



Special issue
Preserving Play
August 2018 28-33

Interview: Marco Accordi Rickards & Micaela Romanini (VIGAMUS)

Conducted by Alison Gazzard and Carl Therrien

AG/CT: Can you give us a brief history of VIGAMUS? How did it come to be, what were the major principles guiding its creation, and what challenges have you faced?

MAR/MR: VIGAMUS was opened in 2012, but it was the result of over 10 years of networking and development. Marco Accordi Rickards, VIGAMUS's Director, started his career as a games journalist and worked on many important outlets, such as Game Pro, the Italian edition of Edge. From this cultural infrastructure, the basis for the Museum was born. VIGAMUS was inspired by the need of spreading knowledge about the artistic significance of video games, and it was conceived for being accessible to the broadest audience of visitors possibly. This means that we ditched the "manic retrogamer" approach, opting instead for focusing on the "pop culture" aspect of video games. Inside VIGAMUS, we celebrate the stories of the great video game creators, from Nolan Bushnell to Shigeru Miyamoto. The visitors are amazed by the passion and the curious stories of developers of the yesteryear and today, and of course they can play with video game history, with more than 60 interactive stations and hundreds of emulated titles.

Our greatest challenge in our mission was to make the institutions aware of games as a cultural artifact. It may sound silly, but the Italian government thought of video games as slot machines! And this was a problem... So, getting a physical seat was the hardest part, but we somehow managed to get a building inside the center of Rome.

AG/CT: What are some of the other museums and exhibitions that inspired you in the process? What aspects were you trying to integrate or improve upon?

MAR/MR: Before opening VIGAMUS, we went to visit our friend Andreas Lange (the director of Computerspielemuseum) who owns the first video game museum ever opened. Even though we opted for a slightly different approach, Computerspielemuseum inspired our vision of a museum as a cultural hub, a place where knowledge is spread and disseminated, which can be visited not just by hardcore gamers, but by families and even people who just don't play or played while in their infancy. To think that someone could display an Atari 2600 like Mona Lisa probably sounded crazy many years ago, but luckily Computerspielemuseum paved the way for our Museum and many other which opened later. The strong academic background of Computerspielemuseum inspired us, and made us realize that it was indeed possible to open a Museum about video games, in an European Capital. I think that was the biggest inspiration: to see a place full of people having fun while learning such as Computerspielemuseum, made us understand that we were in the right direction.

AG/CT: How do you decide what histories to tell? Does your team come up with specific selection criteria?

MAR/MR: Of course there is a strong research component inside our Museum, which is incarnated in the Research Center, a place where video game experts and academics discussed about contents even before the inception of the Museum. Marco's journalism background played a big role in defining which contents would have been more fitting for the exhibition. We understood that games can't be boring, we had to communicate the excitement and the wonder of electronic entertainment, an industry, yes, but an industry that is very peculiar in its very nature. I mean, Nolan Bushnell held Atari's meetings inside a Jacuzzi... At the same time, we knew that we had an important mission, to make people understand that games could be serious and able to deliver important messages. Think of games like *Metal Gear Solid*. So there is this balance inside the Museum between showing the most iconic games and the most significant ones from an industry point of view. This philosophy is well reflected in the entire exhibition: there is the game that is gonna make you say: "Oh, I played this game when I was a kid" and then more obscure games that played a pivotal role in the growth of video games as a medium. Again, "pop culture" was really crucial in shaping our exhibition.

AG/CT: How important is the notion of “local history” in the design of your exhibitions and event planning?

MAR/MR: Italy hasn't a big history when it comes of video games, our industry is blossoming right now, even though we had many glorious developers in the past and sometimes we do organize event about them. So, our Museum lives on stories that happened in other countries, such as the United States or Japan. Even so, we pride on telling the most important example of local history of the video games industry. In 2012, we've opened the exhibition *E.T. The Fall*, the first in the world to display the famous E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial buried cartridges. We were in contact with the local community of Alamogordo, New Mexico, that provided us with these artifacts, that for a long time were considered the stuff of legends. It was truly an operation of video game archaeology. We also invited in our Museum Joe Lewandowski (Vice President of Tularosa Basin Historical Society), which played a crucial role in the excavations that led to the finding of the buried cartridges. So, VIGAMUS played a huge part in making the public aware of the solution to one of the biggest mysteries of video games history.

AG/CT: Can you tell us a bit more about the types of displays that are featured in your exhibitions, and the displays you would ideally like to integrate?

MAR/MR: Thanks to our connection to collectors, we offer many different kinds of items in display. Naturally there are a lot of console and home computers, from the most common ones (the ones that people used to have in their living room) to the most ancient and obscure ones. Games are displayed too, in particular the ones player have most fond memories of. Some of the choices reflect personal studies of the members of the Research Center. In all of our studies, we have a strong focus on storytelling and narrative, so one of the areas of the Museum is entirely dedicated to the text adventures of Infocom, with all the original goodies (the so called “feelies”). This can seem counterintuitive, but instead it reflects a very personal view of the Research Center of video games as interactive experiences, that can transmit important messages and values. Many Infocom games were thematically and mechanically groundbreaking (think of Steve Meretzky's *A Mind Forever Voyaging*), so every story-driven game of today needs to pay their respects to Infocom. Lastly, we have unique pieces, with an incredibly high symbolic value; one of our most precious pieces are the *Doom's* Master Disks, the first disks where the source code of seminal id Software's was copied, and from which all the subsequent copies were printed. For us, it as important as the first copy of Beatles' *White Album* first vinyl would be for a museum about music.

In the future, we hope to make a broader use of technology inside the exhibition itself, integrating augmented and mixed reality with the fruition of the artifacts.

AG/CT: How important was it to have playable games in the museum? What are the challenges in maintaining playable exhibits?

MAR/MR: It's extremely important, you simply can't make a Museum about games without letting people experience them first hand. Of course it's crucial to find a balance, because even if we let people play we can't act as an arcade and, as a Foundation, we have first and foremost a cultural mission. So, thanks to the constant work of the Research Center, we carefully select interactive experiences with a symbolic significance, paying attention to anniversaries and to the integration with what is written inside the panels. It's like stealth learning: we're letting people play, but they're playing with important games, created by great designers. You come out of the Museum with a deeper understanding of the artistic value of games, and with a clear idea of what a video game was, what it is and what it will be. The challenge in maintaining a playable exhibit is the obsolescence of the original hardware, that need a regular manutention and in some cases this can be tricky (like in the case of the dreaded Vectrex...). Thankfully we have a strong network of collectors able to help us, and many games are offered via legit emulation.

AG/CT: On the museum's website it states that "The aim of the Foundation is to promote VIGAMUS and spread awareness of the cultural value of video games in Italy." How important is it for you to explain games culture to people that may view themselves as non-gamers, and how do you try to achieve this? What are some of the challenges that you face in this process?

MAR/MR: VIGAMUS was conceived as a house for video games and players, not only a museum. A place where people can meet, celebrate and play together. This philosophy is expressed by the VIGAMUS tagline: "Past, present and future of video games". VIGAMUS was born to accommodate the first generation of gamers, today's gamers, families and people who want to discover more about this fascinating universe. VIGAMUS puts on display not only the history of video games, but also unique artifacts donated by video game companies and developers from all over the world; among these, the *Doom* Master Disks, donated by the world famous Texan developer id Software, and an original *Space Invaders* cabinet from 1978, donated by TAITO Japan and available in free play.

We should mention also our recent exhibition *E.T. The Fall. Atari's Buried Treasures*, which allows visitors to discover one of the most fascinating legends ever known in the history of

video games (Atari's cartridges and hardware found in the excavations of the desert of New Mexico, USA). VIGAMUS was the first museum in the world to display the symbols of the collapse of the video game industry in 1983, donated by the City of Alamogordo and now considered a unique episode of "video game archaeology".

Inside Epson Multimedia Conference Center (100 seats), the museum hosts a huge variety of happenings regularly, divided between consumer events designed for the general public and others dedicated to the main video game sensations of the year; seminars about retro-gaming and high profile academic roundtables to help families understand more about the medium.

Our consumer events are usually organized jointly with the Italian and international game companies: for example, through the years we've organized together with Ubisoft Italy many days dedicated to the *Assassin's Creed* saga, inviting as special guest the Italian Voice actors of the games, organizing activities such as trivia and art contests, cosplay challenges, live performances. Consumer events, like AC Day, are the most successful and loved ones. We truly encourage the direct experimentation of video games: through over 55 interactive stations VIGAMUS allows visitors to experience firsthand the titles that have made the history of video games and the most innovative technologies.

The interactive areas within the structure host in fact not only different types of platforms and software, but also different gaming devices: from the pinball, considered the ancestor of the interactive medium, to the coin-ops, symbols of the '70/'80 arcade mania, to the console stations, up to the Oculus Room, where the audience is able to experience the Oculus Rift virtual reality device, seeing with their own eyes the future of electronic entertainment.

AG/CT: Looking ahead, could you tell us what you think represents the biggest challenges in terms of game culture preservation and how this is communicated to the public?

MAR/MR: The biggest challenges in the preservation of the Game Culture are linked to the technology: we can understand clearly the historical cartridges and hardware need to be preserved for future generations, but we can't forget that the console we can see today will get old faster, as we see new console generations released every 4-5 years.

Additionally, if the digital distribution allows more people to play and more developers to make their games available, it brings additional problems in terms of preserving our game culture. We truly want to encourage the direct experimentation of video games: through over 55 interactive stations VIGAMUS allows visitors to experience firsthand the titles that have made videogame

history and the most innovative technologies. Together with EFGAMP [European Federation of Video Game Archives, Museums and Preservation projects], we seek to promote the need of preserving the video games in all these incarnations to a broader audience.