gamevironments

global network player authority PewDiePie guild god Let's Play angel undead wtf authentic mediatization Skill PVE contest dungeon game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing noob kills demon race body fight pop experience ingame PS4 discussion digital religion gamer analysis lol religio-scape soul diablo class tradition twitch rebirth wedding simulation ludology The Last of Us healing lore death resurrection funeral ritual virtual identity buff priest genesis clan gamer narrative community symbols salvation mage XBox 360PVE immersion hel

Issue 14 (2021)

articles

History Games for Boys? Gender, Genre and the Self-Perceived Impact of Historical
Games on Undergraduate Historians
by Robert Houghton, 1

Inaudible Systems, Sonic Users. Sound Interfaces and the Design of Audibility Layouts
in Digital Games
by Eduardo Harry Luersen, 50

Ghosts, Spooks, and Martyrs. Historical Hauntings in *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon
Wildlands*
by Megan Ward, 85

Feminist Gamer Social Identities
by Michael Winters and James L. Williams, 119

research reports

New Earth. Fantasy Pantheon Inspired by Afro-Brazilian Religion
by Eliane Bettocchi, 170

Holy Ocarina! Exploring Religion in/of/through *The Legend of Zelda* Series
by Johnathan Sanders, 198

interviews

reviews

Interview with Stella Wisdom, Digital Curator at the British Library

Lissa Holloway-Attaway

Abstract

This interview with Stella Wisdom, Digital Curator at the British Library in the UK, focuses on illustrating the ways video game technologies have become inspirational for curatorial practice and public outreach activities that support new research on digital media. Wisdom discusses her role working with games and related games media and activities from the perspective of a cultural heritage organization working with the preservation and collection of complex digital artifacts. She identifies games as a significant kind of emerging format in which a traditional heritage organization, like the British Library, has become increasingly interested based on the complex cultures, stories and media that intersect with games and users. She shares her experience running games competitions and hosting activities for developers and players, including with children, demonstrating how games have become a key focal point for libraries, museums, and digital archiving practices helping to create new knowledge. Her close cooperation with video game developers (such as Inkle and Crytek) and with other creative industry partners illustrates the importance of understanding games as complex material and game social objects. The transhistorical connections among games and with other media forms, analog and digital, in the Library's collections, provide inspiration for many interesting collaborative research projects. This work forms a foundation for others interested in researching, developing and preserving games as meaningful cultural artifacts for analysis.

230

Can you tell me a bit about your background and your job at the British Library and how it positions you and your interest in digital games?

I am currently a Digital Curator for Contemporary British Collections at the British Library. I trained to be a librarian, my undergraduate degree is a BA Joint Honours in Information and Library Studies and Art History from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. I studied from 1996-1999. It was an exciting time to be a student, as it was the early days of the World Wide Web. I spent a lot of time on IRC and making awful websites with flashing animations. So it was a fun time to be a library studies student! Then in the early 2000's I studied for an MA in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, and I worked at the National Library of Scotland (NLS) in their maps department – which becomes relevant later with my work and interest in games. So my education and training is in traditional librarianship and museum studies – although I quickly moved into areas focused on digital innovation and creativity.

I joined the British Library's Boston Spa site in Yorkshire in early 2006 to be a collections preservation and storage manager, working with physical analogue collections. In 2010 the British Library set up a new digital scholarship department. I was one of the first members of this team to establish this brand new department focused on digital research. Our remit was to promote innovative use of digital collections. The British Library had been digitizing collections since the early 1990's, but now was really interested in seeing how scholars in fields like the Digital Humanities could use these resources computationally. So we promoted using our collections for research projects and became actively involved in research ourselves.

My interest in game technologies happened rather serendipitously. It began when I went to the Preservation of Complex Objects Symposia (POCOS) held in Cardiff in early 2012 (Delve and Anderson 2014). I wasn't at all focused on games in my work when I attended, but that changed after meeting some key people at this conference. These included Iain Simons, who ran GameCity Festival in Nottingham, and Professor James Newman from Bath Spa University, both co-founders of the National Videogame Archive, which became the National Videogame Arcade and then evolved into the National Videogame Museum here in the UK. During a break, we started a conversation, and they asked me what the British Library was doing regarding games. I said I was unaware, if we were doing anything at all with games. I told them, we don't collect games, as such. They might sometimes be accidently collected, but we didn't have a remit or collection policy to acquire them. They then began to *pitch* to me about how games might be created using British Library digitized collections, and they were quite persuasive. They told me about the GameCity Festival and how they held student competitions. They specifically asked if the British Library might be interested in collaborating with the festival, using the British Library digital collections to inspire this student game-making competition.

I said I would definitely investigate, and when I returned from the conference, I discussed the proposal with Tom Harper, the British Library's Lead Curator for Antiquarian Maps. Given my background, working with NLS map collections, I could really see how cartographic collections could be used as inspiration to create games. Tom Harper thought it sounded really interesting and fun, and said he would be happy to work with me on it. So we collaborated together with Iain Simons and James Newman to create what would become the *Off the Map* competition, which we ran for 5 years (British Library 2018). *Off the Map* was a student game making competition, and each year we picked a theme linked to British Library exhibition

topic, except for the first year. So we had, for example, an Alice in Wonderland, a Shakespeare, and a Gothic theme for the competition based on which exhibitions were running at the same time (Wisdom 2015). We also expanded beyond maps, to include texts, illustrations and digitized sound recordings, but in the beginning we used maps and topographical views of sites including Stonehenge and of London, before and after the Great Fire of 1666.

The first *Off the Map* winning entry Pudding Lane Productions, by students from De Montford University in Leicester made an amazing interactive environment for their game based on London before the Great Fire in the 17th century (British Library 2013). We had a surprising amount of press for the competition, and for this work in particular, much more than I ever imagined, we were even featured on the BBC's technology show called *BBC Click* (BBC 2013). It was then, after all this press, that I had to *confess* to my senior managers that I had quietly been running a video game design competition. Fortunately, because of the positive press, they were supportive, and it was here where we really began a more formal focus on video game technologies, interactive media and emerging formats as an area for the British Library to explore for research and related activities.

Maps and gaming have a long historical relationship, and this relationship has been the subject of much postcolonial and other critique based on *mapping* strategies that promote power and exclusion. But how do you think games and maps can link together

to inspire and/or to transform understandings of places and identities? What were the specific ways you brought them into alignment, and was this positive?

Yes, maps are complicated, and we definitely looked at them as complex objects. Many of the maps we selected were illustrated with *cartouches* – illustrated frames and drawings to decorate the maps, and we included topographical panoramic views, which were quite inspirational. Pudding Lane Productions for example used them as a basis for their explorable 17th century London (2013) to show what it looked like before The Great Fire in 1666. There is a really detailed view of London by Visscher, that includes *Old* London Bridge (which was there 1209-1831, but no longer exists). It is an amazing work, really detailed – complete with heads on spikes – and here you can really feel the ambience of the scene. The evocative architecture in Visscher's *View of London* and the area destroyed by the fire depicted in John Leake's *An exact surveigh of the streets lanes and churches contained within the ruins of the City of London* became a key part of their submission. They made these wonderful modular houses based on the views with different tops, middles, bottoms, that could be combined together in various ways to make very different looking streets, just by rearranging them (Dempsey et al. 2014). So the maps and views were literally graphically inspirational.

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Figure 1. Scene from Pudding Lane Productions, created by students from De Montfort University in the UK, winners of the first *Off the Map* competition in 2013 © Joe Dempsey, Dominic Bell, Luc Fontenoy, Daniel Hargreaves, Daniel Peacock and Chelsea Lindsay.

Figure 2. Scene from Pudding Lane Productions, created by students from De Montfort University in the UK, winners of the first *Off the Map* competition in 2013 © Joe Dempsey, Dominic Bell, Luc Fontenoy, Daniel Hargreaves, Daniel Peacock and Chelsea Lindsay.
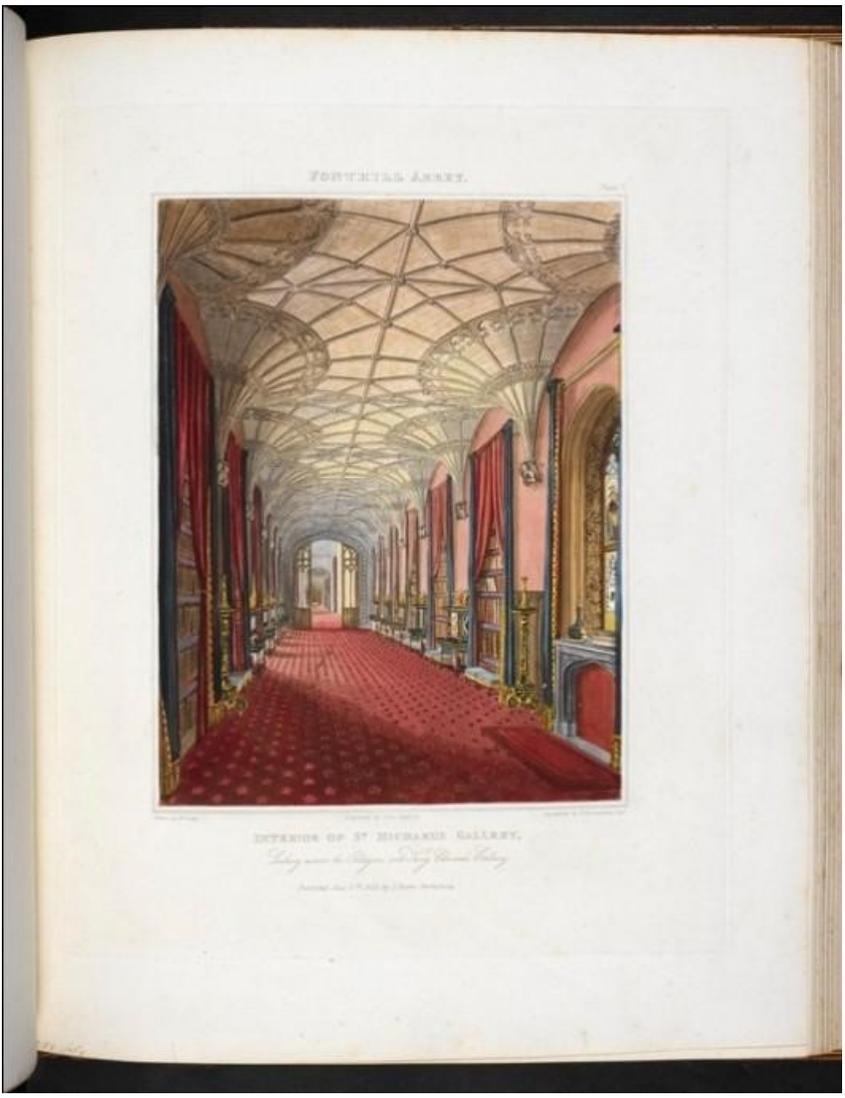
Figure 3. John Leake's *An exact surveigh of the streets lanes and churches contained within the ruines of the City of London* (Stationer 1667) © Public Domain, British Library, Cartographic Items Maps Crace Port. 1.50.

Figure 4. Detail of Visscher's View of London (Visscher c. 1616) © Public Domain, British Library, Maps C.5.a.6.

In 2014 for the *Off the Map* Gothic competition, a team of three students from University of South Wales created an underwater VR game *Nix*, where players rebuild Fonthill Abbey, the once-stunning Gothic revival country house in Wiltshire, which was demolished in 1846 after the collapse of its spectacular 300-foot tower twenty years earlier. Not even a ruin remains of this once stunning building, but the British Library has wonderful illustrations depicting both the exterior and interior of the building (British Library 2014).

Figure 5. Detail of the Fonthill Abbey (Rutter 1823a) @ Public Domain, British Library, General Reference Collection 191.e.6.

Figure 6. Interior of St. Michael Gallery, Looking across the Octagon into King Edwards Gallery (Rutter 1823b) @ Public Domain, British Library, General Reference Collection 191.e.6.

Figure 7. Scene from Nix, the 2014 *Off the Map* winning game, by team Gothulus Rift, from University of South Wales, who created a Fonthill Abbey inspired game for Oculus Rift © Jackson Rolls-Gray, Lauren Filby and Faye Allen.

Figure. 8. People playing *Nix*, the 2014 *Off the Map* winning game, by team Gothulus Rift, from University of South Wales, who created a Fonthill Abbey inspired game for Oculus Rift © Stella Wisdom.

For the first two *Off the Map* competitions, including the gothic themed competition, I collaborated with Crytek , an independent video game developer, publisher, and technology provider based in Frankfurt, Germany, who ran a video game studio in Nottingham, UK – they were the first game studio I'd ever worked with as a partner. Crytek provided free educational use of their software to the participating students, the CryEngine (Crytek 2021) and were competition judges. Sadly, they sold their UK studio in 2014, and our partnership ended then. However, it was very interesting to experience the differences in working with creative industry partners, specifically the gaming industry, and the commercial sector, rather than with other cultural heritage partners, which I was used to in my work at British Library. I learned a lot from this collaboration, and I'm still learning today.

Do you think these events working with games have now solidified a strong connection to them for the British Library? Do you think they now find significant connections?

Yes, the British Library has definitely evolved to be more interested in interactive technology and games, though we call them emerging formats. The culture of the Library is always evolving.

In 2019 we hosted an artistic residency and exhibition called *Imaginary Cities*, by Michael Takeo Magruder (British Library 2019). This included an interactive VR piece, which was on public display in the Library. His residency used maps and book illustrations from the British Library's "Mechanical Curator" release of more than 1 million images to the world, uploaded to Flickr Commons under the public domain mark, meaning complete freedom of re-use (The public domain review n.d.).

Imaginary Cities showcased fantastical cityscapes, created with traditional materials combined with cutting–edge digital technologies to remix images and live data from the Library's digital collection of historic urban maps into fictional cityscapes for the Information Age.

The exhibition displayed four technology-based art installations, exclusively created using images and metadata of 19th century city maps. Each artwork combined contemporary digital technologies and traditional analogue processes. Algorithmically generated imagery and real-time virtual environments next to precious metal gilding and historical woodworking techniques.
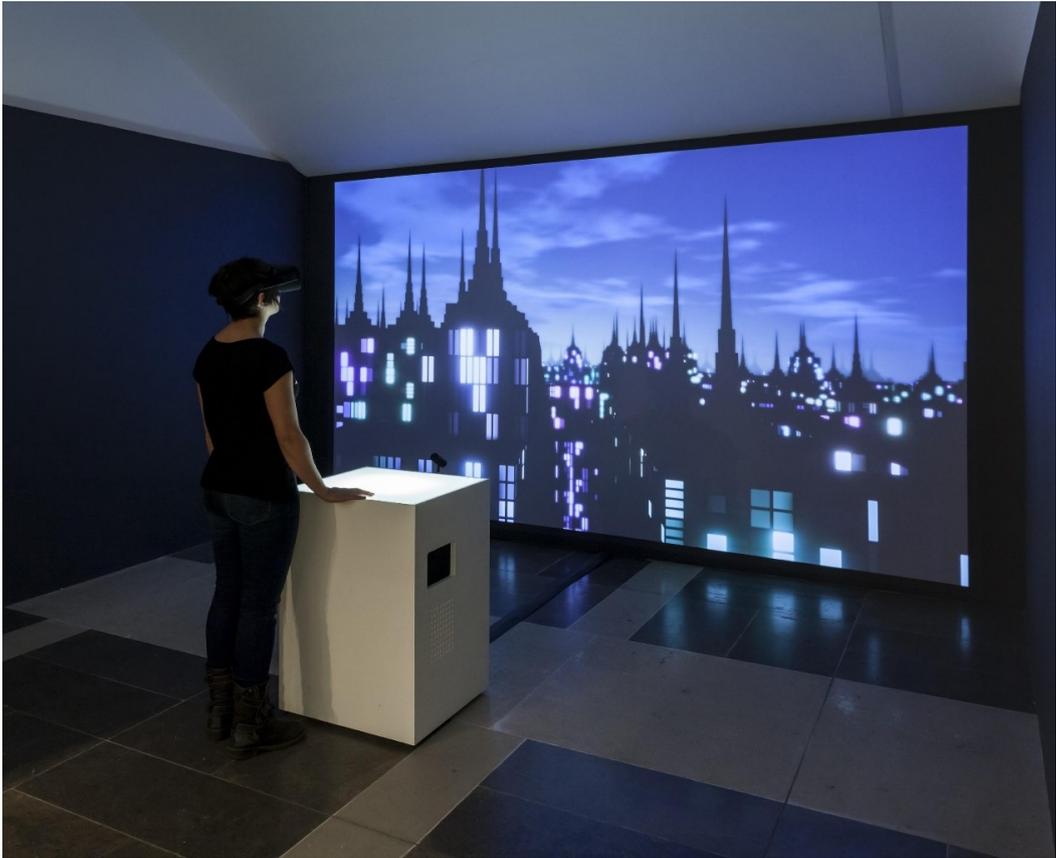
Figure 9. Michael Takeo Magruder, *Imaginary Cities* at the British Library, 2019. Photographs by David Steele © Michael Takeo Magruder.

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The British Library has been very receptive to technological progress, and our *emerging formats* research is a significant development. The term *emerging formats* refers to types of publication, such as eBook mobile apps and web-based interactive narratives, that are in scope to collect under the UK's Non-Print Legal Deposit Regulations, but whose content and structure are more challenging compared to those currently collected. Working with the UK legal deposit libraries, the British Library is building its knowledge and capability before it can collect these publications and make them available onsite to readers (Smith and Cooke 2018).

We are interested in collecting work that may be published by game studios, but which the Library may see as interactive e-book, e.g. if the work has considerable amounts of written text. We are trying to define the scope of these new types of book, to understand how can we collect and digitally preserve them, as there are not established methods. Emerging Formats is itself an emerging field and we have been developing collaborations with other organizations.

We successfully experimented with the UK Web Archive set up originally in 2004 (UK Web Archive 2010). This work includes a post-doctoral project by Lynda Clark we hosted in 2019 that looked at web-crawlers and interactive fiction works, looking at, for example, works created with Twine or Bitsy, but other web-hosted interactive works too. Lynda Clark built an excellent UKWA Interactive Narratives collection (UK Web Archive 2018-2019) for us.

Also we are working with apps and other materials created by game studios, like Inkle, which made *80 Days*, a seriously text-heavy game, with a lot of writing! Inkle have been very helpful and collaborative. We have been experimenting with how to collect and preserve *80 Days*, and we are learning a lot, but it's difficult even with a

close collaboration, one-on-one even, with UK game studios like Inkle. How to find scale-able approaches becomes a serious challenge given the complexity of the game form. We are still working it out and exploring how we can preserve interactive works. It's an emerging field, we can say, for sure.

One of my best moments at the British Library was when I saw people cosplaying characters from *80 Days* at the Library for the AdventureX narrative games convention – it felt like we'd become like a *Comic-Con*, or something else kind of cool. It's been amazing to see the shift in thinking about what is now *permissible* in the Library space.

Figure 10. Attendees at the British Library for the 2019 AdventureX narrative games convention cosplaying characters from Inkle's *80 Days* © Jordan Erica Webber.

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You've mentioned narrative games a few times. Can you say more about your interest in this genre and related ones and how you work with them at the British Library?

A number of years ago I learned about International Games Day – which is now International Games Week (American Library Association 2021) an initiative started by and overseen by the American Libraries Association, but it is a global event. It features all games, from card games to board games, and digital games. In 2014 I started running my own events for this each November (Wisdom 2014). Through participation in games week, I discovered *WordPlay*, a festival that normally happens in Toronto, Canada, which celebrates *writerly* and narrative games and the like, which feature lots of text, story and words (Hand Eye Society 2021). In 2016, I borrowed the event, and held WordPlay London at the British Library – the only time it has ever been held outside of Toronto (Munroe 2016). Unfortunately, I realised I had planned it at a time that clashed with a similar event, *AdventureX* (2019), which also celebrated narrative games at their international convention. I felt terrible that I had scheduled it at the same time and that our events would be clashing. So I reached out to the organisers of *AdventureX* to let them know about the conflict and explain that it wasn't on purpose. As it turned out, we had high participation at both events. Both sold out! This was great for the events, and it also opened my eyes that there was clearly a high demand for the topic of narrative games. The *AdventureX* organisers shared with me that they were looking for a bigger venue for the event, which was previously held at Goldsmiths University. They knew they could grow their audience, and asked if we could support that growth with a bigger venue at the British Library, and that's how I got involved.

I was of course very interested – because of the narrative games element which is very relevant to a library. So we hosted *AdventureX* in 2018 and 2019 at the British Library. The only reason we didn't have it last year was because of the covid-19 pandemic. What really shocked me was how quickly all the tickets sold out. For the two years we hosted it, it was the fastest selling event in the British Library autumn season. We had attendees come from the US and from Australia for just for a 2-day event. This let me know that people were really passionate about narrative games. It has also provided a forum for curatorial staff to meet and talk with game developers, to help us with our curatorial work. Jon Ingold, co-founder of Inkle, is a regular speaker at *Adventure X*, and this was what led to follow up conversations with him that helped us with our work to collect and preserve *80 Days*. The event is a positive way for curatorial staff to have dialogue with games companies in a friendly cooperative space; *80 Days* started this, but we'd like to collaborate with other studios in this way in the future.

245

Figure 11. *Sumatra: Fate of Yandi* by Cloak and Dagger Games, exhibited at AdventureX in 2019 © Other Tales Interactive.

Are you interested at the British Library in games beyond narrative games? Are there other kinds of games, game materials, or game-based activities that you think might also be the source for innovative research?

We have been talking to other Cultural Heritage organizations in UK with respect to emerging formats. For example, the Victoria and Albert Museum is interested in the art and design aspect of games, the British Film Institute is focused on film and animation, and Tate Modern on digital art. So we do keep in touch with our peer organizations, to share our knowledge and experience specific to our institutional remits. This creates a very positive forum to cooperate.

In fact, the Videogame Heritage Society, Subject Specialist Network (VHS 2021), founded by Iain Simons and James Newman, who helped me first establish my interest in games through the *GameCity Festival* and *Off the Map* competitio*n* set up this network. They saw it as a way to provide a collaborative forum for all of us to talk to each other about our interest in games. We feel that there isn't just one institution that will collect everything, and this is how we can respond and work together.

At the British Library we are also interested in what we call contextual information around games and we are exploring how we can collect these too (press packs, blogs, reviews, for example). So even if we can't collect the games in the UK Web archive, we have this other important online cultural material to help us understand the social dimensions of games. We see the UK Web Archive as a resource we can share with others, and an important means to capture the wider culture of games.

Can you say more about the Web Archive itself? Is it specific to British Library? And do you have other strategic partnerships that might surprise us, beyond games and cultural heritage?

The UK Web Archive is a collaboration between all of the UK Legal Deposit Libraries: Bodleian Libraries, Oxford University, British Library, Cambridge University Libraries, National Library of Scotland, National Library of Wales and Trinity College, Dublin. However, there are many web archiving institutions around the world who explore digital documentation and preservation issues and they collaborate via the International Internet Preservation Consortium (IIPC 2021).

I am also engaged in work with children and young people, I've worked with our Learning team here at the library, and in partnership with academic institutions; including the MissionMaker projects at University College London (Burn n.d.). I have also worked with Lancaster University and their *Litcraft* project where children complete tasks in Minecraft story worlds from classic books e.g. *Treasure Island* (Chronotopic Cartographies n.d.). Our real aim is to engage young people in reading, especially to encourage *reluctant reader*s. The children read books and do related activities in *Minecraft* as a way to encourage them to read and become more interested in books (Flood and Cain 2018).

Figure 12. Children doing *Litcraft* activities on an iPad © Lancaster University.

Figure 13. Scene from *Litcraft Treasure Island* © Lancaster University.

Do you see any problem working with big commercial games, versus the original games you've helped to support through other activities or with independent smaller studios?

Actually, No. We love that *Minecraft* has such a massive reach, so we can tap into that network. I have thought in the past of other virtual worlds and how we might consider them in our work, for example in platforms like *Second Life*. But *Second Life* unfortunately never sustained a long-term interest for their followers and it has dwindled in popularity. But the fact that young people have really warmed to *Minecraft* and are so comfortable with it means it is a great medium for us. Using the platform to get kids interested in literature feels like a *no-brainer*, and we are happy to leverage their social connection to the games for our interests. Why would we not want to work with it? We have hosted *Minecraft* events at the library, for example, we had *Litcraft* sessions every week for a while (pre-Covid) where we worked with a local school in Camden, London, near the British Library where children came to the Library to do activities based on their readings. *Litcraft* also partners with public libraries around the UK for similar activities, so it's become a useful model for us and we are happy to share our methods.

Are you surprised about how games have become a part of your work at the British Library? It feels like you *accidently* discovered the connection, but do you feel the work with games is now personally satisfying and exciting in connection to your role as a digital curator and especially within emerging formats research?

I am excited! Yes! Libraries need to evolve to stay relevant and our work with games allows us to do this. I really do see researching innovative technologies and the future

of publishing as being critical. It's important that we don't become the *Museum for the History of the Book*. I don't want to fit the stereotypical image of the fusty old librarian. I love going to other libraries and seeing installations like library maker-spaces. I also love sharing the exciting research we've done at the British Library, so we can inspire and support other related work. I love partnerships with other libraries. Leeds Libraries in Yorkshire, UK hosted a game jam this spring on novels that shape our world, and they were inspired by our work (Leeds Libraries n.d.). So it's exciting to see the influence that my projects have had.

Could you discuss future possibilities and opportunities for research and development collaborations with the British Library in terms of games? Are there particular collections, or historical periods that you think lend themselves to this kind of research, or is it more open, and what is the process to begin a collaboration?

British Library collections are massive! In fact, we don't know exactly how big they really are, but we estimate we may have 170 million items in our collections (British Library n.d.a). This includes everything from books, music, sound, comics, manuscripts, stamps, maps, most media forms you can think of. The main advice I'd give to future researchers in games, or in other fields, is just to reach out and talk to us. We collaborate with researchers on projects often funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK. We also supervise collaborative PhD research students via the AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships scheme (Arts and Humanities Research Council n.d.). British Library curators propose research topics for these doctoral projects, then we advertise for the university partners, and then we advertise for students. So, it is multistep process, but it leads to some interesting research. For example, I currently co-supervise four PhD students, including Alastair

Horne (2019) at Bath Spa University whose research explores how mobile phones are changing storytelling. Carol Butler at City, University of London, who is investigating how technology is used to support the co-construction of understanding of text through interaction between readers, and between reader and author. Linda Berube also at City, University of London and Thomas Gebhart at University of the Arts London, who are both researching aspects relating to digital comics creation, consumption and collecting (British Library n.d.b).

My best advice for anyone wanting to collaborate on a research project with us, is to approach us early. As a large public institution, we often need a long lead-time. So start reaching out to curators if you're interested in working with us. We are generally very receptive to ideas for innovative research with our digital collections, and this includes emerging formats work.

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255

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THOMAS STREETE & RICHARD SHORTGAVE in Decber. Ao. 1666. BY THE ORDER OF
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