Interview: Andreas Lange (Computerspielemuseum)

Conducted by Alison Gazzard and Carl Therrien

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

AL: The initial idea was our belief that computer games have a big cultural impact on us and our society. At the time of the opening in 1997 they often were underestimated as only toys. Our approach was to set up a standard museum. We wanted to put games as a new medium in a traditional museum setting to show everyone that the cultural aspect of games is worthy of our attention. Thus this was our program and part of our name as Computerspielemuseum. From the beginning we received broad and positive feedback, even if the exhibition was quite small and made with modest resources.

The founder and current owner of the Computer Games Museum is a non-profit organization called fjs e.V., which ran and still runs several projects on education and youth culture. For example it founded the German age rating system for games (USK) in 1994.

The collection only started when we had decided to open a museum. I then went to flea markets and read private announcements in newspapers to buy the first collectibles, which were meant to become our exhibits. At that time, Ebay wasn't invented yet. After we had opened, people started to offer us donations of their old games, hardware and magazines. Donations have greatly contributed to the collection since the beginning.

As a private museum, which is not receiving regular public support, the general challenge was

getting enough resources for operation. At the beginning our exhibition was not big enough to earn significant amounts with entrance fees. We were commissioned to do exhibitions for other organizations that provided a budget, such as the Leipziger Messe. This enabled us to do exhibitions at the Games Convention fair in Leipzig, which was the forerunner of the Gamescom in Cologne.

After we succeeded in getting the budget to set-up our recent permanent exhibition, one of the new challenges was to set-up operations with a dozen employees and operating an exhibition with 100.000 visitors yearly. Fortunately we made it and get the chance to face our most recent challenge: how to expand.

AG/CT: How did your background and interest in video games as cultural forms help shape the aims of the museum?

AL: It was always important to us, to give our visitors a deeper understanding of game culture. This is very much an institutional approach, which differs from the typical "collectors approach". Since collectors are proud of the size and rareness of their collection, they often are satisfied just to show their collectibles to others. Their assumption is: the rarer an exhibited object is, the better the exhibition. We have adopted an opposite approach: we want to show significant objects which are helping to tell stories on basic and typical aspects of gaming culture. Only when that foundation is set can we start thinking about other rare exhibits, which usually attract other collectors mostly. Of course this approach has to be guided by explanations and text displays, which do not take knowledge on games for granted.

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?

AL: When we started the main source of information on the history and culture of games were online exhibitions in the early days of the internet, created by fans. Books on gaming culture hadn't been really published back then and I only knew of two physical exhibitions: from 1996 onwards, the US-touring Videotopia on the base of a private collection with a strong focus on arcade cabinets, and a special exhibition of the Museum of the Moving Image in New York called Hot Circuits, which was shown there for some time since 1989. Both I hadn't visited.

While we were basically on our own at the start, the first inspiration came from a meeting with Hiroshi Masuyama, who organized an annual games exhibition in Japan since 1996 called Bit-Generation and started a TV-Game Museums project in Japan in 1994, which unfortunately

never came to life. After he visited us, we agreed to make an exhibition together. This project became Tokyo Techno Tourism, a special exhibition which Masuyama created and which we showed in 1998 in Berlin. The exhibit was not on gaming history at large but rather on used games as an interactive vehicle to Japanese urban life-style. That broadened my understanding of games and how they can be used as exhibits.

Since the opening of our recent exhibition, we are trying to improve the balance between interactive exhibits and explaining contexts and telling stories. Playing games and reading texts or listen to interviews are attracting different target groups and it is important for us to achieve the right balance. In regards to the interactive exhibits specifically, practical aspects like the available resources for maintaining and repairing have to be considered.

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

AL: Basically it's a mixture of what I would wish to exhibit and the limits of our resources in space and budget. Of course, the basics of the established canon on gaming history – like the first commercial video game (*Computer Space*, 1971) or the first home video game (*Odyssey*, 1972) – are integrated. In that regards we have a special regional focus on German games, too. Beyond that my goal as curator is to show our visitors as much of the spectrum of games as possible, so that they understand that one can hardly speak on games without exploring the differences. For that selection, I didn't have specific selection criteria at hand, but relied on my experience about the most important facets and stories. Also here practical aspects have to be taken into account. For example complex strategy games are difficult to exhibit, since one has to play them for a couple of hours to understand. Therefore we look for games that fit into social context and social space, are attractive, dynamic and can be played quickly.

Along with the permanent exhibition we provide a special exhibition space, where we can tackle aspects which we couldn't integrate into the main exhibition.

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

AL: At the beginning of our work, it was not that important, because the ground had to be provided rather in general terms. But specifically in recent years, one can observe a growing global trend: regional gaming histories are moving at the forefront. On the one hand this is driven because of (regional, national) funding sources, on the other hand it is a natural

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development that the US-centric history telling, which influenced the European view very much, is now complemented and even verified by documenting regional history. For example it was only recently discovered that the first game which used the real time first person perspective was not *Night Driver* (Atari, 1976), but the German *Nuerburgring* driving simulator, produced by Foerst GmbH in 1975.

Speaking in more general terms, the regional context is always important because as cultural artefacts, games could not be understood without it. For instance, in Germany we have more problems with military games than others because we have caused and lost two world wars. Another example is the openness Japanese people have to artificial life forms like Tamagotchis. In western culture, life – even artificial – could be understood as something divine. In Japanese culture there is no single god who is the only one able to create life; the souls of the dead could be in every living being. Therefore the difference between man and animals is not perceived as strongly as it is in in western culture. From that perspective, the step to accept artificial life forms as equal partners is not that big to take anymore.

The connections between games and regional cultural traditions are moving even more in focus recently, because of several initiatives on national state support of the industry. Since this funding scheme could only be established as an exception of the free trade treaties countries like England, France, Poland or Germany have signed, it's even necessary to assume games as national cultural heritage (which is allowed to be supported in this context).

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?

AL: Since our subject is mainly a virtual one, one of our main challenges is to transfer it into the physical and social space of the medium exhibition. Considering our private nature, which makes us dependent on the satisfaction of our visitors, we have to offer attractions and experiences that the public cannot download at home. This means that every unique exhibit, like artworks for example the notorious PainStation, are ideal exhibits for us. Also installations which offer social experiences are very appropriate, in spite of the expenses they involve. For example we are presenting our selection of 52 games milestones as a social installation, in which every milestone is displayed virtually and spatially as well (figure 1). By controlling a moving spot with a Competition Pro Joystick one visitor selects a single milestone, which then is instantly shown on a big screen with a recording of a game scene and an explanation of the

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cultural impact of the game. While most of our visitors like the unusual navigation others are fine with watching and maybe start to chat with other visitors on specific milestones.

Figure 1. Copyright: Computerspielemuseum (credit: Joerg Metzner)

Another basic principle one can say that these unique experiences offer entertainment as well as learning effects. For example we offer a museums game called "The Legend of the Golden Console". It is a treasure hunt, where you have to solve puzzles in our exhibition. The game is based on NFC (Near Field Communication) technology played on mobile phones, which can be loaned at our front desk. It is a cooperative game with adventure game mechanics. If you have solved all puzzles, a vault can be opened, which set the legendary golden console free. While it is just fun for our visitors to play it in our exhibition, the players are learning about aspects of gaming culture and history with every puzzle.

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

AL: It is important for us to offer interactive exhibits because it is the easiest way to learn about the media and it is what the visitors expect from a computer games museum. And yes, it is quite

a challenge to maintain them. We have three technicians who repair everything that breaks twice a week. Old exhibits, which are very interesting to play because of their authenticity, are becoming rarer and older. Also they were usually never built to be played ten hours a day from more than 100.000 players/visitors yearly. Therefore we only present old consoles in playable form, because they were sold massively and can be replaced nowadays without big efforts. Also we are modifying hardware like the old arcades, with the aim to make it more stable without losing too much authenticity. Without emulators, we wouldn't be able to show that many playable games. Of course it is important that one makes the modifications transparent to the visitors, at least the ones leading to many differences in the original's "look and feel".

AG/CT: On the museum's website it states that "The Computer Games Museum has taken an active role in presenting the culture and the history of digital games to a wide audience by means of exhibitions, workshops on media competence, events and publications." What are the challenges in presenting game history to the general public? 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? Can you give specific examples of some of the strategies you have adopted in order to appeal to wide audiences?

AL: It is very important for us to approach non-gamers, because games are offering knowledge beyond pure gaming history. Especially today, when everybody has understood the huge impact the digital revolution has had on our lives; games are illustrating many aspects of that change perfectly and make them concrete and therefore better comprehensible. We must remember that games historically were the first programs which allowed the common citizen to handle a computer, and they will also be the first applications one encounters in the future. Games were the first and are the most used virtual environments, which motivate people to stay and interact with the system and other people, something which every one of us is doing more and more.

In order to locate games in our general culture, we trace back their roots to pre-digital times. For example we are displaying a timeline of virtual worlds created with technology starting in the 18th century with Laterna Magica. This offers our visitors who are not familiar with gaming culture an entry point for understanding games, and also highlights what impact the penetration of digital technology in our lives has. In that regards games are a bit like the glass sphere of a clairvoyant: they bring future developments connected with digital technology into view, at least if you know where to look. And guiding the view of our visitors is one of our most important tasks.

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 presented to the public?

AL: To preserve this part of our cultural heritage for future generations we are facing three areas of challenges: legal, technical and financial ones.

Starting with the financial aspect: as a private museum we are able to get funding for exhibitions by charging a fee to our visitors. At the moment, there is no business model to operate our collecting and preserving activities. Therefore we have co-founded an initiative with other institutional collections holders in the Berlin area with the aim to combine our collections, and doing so advancing our chances to get public funding. This strategy paid off at end of 2016, when the German parliament granted the initiative for the budget for the first two years.

Technically we are building on the achievements of the retro gaming and emulation community, which are more than remarkable. But since this was driven by the passion of the community and the emulation strategy needs permanent maintenance, we cannot expect that people have an emotional relationship to the old games and platforms in the future. Therefore one challenge is to transfer this knowledge and experiences to the institutional sector, which is expensive and usually needs more time, but is more sustainable and systematic.

Of course also the shift to digital distribution and especially pure streaming services is big challenge for all preservers, because we can't collect the artefact itself anymore; it remains in complete control of the IP-holder. As a last technical challenge I want to point at MMOGs, which might be preserved technically in the future, whereas it is a challenge to preserve / document the social life on the servers, which is a crucial part of every MMOG.

To develop all these aspects, a sound legal base is mandatory, but unfortunately this still has to be built. Until now, the main problem is that law makers for important legal chapters like copyright law and laws on orphan works aren't aware of games. The result is that games could not be defined as one of the classes of work in the law. If this is done, the next step is to implement applicable regulations, especially for the background of the big amount of orphan works we are facing. Since the most important laws for Germany and the other European member states are done on the European level, we have co-founded a **E**uropean **f**ederation for **g**ame **a**rchives, **m**useums and **p**reservation projects (EFGAMP), which offers a compact interface to law makers where they can get the information on our demands.