

Collecting, Exhibiting, Visiting, and Performing in the Wunderkammer of *Animal Crossing*

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Keywords

New Museology, Digital Curation, Collecting History, Musealisation, Playable, Appropriation Art

INTRODUCTION

Video games have been in the museum collection of MoMA for over a decade and have become an increasingly prominent presence in art exhibitions. Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Worldbuilding* (2022) explored how video games are made into an emerging art form by artists; Mori Art Museum's *Machine Love* (2025) contemplated how the hyperrealistic landscape through game engines, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality affects contemporary artists' aesthetics and creation. Besides recent popular research and practice on the gamification in museums, the multifacets of video games are getting more and more entangled with the space and narrative in museums. Video games are not only artefacts that are displayed and viewed in museums and galleries. Moreover, in the sense of virtual space and digital curation in the gamescape, video games act as "museums" for players to collect, archive, research, exhibit, visit, and conserve.

This paper adopts the theoretical framework of contemporary art curation, collecting history, and new museology to analyse the "museum", the Cabinet of Curiosities (*Wunderkammer*), in the case of the popular life-simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020). There is an in-game art museum curated by Blathers, an owl character, designed with an ecosystem of collecting, purchasing, donating, displaying, and visiting art works. Playing with this virtual art museum and collectable artefacts is examined (King, 2025; Bailey, 2020). The playability and collectibility involved in the game are even fascinating when art museums like the MET and Getty invited game players to collect and own the game copy of their collections in April 2020. Real-life art pieces become playable artefacts, interactively collectable in and beyond the game world.

Additionally, the playful "museum" redefines and extends the public sphere. *Animal Crossing* transformed into an exhibition site. *Shiny Art Animal Crossing Art Carnival* hosted in June 2020 gathered 30 artists' 200 hours of creation and virtual installation based on game materials and mechanics. The media artist aaajiao turned the game into an experimental art space in his project "CROSSING STORIES", which reconstructed his personal in-game island into a performative venue for shared stories, a participatory museum of lived experience. These two cases highlight that beyond a repository of collectable artefacts, the gameworld can function as a public

Proceedings of CDiGRA 2025

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space for collective memory and social interaction, generating new forms of knowledge and meaning.

In the lens of the historical and practical context of art collecting and museums, the musealisation of in-museum objects now turns into a virtual musealisation of in-game collectables. It provides simultaneously a private space for collecting and conserving, and a public space for visiting and sharing. Thus, this digital cabinet of playful curiosities—the image of a museum—is manifested in the gamescape. This paper argues for post-“ways of seeing” that viewers approach art and artefacts through interactivity, embodiment, and player agency in the landscape of digital gaming. Video games become a new form of “museum”, or more specifically, the new public space for “education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM, 2022).

Game References

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BIO

Yifan Wang is currently an Assistant Librarian on Digital Humanities at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Library. She read Classics (BA) at Durham University and Art History (MSc) at Glasgow University. She has curatorial experience in textile/fibre/unwearable art, and handicraft techniques. She is weaving classical reception, art history, curation, science fiction, and mythologies into the cosmological fabric of the world and landscape in video games. She presents her research at ICGAN 2025, DiGRA 2025, Mythological Game Studies Conference 2025, and Antiquity in Media Studies 2024. A recent book chapter is “Spatiality and Visuality of Mythical Objects” (Ward. et al., Springer, 2025).

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