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Inside Overcoming Necessary Obstacles – an introspective games exhibition

A pandemic-delayed game exhibit finds new life in the middle of New York City.

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A screenshot from Studio Oleomingus's *Folds of a Separation*



Upon entering the Project Space at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, the first installation that jumps out to the eye is an anachronistic set-up in the center of the room. Colorful, glowing LED keyboards that look like they came from a Twitch streamer's set up are attached to monitors that look like they belong in the early 2000s. This is what you will see when you go to see *Voluntary Attempts to Overcoming Necessary Obstacles*, a small but vital video games exhibition located in the middle of New York City.

Nicholas O'Brien, developer of 2019's [The Last Survey](#), is the curator of *Voluntary Attempts*, an exhibit showcasing games using technology to tell stories, and expand upon ideas, concepts and spaces that the

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Identifying fine art in video games

"One of the questions in that cycle was what kind of work isn't getting the fine art or contemporary art treatment it deserves?" O'Brien said. Naturally his answer was games. And not just traditional video games. Exposing an art gallery audience to the variety of gameplay and stories on display was one of the exhibit's main objectives.

The gallery includes works from Pippin Barr, Angela Washko, Nathalie Lawhead, Jeremy Couillard, Robert Yang, Everest Pipkin, and Studio Oleomingus among other notable developers. Each of these creators agreed to put their work on display when O'Brien first pitched the idea to EFA in 2019. The realities of a pandemic pushed that opening back to Fall 2022. While some of the entries have changed, all the same artists originally involved stayed to see the project through.

"When I got a finalized date I went back to all the artists in the original proposal and said this is actually happening, do you still want to participate? Graciously, everyone said yes." O'Brien noted that for some pieces, like Jeremy Couillard's *Fuzz Dungeon, Voluntary Attempts* was planned to be the debut of artists' latest projects.

Conversely, Angela Washko used the exhibit as an opportunity to show off the brand new game, and companion piece art book, she had worked on during the pandemic. Studio Oleomingus was another contributor who replaced their initial proposal with a new project.

The exhibition's title is derived from Bernard Suits' definition of a game from his book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Suits defines a game as "a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles," but O'Brien finds a central contradiction in this wording.

By highlighting games that all display meaningful subject matter with a well-founded sense of urgency, he argues that the medium has made a case for its necessity. The one liberty he takes when using Suits' words makes all the difference to the definition itself.

"If the premise is about [games] being such a core part of sociability or humanity, then it seems like it's not unnecessary. It seems quite necessary," O'Brien explained. "Games deal with content and subject matter that are really pressing. They can be more than bodily expressions or expressions of chance. They can have contained within them nuanced expressions of introspection and self-criticality, analysis of culture, critical theory, and satire. These are the things on display in the exhibition."



One of the most openly humorous examples of this criticality is in Pippin Barr's unwinnable mini-game collection *Let's Play Ancient Greek Punishment* where you can live the endless cycle of Sisyphus and other mythical failsons. Running on old CRT monitors, the game lets you experience the punishment of Greek mythology's last successful tricksters in four different endless modes.

It wasn't just *Let's Play Ancient Greek Punishment*. Every bit of the exhibit's design and functionality was created with forethought from the makers and the curator. The setup for Porpentine Charity Heartscape's Twine text adventure, *The Soft Rumor of Spreading Weeds*, was sprawled out on a dark rug to evoke the soft comforts of the royalty you are stepping into the shoes of. Making choices as an empress of a dying empire, you

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details as

"Early on in the exhibition design there were conversations between me and the gallery about whether or not the gallery needed instruction manuals for every game. And I really pushed back against that at a certain point because I didn't want to both assume little of the audience." O'Brien opted for a solution that would create the least friction with the widest audience. Doing so meant determining which method of control fit each piece.

Jeremy Couillard's *Fuzz Dungeon* was displayed on a TV with a singular wired Xbox controller on the bench in front of the piece. Many others only gave you a mouse. But giving a universal set of tools to all gallery visitors is not the same as instructing them on how to play. "I wanted folks to approach the work with curiosity and a desire to explore rather than a predefined way of playing. I wanted the tools present to be indicative gestures of what those games are about."

A unifying aspect of all these works is how they act as windows into the creator's thoughts and process. Not in a fourth wall-breaking way like *The Beginner's Guide*, but in subtler expressions like in Nathalie Lawhead's *SHARED_ANXIETIES_WITH_A_FRIEND_ON_YOUR_BIRTHDAY.exe*. O'Brien recognizes how Lawhead's talking desktop buddy could be considered more of an app than a game, but its inclusion is an acknowledgement of the exhibit's interest in methodology. "It is gamifying the expressions of anxiety and self doubt that the piece is talking about. There is this call and response game dynamic that I think is appropriate for the exhibition, but there's not an expressive goal in a traditional sense." O'Brien said.

As you reflect on your interaction with an anxious desktop friend, it's easy to let your gaze drift to the dark side room in the corner. Inside, Robert Yang's 2017 "historical bathroom simulator" *The Tearoom* plays on a projector while upon an obelisk-like column in the center of the room rests a mouse. In Yang's satire you are a man in a restroom and your only goal is to suck another man's gun (the euphemism Yang is making here is apparent when you play the game) to completion—just as long as you don't get caught by the police.



It's an experience evoking VR-levels of distress when the game is projected onto a ten foot wall—an insightful and mesmerizingly engaging work,

"Having people arrive at Robert's piece, furthest from the door and deepest into the gallery was intentional," he said. "I wanted people to arrive at this piece that was directed in its message and intentional in its content and critical in its perspective and sharp in its wit and satire."

Each of these qualities in Yang's work speaks to O'Brien's larger goal with *Voluntary Attempts*. These are games that show how the medium can be appreciated in the same way as modern fine art. You don't need to be an artist or know the first thing about sculpture to have an emotional response to an exhibit at the MET.

Exhibits like O'Brien's argue games are no different. If these spaces can truly exist for everyone, the barriers for who gets to participate in the conversation get torn down.

When asked about what comes next after *Voluntary Attempts* has run its course, O'Brien paused for a beat

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