

The Video Games Collection at the Museum of London

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"Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts" (The Image of the City /Kevin Lynch, 1960, p.2)

Three-dimensional game cities are not static environments, nor stationary views. They are experienced through movement, action, and play. It is through this that the "operational spaces of games encourage players to engage them, find their own identity in relation to them, develop of a history with them, customise them.

The Museum of London has started a new collecting area in the museum's collections, in order to tell the story of London through an interactive, more fluid and engaging way.

The Museum of London is looking into the documentation of the capital through video games that mostly sprung from the Indie scene, without ignoring the corporate world, but shifting the balance to more alternative games and gamers that inspired the following generations.

Cities are dynamic places of change and transformation. Dense and heterogeneous, they offer a general framework for individuals to create personal patterns and act on them. Within the game of urban possibilities, the city is a constantly changing stage, forever reinventing and redefining itself on the basis of its performers' creativity and interactions.

The Museum of London has acquired artefacts that explore and articulate the unique boundaries of video games as an art form and plans to acquire and commission additional video games in the future, working with artists, developers and programmers to represent this new creative practice. The inclusion of video games furthers the mission of the museum around a new digital approach to our collections and ensures the ongoing preservation, social history study and interpretation of video games as part of the overall collections. By bringing these games into a public collection, the museum has the opportunity to investigate both the material science of video game components and develop best practices for the digital preservation of the source code for the games themselves.

The architecture of video games and their stories are inexorably linked. The game spaces serve as narrative functions, and can enhance immersion or provide a new perspective.

- Overview

The Digital Collections at the Museum of London are currently holding born digital objects which have started being acquired since 2012 when the Museum began developing its digital collecting framework. The Digital Collections started being developed through a series of collecting projects that included social media, sound, digital art and video games, building upon the already accessioned film, video and oral history collections. The first born-digital collecting projects formed the basis of the Digital Collecting Framework at the Museum of London.

The Museum is collecting born digital objects as part of its remit to reflect the contemporary experience and culture of London and

The areas we will focus on over the next 3 years are:

- Politics and democracy
- Everyday life
- Major events in the capital

These themes are represented by objects in born digital formats such as digital video, social media, digital audio, software or web based applications. As general collecting principles of the Digital

Collections: Objects must have cultural, social and/or historical significance to London or Londoners and/or objects must show significant interpretation of historical/contemporary/ everyday issue(s) facing London and Londoners. The video games collection was born out of this born-digital collecting initiative as an attempt to explore London via the medium of video games through a social history point of view; celebrating the role of Londoners in the video games industry as well as exploring depictions of the virtual space of the city as the setting for the action (mis)representing London's topography. In 2015 the video games collection at the Museum of London formalised their own collecting framework as part of the wider Digital Collecting Framework stating the criteria of the collection:

1. Historical Value
2. About London (virtual depictions of the city) or developed by Londoners (celebrating the contribution of Londoners in the industry)
3. Social Impact (treating video games an object of social history)
4. Non corporate (mostly from UK Indie scene but not exclusive)
5. Not online games

- Activity

The collection includes 28 video games so far that span from 1982-2016. The brief history of video games in the UK, starting in 1978, in a very important and socially active time for Britain and London in specific, already includes several generations of both games and gamers. The rapid evolution of technology and the enormous cultural reach of video games have set the stage for a new genre in media art. Video games offer a compelling avant-garde performance space, activated by artists and players alike. These media art practices are distinct from film, video and theatre and mark a critical development in the history of art. The Museum of London is planning to acquire works that explore and articulate the unique boundaries of video games as examples of social history and as art forms and plans to acquire and commission additional video games in the future, working with artists, developers and programmers to represent this new creative practice. The inclusion of video games furthers the mission of the museum around a new digital approach to our collections and ensures the ongoing preservation, social history study and interpretation of video games as part of the overall collections. By bringing these games into a public collection, the museum has the opportunity to investigate both the material science of video game components and develop best practices for the

digital preservation of the source code for the games themselves.



Figure 1. Video Games Collection at MoL.

In 2016, the museum curated a display under the title 'London in Video Games' exploring depictions of the city through early video games. 'London in Video Games' examined London in gaming culture and offered visitors an opportunity to play some early video games on specially emulated computers. The games on display all included (mis)representations of London and many were also developed in the capital. They demonstrated how early representations of London in the early, text-based adventure video games evolved into more recognizable depictions of the city. Four video games were emulated on the retro-pi emulator and were available to be played in the exhibition space.



Figure 2. London in Video Games, 2016. Museum of London



Figure 3. London in Video Games, 2016. Museum of London



Figure 4. London in Video Games, 2016. Museum of London

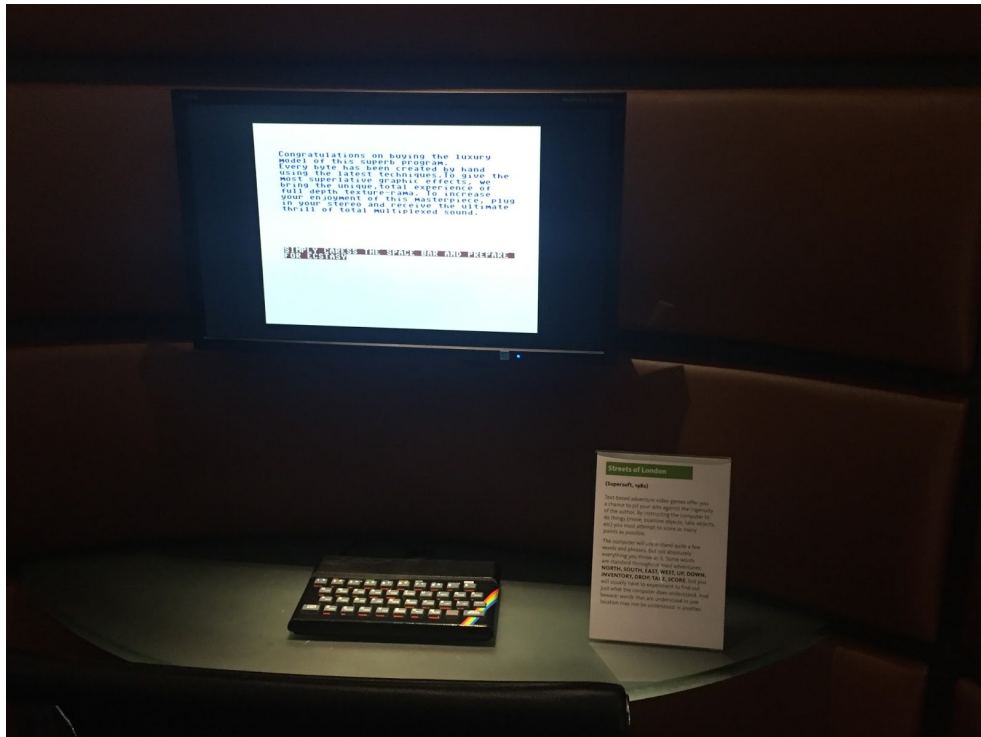


Figure 5. London in Video Games, 2016. Museum of London

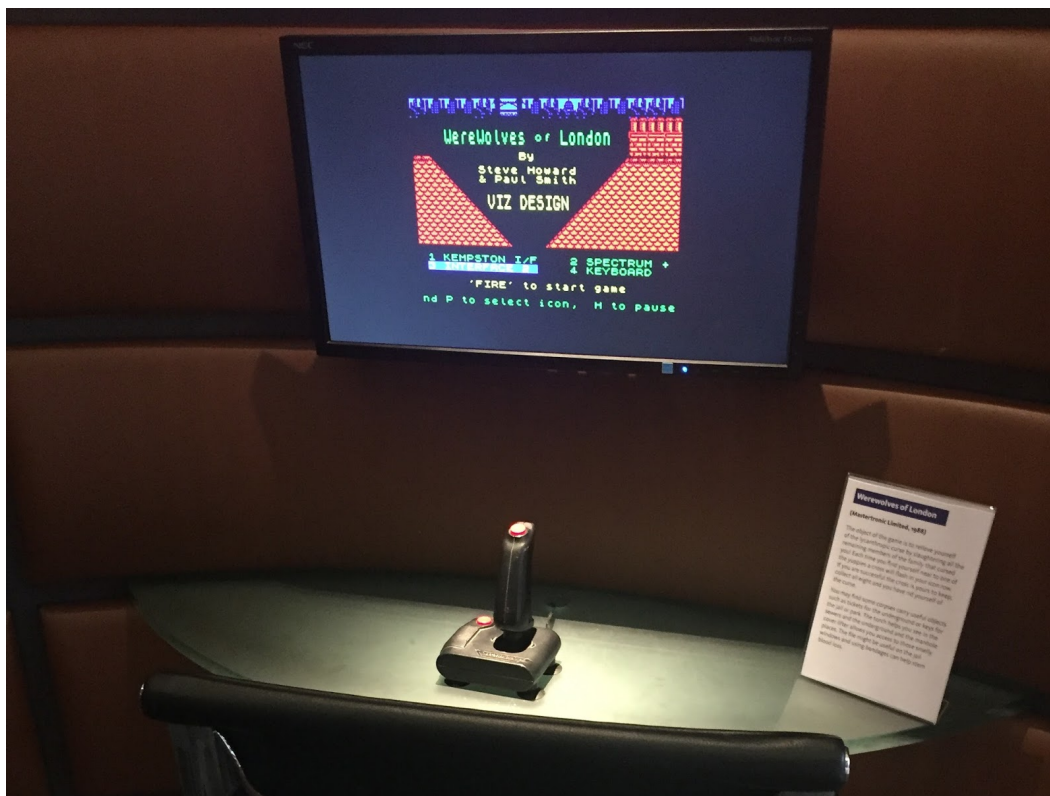


Figure 6. London in Video Games, 2016. Museum of London

The display was framed by a year-long series of talks, exploring the relationship between video games, history, politics, art and architecture. CITY | SPACE | VIDEO GAMES was a very successful series of panel discussions that attracted a very different audience at the Museum of London.



Figure 7. Video Games: Women in Digital Worlds talk in February 2018. (Marie-Claire Isaaman, Charu Desodt, Dr Lynda Clark and Dr Joe Twist)

- Challenges

The biggest challenges we have been facing since we started the video games collection are around their long-term digital preservation and robust display in the museum galleries.

Video games are more prone than other media to obsolescence. With each new generation of hardware and software, scores of titles are made unplayable. Video games, which rely not only on audiovisual reproduction but also on a computer's ability to understand and execute their coded rules and instructions, require more profound reconstruction.

The digital preservation of video games is a field in its infancy. Major research and efforts to preserve early video games, herein defined as computer games and console games, have only been a focus for about twelve years. Most of the research conducted on the best processes and requirements to preserve video games have been the result of collaborative efforts or conducted by academic institutions. At the Museum of London we decided to acquire each game in the original physical format it was originally launched (for museological reasons, treating the video game as a museum item) and then we are creating a digital facsimile (emulated/migrated- for displaying reasons and for digital preservation). For the reasons above, the Museum is acquiring the original hardware for the original format of the games and emulated hardware for display. As we are collecting video games as part of London's social history, we are interested in the original publication. "It's the holy grail of the acquisition," as that enables the game to be preserved in its original format. Our approach would first to go for the first edition, when we cannot get the first edition, we will try for a copy of the video game. If that is not available, the museum will go for the emulated version of the game provided by the publishers.

Taking into consideration the rapid obsolescence of technology and the unstable state of magnetic media (most of which were used in the 80's and 90's), we decided to go for a combined digital preservation approach. We commissioned the customisation of the old consoles built on a Raspberry

Pi. This way we can still simulate the original e.g Spectrum ZX experience with all peripherals (e.g joysticks, keyboards, etc) but having the advantage of loading easily the games which are migrated on digital format (through SD cards, USB sticks, etc)

- Priorities

My priority and aspiration is to raise the profile of video games in the collection and start treating them with the same weight as the rest of the collection; as another object to tell the story of London. I don't want to create a silo around the collection but my goal is to integrate them in exhibitions and in the permanent galleries as another type of object within the same narrative. Moving towards the New Museum of London, I am focusing on how we could integrate video games in the new galleries that will cover the history of London from pre-history till now.



Figure 8. Lawrence Lek. *Europa, Mon Amour (2016 Brexit Edition)* at the Museum of London Collection