

Not to Disappear Completely: Embodiment and Interactivity in Kid A Mnesia Exhibition

When British rock band Radiohead's simultaneously-recorded albums *Kid A* (2000) and *Amnesiac* (2001) were approaching their 21st anniversaries, singer Thom Yorke and the band's in-house artist Stanley Donwood began discussions with the Victoria and Albert Museum to construct an eccentric exhibition featuring unseen material from the creative process of the albums. They eventually realised that the exhibition they had planned was too large to fit in the V&A, but the Westminster council disputed their request to move to the Royal Albert Hall, and the arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic shut down the plans entirely. The exhibition did manifest eventually, but not as it was originally envisioned; instead, the final product was *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* (2021), an exploration-based video game distributed for free on Windows and macOS as well the PlayStation 5. Yorke and Donwood, speaking on the digital format of the exhibition, commented that it meant it no longer needed "conform to any normal rules of an exhibition. Or reality."¹ The "rules of an exhibition" are, as Yorke and Donwood discovered, governed by space and physics, but also by strong conventions and ideologies that determine what gallery spaces look like and what moral functions are ascribed to that appearance. In recent years, museum scholarship has turned a focus to such conventions and how they affect visitor experience; a strong reoccurring theme in these studies has been the multisensory and embodied potential of the museum space, and how this potential is almost always overlooked. *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition*, as per its title, has continued to refer to its inception as a museum piece despite its transposition to a digital format, but that format also transforms the museum space beyond the realm of reality. Using multisensory museum studies as a backdrop, this essay will explore the potential for embodiment and sensoriality in interactive art with *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* as a case study, and argue that the interactive, audiovisual format holds strong potential for engaging the body and senses through its extension of real-world embodied experience.

The museum and gallery's alienation of the body is enforced by a consistent sense of detachment from the exhibited art and the museumgoer. Any museumgoer will be familiar with the repeated mantra "please do not touch the exhibits" – though many museums have tactile areas where some objects can be handled, these are usually enclosed to particular rooms due to the inevitable fragility of historic objects.² Less inevitable, though certainly not less common, is the detachment fostered by the space of an exhibition itself. In most art museums, pieces are presented on white walls in empty, white rooms, and though gallery rooms are often organised

¹ Donwood and Yorke, "Radiohead explain the story behind the creation of its Kid A Mnesia Exhibition."

² Candlin, "Touch, and the Limits of the Rational Museum or Can Matter Think?" 279.

thematically, by artist or by movement, museumgoers are not encouraged by the space to view pieces in relation to one another, but rather individually. Architect and scholar Juhani Pallasmaa writes on this convention that, within the hegemony of the traditional white gallery wall, “artworks are seen as individual and independent aesthetic objects with a special “aura,” and they are exhibited to their best advantages in visually “neutral” settings.”³ This suggestion of the neutrality of “overall whiteness, smoothness, and even illumination of surfaces,”⁴ he argues, is not *inherently* neutral but is in fact a manifestation of associations between whiteness, purity and morality. Pallasmaa characterises this obsession with whiteness as a modernist preference, but these associations also have a strongly neoclassical flavour, since neoclassicism was characterised by the veneration of the supposedly flawless whiteness of Greco-Roman sculpture (though of course, this sculpture was all polychromatic in actuality). This phenomenon of white space creates “an ambience of artificiality, detachment, and isolation” distinct from “reality,”⁵ distinct from the embodied and utilitarian world. Along similar lines, Laura de Caro writes that because museumgoers are so divorced from any sense of immersion in the ‘white box’ space of a museum, museum visits are based on “visual inspection”⁶ – detached, and intellectual rather than emotive. This also takes on a sort of elitist moral quality, as “vision has been repeatedly assigned a prime role in the hierarchy of the senses and in the construction of knowledge”⁷ among western intellectuals: Fiona Candlin writes that “notions of objective science, rational thought and truthful representation have all been predicated upon a shift away from the texture of multisensory experience.”⁸

Compare these ‘white box’ landscapes with the landscapes of *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition*. The space is overwhelmed with objects, texture, and with spatial deliberateness. Rooms are filled with televisions, covered in flapping paper, album artwork is projected in immense scale over walls, floors and ceilings (figures 1-3). Such textures are there to be interacted with, not merely observed – the player immerses themselves in cylinders of gel (figure 4), moves around not only by walking but also by floating between and *through* images (figure 5), lyrics appear on empty walls as if chasing the player down (figure 6).

³ Pallasmaa, “Museum as an Embodied Experience,” 239.

⁴ Ibid..

⁵ Ibid., 240.

⁶ De Caro, “Moulding the Museum Medium: Explorations on Embodied and Multisensory Experience in Contemporary Museum Environments,” 55.

⁷ Ibid..

⁸ Candlin, 277.



Figure 1

Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 4



Figure 5

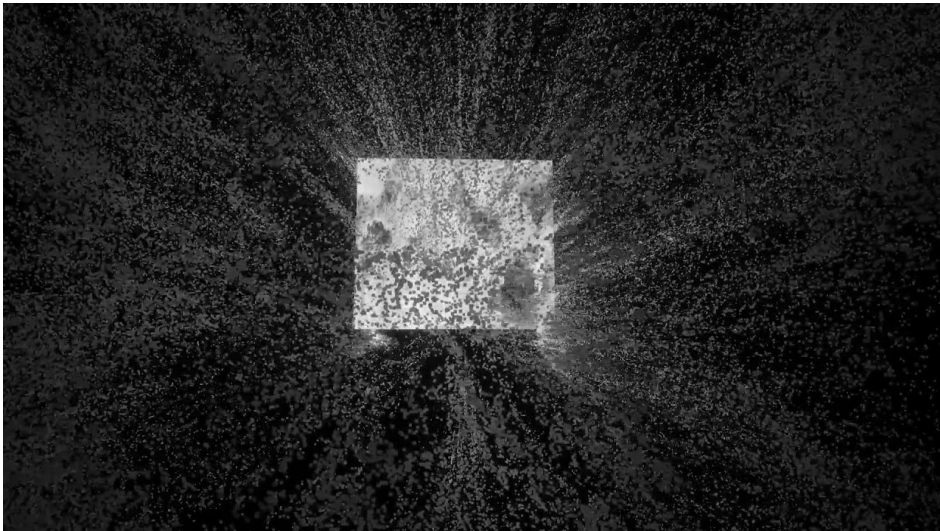


Figure 6



Pallasmaa writes that an embodied exhibition space should mediate between the space of the museum and the works themselves, and create ambience that resonates strongly with the work⁹ – in *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition*, this principle is taken to such extremes that there is essentially no difference between the art and the space – the player/museumgoer experiences the entire space as the art piece. It is impossible to experience the virtual museum as presenting fragmented, isolated art pieces because every image is part of a whole space, one which the player's body is immersed in and in a sort of physical dialogue with.

The interplay between visuals and audio is a significant part of the game, and also encourages a multisensory experience of the space. Though the audio is taken from *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, it is not presented straightforwardly, and only the three songs from a fixed sequence actually appear as they appeared on the original albums. Instead, the songs appear in fragments – for instance, a room plays *Kid A*'s "The National Anthem," but while the synth line plays aloud in the room the drum and bass lines are only played within the aforementioned block of gel, and Thom Yorke's scratchy, digitised vocals play inside a phone booth, accompanied by dialling sounds. Thus, the songs become not simply a soundtrack to the game but function like physical objects within it that must be 'found' within the environment, amplifying the sense of texture in the game's world. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard writes that the game uses "dynamic audio," audio that is changeable and reacts to gameplay scenarios and player input, to the effect of integrating visuality and sound in a multisensory manner, that is, so that the music "becomes process rather than a fixed, single object."¹⁰ This echoes the way that the game's visuals are organised to promote a sense of interplay and interaction between individual visual pieces, the space, and the player.

Scholarship and reports on embodied museum experiences tend to have didactic overtones, and generally suggest ways for sensoriality to be more prioritised by museums.¹¹ De Caro writes that immersive museum space allows the museumgoer to be "no longer a passive recipient of content" but "an actor in a dialogic multisensory process of communication with his/her surroundings"¹² – thus, a multisensory museum experience is one that creates embodiment not only by engaging the body sensorially but also phenomenologically, encouraging the museumgoer to be an active participant in meaning-making. Thus, the multisensory, body-engaging qualities of *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* are actually rather radical reconstitutions of the museum experience, and certainly in line with the multisensory aspirations of actual, real-world museums.

⁹ Pallasmaa, 241.

¹⁰ Korsgarde, "Music Videos and Video Games: Radiohead's *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition*," 193.

¹¹ Tzortzi, "Museum Architectures for Embodied Experience," 491.

¹² *Ibid.*, 56.

There is, of course, a major issue with the arguments made about *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* thus far: however textural and immersive the digital gallery space is, it remains a *digital* one – the body that immerses itself in gel and floats above high ceilings is not an actual body, but a digital simulacrum of one. Is the video game format capable of bridging this gap, of addressing the body in a way that can overcome the lack of physical presence in a space? Vivian Sobchack’s influential work on embodiment in film has been picked up by numerous video game scholars (such as Danny Steur,¹³ Daniel Black¹⁴ and Timothy Crick¹⁵) and provides a good framework for thinking about how screens can engage the body. Sobchack writes that cinematic technology is both expressive and perceptive, that is, that they both extend our human senses and let us use those senses to “make sense of ourselves,” making us both “seer” and “seen.” For Sobchack, the film image usurps the power of the human eye and a sense of subjective time – the camera can perceive the world exactly as it appears to us, and can show us the perceptive, subjective experiences of others. These perceptive qualities in cinema replicate lived, embodied and subjective experiences. Because cinematic temporality and perception is similar to that of lived experience, moving images are “inhabitable” and thus “mobile and tactile... deep and textural.”¹⁶ Cinema is made up of perception, and allows us to witness our own bodies as well as how they operate as perceiving subjects in the world, and so cinematic perception creates a sense of “presence” and “being-in-the-world.” Furthermore, Sobchack writes that what we perceive goes beyond the “surface of the eye”¹⁷ and is incorporated into our experience of tactility.

A number of these concepts are useful for thinking about *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* and video games more broadly. If embodied presence is conveyed by the perceptions of a camera with a fixed sequence of movements, and is not responsive to the film viewer’s body, then its effects are surely amplified by the simple fact that the modes of perception in video games is, especially in first-person games like *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition*, determined by player movement. When inside the exhibition, one moves around rooms and interacts with objects and surfaces in a direct mimicry of how one would do so in real life. For the player, perception of the game world is coming from a specific, consistent and mobile point; Timothy Crick refers to this as the “game body,”¹⁸ which has a “corporeal presence... implicate[d] and inscribe[d]” on it by a game’s camera. Subjective viewpoints occur not

¹³ Steur, “Cinesthetic Play, or Gaming in the Flesh: Grasping Celeste by Adapting the Cinesthetic Subject into a Phenomenology of Videogaming,” 89.

¹⁴ Black, “Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied Visual Engagement in the Third-Person Video Game,” 190.

¹⁵ Crick, “The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming,” 259.

¹⁶ Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen,” 108.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁸ Crick, 261.

only because a camera is being pointed at the game world, but because precisely where the camera is pointing is unique to and controlled by each individual player. Furthermore, the ‘walking simulator’ genre that the game is sometimes categorised into¹⁹ prevents the game experience from becoming particularly separated from real-world experience. The game is not actually ‘gamified’ in any way – the progression from the beginning to the end does not require overcoming any kind of challenge, and there is no inventory or user interface layered over the screen. The player simply explores, looks and hears, much like one would in a real exhibition – this not only mimics real-world experience, but actively draws player attention *away* from the fact

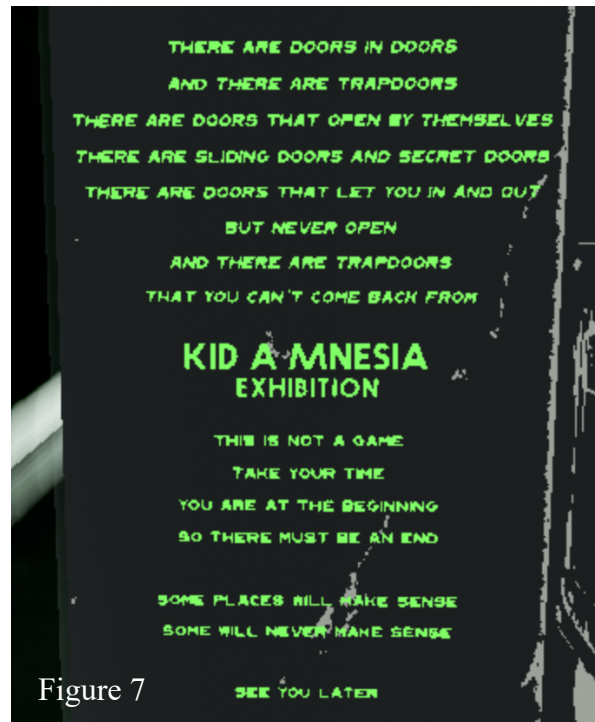


Figure 7

that they are having a digital experience. The game is very much aware of this effort – it proclaims at the entrance to the exhibit building that it is, in fact, not a game at all (figure 7).

Of course, a video game also involves actual bodily action from the player – the game will simply not happen if no one is there to push buttons and move the mouse. Though the physical actions of a player do not (typically) mirror the actions of the game body, it is still a level of physical engagement that is unique to video games among screen media. In this way, the player maintains a certain presence in their own body in addition to that of the game body. Following from Sobchack, Crick argues that this is how the idea of being “seer” and “seen” at once manifests in video games²⁰ – the player both acts “on” the screen and “through” the screen, witnessing the game body as a viewpoint outside themselves and also seeing “through” it as it exists within the game itself. Thus, the game body and the player body are not necessarily felt as separate entities, but as united bodies moving and acting simultaneously. Explaining this phenomenon, Nicolas de Warren uses phenomenological concepts from Husserl to argue that a player will typically “project” their body into the game avatar or ‘game body.’²¹ In order for the space of a 3D game to make sense to us, it is in fact *necessary* to orient ourselves to it by understanding the game body as a version of our own body, and the typical relationship a person will have between vision, a

¹⁹ Korsgarde, 193.

²⁰ Ibid., 263.

²¹ De Warren, “Towards a Phenomenological Analysis of Virtual Fictions,” 110.

sense of spatiality and movement in the real world causes the imagination to be activated by the sensation of moving through a 3D space by way of “projecting one’s consciousness” into a game avatar.²²

Sobchack’s suggestion of the power of visuality to evoke tactility (“[n]or does what we see merely touch the surface of our eyes”)²³ is also relevant to *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition*. Crick pulls up Merleau-Ponty’s idea that the tactile world, and the physical sensations that come with it, are evoked by perception: “there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense... [m]y field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises, and fleeting tactile sensations, which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately ‘place’ in the world.”²⁴ Sobchack calls this direct response to materiality based on perception “microperception;” that is, a response to visuality that is not based on interpretation but is a “material” and “immediate” reaction to sensory inputs based on our subjective experience of embodied reality.²⁵ If the perceptual and the tactile are so strongly linked, and perception within the game is done through the quasi-corporeal ‘game body,’ (itself tied to the player’s actual body) then the contact with the textural materials in *Kid Amnesia Exhibition* through the game body can surely evoke a sense of an actual tactility and touch. The player may not feel themselves flying, stepping into gel or walking on concrete *literally*, but the invitation to imagine such sensations in so many parts of the game surely strengthens the bond between the player’s body and the game body.



Figure 8

²² Ibid..

²³ Sobchack, 93.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, “Phenomenology of Perception,” 137.

²⁵ Sobchack, 92.

One moment at the very end of *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* throws into stark light the importance of mediation between the player's actual body and the game body. The museum is populated by strange creatures of varying sizes, some only as tall as the player and some immensely large (figure 8): toothed, dark stick figures, hunched minotaurs, and the 'modified bear,' Radiohead's mascot. The player ascends a staircase out of the main building and sees the external landscape of a 3D rendering of *Kid A*'s album cover. As they walk forward, the camera suddenly moves out of first-person perspective and into the third person. Dwarfed by a large exterior wall, it is revealed to the player that the avatar they have been controlling is, in fact, one of minotaurs that have populated entire the exhibition (figure 9). The player traverses the balcony across the wall and goes back inside the building, where the camera zooms back in to the first-person perspective. It is common in 'walking simulator' games for the game body to not be attached to any particular avatar or in-game person, and so it would be natural for the player to straightforwardly project their own body and perspective into the perceptive game body. In this moment, however, it is revealed that the game body was not detached or separate from the game world in any way; instead, this minotaur was *part* of the exhibit all along, and the player has not been only viewing but actively participating in the artistic environment as one of the viewable art objects within it. The player, game body and game world are, suddenly, united. An experience like this is not a mirror or a mimicry of a real-world museum experience, but is possible only because of the exhibition's digital format – because the avatar and the 'game body' belongs exclusively to the world of the game but are inhabited by a real-world person, the player's perspective and embodied game experience can exist within the physical environment presented in a way that a person who inhabits the far wider, non-digital world cannot.

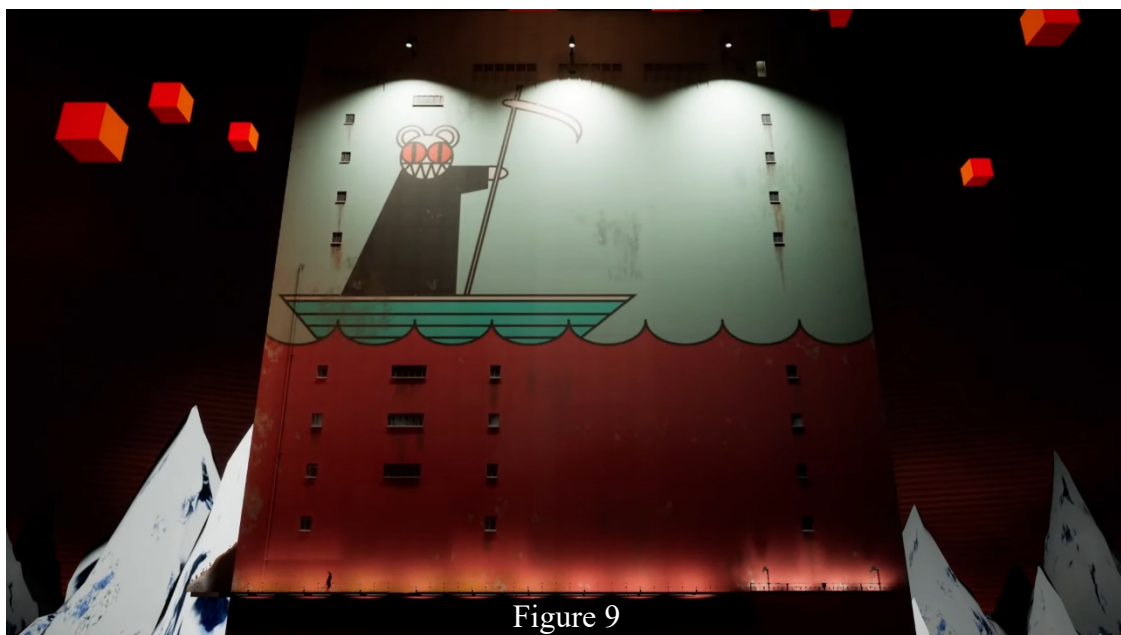


Figure 9
(player character in bottom left corner of wall)

Though Sobchack does not address video games directly, she does write extensively on “electronic presence” created by digital technologies, and considers these technologies fundamentally *disembodied*: they express atemporality and a separation from or diffusion of the body, since the continuous onslaught of screen information and the immateriality of digital space remove us so far from the embodied experience that, Sobchack says, cinema evokes – she includes “electronic games” among the technologies that provoke this disembodied response.²⁶ However, this discussion of the ‘game body’ has hopefully demonstrated that this is not, or at least is not *necessarily*, the case. In fact, the “perceptive sensorium”²⁷ that Sobchack’s cinematic presence engages is as present, if not *more* so, in the game world. The digital world of *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* is not an object within the real world or a distraction from it, but instead *constitutes* a world of its own; it invites not the glance of a phone screen or a digital advertisement, but the prolonged gaze of a film screen, one that can be inhabited and sensually experienced. In the context of the museum space, it even opens up new possibilities for bodily experiences that are, in the real world, restricted by social conventions and, of course, the less malleable rules of space and physics. To conclude, then, *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* is not simply a compensation for a real-world museum experience, but a viable and powerful alternative to one.

²⁶ Sobchack, 109.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

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