

THEMES

Narrative/Theme

Storytelling is a powerful thing. We learn, connect and imagine through stories. We can explore our own identities, make sense of the world around us and envision new futures. A narrative thread through an exhibition can provide a meaningful way for audiences to understand and connect to the show in a tangible way; stirring thoughts and provoking conversation. The shared experience of the story, along with the inherent interactive/participatory/spectatorship nature of video games exhibitions, can also greatly enhance audiences' connections to each other, and to the games, too.

Furthermore, a thematic narrative can act as an effective anchor and motivator, bringing focus and cohesion to the curatorial process, and allowing us to state an intention, both to ourselves and to our audience.

At the outset of any curatorial endeavor we may wish to ask ourselves,

`"What is the story that I/we would like to tell?"`

Whilst the answer to this question may emerge in a number of ways and from a number of places (as laid out in the forthcoming text), there is no set hierarchy or chronology to this process. Each curatorial project is of course beautifully unique. Instead, these narrative-defining factors are proposed as considerations to be absorbed or disregarded - whatever is helpful to you as Curator.

Voice

To begin - a nice light, soul searching question. Who are you? And what do you care about?! In the same way that you wouldn't write a book or direct a play about something you don't know or are not invested in, it is pertinent to root the exhibition narrative in an area of your personal or collective knowledge, or indeed to use it as an opportunity to expand knowledge; to learn from and collaborate with others.

The narrative that emerges from a video games exhibition may explore video game aesthetics, mechanics, or design processes. Or it may investigate and expose modes of play, specific kinds of interactions, nostalgic or contemporary hardware. It may be about character, history, social commentary, politics, fantasy. Or it may be a blend of these things - or none of them at all. The point is that it is useful to consider and roughly define the thematic story that threads the exhibition together, prior to selecting the work/games that speak to this narrative.

Context

Context is everything from the physical space to the influential circumstances that will undoubtedly guide the focus of the narrative and the shape it takes.

Some things to think about...

Where is the exhibition happening? Whether it is in a traditional exhibition space, like a museum or gallery, or in a non-traditional exhibition setting like a bar, an empty store unit or perhaps in an educational environment, the physical boundaries and opportunities of the space will not only impact on the practical implications of exhibiting video games (layout, power, wifi, light, kit) but also on the selection of work that speaks to that space and is appropriate to the kind of audience that may traditionally interact with the space. Think about both the logistical restrictions AND the character of the exhibition's location, and what this could mean for the narrative of the show.

Who is it for? Beyond the considerations of who the audience might be (as identified in the Audience chapter), you may have to consider who else might be invested in the exhibition's narrative - personally, professionally and even financially. These stakeholders may come with their own expectations or requirements so it is important to consider how much weight, if any, you need to place on these when considering the narrative. Partners or funders may have particular data, impacts or evidence that they need to evaluate as a core part of the agreement, so weigh this up and consider if you need or indeed want these constraints/directive influencing the narrative of your exhibition.

When is it happening? Think of the place in time. What is the socio-political and cultural contexts of the now? What are the technological or industrial developments within the field, and the important or significant practice-led innovations from makers? This complex landscape of time-based and time-sensitive circumstances is worthy of some thoughtful deliberation, helping to set the story, tone and perspective of the exhibition. Is the intent to take a particular position or to present the games as artifacts in their own right that speak for themselves? How does this effect the narrative?

And in a different way of thinking about time, consider the situation of the exhibition. Is it part of a festival? Are there relational aspects within a wider programme to consider? Is it a long-form exhibition or a one-night play party (or something in-between)? How does this impact on the story that you are trying to tell through the video games you select to exhibit?

Vision and scope

Through the emergence of the exhibition narrative you will research and select work that talks to the story. In a physical sense, how do the experiences of these works piece together? How does each exhibit talk to each other, either connecting or contrasting? What is the journey that you want visitors to experience and how does the story unfold as they move through the space? The journey may be linear or non-linear, experienced partially or in full. Consider the impact of these variables on the experience of the story.

Think about the need for [diversity](#) of voices, perspectives, modes of interaction, accessibility and written/audio/video interpretation too - all of these things enhance and enrich the intended narrative of the show.

For yourself, write a curatorial statement early in this process that sets out your vision for the exhibition. This will of course change and evolve as the ideas for the show develop, but will help you meander towards a place where you can 'set the scene' for exhibition visitors.

Through the story, invite your audience in to play, explore and participate in the narrative.

Examples

The Blank Arcade 2016 was a gallery installation selected from an international submissions pool. Submissions were narrowed down based on their quality and interest to the curators, and then a group of 8 works were selected based on their general aesthetic and thematic cohesion, presenting unique graphical styles and sensory experiences. Then, an introductory text was prepared and printed to appear at the entrance of the exhibition:

Now in its third year, The Blank Arcade is an annual exhibition which highlights videogames, toys, and other artistic interventions and research exploring the blanks in mainstream perceptions of gaming and play. The selections for this year come from an impressive pool of international submissions, and include interactive sculpture and table games alongside digital games and other software works. These works subvert ideas that have become taken for granted in mainstream software development, challenging aesthetics, mechanics, and play styles we have become accustomed to. Primarily, the games in this year's exhibition address play's interaction with and effect on the player's senses, whether it be the scientifically defined five senses, our sense of space around us, or our sense of place and identity. From using textiles, sculpture and cut paper as direct sources for technologically-engaged work, to navigating themes of personal experience, emergent play, community, humour and awkwardness, these works present a broad and ambitious scope of playful interaction. In presenting these works we hope to highlight the importance of often-overlooked approaches, and inspire broader practices in digital gaming and beyond.

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