

## On Collecting New & Variable Media Artifacts

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This paper is an exploration of the act of collecting. The desire to collect physical objects has been around for millennia (Csikszentmihalyi 1993). Seal impressions, similar to autograph collections, existed in Persia as early as the Fourth Century BC (Rigby and Rigby 1994), wealthy Romans collected art and copies of art, as well as coins, fossils and other natural objects (Belk 1994), but collecting really gained popularity during the Renaissance with the rise of the middle class (Blom 2003) and became solidified as a true hobby in the 1930s as a way of asserting individuality, and a means to self-education about the world (Gelber 1991). Because we have such a long history, good models for how to collect, and how to evaluate collections of physical objects exist. However, collecting new media artifacts presents a host of problems. In this paper I'll review traditional models of collection building and evaluation, and then provide an overview of some of the challenges inherent in collecting new media artifacts.

More than providing an outlet for acquisitional appetites, a good collection is often associated in the mind of the collector with the idea of a "tangible biography" (Benjamin 1969; Beer 2008); the ability to look at a collection and remember different periods of one's life, to associate objects with experiences, and to "transform the precariousness of consciousness into the solidity of things. The body is not so large, beautiful, and permanent enough to satisfy our sense of self. We need objects to magnify our power, enhance our beauty, and extend our memory into the future" (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 28).

Csikszentmihalyi believes that the act of collecting is a fundamentally important part of self-creation, and identifies three ways in which collecting artifacts help substantiate a person's sense of self: 1) a valuable collection displays the owner's power, energy, and place in the social hierarchy; 2) objects remind the collector of the self through time, the objects providing a focus of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs from the past, and pointers to future goals; and 3) the act of collecting provides concrete evidence of the collector's place in the social world, the objects in a collection acting as illustrations of valued relationships. "In these ways things stabilize our sense of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 23).

### Defining a Collector

Defining the precise nature of a collection is difficult. Tanselle provides a very broad definition of a collector as a person who accumulates "tangible things," (Tanselle 1999, referenced in Case 2009); but that definition, although to be lauded for its simplicity, does not provide any guidance on the nature of the objects collected, nor on the nature of the collection itself. Anyone who owns a set of dishes or living room furniture for example

could be called a collector under this definition, although collections typically occupy a different conceptual space than the objects that constitute daily life. A more precise definition describes a collector as a person who acquires a series of similar objects where the primary function of the objects is not important and who does not plan to immediately sell the objects for profit (McIntosh and Schmichel 2004). A chef does not collect knives, for example, although he might own many of them.

Thus, McIntosh and Schmichel's definition, which characterizes a collection partly by its lack of functional intent, does not seem to account for those instances in which the collected objects are still in use. In these situations the objects in a collection continue to perform their original function; for example, a guitarist with a guitar collection most likely plays those guitars just as a fashion maven with a hat collection might continue to wear those hats. The difference between the aforementioned chef and the guitarist lies in the motivation behind accumulating their respective objects; whereas the chef must necessarily purchase a number of different knives to successfully perform his job, the guitarist really only needs one working instrument to perform his. Thus, while a guitarist with many guitars could be called a collector, a chef with many knives would more accurately be considered an owner of knives, assuming each knife serves a purpose within the chef's working environment.

However, the chef may decide to bring some of his "special" knives home, where he organizes, maintains, and perhaps even uses the knives outside of their functional domain, the industrial kitchen. At this point the knives are being "saved for prosperity" as part of a collection, and the chef has become a collector. In this example, the chef decides that certain knives have special characteristics that differentiate them from the knives used in the workplace, which suggests a sense of agency. Additionally, the knife collection is provided with a special space that may or may not emphasize their special characteristics, which suggests an organizing principle. Finally, because the knives have been taken out of their original context and placed into a different space for a different set of uses, which may or may not include their original use, an act of decontextualization has occurred.

One final problem with this definition is its focus on tangible objects. Although one of the most prolific scholars in the collecting literature has argued that people can collect material objects, ideas, or experiences without tangible manifestations of those experiences (Belk, 1994), there is little research on how one would do so, which is a shortcoming that will be addressed in this paper. For the purpose of this paper, then, the definition of a collector augments McIntosh and Schmichel's, and includes some wording for intangible objects: a collector is a person who purposefully accumulates similar artifacts, where the artifact's original function is not the primary reason for integration into the collection.

## **Types of Collections**

Numerous scholars have tried to define the salient characteristics of different kinds of collectors and collections. Belk (1991, 1994) provides a distinction between collectors, who acquire objects for either taxonomic or aesthetic purposes; and non-collectors, who merely accumulate or hoard materials without any guiding principles. Broderick (2005) and Hendricks (2008) define collectors from a monetary standpoint: collectors are distinguished from investors and dealers in that collectors acquire objects for non-financial

purposes, whereas investors and dealers expect to make a profit either in the near or long-term from their collections.

### ***Souvenir Collections***

Pearce (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) provides the most comprehensive definition of collections by dividing them into three major categories: Souvenir, Fetishistic, and Systematic Collections. These different types of collections are defined not by the kinds of objects collected, but by the collector's motivation to collect. A collector forms a souvenir collection to serve a reporting or reminding function. The objects in a souvenir collection are a sample of an event that can be remembered but not relived, "not repeatable, but reportable."

*"They are an important part of our attempt to make sense of our personal histories, happy or unhappy, to create an essential personal and social self centered in its own unique life story, and to impose this vision on an alien world. They relate to the construction of a romantically integrated personal self, in which the objects are subordinated into a secondary role, and it is this which makes them, all too frequently, so depressing to curate and to display." (Pearce 1994b, 197)*

It is important to stress that it is not the nature of the objects in a collection that determine its type. A souvenir collection could contain ephemera like ticket stubs or Broadway Playbills to remind the collector of a New York vacation; or it could include Old Master drawings and valuable historical artifacts to remind a collector of their Grand European Tour.

### ***Fetishistic Collections***

The term "fetishistic" has a pejorative tone, and implies a compulsive quality that is not necessarily descriptive. A better term might be "devoted" or even "obsessive" collecting, but unfortunately, the term "fetishistic" is commonly accepted by the scholarly community, and introducing a new term would be counter-productive. Fetishistic collections contain samples, and many of them, rather than a few choice exemplars, which is one of the characteristics that distinguish them from systematic collections. The process of collecting is important for the collector; it's a "deployment of the possessive self, a strategy of desire..." (Pearce 1994b, 200). Furthermore, fetishistic collections are not taxonomic, and are not organized or created according to any commonly accepted norms. Instead, fetishistic collectors arrange their collections idiosyncratically, and the collections are typically an extension the collector's personality. "This kind of collection is formed by people whose imaginations identify with the objects which they desire to gather" (Pearce 1994b, 201).

Because intensely personal motivations characterize both the fetishistic and souvenir collections, both are typically devoid of context. These types of collectors "...do this by trying to lift objects away from the web of social relationships, to deny process and to freeze time. In museums, therefore, they are perceived as disassociated and static, floating in a kind of purposeless limbo" (Pearce 1994b, 201). The nature of the relationship between collector and collection is what distinguishes the fetishistic from the souvenir

collection. In the souvenir collection, the collector merely uses the objects to support their memory of self, whereas in a fetishistic collection, the collection plays a more fundamental role in defining the personality of the collector, who experiences an almost worshipful attitude towards the objects in the collection. Again, a fetishistic collection is not defined by its contents, but by the relationship the collector has to the objects contained within.

### ***Systematic Collections***

The most evolved form of collecting, from an institutional standpoint, is systematic collecting, which relies on external principles of organization and valuation, rather than on the more personal motivations of fetishistic and souvenir collections. The boundaries of systematic collections are set externally, either through a history of collecting different kinds of materials, or through the process of observation and reason; and these collections are situated in a commonly understood external reality. Objects in the collection are contextualized by the society in which they were formed, and often reflect historical mores and ideals contemporary to collection building. A systematic collector wants the best examples of a set of objects, and builds the collection based on a preconceived and external taxonomy that can be fulfilled. "The emphasis is upon classification, in which specimens (a revealing word) are extracted from their context and put into relationships created by seriality" (Pearce 1994b, 200-201). The collection is conceptualized by a pre-existing taxonomy, from which the collector attempts to build a Platonic ideal: their attempt is to build the "best" possible collection given the realities of the market, the materials, and the society in which they live.

Systematic collections are often created, consciously or unconsciously, to demonstrate a point or illustrate a pre-defined theme (Pearce 1994c). The act of collecting different objects and arranging and describing them in a meaningful way serves the purpose of convincing or imposing a set of beliefs, creating a secondary context, or to encourage a particular way of thinking (Pearce, 1994c). This pedagogical character is another difference between systematic collecting and souvenir and fetishistic collecting. Because systematic collections are based in an external reality, and there is an objective metric with which to judge for comprehensiveness and value, these kinds of collections are able to draw outsiders into the collection's frame of reference, from which a user can learn, or with which a viewer can agree or disagree. By depending on an external set of conditions, the systematic collector is able to make a public declaration about the nature of reality, rather than a very private statement about themselves.

### **What do People Collect?**

People can collect anything. Collected objects "may be material, ideas or experiences (e.g., travel, restaurant or concert experiences, either with or without tangible manifestations of these experiences)" (Belk 1994, 317). As mentioned earlier in this paper, the literature on collecting focuses on tangible collections, which may include objects we consider typical: like art (Rovers 2009; Grodzinski 2009; Korn 2004); books (Benjamin 1969), and coins (Case 2009). Descriptions of more unusual physical collections include British children's shrapnel collections from World War II (Moshenska 2004), bricks (Pearce 1994), and human detritus (i.e., scabs and hair) (Hartman 2006).

### ***Individual and Institutional Collections***

Private interests often inspire personal collecting, determining whether the individual has taxonomic or more personal intentions and providing the motivation behind an individual's decision to collect bricks or priceless art. As mentioned earlier in this paper, collections can help people remember events (Yates 1966), build a sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi 1993; Pearce 1994), and provide a means to build and become part of a community (Case 2009). The act of collecting can also give a sense of power to the powerless (Moschenka 2004), and provide markers of status for an outsider minority (Korn 2009; Rovers 2009).

The situation for institutions is different. Within an institution, the act of collection building is formalized and systematized, and supports overarching institutional or even sometimes national goals. However, the systematic nature of any collection development plan, even one developed by an institution (small or large), is always subject to idiosyncrasies. For example, the Quebecois Historic Monuments Commission's selection of ten kinds of cultural property reveals both a striving toward an ideal cultural identity and a willfully nostalgic remembrance of things past that "appears as a taxonomy worthy of Borges's 'Chinese encyclopedia'" (Clifford 1994, 259). Historic monuments thus include: "1) commemorative monuments; 2) churches and chapels; 3) forts of the French Regime; 4) windmills; 5) roadside crosses; 6) commemorative inscriptions and plaques; 7) devotional monuments; 8) old houses and manors; 9) old furniture; 10) "les choses disparues" ["things missing"] (Handler 1985, 199; quoted in Clifford 1994).

Collecting institutions like museums, archives and libraries often depend on individuals as the collection's starting point, or as a means to collection building and augmentation. When institutional collectors interact with individuals, they prefer systematic collectors, due to the overlapping goals of comprehensiveness, and the collections' taxonomic nature. However, while institutional collections provide a valuable service – they preserve, protect, organize and provide access to materials – because of their formalized collection development and access models (Tappeiner and Lyons 2008), and institutional models of interaction (Clifford 1994) their collection development processes are much less flexible than those of individuals. Before the advent of the Internet, when cultures were mostly static and objects and production models were more established, this lack of flexibility translated into a much-appreciated stability. Unfortunately, due to the increasing popularity, centrality, and inherently variable nature of new media, this inflexibility may now translate into rigidity, which could result in dire consequences for the future of traditional collecting institutions.

### **Material Culture and New Media**

New media is gaining importance both within culture at large, and within traditional institutional collections. With the advent of ubiquitous computing in the form of iPhones and other kinds of sensor technology, people are interacting with, and developing intense personal relationships with technology in a way that is difficult to precisely define. Further, the open-source movement and the ensuing "maker" culture have given the general public tools and the mind-set to interact with media in a way that was not possible even five years ago. Instead of passively receiving media like movies, music and art created by

professionals, individuals are participating in cultural production, creating their own materials, often based on the objects of material culture. These artifacts of participatory culture include objects that range from materials that look a lot like traditional media: movies, music, and art that simply have different production and distribution models; to materials for which we have no vocabulary to describe, and no model to provide access.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the literature on collecting focuses on physical objects, although there is a recognition that people can and do collect experiences or ideas with no tangible manifestations. While there is a literature on collecting more ephemeral materials, this literature still, to some degree, focuses on relatively fixed and tangible materials like 'zine (Koh 2008; Asch 2010) and videogame artifact collections (meaning collections of physical game cartridges or other physical game manifestations) (Tappeiner and Lyons 2008). There is also a literature on materials that are digital but have a strong physical model from which to work, like digital music (Kibby 2009; Cunningham et al. 2004; Bainbridge et al. 1999) and digital photograph collections (van House et al. 2005; Wilhelm et al. 2004; Naaman et al. 2004), but the focus there is often on description, access and infrastructure rather than the nature of the collections themselves. Scholarship focusing on truly ephemeral and variable material is still at the theoretical stage, and deals almost exclusively with esoteric and highly privileged materials, like new media art (Depocas et al. 2003) or online videogames, treated primarily as a form of art (Winget and Murray 2008; Lowood 2002).

All of the materials examined thus far, whether they are tangible and have a long collecting tradition from which to draw, or are ephemeral and require an entirely different collecting model, are created within traditional models of authorship; all of the materials referenced above, even the bricks, have an authoritative creator who works within a traditional model of production for a well-defined audience. For these collections traditional methods of valuation and evaluation apply, and the avenues of ownership and collection building are relatively straightforward. This is not the case for artifacts of a participatory culture, which include materials generated by fans and other members of the general public via new forms of production, and are not easily defined or valued. These materials do have value, however, and in order to remain relevant, traditional collecting institutions must develop new and variable models of collection development, evaluation, and access.

Because these non-traditional materials do not fit into traditional collecting standards, we need to study new media materials more closely in order to establish more inclusionary models. The remainder of this paper will provide an overview of some of the major challenges inherent in collecting new and variable media artifacts, using examples from videogames, performance, and new media art.

### ***The Emergent Nature of These Materials***

People have collected books for hundreds of years. The collecting community has well-understood and established models for describing, collecting, evaluating and providing access to books. The same can be said for collecting almost any kind of material culture: stamps, coins, clothing, music, art, fossils, and insects; even collections of unlikely materials, like hair and bricks have a history and a viable model. We do not, however, have

a commonly accepted model for collecting new media artifacts, much less materials that are created outside of traditional production models. Without these models, it is difficult for collectors to determine what kinds of materials are important, and it is difficult for outsiders to evaluate the collections' worth. At the same time, new media is becoming more common, and as a result, more people are collecting them. Unfortunately, it takes time to develop intuitive and wide-ranging frameworks for description, collection, evaluation and access; and it takes even more time for those models to trickle down to individuals. The result of all this uncertainty is that individuals collecting these kinds of artifacts right now are less sure of their goals and methods than are those collecting more traditional materials.

Additionally, Johanna Drucker, in a recent keynote address to the TILTS symposium, called attention to the problematic nature of genre transformation within new media (Drucker, 2011). Traditional descriptive terms, like "art," "literature," "data," or "journalism" no longer mean the same things they meant even five years ago. Art no longer necessarily looks like art, it looks more like a game; work and play are becoming less clearly defined, and the transformation of journalism makes it difficult to judge information value, credibility, or "truthiness." These changes are difficult from a publishing and monetary standpoint, but they also pose problems for collecting institutions, who, if they're interested in collecting new media, need to have more fluid collecting models and more flexible evaluation protocols.

### ***The Act of Collecting***

One of the reasons people enjoy collecting is because it provides a means to connect with other people and to reinforce social ties. The process of acquiring objects in a collection is a deeply social act. The communities to which a collector belongs, and the avenues of acquisition provide clues to motivations and collection goals. Furthermore the collector's physical limitations – how much money they can spend on particular artifacts, for example; or how much physical space their collection occupies – also assist in reliably characterizing a collection. Both of these issues: the extremely important social aspect of collecting, and the physical limitations of collection acquisition are confounded by new media collections. There are few, if any physical limitations on collection development; and while the social aspect is equally as important as it is with physical collecting, the nature of the social aspect is inherently different.

### ***Physical Limitations***

The lack of physical limitations is one of the major differences between new media artifacts and material objects. New media artifacts are easily copied, often free, and take up very little space, either physical or digital. This is not the case for physical collections of any kind, which often focus on scarce or unique materials which cost more given their relative scarcity, and can often require significant space to store and display. This is not to imply that collecting new media is easy. The limitations placed on collectors of these materials can also be daunting: collectors' ability to find, organize, and host their collections can turn expensive, and many collectors get so far behind in organizing their materials that collection access becomes untenable.

The nature of the problem is different for new media collections. Because these materials are often freely available or easily obtained, instead of focusing on acquisition, new media collectors focus their energies on organization and sharing. Because there are few if any physical limitations to storage and display, these collectors are much more concerned with providing access to as many people as possible.

Collections of new media artifacts appear different from traditional physical collections. Because the objects are free to obtain, the collections are often very large; because the collectors essentially collect in order to share, the collections are often highly organized, if not contextualized for the general public; and because the collections are made up of materials for which there are no traditional collecting and display models, and are exclusively displayed online, the collections look unique. As arbiters of collection quality, then, the traditional collecting models fail in terms of physical characteristics.

### *Social Nature of Collecting*

The scholarly literature on collecting posits that developing social ties is one of the most important elements of collecting. Developing social ties is one of the main reasons people begin and continue collecting. Not only does collecting a certain kind of object provide access to a community of other collectors, the act of collecting can strengthen one's sense of self, and build ego. This social characteristic is even more important for collectors of new media artifacts, but again, the nature of the social interaction is different. Instead of using the collecting community as a means to hone searching skills, or to trade collecting methods and secrets, the communities focus on building one collection. Collecting is no longer an exclusively individual pastime. Whereas physical collectors might form a community to trade information on where to purchase materials, or which dealers have the most interesting and well-priced stocks, new media collectors gather to share artifacts in order to build larger, more comprehensive collections. Because there is no scarcity – and copying is the de facto means of communication and sharing on the Internet, communities are formed around one collection, instead of forming around a type of collection artifact (stamp collectors, for example, or coin collectors).

This changes the nature of the digital collections. Instead of individuals owning collections that they can only share with a limited number of people, usually by loaning or donating their collections to institutions; new media collections become institution-like entities around which communities form, and which are available to vast numbers of people over the Internet. This difference introduces a number of issues relevant to traditional collecting models. First, because these collections are built using ad hoc social ties rather than going through traditional acquisition means, it becomes difficult to determine provenance or authenticity of the materials within. Additionally, because these collections do not represent the vision of a lone collector and have to allow for multiple interests, contexts, and types of materials, the resulting character of these kinds of new media collections is less unified than that of traditional collections. Again, this is another instance where the traditional collecting typology does not provide a useful framework for evaluation or classification of these collections.



## Conclusion

Without a good descriptive and representational framework, it is exceedingly difficult to provide access to new media collections, it is difficult to preserve them, and it is difficult for institutions to argue for their value. This is unfortunate, because new media is becoming more important within our culture, and these collections provide rich, evocative representations of culturally significant artifacts.

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