



Title

Talking about video games

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About the author(s)

is an artist based in London. His solo and collaborative projects employ imagery, aural and visual archives, live performance and sound to explore ideas surrounding class, cross-cultural and post-digital identity. Achiampong has recently used gaming mods in his solo work (Voyage of The Relic Traveller) and collaborative endeavors with David Blandy (the Finding Fanon trilogy), for which they have been nominated for the 2018 Jarman Award.

Wumi Olaosebikan (AKA Wumzum) is an artist raised in East London, whose illustrations and murals are often created in the visual language of comics and video games. Recent works, which include a giant mural at Genesis Cinema of East London and a commission for the 2018 Rise Festival in Croydon, are heavily influenced by Afrofuturism and reflect a strong sense of urban life and culture.

Cover image:

Talking about video games

by Larry Achiampong and Wumi Oloosebikan • 01.10.2018

The exhibition *Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, presents the designs and development behind some of this century's most influential video games. Larry Achiampong and Wumi Oloosebikan, artists and gamers who have used video games in their work, discuss how an exhibition on gaming can intersect with art, politics and DIY creation.

Larry Achiampong (LA): So we've just spent the afternoon at the V. & A., checking out the show. I wanted to begin by talking about our initial feelings and experience of entering the first part of the exhibition, where we come in contact with both AAA (a classification for games with the highest budgets) and indie games including *Journey*, *The Last of Us*, *Bloodborne*, *Splatoon* and *Consume Me*.

Wumi Oloosebikan (WO): I think the way the exhibition kicks off with a small-scale game, *Journey* (by Thatgamecompany) **FIG.1**, is great – I remember when that game was released, and for me, the gaming experience was a truly artful one – I frickin' love that game! Anybody I've known who's played *Journey* and hasn't played video games much, or before, has continued to play them since. It's not just about playability, but beauty as well. Then we have *The Last of Us* (by Naughty Dog) presented nearby – the perfect example of a hardcore AAA title that invokes some of the best gaming in a generation. If you think about it, it's like a big movie: really relatable characters, great game mechanics, immersive and very trendy at the time because zombies were the hot topic, appearing on every entertainment platform. But the developers decided, we're not just going to make a good zombie game; we're going to make a zombie game with purpose, its own identity and substance.



Fig. 1 Screenshot from *Journey*, developed by Thatgamecompany. 2012 (© Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

LA: Definitely, in the same breath I feel one could talk about the importance of the *Resident Evil* series (especially part 4), the Godfather of all survival horror games, which I think *The Last of Us* owes a lot to. I completed *TLOU* on the PlayStation 3 and thinking about it in retrospect, the storytelling that navigated the player experience and that of the cinematic was cool. For me, there's been no other game that has come close to doing that in recent memory other than *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*.¹ Being taken through detailed fragments of the developmental process was something I was able to appreciate. From detailed scripts and drawings **FIG.2**, concept imagery **FIG.3** and even a short film that Naughty Dog made to embody the intricate world-building of *TLOU*, I was able to get a real sense of the development team's desire to manifest levels of depth pertaining to the beauty and anxiety of living in an environment that nature has reclaimed. Also, playing the game as a parent gave me a different perspective towards the paternal relationship of the game's protagonists, *Joel* and *Elle*.

WO: That is emphasised in a big way, *TLOU* takes you through a cinematic experience between relational characters in a story people can invest in. Gamers often talk about the playability of games and them needing to have 'fun', gameplay mechanics and stuff like that. But there is so much storytelling in *TLOU*, which is what we as humans thrive on; we live and breathe stories. It's so mad how we've got to a point in time with video gaming where you can have cinematic journeys on the same level as movies, but you're playing them. Another game included in the exhibition is *Bloodborne* (by FromSoftware), which hardcore gamers love

because it's all about excruciatingly hard gameplay. *Bloodborne* teaches you how to get better as you embark through that adventure, a cornerstone of some of the big games of this generation. It's that witnessing of one's progression, not necessarily through the game prompting you, but through the action of dying multiple times. I always like to talk about old-school games like the original *Super Mario Brothers* and how it doesn't pinpoint instructions on-screen – it teaches you how to play through trial and error, and I think there is a link between that, *Dark Souls* (also made by FromSoftware) and *Bloodborne*. Gaming has that special place in our hearts because it mimics the process of life via the practice of being handed puzzles and a set of tools to deal with them. It seems that lately it is challenging the medium of movies because with gaming you are interacting beyond the screen.



Fig. 2 Character sketch for *The Last of Us*, developed by Naughty Dog. 2013 (© Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

LA: So *Splatoon* (by Nintendo) **FIG.4** is also on display.



Fig. 3 Blue Sky Concept for *The Last of Us*, developed by Naughty Dog. 2013 (© Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

WO: I'm a big Nintendo nerd, you know how we do with this game!



Fig. 4 Screenshot from *Splatoon*, developed by Nintendo. 2015 (© Nintendo; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

LA: Yup, I'm a self-confessed Nintendo nerd as well! A lovely surprise to see that project being represented in the exhibition since Nintendo as a company is usually very cagey around their development processes. What still fascinates me to this day about *Splatoon* is the visual representation of fluidity; swimming through coloured ink, and the uncanny manner of bringing style and freshness that's framed in a meta sort of way. The game essentially does for third-person shooters what *Mario Kart* does for racing games. In *Splatoon*, you play as humanoid squids called Inklings that can morph between both forms; by using your squid form you can swim through ink that you or your team spread across the map. In a regular game, you play in a four-on-four match; with the mode 'Turf War', for example, the aim is to cover

as much of the map with ink as possible. The team with the most percentage of map coverage after the time limit wins. The reason I adore this game is Nintendo took the third-person shooter as a concept and flipped it on its head, where objectives are the focus over killing, or 'splatting'.

WO: Nintendo are very family friendly as a company, they want everybody to have a slice of the pie and even if you lose, you still go away with this sense of fun being had when playing their games. *Splatoon* is the perfect example of those ideas put into play through the practice of making lots of mess with colourful ink in a childlike, cool manner!



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Videogames: Play, Design, Disrupt* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (8th September 2018–24th February 2019).

LA: Yeah, I'm a firm believer that *Splatoon* is the best thing to happen to contemporary painting (laughs).



Fig. 6 'Approaching', screenshot from *Graveyard*, developed by Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn. 2008. (© Tale of Tales; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum,

London).

WO: (Laughs) I always thought of it as the video game equivalent of a Nickelodeon channel! The colours take us back to our childhood – the characters have super soakers, rollers, paintbrushes and more as ‘weapons’. These silly things shouldn’t work so well, yet they do! There’s that whole meta aspect of these kids that are playing around, making a load of mess, who wear all these cool clothes . . . you’re like a pro at this game, right?



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Videogames: Play, Design, Disrupt* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (8th September 2018–24th February 2019).

LA: Well, I’ve been playing since the first game came out three years ago and have been playing the sequel that has been out for a year, I have my own squad that I practice with online and we compete in championships . . .



Fig. 8 ‘WesterosCraft’, reconstruction of King’s Landing from the television series Game of Thrones. Screenshot from Minecraft (© Minecraft; exh. Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

WO: And as a father it must be nice to have a competitive game that doesn’t have this angle of violence hanging over your head!?

LA: Absolutely, my son plays the game, and he's able to access *Splatoon* due to the game's intuitive nature. We didn't mention this, but I'm sure that the team would have been inspired by games like *Jet Set Radio* (by Smilebit) or *Parappa The Rapper* (by NanaOn-Sha) that appropriate the subject-matter of Hip-Hop, Jazz and Punk cultures with such devotion; from the soundtrack through to the art style and clothing options, the game is its own planet.

WO: I love how gaming looks in on the real world and magnifies it to create newer ones. I've learned loads about sea life through playing *Splatoon*!

LA: I've got to admit, I was apprehensive in going to see an exhibition about video games. I don't think there have been many shows that have done it right and I've often left these spaces feeling stagnant as opposed to the thrill that gaming gives me. And maybe it is because I am dedicated to this, but I feel that while the show is sleekly presented **FIG.5**, divided into four digestible spaces,² I still left feeling unsatisfied. The DIY area makes me smile, and that's the reason that I love the medium so much. I appreciate the fine touches to presentation across the show; for example, there is a lingering soundtrack of a cluster of sound effects from gaming icons including the voice of Ryu and Ken of the *Street Fighter* series shouting 'Hadoken!' or the inklings of *Splatoon* exclaiming 'Woomy!'. But you know I just don't feel like I am involved in the way that a gaming event or environment might make me feel. And apart from four indie games including *Consume Me* (by Jenny Jiao Hsia) or the intriguing *Graveyard* (by duo Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn) **FIG.6**, you have to basically wait until the end of the show to play something! It seemed kind of oxymoronic. I didn't need every room to have a cabinet, but....

WO: Of course not, that's what games conventions are about. So a quick anecdote to add to your point: my friend and I (we're both 'Nintendoholics') talk a lot about how although we never knew each other as kids and had very different backgrounds growing up, because we played the same games it's like we had the same history. The little adlibs we say inspired by that game world, the sounds, interacting to the same story form a nuanced choice, this is a crucial part of gaming culture and language – these interactions are so key. So if you are going to have an exhibition that is aiming to touch on these ideas then you have to think (a bit deeper) about that. The choice of games is balanced – the arty games, the hardcore or action-orientated games, games that considered intersectionality. I love the *Splatoon* section for example, but why can't I touch the Splattershots?!³ I want to feel them and they are held up so I can't touch them! I buy memorabilia related to anime and games because I love to interact with their design; I just feel that is an important oversight.

LA: I am fine dealing with certain iconic omissions, but where is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of The Wild*? It doesn't just claim the crown as the best Zelda game (or video game) of all time, but there's a lot going on there that could be smashed open for such an exhibition. From the map and that expansiveness of an open world that is not linear to the visualisation of an environment that feels like you're in a Studio Ghibli film, to the brilliant, ambient moments of sound whilst riding your horse through Hyrule, to the intense orchestrated forms of music during battle.

WO: Notes from developers are things that you get to see a lot of in special edition releases or even in-game, so to be able to play an early build of something might have given the show that added 'oomph'. What I want to know is how are you as a museum or gallery going to get me to read so much when the subject is gaming? We are going through reams of writing and videos, but I want to play something now! I want to experience it!

LA: There are so many labels, which are informative, and then on the other hand there is this sense of dread because if you don't read the words, you miss half the event. For a subject as dynamic as video games, I felt like I was on a linear path.

WO: Is the curator a gamer?

LA: I'd love to know what games Marie Foulston plays or has played. Do you think there were gamers separate from the art or museum world that were invited during the developmental process of this show?

WO: I'd say yes. The choice of games for me shows that there is thought taken into games as a culture rather than a stuffy library of genres. I'd give them credit for some of the conversations/questions approached in the second zone around how games can be political **FIG.7** – women in gaming, is gaming whitewashed?

LA: Of course it is!

WO: In that zone is Ramsey Nasser's project; a coding language created from Arabic, which challenges the basis from which most major computer languages derive – Latin. My mind was blown. These types of prejudices that exist are pushing developers to challenge the conventions and traditions that have gone unchecked. Western languages cannot express feelings that other languages can; you cannot get those additional tones and layers. There is a standard that the Western world has created through dominance, but there is more to learn outside of this construct, so to see that represented in code (via *Pong*) was super interesting.

LA: We know that this is possible; Japanese culture is embedded in a lot of video games currently and historically and has been

accepted around the globe, so there is no excuse. Of course, this connotes why the default lead character in a game will be a young, straight, white man. But I still have hope and recent years are showing some changes.

WO: User-generated content or hacking is showing that, which the presentation on *Minecraft* (in the third zone) highlights [Fig.8](#). There is a lot of potential and I am glad it's not Hollywood led. Because so much of this is now internet-driven, you're getting people from all over creating conversations and the gatekeepers' approval is not needed.

LA: With the way that DIY and hacking communities have grown, the big companies have had no choice but to listen, which is why you hear the words 'fan service' much more. The filming mechanics in *Grand Theft Auto V* (by Rockstar) would have likely not existed if it were not for the fans hacking previous iterations and creating Machinima.

WO: I notice how you're using that as a Segway to talk about your collaborations with David Blandy (laughs).

LA: No comment (laughs). DIY creators have become a force; driven by their love for the things that they grew up playing or doing. The ability to take things apart and to put them together with an alternative angle is a special thing. That makes the final zone so powerful, especially *Breakup Squad* (by Cat Small, Chris Allgoo, Ethan Gooding and Hillmon Ancrum).

WO: The whole game revolves around five players, who are at a party. Two of them have had a drunken argument, and are trying to find each other among the crowds and it's the job of the three other players to keep them apart to stop things from getting messy. I love that they brought a piece of the social into the gaming world! It can't always be about jumping on mushroom heads, dragons or reruns of World War 2...

LA: Another game that we played was *Queers in Love at The End of The World* (by Anna Anthropy).

WO: You basically have ten seconds in the game (before the game/world ends) to make a set of decisions with your partner. I loved the way this game considers and uses anxiety to explore queerness. That secret sauce that binds some of the best games: empathy (through interaction). It reminded me of playing *Limbo* (Playdead); I wish the exhibition could have demonstrated that a bit more.

LA: So, your summarising thoughts?

WO: I think they mostly have the right content, but for a show that you're paying a pretty penny for (laughs),⁴ you want it to have more substance and less writing. Interaction is such a key aspect

of gaming culture, you can have the aesthetics for an exhibition, but if you're missing that feeling of being a part of it, then it will continue to be an untapped area. There is still a task to take the viewer on a journey of the (valid) feelings a gamer feels.

LA: Yeah, that is my issue with art spaces in London and the UK that charge this kind of money. I could have gotten a few PS4 games from *Computer Exchange*,⁵ or gone to the cinema and got popcorn with a drink for the price of a ticket. With one of those options I can repeat the process of immersion if I choose. The problem with the exhibition price point is only a select few who can afford it will see the exhibition.

WO: Ok, let me ask – who do you think the exhibition is for? Gamers or people interested in what gamers do?

LA: Gaming expos like EGX, Insomnia63 and Comic Con are not simply spaces for gamers, and yes, they cost a similar price to visit, but they are way larger. You get to see an arena filled with a plethora of things, with people coming in from all walks of life, most of them with incredibly artful, devoted cosplays. There is this air of exclusivity that museums and galleries emit, and it makes me question if this goes against what gaming is about? I expect more...

WO: Do you always expect a bargain (laughs)? I don't think it is an exhibition for gamers, it is for people who want a look into that world – it feels like a thesis on gaming culture opened up into an exhibition.

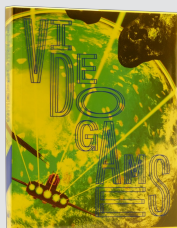
Exhibition details

Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

8th September 2018–24th February 2019

About this book



Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt

By Marie Foulston and Kristian Volsing

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2018

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Footnotes

- 1** *The Last of Us* was released in June 2013; *Metal Gear Solid* (Kojima Productions) in 2015.
- 2** The first area deals with concept building and various aspects of design, the second with the political, the third space is a cinema-like area that presents a grand look into gaming as an industry through spectating, online gaming, sharing and so on. The final zone is dedicated to the DIY culture of game making.
- 3** A 'Splattershot' is one of the weapons you can choose in *Splatoon*.
- 4** Entry to the exhibition costs £18 for adults, £13 for kids aged 12+ and kids up to 11 go free.
- 5** You can currently buy *Fallout 4* for £6, *Dishonoured 2* for £6 and *Sine Mora EX* for £6 on the PlayStation 4, totaling £18 at Computer Exchange. This is also the entry fee to the show at the V&A. You're welcome.

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