

# The Museum and the Killing Jar

## How Animal Crossing's Insects Reveal Videogames' Object Afterlife

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# **The Museum and the Killing Jar: How Animal Crossing's Insects Reveal Videogames' Object Afterlife**

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## **Abstract**

Within the *Animal Crossing* series, players have always had the ability to collect insects and then donate them to a museum where they can then be permanently exhibited. This paper makes the argument that this collecting and exhibiting of game objects works to reflect many of the ways that videogames have begun to take up an increasingly prominent place within real-world institutional exhibitions, archives, and collections. Through a hybrid lens that is equally informed by games preservation, etymology, and art history this essay works to unpack the intricacies of how the museum and collecting function with the *Animal Crossing* series. This examination of *Animal Crossing* will then be applied more broadly case studies of two museum exhibitions (the MoMA and the V&A), making the comparative argument that overtly taxonomic methods of display and archiving can work to deaden videogames' inherently mutable vitality. By speculatively thinking of videogames as things akin to the bugs of *Animal Crossing*, to be kept alive throughout the archival process rather than dead objects to be preserved, a new, more productive lens of videogame curation can be gleaned.

## **Author Keywords**

*Animal Crossing*, collections, exhibitions, archives, games as art, etymology, materialism, MoMA, Victoria & Albert Museum,

## **Introduction**

*Hoo! Is it... even possible? Can the insect collection truly be complete?! I must say, I do not know whether to be elated or absolutely disgusted.*

-Blathers, from *Animal Crossing: City Folk*

The *Animal Crossing* series has often been defined by its consistently cute aesthetic, wealth of customization and decoration options, as well as the relationships you can form with the town's other villagers; however, another aspect of the series that saturates all of its titles is the heavy emphasis on collecting and collections. A relatively common example of this is how players create spaces within their in-game homes where all the furniture and decor corresponds to a singular theme (Hernandez, 2013). At the beginning of any *Animal Crossing* game the player has a very limited number of decoration options available that can be gradually expanded by either randomly finding, purchasing, trading for, or crafting new items. Aside from this decoration-

oriented collecting there is an incredible variety of fish, insects, fossils, and fine art with varying degrees of rarity that the player can hunt for. Bugs can be caught with a net and subsequently displayed in a little transparent container. Fish and other marine life can be caught with a fishing rod or by diving underwater then displayed in aquariums with sizes that correspond to each specific creature. Fossils are found by digging in the ground, are usually parts of a larger animal skeleton, and can be displayed in segments or as a whole. Then lastly fine art is purchased from a shady fox named Redd and can be hung on a wall or displayed on an aisle or plinth. Aside from using these items to decorate their house or village, players can bring these items to the town's museum and donate them by talking to the curator, an owl character named Blathers. If the player agrees to bequeath their collected items to the museum Blathers will give the player a short didactic description of them that is often skewed by his charmingly fussy personality. Once this is done the player can visit each of the museum's exhibition halls to see their donated creatures, fossils, and art objects on permanent display, with empty exhibit spaces showing what is still needed to complete the collection. To achieve this goal the player need only donate one of each fish, bug, fossil, and art object to the museum's collection, after which Blathers will refuse any future repeated attempts to donate those specific items. As the series has progressed this has become an increasingly difficult task, with the total number of each of these collectables increasing from 107 (27 fossils, 40 bugs, and 40 fish) in the original *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001) to 313 (70 fossils, 80 bugs, 80 fish, 40 deep sea creatures, and 43 art objects) in the most recent *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020). Completing the more lively exhibits is especially tough considering that the insects and fish appear by chance and many can only be caught during specific seasons and/or times of day.



*Figure 1.* One of the more naturalistic aquatic museum displays found within *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Although collecting and collections have been a core component of the Animal Crossing series since its inception, these are mechanics that are also easily observed across all of

videogame history. One of the most popular examples of this can be found within the monster collecting genre of role-playing games that includes series such as *Monster Rancher*, *Digimon*, *Yokai Watch*, *Pokemon*, *Ni No Kuni*, and *Shin Megami Tensei* (Banasik 2018; Sapach, 2017). In these games the player is tasked with collecting and raising a team of monsters, often for the primary purpose of battle—though there is usually a variety of other mechanics available to help simulate the monsters' role as a companion as well. The way these games encourage the player to form a bond with their collected monsters works to differentiate the monster collecting genre from collectibles within many other games. Tracing back to 2005 when the Xbox 360 introduced its Gamerscore system, achievement tracking has become a standardized element for most platforms (Jakobsson, 2011; Cruz, Hanus, and Fox, 2017). Within the role-playing and adventure genres, often these achievements will be linked to searching through a game's environments for cleverly hidden collectible items. Sometimes these achievement-based collectables may provide some additional information as to a game's lore or alternatively acting as a prompt for completionist players to replay sections of a game. In contrast to monster collecting and achievement-linked collectibles, what is significant about *Animal Crossing's* collections is how they relate to the practice of curation, both in the context of how the player chooses to organize and decorate their own homes, but also how the player assists the museum's avian curator Blathers in building up a permanent, institutional collection. By consistently including the museum as an interactive space where collecting and curation are spotlighted as potential actions the player can make, *Animal Crossing* establishes broader connections between how videogames might function in relation to or inhabit the auratic spaces of the gallery and historical archive.

The playful connection between videogames and the museum that *Animal Crossing* presents falls drastically in line with its cute, minimal sense of aesthetics, but this connection is not one that exists exclusively in theory or fantastical abstraction. In the two decades since the first *Animal Crossing* game was released, the field of game studies has arisen and stabilized, and debates over the qualification of videogames as art objects have surfaced and resurfaced (Parker, 2014). Over the course of this time, many institutions across the world have taken to exhibiting a combination of historical and aesthetically inclined exhibitions that often work to construct or reveal the growing videogame canon (Hakami, 2017). In addition to these temporary exhibitions there are also a smaller number of museums and libraries that have begun to build their own permanent videogame collections for archival and/or educational purposes (Cross, Mould and Smith, 2015). Although there was already a notable history of science and technology museums that were working to preserve the distant history of videogames through the acquisition of a preservation of arcade cabinets and early computing hardware, it has only been more recently that the very code of a game's software has been attempted to be collected in a similar manner (Guins 2014).

However, regardless of this growing institutional trend, videogame collections have existed on personal, fan, and/or hobbyist scales for a much longer period of time (Stuckey and Swalwell, 2009; Swalwell, Stuckey, and Ndalianis, 2017). These can take the form of the random assortment of games that a player may gradually and casually collect over time, or can be much more deliberate such as a rigorously curated collection of retro games (Newman, 2012). As is the case when comparing how collecting functions distinctly between an *Animal Crossing* player's home and their museum, these kinds of personal collections take on a very different form and function than those at the institutional level. This essay will work to unpack the intricacies of how collections function with the *Animal Crossing* series, and how all of this can then be used to

critically analyze the recent history of how videogames have entered into high profile institutional collections. The following section will review a small sample of scholarship on the topics of gaming history and videogame archives.

### **Chronicles and Collections**

Reflecting on the history of how videogames have both been collected and culturally perceived Erkki Huhtamo argues that in the early 2000s videogame culture could be defined as being within what he calls its “chronicle era” (Huhtamo, 2005, p. 4). Huhtamo categorizes this time period as one in which gaming history was being amateurly chronicled by “the first generation that grew up with electronic games” and who all observed it “with the eyes of a fan and an insider” (p. 4). Although he acknowledges that this closeness could potentially function as a strength, he also makes the somewhat controversial claim that it is these kinds of fan historians who also “often lack critical distance to their topic and are unable to relate it to wider cultural framework(s), including contemporary media culture” (p. 4). Huhtamo further critiques this early chronicle era by describing it as being a collection of “minihistories” told in “remarkably uniform fashion, built around the same landmarks, breakthroughs and founding fathers (not a word about mothers!)” (p. 4).

Although there is merit to some of Huhtamo’s observations surrounding early gaming history—especially those concerning the exclusion of female pioneers of the industry—his dismissal of amateur historians and collectors as lacking the proper critical distance also works to deprioritize any form of analysis that is highly subjective or experiential in tone. Raiford Guins makes similar criticisms of Huhtamo’s definition of the chronicle era, stating that many of the texts that Huhtamo dismisses actually “demonstrate that game history is constructed by a diverse range of sources that are well outside of ‘official’ academic resources.” Guins continues stating that these “enthusiasts, antiquarians, collectors, hobbyists” are all “‘amateur’ historians who have been laboring over the histories of games much longer than academics have” (Guins, 2014, p. 23-24). Guins acknowledges that if these chronicle era histories were the only available research sources then this could definitely become a problem, but that he sees videogame culture as rapidly shifting to more easily allow for the critical distance that Huhtamo calls for:

A recent shift from what has been designated as the ‘chronicle era’ of game history to what might be characterized as the ‘collection era’ has occurred: an era with clear investment in making historical research possible via the collection, documentation, conservation, and preservation of games and related materials across cultural institutions, including the labor of private collectors and game enthusiasts (p. 24).

For Guins this new “collection era” is “exemplified by assorted documentation, archival, display, preservation, conservation, and restoration practices at cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, and universities, as well as itinerant exhibitions, private collections and information repositories produced by the gaming community” (p. 25). Guins argues that it is this combination of public institutional and private fan collections that allows for a comprehensively critical distance to be applied to documenting videogame history.

In addition to the socio-cultural effects of “study, posterity, education, access, and cultural

heritage” (p. 25) that these kinds of historical collections enable, Guins also charts another more ontological process that occurs when videogames are brought into an archive or collection. Guins argues that when videogames are collected they go beyond their initial status of commodity product and enter into a stage he refers to as its “object afterlife.” Although Guins is by no means the first to produce scholarship on the afterlife of an object (Hertz and Parikka, 2012; Appadurai, 1986), he is one of the key figures who have deployed the concept within the field of game studies specifically inside the context of museums and collections. For Guins, the object afterlife functions as “a curious state after commodification and consumption” where a “standard life span is met with extended or repurposed and recontextualized uses” (p. 7). This kind of recontextualization can be easily observed when videogames are brought in from systems of commodified distribution into the archives of libraries, museums, and exhibitions. At this point they leave behind their “initial use/exchange value as products and designed game programs” and become art objects, teaching devices, and research sources (p. 7). This prolonging of the object lifecycle is especially significant within the context of videogames and their history as it “accounts for the life cycles of cultural technological objects in situations of disposal, ruins and remains, and within cultural institutions dedicated to preservation and conservation that manage their born digital (sans the ubiquitous scare quotes), material, and ephemeral forms, conditions and functions” (p. 7).

As videogame culture shifts from an initial chronicle era to a newfound collection era and various games enter into their afterlives within both institutional and personal collections, the questions that surround their archiving and preservation inevitably lead to discussions surrounding their ontology. What part of a game should be archived if the technology required to play is no longer accessible (Newman, 2012)? What part of an online multiplayer game can be collected when the brunt of its historical and cultural worth is embedded within the volume of and interaction between its players (Winget, 2011; Murphy, 2016)? What is the actual game? Is it the code? The graphics displayed on screen? The experience of play, flow, or the reflection it prompts within its player (Keogh 2018; Anable 2018)?

Working to acknowledge the complexity of these kinds of ontological questions Ian Bogost extends Marshall McLuhan’s theory of media ecology and calls for instead a media microecological approach toward the study of videogames. As part of this media microecology Bogost animates videogames and describes them as having their own specialized properties, habitats, and relationships in the same way a living creature might. Bogost argues that this media microecological information can be gleaned by “...digging deep into one dark, unexplored corner of a media ecosystem, like an ecologist digs deep into the natural one. Just as an entomologist might create a collection that thoroughly characterizes the types, roles, and effects of insects on an environment, so a media microecologist might do the same for a medium” (Bogost, 2011, p. 5).

Returning to the *Animal Crossing* series and its emphasis on collecting and collections, there is a productive space to apply Guins’ and Bogost’s lively theories to found within the process of donating insects and fish to Blathers and the museum. Like Guins’ theorization of videogames as living object-entities with their own life cycles and afterlives, the insects and fish that the player can catch are being significantly repurposed and recontextualized as they are sold, added to a personal collection within the player’s home, given to other villagers or players as gifts, or



donated to Blathers and displayed within the museum. Within this process these in-game organisms transform from represented creatures to a commodity object, a means of domestic decoration, a form of symbolic exchange, or an object to be appreciated and studied within an institutional context. Additionally as these digital creatures are collected from their simulated ecologies each with their own dynamic schedules and habitats into museum objects, they are also entered into an in-game encyclopedia that provides the player with taxonomic details such as the season and time of day that they are most likely to appear. As more and more entries are added to both the museum and the encyclopedia, players will become increasingly aware of the insects or fish that they are missing and will potentially feel a growing urge to seek out the remaining specimens to complete the collection. In this way by working to complete both the museum collections and player encyclopedia the player is taking on a microecological perspective and becoming increasingly aware of the varying types of fish and insects that inhabit their village.



Figure 2. An empty display reveals to the player that they are still missing some insects within their growing museum collection.

An obvious comparison point to the bug and fish collecting in *Animal Crossing* is the monster catching within one of Nintendo's other most popular franchises, the Pokémon series. Similar to how when a bug or fish is caught within *Animal Crossing* it will then be added to the player's in-game encyclopedia, in the Pokémon games when the player catches one of the titular pocket monsters a new corresponding taxonomic entry will be unlocked in their Pokédex. Michael Dylan Foster relates this what he called an "encyclopedic mode" which he defines as "a desire for order" (Foster, 2015) where any new entry can be taxonomically assessed and defined in relation to all other entries. Elle Santry explains that the encyclopedic mode observed within the Pokémon series can be easily connected all the way back to the Edo period in Japan, which was "characterized by an intellectual curiosity, informed by Neo-Confucian ideas and a burgeoning print culture, that fostered an environment of investigation, ordering, and documentation"

(Santry, 2019, p. 21; see also Foster, 2008, pp. 31-35). Although initially used to label things from the natural world, eventually this encyclopedic mode turned its eye to folklore and more specifically to categorizing spirits and monsters known as yokai. Santry argues that the “Pokedex perfectly exemplifies a contemporary version of this mode, as each Pokémon’s attributes (appearance, type, abilities, hit points, etc) can be contained in Pokédex entries and placed in a catalogue (p. 21).

Looking back to *Animal Crossing*, it is not hard to place the manner in which the player collects insects and fish alongside the encyclopedic mode of Pokemon and its Pokedex. Additionally, this shift from the lively wilds where a collectible bug, fish, or monster has its own playful and slightly unpredictable behaviour, into the inherently taxonomic and static spaces of the museum or encyclopedia mimics many of the ways that videogames have been brought into real-world institutional collections. Oftentimes as videogames are brought in from “the ‘wilds’ of popular culture” (Chapman, 2019) into these settings, their original playful qualities might be diminished or deadened in some way in order to align with the aesthetic, curatorial or preservation goals of the housing institution. To this point, as Adam Chapman argues when critically analyzing videogames we must always “keep one critical eye turned ever inward, regulating our scholarly desire for classification and delineation in the playful face of multiplicity and disorder” (Chapman, 2019). In an attempt to trace origins of this microecological pursuit of taxonomic classification beyond Huhtamo’s collection era the next section of this paper will look beyond the realm of videogames into the cultural history of real-world Japan. Here there are productive parallels to be drawn between these kinds of organically ontological metaphors and the practice of bug collecting—a popular trend that acts as an obvious source of inspiration for the *Animal Crossing* series’ consistent inclusion of it as a game mechanic. Aside from functioning as a tool to broaden my analysis of the *Animal Crossing* series the practice of bug collecting will also help reveal the similarities between how collected bugs and videogames are both brought into museum spaces.

### **Gotta Catch 'Em All**

Although insect collecting is a hobby that exists to varying extents all across the globe, it is within Japan where the practice exceeds any kind of niche categorization and is instead a firmly embedded cultural phenomenon. Akito Y. Kawahara tracks the history of insect collecting within Japanese ornamental artwork all the way back to 600 C.E. and describes how within “the Meiji period (1868-1912), mushiya, or insect shops, sold collecting equipment and singing insects in cages” (Kawahara, 2007, p. 160). Turning his focus from these distant histories to more recent examples within popular culture, Kawahara also documents how insect collecting has continued on into the present and functions as a heavily commodified hobby for both children and adults in contemporary Japan. He points out how during the summer months many department stores will have an “insect corner” where collecting and breeding equipment are sold (p. 161), and how many schools and camps include basic entomology as part of their educational programming (pp. 160-163).

More significantly to the discussion around the *Animal Crossing* series, Kawahara also surveys how this cultural practice has been increasingly featured as a thematic within many popular Japanese videogames. Kawahara notes the obvious link between the Pokémon series and bug



collecting, noting how the evolutionary stages of Pokémon like Caterpie and Weedle are directly inspired by the real world life cycles of butterflies and bees (p. 163). In fact, although Kawahara does not explicitly remark upon this, Satoshi Tajiri (the creator of the Pokémon series) has often stated that he was directly inspired by his childhood hobby of collecting local bugs within his childhood town of Machida (Plunkett, 2011). Beyond the pervasively popular Pokémon series, Kawahara also describes a collection of more intensely insect-focused games that never were distributed to a Western audience. There are many games with collecting and RPG battle mechanics similar to Pokémon such as the *Mushiking: The King of Beetles* and *Konchuu Monster* series, but perhaps most significantly comparable to *Animal Crossing* is an educational game for the Playstation 2 that he refers to as “Za Kontyu Saishu”, but that is currently commercially distributed through resale sites under the title *Simple 2000 Series Vol. 83: The Insect* (D3 Publisher, 2005). Within *The Insect* players arrive on an island in the Pacific where they must assist an aging entomologist named Dr. Takagi in collecting the 300 insect species that have escaped from his laboratory’s collection. Just like in the *Animal Crossing* series with Blathers and the museum, the player must assist an institutional figure with completing a finite collection of insects. And also like in *Animal Crossing* they must pay proper attention to the game’s simulated time of day and seasons in order to collect some of the rarer species.

The popularity of this seemingly niche genre of bug-collecting videogames helps to provide context for the inclusion of the many collectable insects within the *Animal Crossing* series, but it also works to mirror the way that many bugs (especially beetles and butterflies) are being feverishly collected by both professional and amateur entomologists in Japan. Just like the insects within *Animal Crossing*, the end result of this real-world collecting can take many forms, though the most popular are either for the insect to be kept alive for study, as a personal pet, or for breeding and resale; or promptly killed to be later pinned and framed as an art object. This diversity of transition and transformation falls in line with the object afterlife that Guins describes, except in this case the metaphors of animation and vitality are in fact quite literal as the insects become living (or dead) parts of a collection. Additionally, the tangled relationship between amateur and professional archiving that Kawahara describes as being a common aspect of Japanese bug collecting (p. 167-169) strongly parallels the web of institutional and fan gaming historians Guins describes in his definition of videogames’ collection era. Looking at these various comparison points more broadly, how can the parallels between insect collecting within the *Animal Crossing* series and real-world Japan be utilized as a productive lens to examine similar parallels that might exist between insect and videogame archives at both the amateur and institutional scale? What is the potential benefit of metaphorically conceptualizing a videogame as a kind of living collectable in the same way a Japanese bug collector might perceive an especially charismatic beetle or butterfly?

In the following section this metaphorical application of an object’s afterlife will be further explored by more closely examining what insect collectors commonly refer to as the “killing jar” and the practice of turning dead insects into art objects. All of this will then be used to critically frame certain methods of museum archiving and display as overtly formal and ultimately deadening to the videogames being collected in this manner.

### The Killing Jar

One of the most often-cited recent examples of videogames entering into the space of the museum is the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) 2012 decision to add a number of videogames they deemed to be canonical into their permanent collection. Collected through their Architecture and Design department and—at the time of this paper's writing—done over the course of two rounds of acquisition (Sharp, 2015, Loc 233), the list of acquired games includes not only “early arcade classics like *Asteroid*, *Space Invaders*, and *Pac-Man*, but contemporary web-based virtual worlds such as *EVE Online* and *Minecraft*” (Anable, 2018, Loc 2622). Shortly following the decision to permanently add these games to the MoMA's collection came the announcement that they would also be exhibiting them in a 2013-14 exhibition titled *Applied Design*. Aubrey Anable criticizes the exhibition's curator Paola Antonelli for her decision to focus purely on “the code” (Anable, 2018, Loc 2634) of the games being put on display at the expense of “other material and immaterial aspects” (Anable, 2018, Loc 2634):

Video games were displayed on screens recessed into the museum's walls, with their controllers perched in front of them on minimalist pedestals. Gaming systems and arcade cabinets, it seems, were deemed too unsightly for display. Perhaps more to the point, these aspects of the material culture of games did not fit with the museum's definition of interaction design. The element of design that MoMA seeks to highlight through its collection and preservation is code, specifically source code (Anable, 2018, Loc 2634).

Although highly critical of this approach which she frames as “echoing formalist approaches within game studies that cite action and proceduralism as essential to the medium” Anable also acknowledges Antonelli's explanation that the choice to focus on code was made largely with preservation efforts in mind (Loc 2634). By acquiring and displaying the code of a videogame—what they consider to its pure essence—the MoMA may be working to partially address issues of supersession and obsolescence, but they also are deliberately ignoring many of the ways the games they have collected function materially across broader technocultures.

Reflecting back to Guins' notion of a videogame's object afterlife, through their museal recontextualization these games do fit into his definition, but through the MoMA's overriding focus on preservation much of their original liveliness has also been made static (Newman, 2012). Attempting to explain the flaws of this kind of formalist curatorial and/or archival mindset, Guins refers to a short story by the science fiction author Phillip K. Dick titled “The Preserving Machine” that was first published in 1953. In this story, a scientist named Doc Labyrinth—fearing an imminent societal collapse—works to preserve canonical classical music by developing a technology that organically animates them into living creatures with the ability to move and defend themselves. To Doc Labyrinth's surprise, his lively creations—a Bach beetle or a Stravinsky sheep to name but a few—also have the ability to rapidly adapt and evolve to their new environments, preying upon each other within an odd form of bio-artistic ecology. As explanation for his reference to the story Guins calls for a livelier method of collecting and archiving videogames that allows for them to be defined as dynamic objects, and that can account for how they change through time via ongoing external cultural and material processes. In the context of the MoMA and the *Applied Design* exhibition, their focus on minimal display and pure code did not result in their acquisitions suddenly changing on them as Doc Labyrinth's creatures did. Instead, like many of the insect collectors wanting to pin and frame their elusive quarry as precious art objects, the MoMA placed their newly acquired games within a

metaphorical killing jar, preserving them within what they hope will be a kind an infinite and unchanging stasis, but in the process also denying many aspects of both their material and immaterial liveliness.

All of this informs *Animal Crossing* and the manner in which the player contributes to the museum's insect collection. Although there is definitely the potential argument that once they have been donated the bugs also very much exist in a similar kind of stasis, it is not one that completely denies their liveliness or the material context(s) from which they were originally collected. Unlike the consoles and arcade cabinets that were hidden from view in the *Applied Design* exhibition, within each of the games within the series the insect collection's exhibition hall works to replicate the environment that its acquisitions originated from. There are trees, grass, stones, stumps, and flowers for the insects to crawl around on. The room contains many large windows that allow in natural light, and the walls have been decorated in such a way as to simulate the feeling of being outside with images of clustered trees and picket fences. Unlike when the player encounters an insect outside, the collected bugs within the collection have a very limited range of movement and will not flee upon approach. This does in a way somewhat reduce their wildness and playful vitality, however it is still far from the complete stasis comes along with the killing jar and insect pins. And although *Animal Crossing's* insects are meant to represent organisms that in reality would require more intensely consistent care than most archival objects, through their connections to collecting practices they can be used to prompt productive new perspectives on how videogames exist within the collection era. By speculatively approaching videogames as mutable and animate in the manner of Blathers' bug exhibition or Doc Labyrinth's bio-artistic hybrids, we might sidestep some of the issues that arise throughout the institutional collection process, where perfect preservation is oftentimes highly prioritized.



Figure 3. Once donated, many of the beetles that the player has collected can be seen crawling

on the trees and stumps within the museum exhibition much in the same way that they would appear outside in the wild.

In the next section, another recent high profile videogame art exhibition will be examined through this newly acquired insectile lens. This second exhibition sharply contrasts the MoMA in that it much more successfully manages to incorporate lively methods of archiving, collection, and curation. Although archives by definition “are always imperfect and incomplete repositories of objects and ideas” (Anable, 2018, Loc 2647), by structuring an institutionally-scaled videogame collection from the ground up with this lively partiality as a core thematic element of its curation, the deadening stasis of the insect collector’s killing jar can be avoided.

### **It’s Alive**

The 2018-19 exhibition *Design/Play/Disrupt* that was originally displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in South Kensington in London, England acts as a stark contrast to MoMA’s formalist focus on code in its *Applied Design* exhibition. In the catalogue for the show, co-curators Marie Foulston and Kristian Volsing acknowledge the difficulties already noted above that come along with exhibiting and archiving videogames, opening their curatorial essay with a series of poignant questions that they then do a remarkable job of answering:

How can we truly exhibit videogame design? How do we make visible its materiality and process, both its engineering and aesthetics? As a time-bound and interactive medium, videogames are complex objects to showcase publicly. However, they are far from the only medium that faces such challenges. In our research we looked at fields such as architecture, a subject that grapples with the very large issues of physical scale (how can you exhibit a building within the walls of another?), and to theatre, another time-bound medium that exists only through its performance. Both are subjects that require curators to look beyond the finished form. Learning from methods of display and interpretation employed by these areas we sought to define a new curatorial language for videogames, one that enables us to travel beyond the game itself and to make visible its design. We tested new ways to exhibit them—through artefacts of design and interpretative installations that invite fresh perspectives on the player and maker alike (Foulston and Volsing, 2018, p. 10).

In the execution of this curatorial mandate Foulston and Volsing organized the exhibition into four distinct sections that strongly differed in their styles of display and installation. The first area is a dark grey room broken up by semi-translucent fabric dividers. This area focuses on a number of games that show a strong range of development practices which are displayed according to a ruleset reflecting what is most significant about each respective game. The second area attempts to organize its content according to “several issues which have shaped the criticism of mainstream videogames over the past decade”, such as “sexism, racist representations and lack of representation” (Reed, 2018). Each of these issues are displayed within glass display tables with content ranging from didactic text and video essays to playable games. The third area is largely dedicated to a mixture of fan communities and esports documentation displayed through large-scale video projections. Then lastly, the fourth area is a colorful arcade with a collection of elaborately decorated custom playable cabinets each featuring a popular art/altgame from the last

decade or so.

Emilie M. Reed (2018) argues that it is the first of these areas “does most of the work the exhibition is trying to do to differentiate itself from the display style and official history increasingly canonized by many other videogame exhibitions.” Reed explains that this is largely achieved through the curators’ choice to select different forms of content to display for each individual game rather attempting to exhibit them according to any sort of uniform schema. For example, the area dedicated to *Bloodborne* focuses not only on “concept art and SketchUp models of the impressive cathedral areas in the game” but also “draws visitor attention towards the process of playing the game with a multi-screen display that combines a successful boss fight with a video of the player’s hands, a series of failed runs, and the player’s commentary.” Reed then contrasts this with the display of “Consume Me, a work in progress by Jenny Jiao Hsia, which is accompanied by a selection of toys which contributed design ideas, as well as the storyboards and the artists’ laptop ‘at work,’ displaying a screen capture video of Jenny using the Unity engine to build the game” (Reed, 2018).

Beyond the *Design/Play/Disrupt* exhibition, Foulston has also brought her curatorial mandate of looking beyond the finished form of videogames in organizing the more recent 2020 iteration of the Now Play This experimental game design festival. Initially planned as an in-person event the festival unexpectedly was required to convert to being entirely virtual due to the restrictions put in place by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than just simply converting all of the festival’s panels into fairly standard video calls between their participants, Foulston instead arranged for a series of interactive interviews, tours, and workshops to take place directly within the online spaces of a selection of videogames. Highlights include a guided tour of *Half-Life* with game designer Robert Yang where he spoke about the game’s history and level design while also taking questions from his tour group, or a game photography workshop that was led by game designer Gareth Damian Martin from within *No Man’s Sky*. However, the event that relates most significantly to this paper is an interview panel between digital curatorial collective The White Pube and the development team of *Untitled Goose Game* that all took place within *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. The island that the interview took place on was decorated with custom goose-related artwork and also had a little section set-up made to look like a televised interview with a row of chairs for the participants to sit in and film lights scattered around. Describing the experience, Foulston states that being forced to work within virtual spaces has helped her further develop her curatorial language for videogames. “The biggest takeaway for me has been being pushed to confront, at a fundamental level, questions about what on earth an exhibition actually is. I don’t think we should be rushing to move things virtually just for the sake of it. We should consider, with the same curatorial rigour that you would a physical event, what the audience is, what your community is, and what you’re actively trying [to] make happen” (Hine, 2020).

In examining *Design/Play/Disrupt* and Now Play This 2020, it becomes apparent that Foulston is working to develop her own experimental and non-formalized approach to videogame curation. Each of these events playfully blends the expected with the novel in a way that reflects Foulston’s own subjective position as a curator. Looking back to *Animal Crossing* and its museum collections, a comparable mode of curatorial subjectivity can also be observed in Blathers. When the player attempts to donate something to Blathers he will ask them if they

would like to hear some contextual information about the item. These descriptions are typically mostly factual though occasionally they will be more heavily influenced by Blathers subjective tastes. For example, in *New Horizons* when donating fossils from a Pteranodon Blathers will comment that the large bird-like dinosaur was a “role model to us all” (Animal Crossing Wiki). This subjective framing of the player’s donations is most consistently explicit however when they are attempting to donate an insect to Blathers. Every time the player does this Blathers will visually shudder and describe the bug in a way that reveals how much he despises all insects, arachnids, and other multi-legged arthropods. Although Blathers despises these creatures he never refuses their entry into his museum. Nor does he ever suggest the route of the killing jar and butterfly pin, something that wouldn’t necessarily be surprising given the popularity of the practice within Japanese culture. For Blathers it is the lively qualities of the insects that make them a valuable part of his collection.

Turning our focus back to the notions of collecting and videogame afterlife, how does Foulston’s curatorial methodology compare to that of the MoMA’s *Applied Design* exhibition? Also how does the *Design/Play/Disrupt* exhibition and the 2020 *Now Play This* festival appear when we utilize the conjoined lens of how insect collecting functions within both reality and the virtual worlds of the *Animal Crossing* series? By working to define videogames across their life cycles—from initial stages of production to post-release forms of fan expression and consumer play—Foulston’s curatorial language successfully avoids placing videogames within the kind of formalized stasis that would ontologically and aesthetically deaden them. Instead by exhibiting videogames in a manner that emphasizes elements beyond their finished forms Foulston is allowing for them to be dynamically defined as complex objects with consistently shifting life cycles and afterlives.

Although stating that she looked to architecture and theatre for inspiration in her co-authored curatorial statement for the V&A, Foulston’s treatment of her selected works can easily be compared with the conversation and display methods that would be required to display a collection of live insects such as that done by Blathers in each of the *Animal Crossing* games. Not content with solely showing the finished form—the metaphorical equivalent of displaying framed dead insects as art objects—both *Design/Play/Disrupt* and *Now Play This 2020* work to instead create a complexly contextual environment for each work to inhabit. This unique curatorial treatment allows each of the exhibit’s selected games to be read as living objects that actively move within and across contemporary culture.

## Conclusion

Although it is possible to fully complete all of the museum’s collections within each of the *Animal Crossing* games, this is not something that is typically possible in real life when attempting to construct and maintain any form of large scale collection or archive. Like an ecosystem within the natural world the material and immaterial culture of videogame is always in a state of growth and entropy, making it impossible to definitively archive or exhibit in any static manner. Anable makes similar arguments, stating that “it is impossible to create a perfect archival record of anything, let alone what a video game feels like, long after its technological moment has passed” (Anable, 2018, Loc 2647). In this way, through its “close relationship with decay and ruin”, the form of the archive might be better likened to the cycles of life and death



observed in living creatures. With this in mind, and the knowledge that videogames are becoming increasingly complex objects that each individually function as a “cultural accretion of technologies, materials...design and development...and contexts of experience for economic and social relations” (Guins, 2014, p. 8), it becomes useful to metaphorically consider them as living things that function within a global media ecology as well as the smaller scales of both the personal and institutional collections we are placing them inside. Bogost’s microecology may sound partially promising in terms of its theoretical applicability to videogame archiving and curation, yet in its focus on creating taxonomically-rooted collections the videogame microecologist also resembles the second kind of insect collector, the one that relies on killing jars and butterfly pins. Instead of building pristine archives of static art objects, we should look at Blathers and the simulated ecologies he has constructed within his museum in order for his collections to remain vital and animate. Foulston’s curation of *Design/Play/Disrupt* and the *2020 Now Play This* festival are comparable examples of where this kind of lively methodology has been applied. In each of these cases Foulston did not look to slot all of her curated objects into the same institutionally friendly system, but instead created unique environments for each work to dynamically inhabit and grow within. Just like how the insects within the Animal Crossing series continue to function outside of the museum space as animals, collectables, commodities, gifts, and decorations, we would do well as researchers not to forget that videogames do much of their most important work “in their natural habitat—the ‘wilds’ of popular culture” (Chapman, 2019). Thus as difficult as it might be when considering the collection, curation, and archiving of videogames and their history, we must resist the tradition of the killing jar and butterfly pin, where the need to define, categorize, classify, and archive actively damages the liveliness of the object at hand. There is much to be gained in the speculative animation of videogames into non-human entities, however unlike Doc Labyrinth within Dick’s *Preservation Machine* we should work to frame their uncontrollability and evolution as a productive feature rather than an unintended deficit.

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