To Craft a Game Arts Curators Kit

A Collective Record of How to Publicly Exhibit Video Games Around the Globe

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> How can this field develop a more comprehensive understanding of art and technology without appropriate methods designed to bring it into relief? What would such methods consist of? What insights might emerge into the relationship between art, science, and technology?
> EDWARD SHANKEN[1]

Over the course of two Game Arts International Assembly (GAIA) symposia in 2019 and 2021, dozens of video game art curators and practitioners worked together to create the *Game Arts Curators Kit (GACK)*: a collectively authored document that represents roughly a decade of practical experience producing game art exhibitions and public programs at museums and other cultural venues. The contributors, writing from different parts of the world, offer different insights and perspectives on the international game curation and exhibition movement. However, in comparing our experiences, we found that similar models of how to support video games within local and regional communities have organically appeared in different places. The *GACK* is an attempt to document at least a portion of the collective experience of this group to share it broadly with other video game curators and organizers or those who may consider becoming video game curators and organizers.

1 Shanken, Edward: "Historicizing Art and Technology," in: Grau, Oliver (ed.), *MediaArtHistories*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2007, pp. 43-70, here p. 43.

This chapter is an account of how the *GACK* came to be, a summary of the main themes contained in the document, a record of those who have participated in its creation, and perhaps most importantly, an explanation of the role this video game curation plays within the broader world of museums, galleries, and public programming in cultural venues of various kinds. As an index of a global movement, the *GACK* points to how video games, their non-digital corollaries, and related new media art are often not the disembodied flow of placeless, globalized media they appear to be in mass-market contexts but instead are the instrument of playfulness in the material reality of our cities and communities. Multinational corporate video game studios attend to the game consoles and proprietary downloading platforms that often define private, domestic forms of video game play, but it is the local video game art organization that serves the public's ability and drive to play together in common corporeal space.

THE ASSEMBLY OF CONTRIBUTING VIDEO GAME CURATORS

The authors of this chapter traveled different paths to working in video game curation. Yet when we received the opportunity to co-lead the *GACK* together, we were excited to find we shared many of the same perspectives and goals for the field. Evans started curating video game artwork when he co-founded Chicago's Video Game Art (VGA) Gallery in Chicago with Jonathan Kinkley in 2013 and mounted its first exhibition in 2014. In his work with VGA, Evans was driven by the need for a public venue in Chicago that could support contemporary artists using video games as their medium as well as independent game studios or individual video game developers that were experimenting with aesthetics, subject matter, and mechanics that did not fit into commercial games contexts. As an organization, VGA mounted dozens of video game art exhibitions and events and maintained a brick-and-mortar space from 2017 to 2020.

The Chicago-based organization was a node in a not-yet-defined network of similar spaces being founded in other cities and countries over the 2010s, and Evans was intrigued when he learned about GAIA, founded by Jim Munroe and Maria Lujan Oulton, and was invited to its first symposium in Buenos Aires in the fall of 2019. It was there that Oulton and Chad Toprak proposed the idea of a Game Arts Curators Kit that could serve as an information-sharing resource for those already working in the field, as well as a guide for others who wish to join it. From there, an initial writing session took place between different GAIA participants where initial categories and prose were developed. Work was then paused

by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021 a second online GAIA symposium was organized by Munroe, Oulton, and Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan, and that organizing committee invited Evans to re-engage the project with Rene G. Cepeda.

Cepeda's work in video game curation began with his personal interest in gaming from a young age. After finishing his degree in information design, Cepeda proceeded to enroll in a museum studies degree where he would propose a merging of video game technologies with heritage preservation and exhibition. This was followed by a second master's in art history, where Cepeda joined the games as art discussion, and then a Ph.D. in curation and display of interactive new media art. This Ph.D. was a practice-based project that described the research, methodology, and creation of the *Manual for the Curation and Display of Interactive New Media Art*. Through this manual, Cepeda became involved with GAIN and eventually *GACK*; more specifically, while applying for GAIA 2021, the subject of Cepeda's experience with curatorial manuals came to light, and he was therefore invited as co-editor for the project.

It is through the GAIA symposia and the collaborative exercise of the *GACK* itself that Cepeda and Evans deduced that a global network of video game curators was not, in fact, aspirational but an established international movement in local public programming. Practically speaking, the *GACK* connected the work to over twenty practitioners representing over ten institutions and at least ten countries over four continents.[2]

2 The full list of collaborators on this project is as follows: Isabelle Arvers (curator, France), Jose Luis Pacheco Boscan (artist, Venezuela), Clare Brennan (Abertay University, UK), Zuraida Butler (curator, Netherlands), Jenna Caravello (UCLA, USA), Rene G. Cepeda (UNARTE and Header/Footer Gallery, Mexico), droqen (game developer, Canada), Chaz Evans (University of South Carolina and VGA Gallery, USA), Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan (artist, Canada), Tiffany Funk (University of Illinois at Chicago, USA), Mer Grazzini (artist, Argentina), Leland Heller (Museum of Art and Digital Entertainment, USA), Lauren Kolodkin (Smithsonian American Art Museum & Renwick Gallery, USA), Shalev Moran (game designer, Denmark), Jim Munroe (Game Arts International Network, Canada), Maria Lujan Oulton (Universidad de Palermo, Argentina, curator Spain/Argentina), Brice Puls (game developer, USA), Emelie Reed (curator, UK), Saraelena Cabrera Roldán (arts educator, Mexico), Jamie Sanchez (designer and organizer, USA), Eleanor Schichtel (designer and artist, USA), Jo Summers (Global Game Jam, UK), Chad Toprak (game designer and curator, Australia), John Wanamaker (Game Designer, USA), and Sagan Yee (animator, Canada).

A SNAPSHOT OF VIDEO GAME CURATION IN THE 2010S

The notion of video game curation may seem obscure to cultural patrons, or even practicing curators, who are only familiar with the practice of curation being applied to objects belonging to fields like the plastic arts, natural sciences, cultural anthropology, or antique books exhibited in spaces such as art museums or galleries, science museums, history museums, or archives. However, there have been curators handling the exhibition of video games since the 1980s.[3] Over the 2010s in particular, the practice has grown considerably to require the video game curating specialist. This is a development that parallels the growth in independent or artist-made video games along with not-for-profit organizations, festivals, conferences, co-working spaces, parties, and other regional public displays of gaming that also grew considerably over the last decade.[4]

Up to the time of writing, it is still rare for a long-running cultural institution to have an in-house specialist or department for handling the public presentation of video games, despite their ubiquitous presence in global media and cultural influence. There are very notable exceptions of more august institutions engaging with video games for specific exhibitions, such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2012 exhibition *The Art of Video Games* curated by Chris Melissinos,[5] MoMA's initial acquisition of video games into its design collection led by Paola Antonelli in 2013,[6] and the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Design/Play/Disrupt* exhibition curated by Marie Foulston (also a GAIA participant) in 2018.[7] However, these examples represent one-off projects that are perceived as an anomaly within the history of these institutions' normal public programming and do not

3 For example, the Museum of Moving Image's 1989 exhibition *Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade.* For more information refer to: Slovin, Rochelle: "7 Hot Circuits: Reflections on the 1989 Video Game Exhibition of the American Museum of the Moving Image," in: Wolf, Mark J.P. (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 2021, pp. 137-154.

4 Refer to: numerous mentions of the importance of festivals in developing and defining the category of independent video games in Juul, Jesper: *Handmade Pixels*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2019.

5 See Smithsonian American Art Museum: "The Art of Video Games," https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/games

6 See https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/

7 See Victoria and Albert Museum: "Videogames: Design/Play/Disrupt," https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/videogames

signal an ongoing commitment to preservation or cultural context-building, both of which are required by a medium that is rapidly growing, constantly changing, and expressed differently in specific localities.

Therefore the ongoing work of video game curation is much more visible in local cultural scenes that have produced many support structures for the public presentation of video games most visibly over the first part of the new millennium. In Argentina: there is the ongoing exhibition *Game On! El arte en juego* in Buenos Aires, and the Puerto Global space in Río Grande, Tierra del Fuego. In South Africa: the Super Friendship Arcade and Playtopia festival in Cape Town. In India: Mumbai's Eyemyth Festival. In Australia: Melbourne's Freeplay Independent Games Festival. In Japan: Kyoto's BitSummit conference. In South Korea: Out of Index Festival in Seoul. In Italy: the Milano Games Festival. In Germany: Berlin's long-running, landmark games and independent media festival A MAZE. In the Netherlands: Amsterdam's Playful Arts Fest and Utrect's Broeikas. In the United Kingdom: Now Play This and Wild Rumpus in London, and NEoN Digital Arts Festival in Dundee. In the United States: The Museum of Digital Art and Entertainment (MADE) in Oakland, New York City's Babycastles collective, BitBash festival and VGA Gallery in Chicago, and LikeLike gallery in Pittsburgh. In Canada: Toronto's Hand Eye Society. This is by no means a comprehensive list but illustrates that independent organizations locally supporting video games have developed piecemeal in every continent other than Antarctica.

While the world's output of local video game exhibitions is robust, much of this work is highly ephemeral. Live events are difficult to document. There is no central archive that can store such material even when it is captured, and the organic DIY nature of many of the events means that whole organizations often come and go in a matter of years or sometimes even months. Indeed artist-run, independent, and alternative spaces for exhibiting video game art and related new media are still every bit as precarious yet vital as when they were described by Beryl Graham and Sarah in their 2010 landmark overview of curating new media art in general.[8] A comprehensive archive of all these organizations, the events they presented, and the work they feature would be a project outside of the scope of the possible. However, a document capturing some of the working knowledge driving these endeavors can function as both a record of this field as well as a resource to inspire the generation that comes after.

8 Graham, Beryl/Cook, Sarah: *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media,* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2010, pp. 247-280.

Intentions Behind the *GACK*

Since the general concept was originally proposed in the 2019 GAIA symposium, the *GACK* was intended as a collective and collaborative effort to record knowledge from a variety of individuals involved in the game art scene. A subset of GAIA 2019 participants met online after the meeting in Buenos Aires and resolved that individual writers should be assigned individual topics in order to generate the first draft of prose, but the group should also act as a collective editing structure. That is to say, once one entry was written, it would be handed off to one or more other members of the group for feedback, edits, and even debate if necessary. The intention was to keep the document open to multiple or even contradictory perspectives as unvarnished documentation of a discourse being carried out in multiple cultures (much to the delight of the authors of the chapter and other members of the group, this affordance for diverging views was rarely needed and instead methods and perspectives harmonized far more than they diverged among participants). This initial meeting generated five entries before progress on the project was paused by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

After the GAIA organizers enlisted Cepeda and Evans to re-engage the project in 2021, more specific structures and values needed to be built on top of this initial groundwork. The main unresolved question going forward, especially working in an online context, was: who would be invited to participate and share their experience in the *GACK*? In consultation with GAIA organizers, the project co-leaders devised a simple two-part rule for entry into the process: "Do you have experience curating video games, and would you like to share that experience? If so, you are welcome to participate in writing and editing the *GACK*."

Given the emerging nature of the game curation as well as the DIY and extramural status of many game exhibition projects, it was important to adopt this approach that did not require any further qualifications to enter. This non-hierarchical value was deemed essential for gathering an accurate overview of the field. After this, a call was opened for artists, curators, game developers, event organizers, and others participating in or familiar with GAIA 2021 (which is itself open to the general web-viewing public) to continue the *GACK's* progress. Responses exceeded expectations, and the plan for the global group writing challenge was proposed in an online session on Friday, March 26, 2021.

STRUCTURE OF THE *GACK* WRITING PROCESS

The exercise began with the assignment of topics, and then the document was created over three phases:

- Phase 1, where assignees wrote first drafts over two weeks,
- Phase 2, where everyone switched roles and edited someone else's draft over two more weeks, and
- Phase 3, where for three weeks, the project co-leaders, GAIA organizers, and anyone else with additional thoughts were free to review and address outstanding needs.

Well over twenty individuals from across the world volunteered to participate in the writing exercise. The motivation behind this was to capture a broad selection of approaches to games curation where experience and knowledge came from a variety of sources rather than the more traditional approach where a single curator or curatorial team carries the vision.

The subjects chosen were meant to answer the questions why, what, who, where, when, and how to curate a video games exhibition. During registration, volunteers were asked which themes they would like to write about. We took these responses and generated a system that, to the best of our capabilities, assigned each author the subject of their choice. Not all subjects had the same degree of popularity, with diversity, permissions, and governance only getting one request each. While no formal reason was expressed, we believe contributors did not feel qualified to speak on the aforementioned subjects and thus refrained from volunteering to write these sections. To resolve this, it was necessary to recruit additional contributors with specific experience, so the less popular sections were still covered. Once subject assignments were finalized, the actual writing began. For this phase, authors were given free rein over their chapters and the structure they would use. While Evans and Cepeda had editorial oversight over the entire process, it was decided that volunteers had the qualifications necessary to negotiate the editing of their own sections, with Evans and Cepeda acting as a backup. Fortunately, no section required further editing after the contributors' editing passes.

It is also important to highlight the wiki nature of the manual itself. When it was first proposed, the *GACK* had no predetermined platform as the initial writing exercises were done in Google Docs. However, upon the arrival of Cepeda, he suggested the manual be hosted as a wiki. Wikis are collaborative hypertext publications where a community can collaboratively shape a text without depending

on a central authority.[9] Cepeda recommended this after his own experience handling a collaborative live-document in his own manual. A wiki made editing and change tracking a much simpler process where any member could edit something, document that change, and have it reflected on the document's metadata, making it immediately and publicly visible. The advantages of the wiki structure make the *GACK* forward-compatible and able to evolve as technology and the field of game curation change. Whether or not the project continues will be discussed in the analysis section. After the process concluded, some contributors also shared that the wiki structure had drawbacks in the editing phase, stating that breaking into someone's writing in that format felt too public and final, and they preferred to exchange feedback and edits outside of the wiki.

THE *GACK* IN SUMMARY

The manual is broken down into six sections named why, what, who, where, when, and how. This subdivision of themes was meant to answer the most common questions when curating an exhibition while at the same time creating something of a suggested workflow. Effectively, what this means is that if one were to move through the manual in the order present in the table of contents, it would be possible for the organizers of an exhibition to execute each step in order and, in the end, have a fairly detailed and encompassing exhibition proposal ready to be shopped around.

This suggested reading is not necessarily the definitive reading order, as the modularity of the manual also allows curators to peruse the sections relevant to their interest or current situation. A more experienced curator may not be as interested in the funding aspect of an exhibition as a novice curator who lacks a network of contacts and experience. Similarly, someone already versed in new media art curation may find some of the recommendations made in the manual familiar to their own methodologies.

Having explained the methodology of *GACK*, we'll turn to the underlying structure and contents of each section as well as highlight particularly interesting insights within them. Under the "Why" chapter, we can find the "Goals" section. Written by Evans, "Goals" was one of the original texts generated in the first curators' manual writing exercise in 2019 and lays down the many reasons a curator may want to curate a video game exhibition while avoiding being prescriptive; in

9 See Wikipedia: "Wiki," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki

a way, it is more of a manifesto for the manual and its underlying spirit[10]. The next chapter, "What," attempts to answer the question: What is needed to make a video game exhibition? Sections under this chapter include "Themes," "Formats," "Selection," "Artworks," and "Accessibility." As such, this content deals with a lot of the practical part of curation, including the tone of the exhibition and its content. It also invites the curator to consider the practical implications of their work, or as Emilie Reed puts it:

"Determining the scope of the particular format you're working in and specific concerns and issues related to that format is an important step in planning the activity. Generally, formats are informed by what type of work you are presenting, the venue in which you are presenting it, your target audience, and the time period of the activity."[11]

This recommendation highlights the inherently interdisciplinary nature of video games and prepares the reader for further collaborative work in the workflow of an exhibition's curation and display.

Meanwhile, the "Who" chapter helps curators engage with the individuals surrounding videogame exhibitions. This includes sections on how to address diversity within the community, but more importantly, it addresses xissues of tokenism and performative inclusivity. "Creators" offers ideas on how to engage with game creators. Some insights presented by the game creator and author of this section, droqen, include reminders that not only the general public but also creators themselves often do not see their work as artistic, and this will require curators to adjust to their specific idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, it accounts for issues such as the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of game making. Other interesting contributions to this chapter included audience breakdowns based on their interests and gaming literacy. "Teams" and "Partners" deal with the internal running of an exhibition. From the preparation and importance of front-of-house staff to finding and forming strategic alliances with other institutions.

"Where" covers questions of sites, virtual sites, and regions. Unlike most artforms, video games have very specific demands for sites, including internet access, power outlet availability, space for the public to queue, and low light levels. To account for all of this, Lujan Oulton and Rene G. Cepeda formatted this section as a checklist to be run through as an exhibition is planned in order to ensure none

10 Evans, Chaz: "Goals," in: *Game Arts Curators Kit*, 2021, https://gameartsinternational.network/gameartscuratorskit/doku.php/goals

11 Reed, Emilie: "Formats," in: *Game Arts Curators Kit*, 2021, https://gameartsinternational.network/gameartscuratorskit/doku.php/formats

of these needs are overlooked.[12] "Online" addresses the different ways a video game exhibition can be designed for web distribution, including platform considerations, artwork suitability, and more. It also prepares curators for the costs and heightened challenges they will face should they decide to proceed with such an undertaking. Finally, "Regions," as its name indicates, covers regional differences. In a very astute turn, Jose Luis Pacheco Boscan clarifies that regions are not only geographical but also cultural and that these differences change the way video games are perceived and engaged with. Thus, care must be taken to not assume that what worked in one region will automatically succeed in another one.[13]

"When" is a short section covering concerts of duration and scheduling. As interactive artworks, video games are often best experienced when they are played live. Unfortunately, this places extra pressure on curators, teams, and spaces as queues may form, access to the playable versions is limited to the number of game stations available, and more importantly, depending on the game, its playtime may be beyond the scope of a museum exhibition. It also covers some of the more traditional logistics of an exhibition, including loan time, public outreach programming, and more. While those last few issues affect all exhibitions, it is important to cover them in a manual of video games both because the curator may not be familiar with traditional curatorial practice or the curator may be familiar with it but assume video games function differently.

The final section of the manual, "How," is concerned with the more practical considerations of a video game exhibition, including kiosking, exhibition design, legal requirements, funding, and issues of interactivity. They are discussed both in terms of the philosophy behind games being made playable or unplayable in an exhibition and in the context of how to engage with such interactivity in ways that do not exclude those interested in games but are unable to interact due to any number of reasons. This section also lays down ideas for codes of conduct and exhibition governance where things such as the exhibition's tone are taken into account, as well as ways to account for the problematic aspects of gaming culture such as homophobia, racism, and misogyny. It also helps curators consider how to protect minors and minorities as well as ways to enforce such actions.[14]

12 Oulton, Lujan/Cepeda, Rene G.: "Venues," in: *Game Arts Curators Kit*, 2021, https://gameartsinternational.network/gameartscuratorskit/doku.php/venues

13 Pacheco Boscan, Jose Luis: "Regions," in: *Game Arts Curators Kit,* 2021, https://gameartsinternational.network/gameartscuratorskit/doku.php/regions

14 Sanchez, Jamie: "Conduct," in: *Game Arts Curators Kit*, 2021, https://gameartsinternational.network/gameartscuratorskit/doku.php/conduct

It is the hope of all who participated in creating the guide that following these sections will ideally result in an exhibition that treats video games with the respect and specificity they deserve. Additionally, following this program should ensure that said exhibitions embody values of accessibility and inclusivity in a way that meets the requirements set forth by Jon Ippolito's article "Death by Wall Label," where he describes the curatorial challenges inherent in new media art.[15]

ANALYSIS AND THEMES OF THE *GACK*

Looking back at *GACK*, there are many observations that can be made. First, the resulting document reframes video game curation into a collaborative, multi-disciplinary process that is open to creativity and reinterpretation at both the curatorial and expositive levels. By splitting the writing into a main round of writing, followed by a round of volunteer editing/co-writing and a final round of editing by the GAIA staff, the manual underwent a form of peer review that enhanced the quality of the recommendations and writing. It is also worth mentioning that there were a variety of voices from Latin America, the United States and Canada, Europe, and Oceania. The other beneficial developments that came from this exercise were the creation of new relationships, both professional and personal, that continue to this day.

Were this experiment to continue, possible avenues for growth could include growing the list of contributors in order to encourage even broader co-authorship and more diverse editing rounds. Another potential improvement to the text could be the inclusion of new sections or the expansion of existing ones. For example, the online section could be expanded to address the use of emerging platforms currently drawing wide commercial speculation. It could be particularly important to draw on a group's experience for recommendations on how to incorporate high-quality VR headsets, as well as standards and for whether and how much this field should engage with blockchain technology.

In terms of what could have been improved, fostering a sense of community outside of shared group work and deadlines continues to be a high priority. This could be achieved through get-togethers, casual gatherings, round tables, and other systems of socialization. The use of Slack seemed to be a barrier to communication

15 Ippolito, Jon: "Death by Wall Label," in: Christiane Paul (ed.), *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art,* Berkeley, California: University of California Press 2008, pp. 106-130.

for some, with not all participants being familiar with the software or ignoring it for weeks at a time.

Overall, this version of the *GACK* is now in a resolved and ready-to-use state and is also in the process of being designed and edited for a print edition. While there is room for improvement, the resulting manual is available for use at all levels of video game curation.

CONCLUSION

It is not our aim that the *GACK* and the process that crafted it should stand as a permanent authority on the topic of video game curating. Instead, the most successful evaluation of the *GACK* would be if, after a new decade of this practice, hopefully even more robust and globally supported than the last ten years, another group would convene to share their own observations and themes from experience. Then those experiences could be encapsulated as a new end-of-2020s *GACK* to take the place of this one. However, in the short term, we would like to view the *GACK* experiment as a success through the new strength and definition it has provided to the assembly of video game curators it brought together.

Outside of the results of the process, the act of writing as a group functions as a second step in the evolution of a global video game curator infrastructure after the initiation of GAIA. The response the project received from the call for participation supports the notion that there is ample interest and need for projects such as these. We invite you to look at the lessons of this manual and apply them to your own efforts and perhaps create your own game art organization and continue to grow this important and relevant academic field. Or alternatively, if you are a reader without any inclination to curate a video exhibition of your own, we hope the existence of the *GACK* increases the visibility of video game exhibitions when you are deciding what to patronize within the cultural offerings in your particular corner of the globe.

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