
When did my childhood become an art exhibit?!

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Abstract

Social media has dramatically altered the ways in which people share experiences. Through on-site observations during the Art of Video Games exhibition in a local museum and an examination of related Instagram postings, we found that visitors try to re-experience their memories and to collectively reminisce about their past gaming. We also discuss the implications of our

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findings as ways to encourage visitor engagement and to build a natural storehouse of knowledge.

Author Keywords

Collective memory; reminiscing; museum; the Art of Video Games; visitor engagement.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Museums have long served as venues for conducting research, as they are known to promote introspection and thoughtful discussion amongst visitors. Meanwhile, social media has dramatically altered the ways in which people communicate and made it possible for such reflections and conversations to extend beyond the museum setting. Visitors can now easily share photos, videos, and experiential narratives with family and friends. This occurs not only on-site, but also after the museum visit has ended, through various social media platforms.

As the content in social media is often associated with personal meaning [2], an increasing number of people are using social media for “*archiving life experiences and reflecting on identities*” [3]. Hence, social media



Figure 1: An interactive video game was wall-projected in the study museum. Here, museum visitors gathered to watch a skillful gamer and cheer for his gaming techniques.



Figure 2: Father-and-son on the left and two female friends on the right.

has been conceptualized as a storehouse of personal data because of its reviewability and searchability [4]. While “*memories are clearly personal, owned by individuals to be savoured or silenced in the recesses of one’s own consciousness, [...] at the same time memories are clearly social, shared among friends and family, told and received*” [5].

This paper reports the findings of an observational study at the well-known Art of Video Games exhibit [6], from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, as part of our larger research program that aims to investigate ways to encourage visitor engagement in museum settings. We identified a prominent theme of collective reminiscing among visitors who shared experiences from their old gaming days.

Methodology

The findings reported in this paper are based on our observations conducted during the Art of Video Games exhibition, in a museum in the Midwestern U.S., and our examination of Instagram postings related to the exhibition.

OBSERVATION

We observed visitors interacting with the video games and informational displays showcased during the exhibit. This special exhibition provided a rare opportunity for investigating visitor engagement with highly interactive pieces (Figures 1), which date back to 1977, and with other visitors, including families and friends (Figures 2). The field notes were first thematically analyzed, followed by iterative brainstorming and discussions among the researchers.

EXAMINATION OF INSTAGRAM POSTINGS

We used the hash tag #artofvideogames to retrieve all the images posted on Instagram – about 400, at the time of our retrieval. These images were posted by visitors to the Art of Video Games exhibit in different museums across the nation. We examined the images as well as the associated narratives to identify interesting themes. The goal was to get further insights into the museum visitors’ experiences with the exhibit.

Findings

Reminiscing Together

We observed visitors reminiscing together both during our observational study and through social media. Museum visitors formed spontaneous connections with others based on common experiences with video games that left lasting impressions upon them. For instance, we observed that visitors took immense interest in others playing the exhibit’s interactive games (Figure 1). Instagram postings also showed clear evidence of collective reminiscence of their gaming experiences. These findings are in accordance with previous findings that “*personal events can take on different meanings when they are considered in their familial, historical, and cultural contexts, even long after the event has occurred*” [5], as was the case in the Art of Video Games exhibit.

The Instagram images and narratives – like those shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5 – indicated that reminiscences of the early days of video gaming can be grouped into several sub-themes: feeling old when faced with childhood memories, having a dreamlike experience when being presented with one’s past, and urges to repeatedly revisit the beloved memories contained within the exhibit.



Figure 3: "Pretty sure at least 5 years of my life disappeared into these games [...]."



Figure 4: An Instagram posting showing a couple dressed as their favorite video game characters, Toadette and Mario.

FEELING OLD

Many of the visitors observed in the Art of Video Games exhibit were adults who had clearly grown up playing the featured games, and as such, were reminded of the years which had passed since these childhood experiences took place. As one visitor commented on Instagram, *"Loved the Art of Video Games today [...]. Too bad it made me feel real old at the same time"*, while another visitor posted, *"When did my childhood become an art exhibit?!"* Although visitors feigned distress over their ages, all appeared excited to have had the opportunity to revisit these youthful memories.

These feelings appeared to foster connections between the visitors who were more familiar with past video game consoles and characters. The narrative for an image of such gaming systems read, *"These were the four #consoles that I grew up on! If you don't know what they are, you're too young for me lol."* The exhibit sparked many visitors to share images of and comments about their favorite game consoles, which suggested the periods in gaming history that each person had lived through. These museum visitors demonstrated that growing old does not have to be viewed negatively, and that connecting with others with similar pasts can add value to one's experiences.

"LIKE A DREAM"

While some lamented the years gone by since the heights of their gaming days, others simply marveled at the surreal experience of viewing one's memories through display cases. One visitor shared an image of the consoles he had grown up with and commented, *"It's weird/cool to see these under glass in a museum setting."* Another posted a photograph of his nephew playing an original Nintendo system during the

exhibition, which he described as being *"like a dream."* These comments illustrate the inexplicable sensation that often accompanies a brush with one's past.

When they were not pondering the implications of seeing their childhoods put into boxes, the adult visitors in the exhibit could be observed happily playing the featured games. A woman who visited the exhibit with her children posted on Instagram, following their trip, that *"[t]here were a bunch of adults having just as much fun as the kids."* Some took their nostalgia even further, dressing up as favorite characters from beloved games (Figures 4 and 5). By allowing themselves to express their childish sides, these visitors were able to look back with revived fondness for the virtual worlds which were once as real to them as our own.

RE-REVISITING THE PAST

For a number of those who visited this exhibit, one trip down the memory lane did not seem to suffice. Though some visitors had not played the featured games in years, their initial visits left them with the urge to return. For instance, one visitor shared an image and stated, *"My second encounter with the Mario Bros. this month. [...]"* Others voiced similar feelings, as well as plans to bring along friends and family members who had yet to experience the exhibit. It appears that when people begin to revisit their memories, they often desire more than a single opportunity to relive them, before they are "gone" again.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study revealed that many visitors explicitly recalled and re-experienced the video games that they had encountered in their (much) earlier lives. Moreover, with relatable, interactive exhibits, visitors readily



Figure 5: A child dressed up as "Luigi came to PLAY today homey!!"

engaged in collective reminiscence both during and following their visits. Yet, the reminiscences were largely conducted individually. Thus, they appeared fragmented, rendering it difficult for people – including the new generation – to grasp and follow the more complete set of past experiences.

Although the Art of Video Games is a rather unique exhibit, in that it had a profound impact on many visitors in their youths, we posit that it is also possible to encourage collective reminiscence based upon exhibit-triggered recollection of more abstract emotional experiences. As we continue our research, we hope to determine whether such experiences could, for example, aid a culture in connecting with its history. In fact, group reminiscence has been found to offer a range of benefits such as reducing boredom, promoting teaching or sharing of experiences, [7] maintaining interpersonal relationships, and working through current situations [1].

Furthermore, if museums are able to unite these remembrances, the resulting collective narrative would likely be richer than the sum of its parts. Therefore, our next step is to explore if and how social media and handheld devices may be used to support collective reminiscence, so as to strengthen the current compilation of memories and to create more coherent and complete memory archives, with the hope that the enriched repository will naturally become a robust collection of knowledge, similar to a museum of museum experiences.

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