

# Museum as Interface Metaphor

Here’s another thing about gamification: It doesn’t work.

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● Catalyst: In Collaboration with EPOCH Gallery ran from June 16 to August, 26, 2023, at Honor Fraser Gallery.

REVIEW

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“I want to make buildings which have the capacity to be loved, that’s all,” said Peter Zumthor in a 2017 interview about his design for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. By *capacity*, he meant the potential for being loved. But it’s the meaning of *capacity* as suitable for holding and storing and as the limits of containment that provided the central themes of *Catalyst*.

In a wonderfully rich reversal of institutional hierarchies, the virtual exhibit comprised an immaterial yet navigable LACMA building, which was then used to host an in-game exhibit of seven artists, placing their work in the museum’s “permanent” collection. At Honor Fraser, located just three miles from LACMA, a few headsets were arranged in a gallery delineated by white, flowy fabric hung from the ceiling. The gauzy veils emphasized that the installation was temporary, reversible, a witty visual counterpoint to the whole idea of permanence and monumentality.

The chance to experience the Zumthor building in VR while it’s still under construction was compelling in itself. In the early 2010s, those of us who considered ourselves a part of VR’s third wave were excited by the potential for its mainstreaming. We talked endlessly about immersion, presence, and embodiment, all of which would contribute to making VR an “empathy machine” with the ability to change the world. Venture capital chased the hype, but when VR failed to be adopted by consumers in large enough numbers, it found itself in what the famed Gartner Hype Cycle calls the “trough of disillusionment.”

Zumthor’s LACMA is now mired in its own version of the trough of disillusionment, saddled with cost overruns (\$715 million is the latest price tag given) and delays, tone-deaf monumentality in these crisis-ridden times, and a host of other issues that have been widely raised over the past few years. In Christopher Hawthorne’s recent *New York Times* profile of Zumthor, the Swiss architect comes close to disavowing the project due to the number of compromises he was forced to make. “There are no Zumthor details anymore,” he said.

LACMA aside, museums and the Metaverse are having a moment. The makers of *Fortnite*, a virtual world with a registered user base larger than the US population, recently hired a British game designer to envision and curate a stand-alone Holocaust museum in the game. Last summer, the Metropolitan Museum of Art established a digital footprint in the massively successful virtual world Roblox. Neither virtual museum is particularly impressive as “building,” however. The *New York Times* wryly compared the Holocaust museum’s architecture with a Miami mansion and noted the incongruity of avatars dressed like Spider-Man navigating through its exhibits. And when you’re an avatar in Roblox looking up at the Met from “Fifth Avenue,” the lack of detail in the 3D model is so unsettling it feels like you’re looking at the famous edifice through hot dog water. The Met, like any brand, wants to reach its customers where they are. It also wants to cultivate new ones—the Met’s partnership with Roblox comes a year after the appearance of *Walmart Land* in the game.

Museums all over the world are desperate to find new ways to drive engagement with their collections. In addition to having a virtual museum in Roblox, the Met launched an augmented reality (AR) app for use on its physical premises. “Visit the Met, Enter the Metaverse,” proclaims its website. It’s a promise of immersion that pins all of its hopes on gamification. Visitors to the museum can use their phones to scan, unlock, and digitally acquire replicas of the objects, which they can then use to accessorize their avatars in Roblox. In a similar vein, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam recently launched *Pokémon Adventure*, a brand collab that rewarded visitors for exploring the museum. The problem with this kind of “gotta catch ‘em all” gamification is that it endorses, without critique, an acquisitive, consumerist model of engaging with art. This is ironic given the colonialist origins of collecting and museums, a subject explored in LACMA’s current exhibit *The World Made Wondrous: The Dutch Collector’s Cabinet and the Politics of Possession*.

## Whether in real life or virtually, is the museum building itself an outmoded interface for facilitating meaningful interactions with art?

Here’s another thing about gamification: It doesn’t work. Gamification, by introducing incentives such as rewards and badges, relies on external payoffs to drive engagement. As Raph Koster argues in his influential book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (2004), what makes games so engaging is that they help people learn—they give players individual agency and allow them to experience the kind of inner motivation associated with developing a sense of mastery.

The Pokémonification of museumgoing poses a fundamental question: Why are museums so bad at driving engagement around their content in the first place? Could it be the container and not the content? In other words, whether in real life or virtually, is the museum building itself an outmoded interface for facilitating meaningful interactions with art?

*Catalyst* engaged with the Zumthor building as a site of immersion in order to explore the containment strategies inherent in all cultural institutions. It explored the problematic nature of what museums choose to collect and display and, more importantly, what they choose to ignore. It also questioned the containment inherent in museums as built environments. “Architecture is, above all, the design of immersions,” writes Peter Sloterdijk in his 2006 essay *Architecture as the Art of Immersion*, adding that architecture is the production of environments “into which its inhabitants submerge, body and all.” *Catalyst* found a way to subvert the logic of submitting to a total environment, and it did so even as it asked participants to wear a headset and immerse themselves in a virtual environment.

Powered by the 3D game engine Unreal, *Catalyst*’s immersive environment depicted the Zumthor building in its real-world context. You could see Wilshire Boulevard and some adjacent buildings, including existing LACMA buildings. But the environment was postapocalyptic and unpeopled. Everywhere you turned, nature encroached upon the crumbling city. Postapocalyptic, for sure, but also prehistorical. The specter of the La Brea Tar Pits lurked in the distance—tar, viscous and too vast to be read in time and space—a Timothy Morton hyperobject if ever there was one.

Gallerygoers navigated the architecture and landscape in a first-person perspective accompanied by an eerie atmospheric soundscape. You could be in *Fallout 3* or any number of survival horror games. The interior of Zumthor’s building was cold and monumental—“tomb-like,” to use Peter Wu’s description. Orange sunlight cast shadows of the trees outside onto the building’s interior walls, a reminder of the antagonism between built and natural environments. It was golden hour, the end of the day, but it was also the end of days. The lasting impression you got was that the LACMA building will never be completed, because it can never be completed—it was always already a ruin.

Standing in an art gallery wearing a VR headset is an experiential reminder of the hybrid nature of our physical and digital lives. The artists participating in the virtual exhibit were keen to amplify this condition. Tanya Aguiñiga’s *Mi Nepantla* (2023) explored the borders of the physical and the virtual in the context of border realities and migration, while imagining what it’s like to inhabit organic forms dissimilar to Zumthor’s concrete. Carla Gannis, in *Virtues and Vices* (2021), presented a virtual Wunderkammer, where years of her various online avatars were collected and displayed. In Auriea Harvey’s *Slave Ship Diagram #2* (2022), the boundaries between the humans and the ship itself (container and contained) dissolved algorithmically. Caroline Sinderson’s mixed-media petrofiction *The Rig, 01* (2023) addressed the climate catastrophe head-on and tethered us back to the tar pits and to oil’s historically important role in LA.

The gallery installation and experience evoked the pleasures and pains of engaging with art in the real world. (It’s wonderful to have a museum to yourself.) And it used VR’s capacity to renew our sense of individual agency and presence to create meaningful engagement with the works of art.

But *Catalyst* also drummed up some big questions: Does the museum-as-cultural-monument have the capacity to move beyond the notion of capacity itself, the impossible project of holding and storing? What would happen if we eliminated idea of containment all together? As we increasingly engage with art in virtual environments, one can imagine a day when the word *museum* joins *desktop* and *trash can* as an interface metaphor that’s empty of literal meaning. If that’s the case, can any museum—not just Zumthor’s LACMA—have the capacity to be loved? ●

Robert Nashak writes from the trough of disillusionment.

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