, the exhibition was deemed a success, as overall visitor enjoyment levels were high. Visitors enjoyed playing games on original hardware (e.g. Commodore 64's or a Philips CD-I) and the amount of different consoles and titles were enjoyed by those familiar with the devices, but also by those who were not. Overall, visitor demographics were divided rather equally in age, which illustrates the broad interest in the topic, and all respondents surveyed are under the impression that games should take up an important place at the NISV.

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The Internship Placement: NISV and the Game On! Project

This report is the final assignment of a three-month internship period at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (NISV in short; or het Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid in Dutch). The report focuses solely on an exhibition running at the NISV and is not concerned with any practical duties carried out during the internship.

NISV is the Dutch national archive for audiovisual heritage, although the institute surpasses this role by fulfilling two additional functions. Next to being an archive, NISV is also a center for research and development, and it further houses a museum which is accessible to the public. The (current) museum experience offers visitors the chance to experience audiovisual heritage in a customized fashion: by entering your date of birth, the experience differs for every visitor, as it is tailored to one's year of birth (e.g. watching archival footage from your childhood). The institute has so far been concerned mostly with television, film and radio, boasting over a million hours of footage and recordings. Additionally, thousands of objects related to Dutch media history are safeguarded in its depots. Changes in the rapidly evolving media landscape, however, have expanded the ambitions of NISV in order to reach a more successful coverage of audiovisual heritage. In line with its strategy of moving "*from media to multimedia*" the institute has decided to look beyond these more traditional forms of media and expand its collection and focus by also taking up other forms of (re)media(tion) such as games and web-video.

The internship placement functions as an extension of the author's work as research assistant for Utrecht University, working on the *Game On!* project. *Game On!* is a collaborative effort between the NISV and Utrecht University and funded by the NWO program Museum Grants. The research question underlying the *Game On!* project is "How can computer games be archived in a durable way and be presented in a museum context?". This internship report focuses solely on exhibiting gaming history to the public. For this reason, it attempts to answer a similar question but largely disregards the aspect of archiving. The actual research question of this report will be presented and expanded upon in the next section.

Structure and Approach

Games have been fanatically used in museum settings for years. However, they often serve a supplementing function; an additive – an interactive incentive to draw people in (Naskali et al. 2013). Video games as centerpiece of a museum have seen less widespread adoption, although several initiatives have been popping up over the years. Some of these will be briefly discussed in the next subchapter(s).

As will be argued in this report, game(play) experiences differ per player. A game and its player(s) co-create unique experiences; it is the interaction between them that generates individual ways of playing and experiencing. The complex and dynamic nature of games raises many questions and consequently leads to differences in existing exhibition design strategies. This research report explores some of these strategies through the evaluation of the experience of visitors during the Let's Play gaming exhibition at the NISV. Additionally, a 'newcomer' to the field of gaming exhibitions will be placed under scrutiny: the *Let's Play* video itself. It has been argued that documentation of video games might reveal a greater deal of information as to how a game was played, interpreted and experienced than the actual game itself – *Let's Play* videos being, arguably, a prime example.

This all leads up to the following research question: How can old Dutch games be exhibited to a contemporary audience in a museum setting (i.e. at Sound and Vision)?

In order to provide an answer to this research, a case study will be conducted on the Let's Play exhibition held at the NISV from the 12th until the 20th of November, including the preparations leading up to the event. In order to assess the success and implications of this exhibition, a survey among visitors will also be conducted to test relevant findings from the literature review. The review will provide a backbone to this report, outlining several strategies and approaches, before diving into its analysis.

Another - perhaps more subtle - method deployed in the analysis – that of an observing participant. Having been actively involved with the preparations leading up to the exhibition, as well as the Game On! project at large, personal observations and conclusions are interwoven where deemed fitting.

Unfortunately, with the domain of video game exhibitions being understudied (and arguably, under practiced), there is a lack of literature pertaining directly to the topic. In addition, the literature focuses on cases other than the Netherlands and thus report on situations that are potentially quite different in structure (e.g. attempting to exhibit parts of a market much larger in size). This research report attempts to bridge these gaps by providing a case study of the exhibition of Dutch game culture at a national institute. Furthermore, Let's Play videos have not seen much adoption in the field of game exhibitions or museums: this report attempts to explore their impact.

Review of Relevant Literature

This chapter is divided into different subchapters all relating to different aspects regarding the exhibition of game history. Although a different field in its own right, exhibiting game history shares similarities with game preservation. Exhibiting can be seen largely as a display of preservation, as it needs to be maintained and preserved in order to be presented to the public. It has been argued that the two are indeed deeply intertwined (Prax et al. 2016). Much of the literature available on the exhibition of game history focuses at least partly on preservation, and some even seem to use the terms interchangeably.

The impact of video games on contemporary culture cannot be dismissed. However, the complex nature of games has summoned a wave of debate as to how they should be handled and presented in cultural institutions such as museums (Barwick et al. 2011). This review is structured in a way that is believed to cover the essence of predominant strategies in the exhibition of game history, as identified through a systematic review of the literature pertaining to the topic itself.
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Existing Exhibitions

Many 'traditional' museums and exhibitions offer places to "stop and look around" (Arthur 2012). However, more recent museums and exhibitions showcasing digital objects and technology (including video games) have changed the game. Presenting digital history often includes experimental formats for the presentation of history, where user interaction is often required to assemble the larger historical story (Arthur 2012).

Naskali et al. provide an overview of many game exhibitions from the 1990s until now (Naskali et al. 2013). Based on their schema, it appears that approaches are divided, with some focusing on / approaching games as art, while others present them as cultural history. Existing game exhibitions have ranged from object to concept-oriented, where the latter privileges textual information. Examples of object-oriented exhibitions are set-ups that feature mostly objects, without much interpretative information to allow for context, so e.g. an exhibition featuring playable arcade

machines. Concept-oriented exhibitions rely more on interpretive information and could be e.g. videos relating to a topic or textual information about games. The most successful approaches strike a balance between both. Additionally, with games, there is the extra domain of play (having playable games at the exhibition). Consequently, game exhibitions can focus on digital artifacts (games as objects), games as activity (play), or games in context (e.g. history). According to Barwick et al., the first group to recognize the necessity of preserving games consisted of gaming enthusiasts or fans (2011). This group – which often boasts impressive collections of their own – can play a major role in delivering materials for any gaming exhibition. In fact, many existing gaming exhibitions are even organized and run by fans (Naskali et al. 2013).

Interactivity and participation seem to be clear goals of game exhibitions, as well as opportunities to handle objects (Naskali et al. 2013). Visitors of a museum or exhibition require something to do other than merely gazing at objects or reading about them, for it stimulates the senses on a deeper level and allows for a multi-layered experience (Taivassalo & Leva 2012). Additionally, there seems to have been a shift from attempting to exhibit 'as much as possible', to more pinpointed exhibitions and museums. For example, contemporary exhibitions now focus on e.g. iconic video game characters, influential game designers, or a specific console - just to name a few (Heinonen & Reunanen 2009). However, experiences with 'iconic' characters or other expressions of gaming culture are sometimes divided between different groups of curators, which often further leads to different exhibitions prioritizing different objects for display (Naskali et al. 2013). The majority of game exhibitions have drawn in a target audience somewhat different from many other museums, as they have generally attracted visitors who usually don't visit museums (Naskali et al. 2013). These visitors have been mostly young and predominantly male, causing gaming exhibitions to also tailor more towards this group (Naskali et al. 2013).

On a related side-note: Barbier asserts that exhibiting games as cultural heritage is impossible due to notions of legitimacy (Barbier 2012). As he argues, when cultural objects are showcased in museum exhibitions they are given a form of recognition, but the absence of legitimization from a cultural institution in charge of heritage is what clouds their transcendence to a heritage status (Barbier 2012). However, with the NISV being a national institute for cultural audiovisual heritage, this objection

appears to be easily countered.

The Original Experience

Games are meant to be played. However, keeping the games playable can be a troublesome task, and additionally, there appears to be discord as to what is worth both preserving and exhibiting exactly. Much of the debate on both preserving game history as well as the exhibition hereof has centered largely on 'the original experience', with some noting it is a utopia we should perhaps be steering clear from (most notably Prax et al. 2016). Still, many of the game exhibitions' designs focus on keeping this 'original experience' as 'authentic' as possible.

Providing the original experience is troublesome. For example, playing an old game on newer monitors yields different experiences than playing it on monitors available at the time of release, or, emulating a game to work on different operating systems arguably offers a different experience as well (Newman 2012). Or, through updates and patching, games are objects in constant flux (Glas 2012). What troubles the issue of an 'original experience' even more, are obsolescence and bit rot. Obsolescence refers to older games refusing to run on newer operating systems, while bit rot or media decay translates to the physical breaking down of physical carriers (e.g. floppy disks or CD-ROMs), resulting in unreadable data. While a possible strategy in countering bit rot and obsolescence (as well as the breaking down of original console systems) is to convert the games (i.e. rip them) from their original carriers and run them in emulated environments, the opportunities for museums are limited. Due to copyright issues, emulating older games is not a legal solution for museums and exhibitions (Rosenthal 2015). Still, engaging in dialogue with developers may provide fruitful outcomes when the goal is to exhibit their personal works of art.

Games becoming obsolete, as well as suffering deterioration from bit rot, presents not only challenges for game preservation initiatives, but equally for exhibition purposes. Guttenbrunner et al. have argued that approaches primarily concerned with collecting, caring for and exhibiting video games and their corresponding hardware can be dubbed "museum approaches" as they are by no means long-term solutions (2010). Having games playable at least in some shape or form seems to be

an important requirement, no matter the intentions of an exhibition (e.g. Naskali et al. 2013, Prax et al. 2016), but the issues lurking for older video games seem equally troublesome for exhibitions as they are to long-term preservation – at least when the exhibitions center around the presentation of game history, which often leads back decades.

Research has illustrated that the 'original experience' has been a number one priority for many museums and cultural institutions exhibiting games (Swalwell 2013). However, it is perhaps a goal we might want to move away from. Through a study on GameOn 2.0, one of the more influential game exhibitions globally, Prax et al. argue that by focusing completely on having games playable on original hardware, exhibitions run the risk of "presenting a limited view of digital games". The authors further argue that simply curating games and focusing on having them playable largely fails at "conveying the social and historical relevance of digital games in a museum context" (2016). Instead, it is argued, we should not be overly concerned with an original experience – as long as games are playable at least in some way or form (be it on original hardware or e.g. emulated). This allows us to look beyond the game and focus on other information external to the games, which may serve more valuable purposes in exhibiting game history.

Beyond the Game: Let's Play videos (and other texts)

By looking beyond the game (or in fact looking beyond 'the original experience'), a whole domain of paratextual information is to be explored and interpreted. Although the term 'paratext' was originally conjured to apply to literary works, the term can be equally applied to video games. In terms of games, paratexts refer to texts external to the game that "surround and prolong" it (Fernandez-Vara 2015). Here, a text can be virtually any form of media related to a game, be it interviews with game designers, box-art, reviews, artwork design and so on.

In existing game exhibitions, paratexts take up an important place and allow the visitors to acquire a more coherent picture (Arthur 2012). In addition, Newman has argued for external materials to be great assets in the field of game preservation, for they possess the potential of outliving the threats of obsolescence and decay – but perhaps even more so, because they can often provide great context

and deep layers of information (2012). This would naturally lead to concluding that they are valuable for exhibition purposes as their integration allows for a more wholesome experience.

One of these possible paratexts that has been suggested for preservation has been the Let's Play video (Nylund 2015). The Let's Play video translates to footage of gameplay (a game recording) coupled with verbal commentary by the player. The player is often shown on-screen through a webcam overlay, allowing him or her (or them) to achieve a more intimate relationship with the viewers. After all, there is arguably a higher level of engagement by being visually present. As Newman describes, through being multi-layered with overlays and audio commentary, Let's Play videos capture the "lived experience of gameplay" (2013). Dekker has also argued for video documentation of art works (which could be expanded to apply to games), saying they help to achieve a fuller understanding of "what it was like to be there and then" (Dekker 2013).

Nylund assessing Lets Play videos points out that when we attempt to understand a game's historical significance, the greatest challenge is to grasp "what kind of game it was when it was first created and published", next to how and by whom it was played (2015). Let's Play videos are therefore potentially limited in preservation initiatives, since such recordings can only be made in the now, inherently bearing a present-day approach and context in which the game is interpreted – this is why Nylund asserts that Let's Play videos can only serve preservation aims for current and future games (2015). However, it could be argued that Let's Play videos of older games recorded could still provide valuable insights. As long as it is kept in mind that they should be interpreted in a present day context, they allow for detailed descriptions of a game and still accurately display a game's mechanics and look and feel. While they are perhaps not representative of the original experience, they do reveal additional layers of information (Glas et al 2017). Additionally, Let's Play videos can be an interesting compliment to game exhibitions, for they provide visitors an interactive activity of which the outcome can simultaneously serve current preservation or future exhibition efforts. It should, however, by no means ever become a one-trick solution disregarding all else.

Exhibiting Dutch Game History at the NISV

The exhibition ran from the 12th until the 20th of November 2016, with the exception of the 14th (the NISV museum is closed on Mondays). Although the general theme and aim of the Game On! Project is to preserve and exhibit Dutch game history, the 8-day exhibition hosted at the NISV itself offered more than only Dutch game history. However, pretty much all content for show did maintain a common theme: game history of the '80's and '90's, with a clear focus on Dutch history. Other, non-Dutch sources were selected either for their impact during this time period, or for possessing a certain link with the Dutch market. In addition, the goal was to have an array of interactive possibilities: providing visitors with the opportunity to do more than merely looking at objects.

On the terrace of the NISV building, six arcade machines were placed, offering the option to experience arcade games from the 80's and 90's. Visitors could just drop by one of the machines when they felt a need to get their game on. None of the arcade games available for play were Dutch crafts, simply due to a lack of arcade games produced for the Dutch market. Examples of machines available for play were The Simpsons and Breakout. In addition, a monitor present offered additional background information by showing archival footage from the NISV archive related to arcade machines and arcade gaming in the '80's and '90's. All footage was taken from Dutch TV shows, documentaries or news reports.

Photo: Arcade machines along the canyon

At the restaurant of the NISV, visitors were given the option to record their very own Let's Play video while playing an old Dutch game on a Commodore 64. Because the NISV also hosted a "Let's YouTube" exposition (an on-going ten month event, switching themes every month), this Let's Play station was given a YouTube twist: instead of merely recording the videos, they were live streamed to a specific Let's Play channel of the NISV (Let's Play at Beeld en Geluid - created solely for the event). Rather than recording a continuous, eight hour long stream, separate short streams were recorded per visitor. This was done so each visitor could easily trace back their individual video after the event and conveniently share it through social media. The goal of this streaming was mostly to easily have the individual videos on YouTube, available for sharing, rather than attracting viewers to tune into an on-going live stream.

Photograph: The Let's Play / Live streaming set-up

Along the 'canyon' of the NISV building, three listening pillars were placed to provide audio content to the visitors and allow them to experience some noteworthy tunes. Here, visitors could hear music from some major games that had a powerful impact in the 80's and 90's. Examples of these tunes included the soundtrack from Mario Bros., Tetris and Ducktales.

Theater room number 2 (also the only one used for the exhibition) was dedicated fully to consoles, divided into three different areas: one corner offering Dutch retro games, a corner devoted to Pokémon, and an area committed to 'generic classics'. The Dutch corner consisted of two Commodore 64's as well as three PC's, on which visitors were invited to explore a variety of Dutch games from the '80's and '90's. All of these games came directly from the NISV's personal archive and were donated kindly by their original developers. Because the Dutch market for video games prior to the 21st century was dominated almost exclusively by just two companies, these developers, 'Radarsoft' and 'Davilex', took the stage. Radarsoft produced many games for the Commodore 64, which were mostly educative games (e.g. "Topografie Wereld" and "Tempo Typen"). In the '90's,

Davilex produced a variety of games for the PC, such as the notable "A2 Racer". Additionally, Jazz Jackrabbit co-developed by Dutch programmer Arjan Brussee was also playable at the exhibition and taken up in the NISV archive. For the rest, there were several other consoles, such as a Nintendo 64, an Atari 2600, a Sega Megadrive, a Philips CD-I, PlayStation, or an Xbox 360 that each had different games playable on them. A beamer projected a large screen on the back wall of the exhibition room, where up to 4 players could sit down and play Mario Kart co-operatively (or rather, competitively).

In order to decorate the exhibition further and to provide additional objects for display, a total of 11 display cabinets were spread throughout the building. In these, a variety of objects and games from the past decennia could be viewed. For example, these cabinets housed a collection of "Games' Firsts": games that were considered to be trendsetters in one way or another at the time of release (during the '80's or '90s). This collection took up three showcases, placed next to the Let's Play setup at the restaurant, and was provided private collector (Anne Bras). Another presentation in these display cabinets was a grand collection of handheld devices, made available through cooperation with a private collector (Martijn Koch) who agreed on renting out his collection for display. The collection featured 6 cabinets packed full with all kinds of different handhelds covering more than a decade, which were all placed in theater room 2 so people could walk around the room and experience a historical timeline.

Photo: Mario Kart on the big screen in theater 2

Photos: Showcases with handhelds

Results and Observations

Some respondents to the survey did not know there was a difference between the Let's YouTube and the Let's Play exhibition. While there is a clear link as the LP exhibition did take place as an event within the Let's YouTube exhibition of that month, which covered the topic of gaming (with a clear focus on YouTube gaming), they were separate events each in their own right. Despite respondents being approached directly outside of theater room 2 and clearly being informed about the survey, a couple still mixed up the Let's YouTube and Let's Play exhibition (e.g. one respondent mentioned that the best part of the Let's Play exhibition was Let's YouTube).

The three (or, perhaps actually four?) building blocks

During the working week, all parts of the Let's Play exhibition were visited by very few (actual numbers are unknown). On both weekends, all were packed with visitors (The NISV museum experience follows a similar trend, or at least in that visitor numbers peak multiplicatively on weekends). The element of play (here achieved through having a multitude of playable consoles and making gameplay registrations) within the exhibition was considered to be great; though a few visitors who had also attended the Retro Game Experience in 2014 saw it as a shame this exhibition had a smaller scope (e.g. less arcade machines to play on). Below, the different components are discussed briefly in terms of how the activities were carried out. Several banners throughout the building pointed to where visitors could find the Let's Play/Streaming (restaurant) area, the Consoles (theater 2) area and the arcade machines (canyon) area.

Let's Play Setup – As with the other components of the exhibition, the setup had hardly any players in sight during the week. During some days only one or two videos were recorded, leaving the volunteers who manned the station with long periods of mindless gazing and being "sent home" earlier than initially planned. It was also mentioned several times that it would have been nice to have the Chroma key setup one floor higher (across the reception, where it resided during the Sesame Street event) for a more 'coherent' exhibition and an easier find / link, but this would have been no success of guaranteeing participation during the week. Still, on the weekends the setup was a popular

attraction, often having a new group of people waiting while others recorded a stream / video. Especially both Sundays were extremely successful. There were a few complications in the first few days with eventually pointing the solutions towards a mixing up cables and splitters, which was then corrected. The low attention during the week cannot really be attributed to these problems in any way however. Although not functioning for a 100% of its potential, players could still partake in the activity and basically had no chance of knowing any interference present at all until reaching the set-up, and even then the issues were not noticed by many. Despite the low turn-up rates during the week, literally all feedback heard on the Let's Play station has been positive and everyone who either recorded a video or simply checked it out – sole interest in how the games and players were captured was also fairly high – only had words of praise to say. All these videos are available on the YouTube channel 'Let's Play Beeld en Geluid'.

Consoles – Theater room 2 had a lot going on cramped in the room. There were over ten playable consoles, ranging from a Philips CD-I to an Xbox 360 – each console also offering a title immediately available to play for visitors. A total of 6 display cabinets packed with a history of handhelds and information gave visitors the chance to have a walk around the room and consume information on the development of over a decade of handheld consoles. On a monitor, a twenty-minute video compilation showed recorded Let's Play videos and interviews (20min total) with Dutch retro game developers from the '80's playing their own games. And, perhaps the big hit of the entire show: 4-player Mario Kart on a huge beamed screen in the middle of the room. Nearly everyone took their chance to go for a ride, challenging friends or family. The overall impression of theater room 2 was extremely positive; all kinds of people walked in and sat down to play the games. Although they took very little time to check the video content, they rather quickly moved on to check the rest of the room without sitting down to listen with headphones (the whole compilation was subbed though, so people could easily take a quick peak). The showcases , although very little people showed the same interest as for the consoles and Mario Kart – perhaps because there was not that much recognition or familiarity with the handhelds. Many of the consoles were played on simultaneously on the weekends, filling the room with a cacophony of bleeps. Everyone thoroughly loved the spread of different consoles and retro games, and many parents were explaining their kids about the consoles they had

experience with in their youth.

Arcade – The arcade machines placed along the canyon was another popular area among visitors, loads of people exclaimed this was a great asset (some were bummed out there not being any more). While very few people showed familiarity with the particular arcade machines, the concept of them in general (with accompanying connotations) appeared known by all, also the younger visitors not from that time. The most popular game was clearly The Simpsons, simply due to being the only multi-player arcade machine. With up to 4-player input, families were often seen playing. Still, most of the five Visitors also took some time to sit down at the TV (two at a time) and check out the compilation . It is likely that visitors sat down here with headphones more often than in theater room 2 because there were no subtitles; leaving them not much of a choice.

Listening Pillars - The only component that provided no opportunity for play. While initially somewhat intended as one of the areas (or as part of the arcade), the possibility to listen to tunes was not displayed on any of the banners spread throughout the building. Few visitors actually managed to really take notice of the listening pillars that were placed adjacent to the reception desk. The visibility (or perhaps recognition for what they were) could have been better. Also, the people who did listen could not be convinced to stick around for long.

Survey: Participants / Visitors

In total, 26 surveys were filled out by 29 visitors. Two surveys were filled in collaboratively by youngsters insisting to fill out the same survey because their answers would allegedly be similar. The youngest respondent was 7 years old, while the oldest peaked at 62. The average age of all respondents came in at 29. However, the actual age range of attendees was even broader (for example a 77 year old man recording a Let's Play video!), and young and old seemed to mix seamlessly within the exhibition. As well as with age, gender distribution among visitors was also distributed rather evenly: 53,8% of respondents were female, as opposed to 46,2% male. This can be seen in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Gender distribution among Let's Play visitors

The majority of groups of visitors consisted of (parts of) families; 42,3% of respondents said they came together with relatives. Many were typical nuclear families: a father, mother and their children, though various other constructions were also present. Those that answered "other, namely" in many cases did actually visit with a (part of) the family, but specified the specific relatives in the open-ended answer bracket (so the actual percentage is higher). One respondent came alone, but did not enjoy the exhibition any less because of it. In fact, this respondent was seen roaming around the different parts of the Let's Play exhibition in particular from museum opening until closing time.
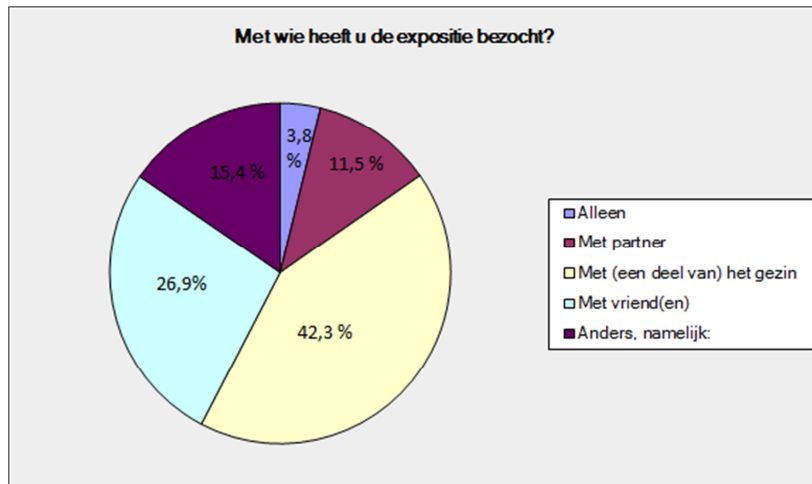
Figure 2: Attended with whom?

Not a single respondent refrains from visiting museums or exhibitions (clearly, the survey was conducted at one), although 32% claims to rarely visit them. Those visiting museums or exhibitions monthly, a group that took up 16%, often had a special card that grants the owner free access to participating museums. The largest group, 52%, pays visits a couple of times a year.
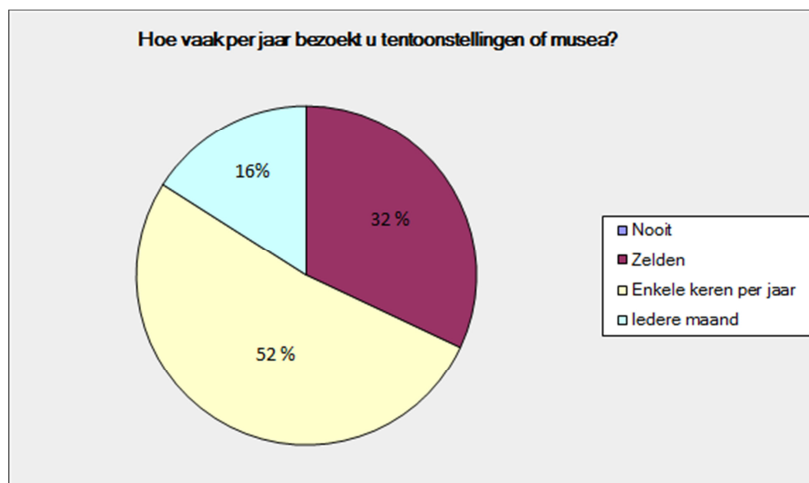

Figure 3: Frequency of museum visits

According to survey respondents, 53,8% came specifically for the Let's Play exhibition to the NISV. However, with = people having a hard time keeping straight which was actually part of what, it is likely that some people read the question as if whether they came specifically for Let's YouTube. This coincides with comments heard when asking around, and would make sense since the Let's YouTube exhibition is a bigger event which has been advertised in various (high-reach) areas. Many visitors

walking around the exhibition spread over multiple days did not have a clue exactly what was part of what, but rather just took a tour throughout the building and experienced everything. What's interesting is that many people (according to the figure below, 30,8%) were not aware the exhibition was running – exactly double the percentage of those who answered they did not come specifically for Let's Play, but were aware that it was happening. The actual number of respondents unaware of the LP exhibition could very well be higher, and points to the fact it was perhaps not advertised enough.

Figure 4: Specifically for Let's Play? Informed about the event?

Over 75% of respondents had never visited any video game exhibition or museum before, a number that could be conceived as quite high. This might be either due to their popularity within the Netherlands, or a lack in their offer. Of those saying yes, the Beeld en Geluid Retro Game Experience hosted in 2014 was mentioned a couple of times along with the Dutch Institute for Games and Computers in Zwolle. One young male respondent mentioned having attended Comic Con in the States.

Heeft u vaker video game tentoonstellingen of musea bezocht?

23,1 %
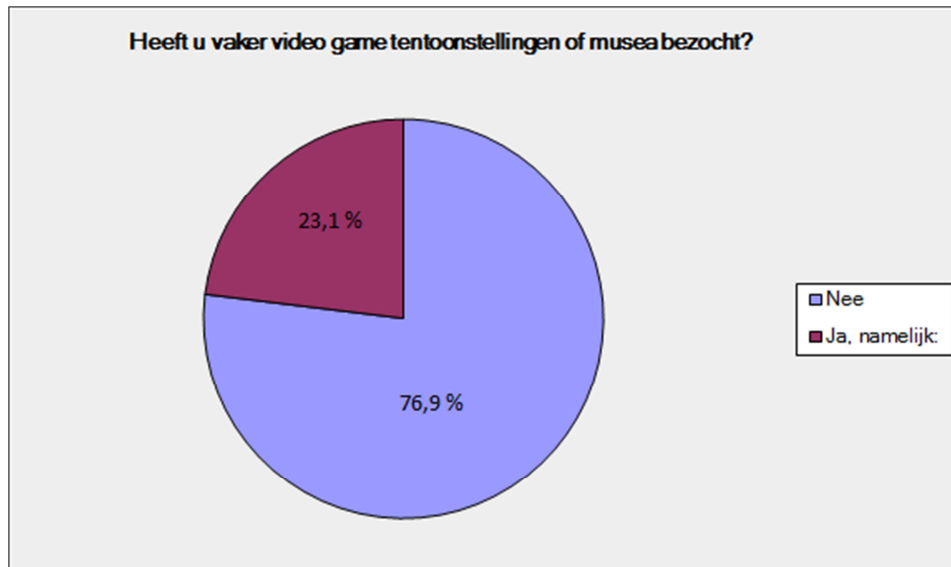
76,9 %

- Nee
- Ja, namelijk:

Figure 5: Video game exhibitions or museums

There was an almost equal distribution between the hours of games played per week, with 10+ being the highest option. As seen below, around a quarter claims to play games for less than 1 hour a week; 23,1% says to spend one to five hours a week gaming, 26,9% five to ten hours a week, and 23,1% spends more than 10 hours a week. This could of course be any number of hours over ten (one survey respondent mentioned it was ridiculous to have ten as a max, as he would easily double, triple or quadruple the hours).

Hoeveel uur per week besteedt u gemiddeld aan het spelen van digitale spellen?

23,1% 26,9%

26,9% 23,1%

- Minder dan 1 uur per week
- 1 tot 5 uur per week
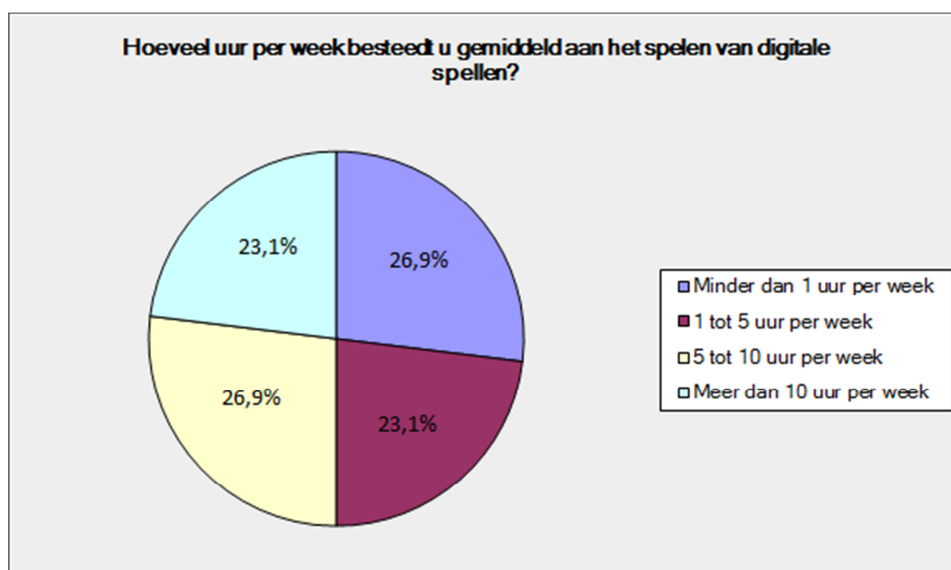- 5 tot 10 uur per week
- Meer dan 10 uur per week

Figure 6: Hours of gaming per week

Only one respondent mentioned he would not recommend the exhibition to family, friends or acquaintances; a person who coincidentally happened to be a self-proclaimed die hard retro gamer and collector. His reason for not recommending it was: "it's recommended if you want to play games, but the word 'expo' or museum is not". He claimed it was a coming together of playable retro games, but failed to be anything like an exposition or museum. It is worth nothing that this person also said to have his own exhibition/museum.
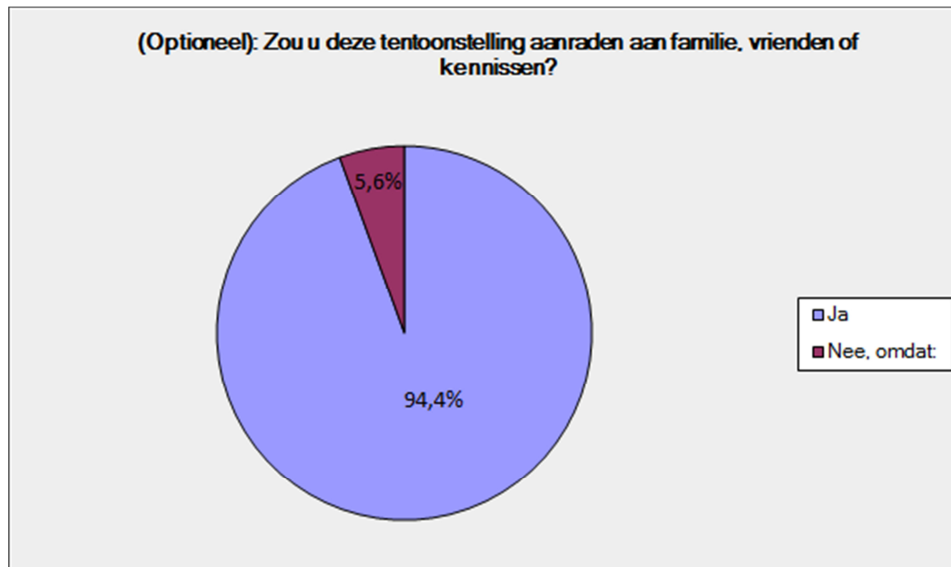

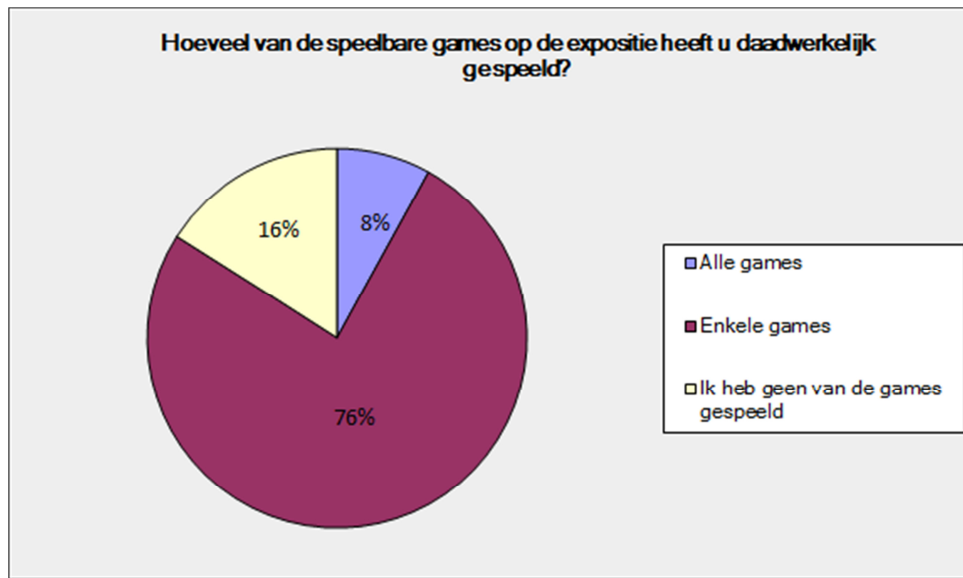Figure 7 : Recommending to family, friends or acquaintances

Figure 8: Amount of games played (all, some, none)

The majority of visitors played several of the games (76%), which is not peculiar since there were many different titles and consoles available. 8% of respondents said to have played all games, which totals in at around 15 games, all on different consoles or arcade machines. Double the amount of people who played all of the games (16%) did not play any games at all. It would be interesting to know their reason for not playing any (since the exhibition centers around play) but unfortunately, this was not taken up in the survey. However, the large demographic group of families might be explanatory (e.g. not every member of the family shows interest in the same things at their Beeld en Geluid visit). In addition, a large part of visitors was unaware of the event taking place so they might have stumbled upon the exhibition by chance.
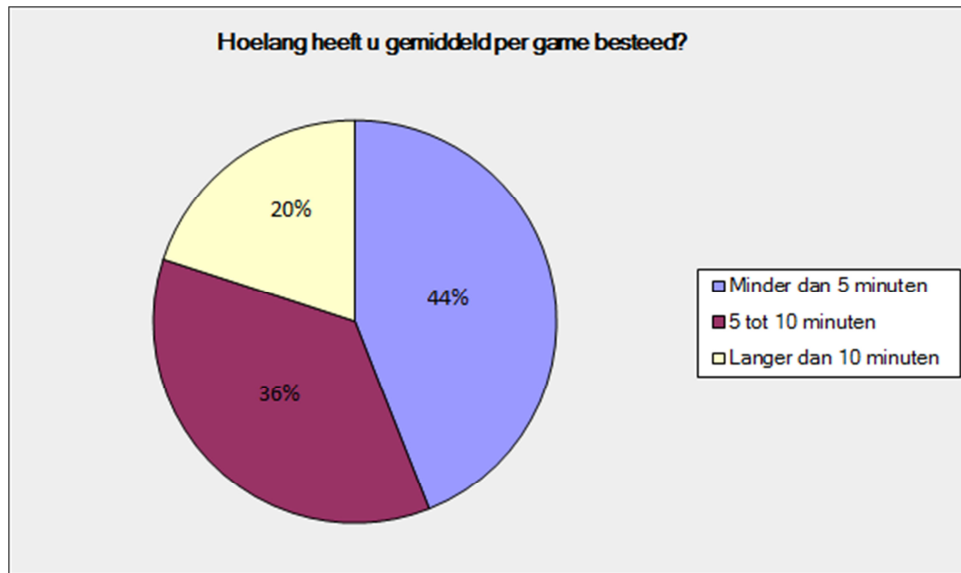
Figure 9: Time spent per game (<5, 5-10, 10> minutes)

Taking up the largest group, 44% of respondents spent less than 5 minutes per game. This is somewhat expected, especially since many of the retro games have mechanics where one round of play takes less than five minutes, sometimes just a minute. A slightly smaller group, 36%, spent between five to ten minutes on each game they played. And, one fifth (20%) said they played each game (that they actually played, at least) for more than ten minutes. There was one respondent who said to have played all games, and also played each game for more than 10 minutes. This would suggest he played games for at least two and a half hours during his visit.

With this high degree of play at the exhibition, the figure below might not come as striking, and perhaps the phrasing of the statement could have been improved on. Still, besides one retro gaming diehard, every respondent to the survey thought there were enough things to do (rather than just look and see). Their average rating came in at a 4.3 out of 5, in between agree and strongly agree.
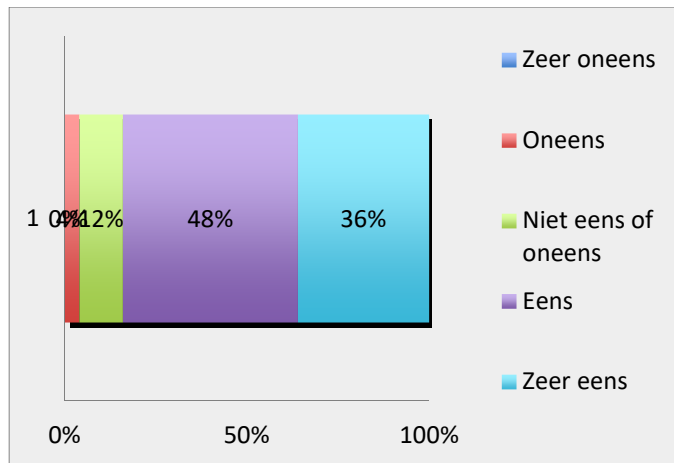
Figure 10: Enough interactive activities at the exhibition?

Although it has been suggested to steer clear from 'the original experience' in the exhibition of video games, visitors did show appreciation for playing games on original hardware. Exclamations of recognition were frequently omitted by older generations, while the younger visitors enjoyed being in touch with history. However, the survey did not dive deeper into topics such as emulation; a suggestion for research would be to explore this subject further. It is likely that – although having a game playable on the original hardware is desirable – visitors would also be content with means of emulation. A couple of gamers that had more experience playing retro games exclaimed that having the original consoles playable was a must through on-site engagement. Still, the added value of having game titles playable on their corresponding, original consoles was recognized by virtually every visitor (every respondent mentioned it as being either important or very important, coming in at nearly a 4 out of 5 weighed average).
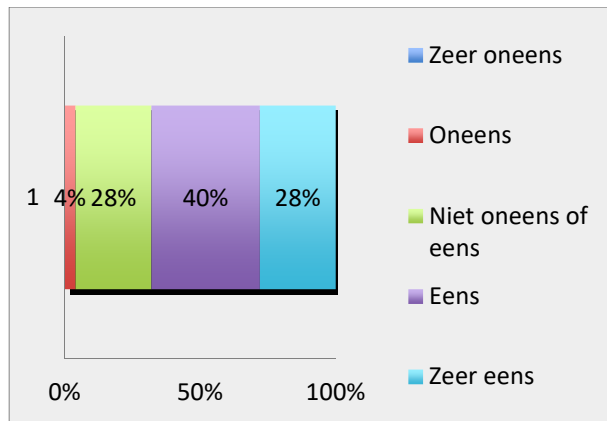
Figure 11: Important to play original games on original hardware?

In order to provide some context to the games and consoles visitors were playing, signing cards were spread throughout. However, many visitors presumably failed to take notice of the many signing cards accompanying game consoles and titles. When faced with the question whether they conceived the information to be relevant and informative, many (27%) answered "neither agree nor disagree" while not providing this answer to any of the other statements. This could be an indicator that they did not read the available information; some even revealed to not have seen the signing altogether. Respondents that did engage with these cards largely found them to be informative and relevant, though some mentioned the information to be a bit plain and basic. One group of three males, real self-identified *retro gaming diehards* were critiquing two of the cards in the showcases placed next to the Let's Play setup (one game was supposedly wrongfully titled the first Nintendo game where Mario has a voice). Heavy passion was delivered when mentioning that the console box of Nintendo's Virtual Boy was intrusively colored down by sunlight, turning the red shades to pink and in his eyes completely nullifying the console ('s box) importance or value. One of the gamers showed a picture of three Virtual Boy consoles that he owned, and it later turned out that he has a video game exhibition or museum of his own, though there is no information on the scope of this project.
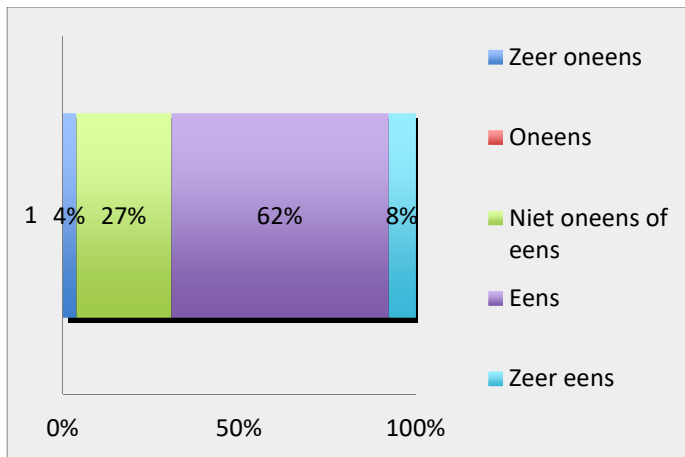
Figure 12: Finding signing cards relevant and interesting?

Survey: The Importance of Games (at the NISV)

The majority of respondents are (strongly) convinced that games should have a place at the NISV – in fact, not a single person disagreed.
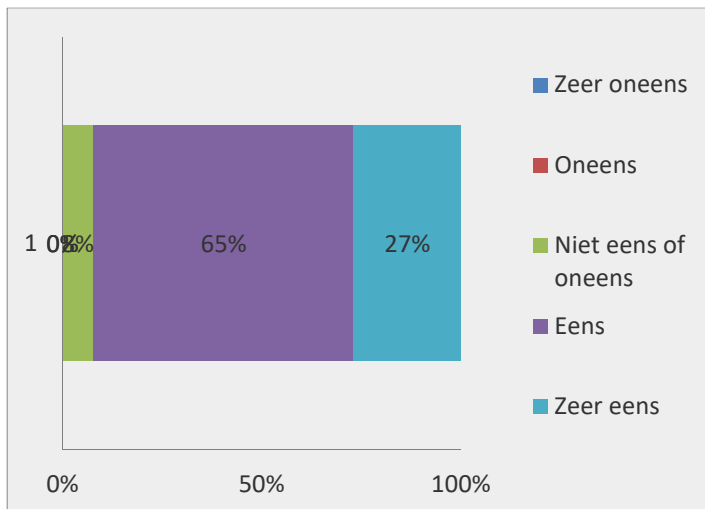

Figure 13: Games should have an important place at the NISV?

While there are currently projects running that cover digitalization and video game archiving, and the Let's Play exhibition featured games as center point, there is no durable integration of games in the presentation to the public, and they are not part of the NISV Experience in any way (although the

experience is play*ful*). The exhibition was consumed with extraordinarily high excitement levels, and many open-ended answers involved the display (and playability) of old consoles – something that is permanently at display in the Experience for other media, but there is not for example a Commodore 64. "The development of consoles for you to see" was appreciated and also mentioned by multiple respondents, e.g. "It's lovely to see how rapid development has been" or "it gave me awareness of how fast technology evolves". There were also comments on how everything sparked memories of the past ("from my childhood", but also "the old consoles from my son's childhood"), and generally, respondents thoroughly enjoyed this (temporary) addition to the NISV.

Respondents said to perceive games as an important part of cultural heritage. However, no specificity is uncovered about whether they think that undertaken efforts currently are sufficient, if they are up to date about them, and so on. What has been admittedly an error has been to not dive further into Dutch games specifically. Although respondents mention that games take up an important part of cultural heritage, no exploration has been made into the (actually quite scarce) production of national video games, and the perception hereof. And, lastly, with some respondents being underage or perhaps unfamiliar with the concept, the questioning has admittedly been too vague.
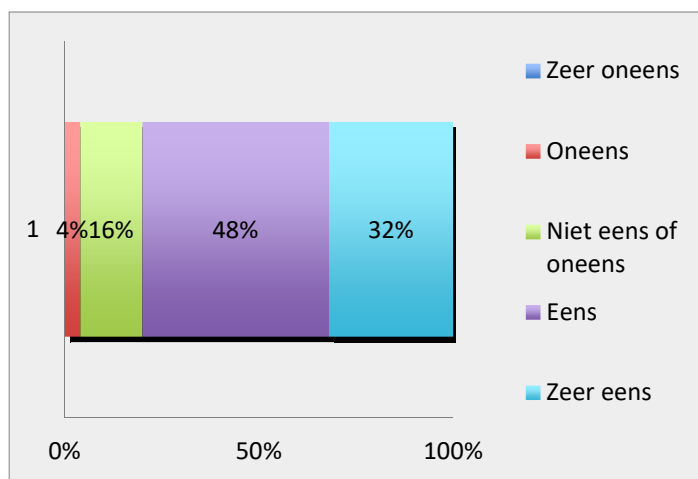

Figure 14: The importance of games as cultural heritage?

Conclusions

The Let's Play exhibition is history! Overall, it was a great success, though unfortunately very empty during weekdays. Still, more than 5100 visitors came to the NISV during the length of the exhibition. Feedback on the event has been almost exclusively positive, and all ages seemed to enjoy the exhibition, albeit perhaps for different reasons (e.g. experiencing old games for the first time, being brought face-to-face again with consoles from childhood, etc.). Many visitors did not necessarily recognize the direct link with Dutch history specifically, but admittedly, a chunk of elements was not related. After all, Dutch history of video games in the 80's and 90's has been relatively scarce. Admittedly, other consoles and titles that had a big impact in the past were perhaps an even bigger hit at the exhibition. Still, by being donated game collections from two Dutch developers from the 80's and 90's, as well as recording Let's Play videos with original developers, elements of Dutch history were incorporated. Visitors enjoyed the chance to 'experience and play history', but did not view it as a tour through Dutch game history.

The exhibition deployed a multi-modal approach, combining elements from different strategies. As has been argued, such an approach is generally the most effective. It seems this has also been illustrated through evaluation of the Let's play exhibition. Games were treated as artifacts by showcasing them, while context was provided through video compilations and signing cards – elements of concept-oriented approaches. Consoles (and also games) were treated as artifacts but integrating the activity of play, by not merely showcasing different consoles but having each and every one of them playable with different titles. As such, the exhibition was both object and concept oriented, which, judging from visitor feedback, provided an interesting and entertaining experience. Attempts to incorporate high degrees of interactivity have been a notable success; visitors loved the fact there was a lot to do and engage with (rather than just walk around). All different areas that were declared on the banners (consoles, arcade, let's play) were valued, although the listening pillars did not seem to provide any additional value. Still, the multitude of interactivity and means of delivering (a multi-modal approach) worked well with the exhibition's design.

According to literature, game exhibitions are visited predominantly by young males who normally visit

don't museums – besides other museums or exhibitions on video games. While this has not been the case for the Let's Play exhibition, a couple of plausible explanations underlie this. The NISV offers a lot to see for visitors and the LP exhibition was merely temporary. Some visitors were unaware of the event taking place, and many visitors initially came to visit the Experience or the Let's YouTube exhibition. This likely provided a different demographic than mentioned in literature, although other possible reasons are not exempted.

Indeed, fans and collectors can possess quite the materials for any presentation or exhibition. By working together with two private collectors, the Let's Play exhibition was able to have (most of) the playable hard- and software for visitors to play on, as well as content for the showcases. Without teaming up with enthusiasts, setting up this exhibition would have in fact been impossible (or, a lot more pricy).

It has been suggested to steer clear from the original experience in the presentation and exhibition of video games, but mostly because it can be(come) an impossible task (i.e. it is only a short-term solution). However, aiming to provide as much of an 'original experience' is not, it seems, a bad thing. Visitors enjoyed playing on original consoles and multiple times mentioned the added value for their experience, with references being made to the past by some of the older visitors, and youngsters loved to play on original consoles from before they were born. Although it was not a number one priority in exhibition design, it was still taken aboard due to the goal of showcasing history. Survey respondents also valued original games and original hardware, although it remains an uneducated guess what their views on a higher degree of emulation would be. Dutch PC games that were emulated on DosBox did not seem to be enjoyed any less because of it, although it does seem that authenticity is enjoyed and preferred. Plus, with this form of emulation, the interaction methods remain the same (a mouse and keyboard). In any case, at least having the games playable remains a number one concern. In terms of newer games, no conclusions can be drawn from this exhibition. The concern of an original experience applies in different ways, as games are constantly changing through updates and patching, making it difficult to determine what 'experience' actually to present. Presenting playable games on original hardware has been dubbed a short-term solution, a "museum

approach", which seems to hold true for the future. However, it is still a viable setup for the now and near future, to be enjoyed. And, if we can overcome the legal barriers of emulation, we can at least keep games playable on emulated systems. The experience of visitors when presenting more emulated hardware and titles is a suggestion for further research. Still, there are other ways to capture gameplay and additional layers of context (which can capture experiences now, and present them in the future, perhaps after the museum approach stops being viable) such as the Let's Play video.

The Let's Play setup at the restaurant provided an enjoyable experience for visitors. Around 70 different videos were recorded during the exhibition and live streamed to YouTube. Their value as activity during the exhibition was clear, although the value of the produced videos as archiving or preservation material could be debated. The informative value and deeper layers of context are absent in the majority of videos as they mostly revolve around frivolous fun between family and friends – though they can still provide gameplay information that might be worth preserving; these materials should be heavily curated. Some videos recorded with a game collector knowledgeable on the games played provided interesting and informative videos with definite potential. Knowing the games' narratives, enemies, tactics and backstories on the developers, the video outputs are an interesting way to capture the games' core gameplay, strategies and surrounding stories. Still, it seems that recording videos with museum visitors (especially when they are not familiar with either the game titles or the console itself) does not lend itself for preservation purposes – it is, however, a great addition as an exhibition activity. Video content in theater room 2 featured Let's Play videos with makers, which provided new insight as to how the games' creation was experienced by the original developers. While basically every Let's Play video is created by players, developers often have a different way of looking at the game and can enlighten the viewer on challenges and methods in game design, or tell interesting stories relating to the game's release and development. The potential of such videos for documenting history seems high and is recommended to be researched further; if, other developers are willing to cooperate.

Although the Let's Play exhibition could definitely be regarded as a successful video game exhibition, notions of Dutch heritage were largely absent and not so much recognized by visitors. Signing cards

explaining context were often overlooked, and other than *A2* Racer and RedCat, no games were seemingly identified as Dutch history. It seemed that visitors mostly enjoyed playing games (on 'old devices') and express familiarity towards consoles and titles (that were largely non-Dutch). Important for preservation purposes will be to determine what exactly is worth preserving as Dutch heritage. Perhaps, video game culture of the Netherlands in the 80's and 90's is not even conceived by the masses to consist of Dutch titles and works, although the consensus is that the importance and impact of games in general on our culture is clear. Discussion is highly encouraged; it's a good time for more dialogue.

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