‘Super Plumber Man’ and the reality-bending games ideal for lockdown

You’ve been playing a lot of games during lockdown – but not ones like these.

For example, how about a ‘Beat em up’ platformer played out on a physical paper diorama? Or a Mario-style one that takes place on a set of real physical shelves? Or a projection mapped take on a pinball game?

All these and more are examples of multimedia art duo Davy and Kristin McGuire’s foray into games, resulting in four new projects from . You can see these games in practice below in our interview with Davy, and hopefully once lockdown ends have a chance yourself to play them yourself.

This is your first time working with game engines. What inspired you?

We went to a VR workshop called StoryHack at Liverpool School of Art and Design and realised how fruitful it would be to incorporate games engines in our practice. Most of our work is linear in narrative and audiences often view our installations unfold over time like a film. Games engines allow the audience to take control over characters within the worlds we create and this interactivity is an exciting avenue to explore.

The real time rendering capabilities of game engines are amazing. Anything that allows you to ditch time spent aimlessly watching a render bar is a welcome blessing. With game engines we can also create a diverse range of new experiences for audiences ranging from Virtual Reality stories that take place in our paper model sets to Augmented reality pop up books.

What did you end up making?

There are four games: with *Shelf Life* the idea was to imagine Super Mario running through your parent’s living room. We wanted a character to contend with the various objects on the shelf like a giant obstacle course.

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Lucy is a ‘Playable Video Sculpture’, a kind of ‘Beat em up’ platformer game played out on a physical paper diorama.

The object of the game is to get Lucy (a vampire maiden) back to her crypt before the sun comes up. Kristin plays the character of Lucy and I play the evil priests in the game. We shot it all on a green screen and imported the video into unity as sprite sheets.

We sell a lot of our diorama work in galleries as art objects with animated video elements. With this game the idea was to take this a step further and make the art object an interactive playable item that could give you a different experience every time you played it. We hope to develop more of these games for art buyers and collectors.

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Wall Pinball is a projection mapped-pinball game designed as an app for an end user to set up on any wall they want from inside their home to large scale outdoor facades.

The idea was to create a projection mapping product that anyone could use.

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Finally, *Hologram Jukebox* is a jukebox in which the artist appears as a hologram in the jukebox to perform when you select a song. It’s not made with a games engine as such and instead uses a Raspberry Pi for selection and playback.

We worked with an organisation called Back to Ours who are all about bringing high quality acts to people’s doorsteps in hard to reach areas in Hull. The performers are almost all Hull-based artists and the project will be taken to all sorts of

contexts from music venues to old people's homes to unite artists with new audiences and vice versa.

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How long did each game take to make?

We often work on various projects simultaneously so it's hard to know how long they each took. We started work on three of the projects in January and *Hologram Jukebox* in November.

What's the best way to research game engines?

We were given a R&D grant from XR Stories who are an organisation that invest in Yorkshire as a centre for world-leading, innovative digital storytelling. This allowed us to work closely with two Hull University graduates (Adam Tunnicliffe and Meggan Gumbrell) who developed *Pinball* and were close on hand to teach us Unity and C# coding language as well as troubleshoot the many problems with *Lucy* and *Shelf Life*.

A lot of research was also done online. There's a lot of great Youtube videos to get people started on working with game engines. I would

The project has a retro feel, with Gothic buildings, old arcade games, vintage jukeboxes. Why so?

I guess that it's important for us to make things that people can already relate to. It gives our audiences a cultural reference before we start to dazzle them with the smoke and mirrors of technology.

I guess we also just draw reference to things that have a nostalgia for us.

Besides the game app you made for *Wall Pinball*, when can the public get their chance to play these once lockdown eases?

To be honest we were initially only intending to create proofs of concept for the R&D grant but we got a bit carried away to create quite complete self-contained pieces.

We were intending to showcase the work at an event in York set up by the XR Stories team and York Mediale but that got pulled

because of Covid. Once things ease we want to get a few venues and dates into the calendar so we are looking to promote these pieces as widely as possible now. Our intention is to develop more work to create a touring playable art exhibition as well as larger outdoor projection mapping games for the light festival circuit. We are also available for commissions.

will be announcing tour dates for the Hologram Jukebox soon.

Where do you think these projects will take you next?

Games engines will definitely become an integral part of our future plans and projects. We want to create a ‘playable exhibition’, a VR story in which the viewer is immersed in one

of our paper model sets and an AR pop-up book based on the story of *Dracula*.

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