Smithsonian Calls on UA Video Game Experts for Help on New Exhibit

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Two University of Arizona video game experts are advising Smithsonian Institution curators developing an exhibit that will showcase the history and impact of video games in American society.

Ken McAllister and Judd Ruggill, co-directors of the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive in the College of Humanities, were part of a group of outside consultants—game historians, archivists and scholars—invited by the Smithsonian to brainstorm the best ways to create an interactive museum space that can contextualize how video games have become a force in modern life.

The Smithsonian's Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation hosted the gathering. The Lemelson Center announced its Video Game Pioneers Initiative in 2016, the first effort by the Smithsonian to collect artifacts for a presentation about an industry that has grown to more than $100 billion in worldwide sales annually.

"There are a number of gaming museums around, even one called the National Videogame Museum, but when you have the Smithsonian Institution collecting and valuing these materials, it sends a powerful message about the importance of collecting and preserving video games," says Ruggill, head of the Department of Public and Applied Humanities. "And it was fascinating to see the scale of what's planned for one of the country's most popular museums."

The National Museum of American History currently houses a world-class computer history collection and began collecting video game consoles in the early 2000s.

The National Museum of American History—the branch of the Smithsonian Institution that houses the Lemelson Center—began collecting video games and game consoles in the early 2000s, mainly to supplement its computer history collection. As the video game industry grew economically and in terms of cultural impact, the museum's curators decided that documenting its unique history and global contributions was merited. The new exhibit will occupy an entire floor of the museum, and will connect video game history to a variety of other innovations in play that coincided with the rise of the neighborhood arcade and the home console market.
"Over the course of only 50 years, video games grew from the idea of a few pioneers to an industry that entertains and educates billions of people worldwide," said Arthur Daemmrich, director of the Lemelson Center, in a news release announcing the project. "The Video Game Pioneers Archive will allow the Smithsonian and like-minded organizations to capture the history of this technical and creative industry through the first-hand recollections and records of its founders and put the materials to use in future exhibitions and programs."

"It's interesting to see the organizational thinking around a project like this," McAllister said. "The Smithsonian has some unique materials, but the acquisition of objects isn't a big deal for them."

"For them, the challenge is how to think about an exhibit that will be engaging for at least 20 years and be seen by millions of visitors," he added.

The museum's request for outside expertise, he said, centered on how to create innovative and interactive exhibits that truly reflect the nature of video games. The two-day meeting in late November covered topics ranging from how best to represent the wide range of people who make video games possible and the ethical responsibility of the museum to address widespread cultural criticisms about video games (e.g., that they encourage violence, racism and misogyny), to technical, legal and planning matters related to video game emulation and the design of a "future-proof" exhibit that can accommodate the yet-to-come history of games that will unfold during the life of the exhibit itself.

"They want to do more than just present a timeline of video games. Putting important items in glass cases isn't all that interesting to most people, and arguably runs counter to what makes video games so compelling," McAllister says. "A video game in a museum case is really just an exhibit about game packaging. The Smithsonian is trying to figure out how to do an exhibit of games themselves. A game isn't a game until it's being played."

McAllister and Ruggill pointed to the challenges the Smithsonian faces on how to present video games within the context of national history when video games, for the most part, have drawn heavily on international technologies, labor forces and aesthetics.

"How do you reflect a national history when the games you're playing depend on electronics from Japan, China, Hungary and Mexico, software from Canada, Spain and France, and content from the U.S., Sweden and Brazil? Some of the most iconic games in America aren't from America," Ruggill said.

Another consideration is the relatively short history of video games, which presents both challenges and opportunities. "You're looking at a medium where the inventors are mostly still alive," Ruggill said.

McAllister and Ruggill say they were impressed to see not only the scale of the project, but also the Smithsonian's commitment to delivering a different sort of exhibit. And as academic experts on gaming, they were honored to be invited as consultants in shaping the project.

"We had the opportunity to help the Smithsonian answer the question 'What meanings do we want to help create?'" Ruggill says. "It was remarkable to be a small contributor to the imagining of the nation's history, and to be among the chorus of voices there advocating for an exhibit as diverse, multicultural and complex as the video game industry itself."