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Editorial: Hedvig Jalhed and Margot Edström



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What to Keep, 2024. Card game. Installation view, detail, *Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024*, IAC.
Marika Hedemyr, Sophia Ioannou Gjerding

What to Keep: a conversation about a game

with Ylva Grufstedt, Marika Hedemyr and Sophia Ioannou Gjerding

What to Keep is a work by artist and choreographer Marika Hedemyr and visual artist Sophia Ioannou Gjerding, exploring themes of conservation, display and collecting. The game's content originates from interviews with Malmö Museum staff (conservator Annika Edgren and aquarium curator Jesper Flygare) and the artists' family members, each answering the same 11 questions about what to keep, display and hide. Their answers were subsequently transformed into a card game that takes its form in between game play and conversation.

Historian and game scholar Ylva Grufstedt from Malmö University was invited to further discuss *What to Keep* and was joined by Margot Edström, artistic supervisor at Inter Arts Center.

Ylva Grufstedt (YG): I played your game, and found it really interesting. My research often focuses on how history is used today, and cultural heritage is very much a part of that. The questions that came up about selection and balance are central, and I think balance is a really fun word in this context because, there's game balance, right? But there's also a balance between preservation and mediation of the past, and throwing things away.

Marika Hedemyr (MH): The prelude to our process was a visit to Malmö Museum with our group that included David Cinthio, technician at the Museum. This sparked discussions about collecting and care practices – in museums, in games and in private life. We visited both the backstage of the aquarium, and the huge museum storage warehouse. I was really struck by what Annika, the conservator, said: 'When we take it in, we take it in for life.' For me, coming from Dance, this is very different from how you work in performing art, in which you propose something for a situation and it is ephemeral.

YG: Do you think the project captures a specific moment in time, like spring or summer of 2024?

Sophia Ioannou Gjerding (SG): In a way, yes. The game and the process reflect contemporary questions about collections, both living (like animals in an aquarium) and preserved objects. Visiting Malmö Museum made me realise how the collections reflect both living practices and the systems we use in everyday life.

Making the game made me realise how we were also making selections and creating systems, similar to curating a museum collection. This selection was necessary to make the game work as a game. The game as a system or a framework in itself. I wondered whether the game would open up discussions or feel like a final product, but when people played it, I saw something new emerge. A whole new situation was created, which is completely different from our process of making the game. Which gives me a sort of answer to your question.

YG: These are indeed very contemporary questions, dealing with living collections, for example, the practicalities of that, as well as the ethics of it.

It is mind boggling how recently these types of questions became central to collecting. I mean, it's not necessarily something that we can take for granted.

So, I'm thinking, when listening to you, that there is for sure a temporal aspect at play here in two ways. It is something that happens in your work that you're reflecting on while making the game. It is also reflected in the game itself. It becomes more or less visible and explicit depending on the players, but it is for sure there.

And it will continue to change. In 25 years, when someone finds your game in a box somewhere, it might be an opportunity for the people of the future to reflect on how the questions have changed once more.

MH: In relation to our contemporary time, there are really mixed messages around keeping things or not. On one hand we have the capitalist logic that encourages us to constantly buy new things instead of repairing. We also have the trend of living a minimalist life, with for example Marie Kondo, that encourages us to get rid of a lot of stuff. At the museum, I was really struck by the thing of 'taking it in for life'. I was also struck by the enormous amount of care work in the aquarium and how they are connected to global chains of care, for example by breeding small fish from South America to ensure they don't go extinct. So, it's like a clash, in the private as well as the public life.

How you can both enjoy getting rid of things, and at the same time enjoy taking care of things.

I also think, in these times of many ongoing wars – who can care for a box full of photos and who cannot? Who can save a cup and who cannot? Maybe you just have to run to save your life, you know? When you put these different perspectives together, there's something about it which makes it absurd and serious, but also darkly humorous. When selecting the quotes, we had many discussions to find the statements that reflected the practical practice of deciding what to save or discard, as we wanted to avoid the value aspect of whether it is good or bad to get rid of things. We tried to embed and circle around the actual practice of deciding what to keep or get rid of, what to display or not, given the many mixed messages about it in society today.

Margot Edström (ME): And then you asked these 11 questions to family members and museum staff?

SG: We did the interviews, we got them transcribed and then we made the selection. We tried to look at the action of selecting in relation to how we curated the quotes. It's like looking at what we want to display from these people that we interviewed. In many ways, making a game is like making an algorithm, making decisions about what you want to have in it and what shouldn't be part of it. It was interesting to see it unfold in such a concrete way.

I have this book from the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo called *Heritage – Our Place in History* by Øivind Fuglerud & Karoline Kjesrud. It really broadens what heritage is, illuminating how their collections also derive from personal heritage – for example, people contacting the museum about some interesting object they have inherited from their grandmother. This mixture between the private collection and the museum collection is very interesting, and also, how the museum staff makes selections on behalf of a whole country in a way. What lies behind the decisions of what is important for us as a nation and which stories we choose to tell? I think those questions become present in the game, asking the participants: What do we want to tell? What do we want to preserve and display? And as makers of the game, we end up in the same situation with the selection of the quotes ... Does that make sense?

YG: For sure. This makes me very curious; what did you reject? Do you have any favourites or any memorable quotes that did not end up in the game?

MH: There was, for example, the discussion about how to handle human remains in the museum collection. In the interview it was talked about in a conscious and good way with reasoning about the ethics, and as a quote it was very long. In general, we had given ourselves the artistic freedom to condense a quote if there were a lot of words. But this one was really difficult to summarise in that way.

YG: So, you looked for ‘short and snappy’?

MH: Yes, a short and snappy thing for the game thing. It was like a discussion between Sophia and me, to find out if a quote may take the thinking in another direction than we wanted the game to circle around. For example, a teenager who said: ‘I have my teddy bear on my bed so everyone can see it every day.’ We took that one out. So, it was anything from the ethically complex to private, because how can such issues and quotes be given justice and not be gamified?

YG: You were constrained by the design of the game?

MH: Yes, we were thinking ahead of how it would work in contrast to the other quotes, together in this pool of cards.

Firstly, we knew that we wanted cards with text – some kind of conversation cards. Then we knew we wanted the green playing table. This one is from my grandparents. That was the setup. Then we started to just try things out, like size, colour, paper type and printing. Then it just clicked with the orange, and the idea to replicate stickers on the back of each card. Afterwards, we discussed whether each category should represent something specific, but we decided, no, let’s just be random, because it’s also about this mess of things.

SG: And we discussed if it would confuse people, because, you know, from games you kind of have categories. We considered if it would be a good confusion. Like working with this montage to open the discussion, hoping that it would expand the conversations between players and not be restrictive.

YG: Right! One thing that I really appreciated about your work was specifically the space that I was given to interpret and contextualise. I think your rules and setup card on the wall did that very well because I think there is a risk of over-explaining. The design of the paper itself is clever. It’s four very quick bullet points and it gives you an immediate impression not to over-think it, and just see where it takes you.

MH: In the process, Sophia and I used a simple exercise to define the premise of the game, who you are playing as, what you are going to achieve, and what your obstacles are. We really tried to answer these questions, until we came to the realisation that this is not that type of game. Instead, it's somewhere in between abstract poetry and activation of a question.

SG: Yeah, we talked a lot about that – like, if I have the material and then add more mechanics to it, you create more distance from the material itself.

For us, it was also this immediacy that really began at the visit to the museums and this overlap in interest. We asked ourselves: How can we use this energy in a game? And every time we tried to make the design a little bit more complex, we realised it was suddenly doing something different from what we had in mind.

MH: In that process we identified some things. Like that the caretaking of stuff never ends. So, we said, okay, that needs to be an important game mechanic. It should never end. Then we were also surprised by how many cards we actually had in the end, and it felt like a mess. But then we said that actually the collections that we work with as a theme, sometimes they are organised and sometimes not, and there is something about that massive amount of things that you just have to handle.

We also discussed the concept of 'backstage' versus 'frontstage'. Are the cards you hold in your hand backstage? Should certain areas of the table represent these spaces of the museum? We also wanted to have the action of choosing what to keep and what to get rid of, and tried the rule that you pick up five cards and remove two.

Staying true to the material meant the game couldn't have a clear end or goal; like handling a collection, it's ongoing. What to keep or display changes over time, with no fixed resolution.

YG: Another question that becomes quite important in this context is accessibility. For example, what you call backstage or the storage area is, on paper, supposed to be accessible, right? In theory, anyone can, for example, go to the city archives and ask to look at a collection or material, but one has to have specific knowledge and a specific skill set to be able to understand what even exists there in the first place; what kind of material is being stored in this particular place, what one might use it for, etc. Did you consider audiences beyond the museum, say inhabitants in Malmö for example?

MH: We discussed it, and we focused on the audience and situation that

would be here at IAC during the exhibition. We tried different setups for the table and cards, and did a lot of tests like ‘Sophia, if you go out to the corridor and come in – what do you see?’ We wanted it to be inviting for someone to enter and take a seat.

SG: In the *1, 2, 3 Playtime* programme, we have been talking about invisibility, what it means when you think a software is easy to use. What goes unnoticed are the kind of politics used in this way of designing things so they’re easy to use. This also influenced the final form of the game.

YG: I’m wondering if there could be a version of this game that focuses on just one question. For example, the ethical issue of dealing with human remains in collections, the fact that they exist in the first place, and what to do with them now. It might also be interesting, then, to develop some of the things that we’ve been talking about in terms of rules and mechanics – maybe add a box for each player where you put your cards when you play them or, maybe you grab cards from someone else for some reason – just figuring out new ways of playing within the same concept through individual questions.

I think there are so many applications for a game like this in terms of discussing with cultural heritage professionals, for example, using it as a workshop tool for students. I would love to have students play a game like this and discuss individual questions of this kind. I just think it’s a beautiful metaphor for selecting, considering, rejecting, displaying, collecting ...

MH: One piece of feedback we got was the question of ‘What do you do with the cards you put down?’ That was not clear, and we intentionally minimised instructions. Most people just threw it back into the pond on the table. One person suggested that each player gets a little box in which to put the cards, so you gradually empty the table.

SG: I also think that when the play-testing worked well, it was when somebody said: ‘This is something that feels overwhelming here with all the cards.’ It reflected something we often experienced during this project, that the collection becomes emotional.

Very structured game mechanics where you feel that somebody has made the rules for you, can sometimes make it too easy to play. I really think it’s nice if the game can be balanced, so you also sometimes feel a little bit awkward in the game.

One thing that I’m also a little bit sceptical about is gamification, where collecting becomes a game. It can make tasks easy and let players feel they’ve

‘learned’ about collecting. You might have, but it is also a game.

So, my immediate thoughts on the idea of putting things in a box and emptying would be equivalent to when we visited the storage space, and an employee said: ‘I have all this stuff, and we cannot throw anything out.’ That overwhelming feeling is mirrored in the game’s endless ‘pond’. This touches on a larger issue with games: their tendency to simplify or ‘solve’ reality.

MH: I think you touched on something which makes me realise that it is one thing to look at the game mechanics and fill that mechanics with content. And it is another thing, which I would call the art-way, to start from the material or a question, and let the work itself not be an answer but posing a new question. Being true to the material, what does the material give us?

We tried various game mechanics, choosing those that stayed true to the material’s emotional and thematic core.

As you said, let the pond be there – messy and never-ending – because there was something about that in the material and in the question we wanted to activate. It has been really interesting to give the game design approach a try. It has been a way to test the material, or sometimes to find new words for talking about what we are doing. It is about letting the material speak, and listening to the material.

YG: Thinking about cultural heritage work, it’s more about exploring questions than providing neat answers. Game mechanics can end up prioritising structure over open exploration, as seen in many historical games. Take *Assassin’s Creed*, for example, it promotes historical ‘immersion’ but mainly teaches players how to use controls, not really about the past.

This risk of over-structuring seems relevant to your game, too. Making it too linear might push players to focus on strategy over content, like ‘I have five cards, you have three,’ rather than engaging with the themes. And with today’s gaming culture becoming more normative, there’s a pressure for games to adhere to traditional mechanics, which can limit creative, thematic play.

Some games subvert this though. *The Stanley Parable*¹, for instance, challenges expectations and encourages players to think beyond typical mechanics. Have you come across it?

SG: Yeah, I played it some time ago. I also thought about that actually.

YG: Have you played it repeatedly? Have you gone through the game many times?

1 Galactic Cafe. *The Stanley Parable* Galactic Cafe. PC/Mac. 2013.

SG: No, I think I only tried it once or twice. Yes, I made a choice that set me right back to the lens of the office landscape.

YG: Yes, exactly. It cleverly disrupts linearity by having the player start over repeatedly and ending up in new places every time, requiring players to replay it to fully experience the story. It sort of challenges traditional expectations and, in a way, problematises narrative structure in games. The same developer made another game, *The Beginner's Guide*², which goes even further by deconstructing the player's assumptions about what a game 'should' be.

A striking example in *The Stanley Parable* is the ending where scenes from the game are displayed as objects in a museum. It's a meta-perspective, turning the player's journey into an exhibit that deconstructs their role and expectations as a player. And as you pointed out, elements like choice, care, and curation resonate with themes of selection, preservation and 'site-specificness,' which could also metaphorically apply to digital spaces, I suppose.

MH: One aspect of this site-specificness, is the specificity of Malmö Museum. Another one is our choice to use a game table that invites visitors to sit down and interact – as a sort of 'on-boarding'. The 'site' also became the connections between private and public spaces and how we handle similar issues in both. For example, when we asked 'How much storage space do you have?' one person answered 16,000 m², while another said 'I have a box under my sofa and one under my bed.' Juxtaposing these responses highlights that in the public as well as private sphere, you have to deal with the same issues – you have to make decisions on how you dispose and use the space that you have.

SG: And what stories are you choosing to tell about yourself? What do you keep in the boxes that you're not using? In a museum, we see similar choices – the selection of narratives to preserve and share. That's the question: why do we keep all this stuff in storage, like at Malmö Museum and why do I use my limited space at home for storing old books from when I was at school, or old photos? What makes us have these kinds of collections and if you think further about it, humans are kind of weird in this way.

Like, with the aquarium, there is the value of having a specific species of fish stored. Of course, we also learn a lot from these collections, as they are the basis of knowledge. Before our visit, I didn't know about this whole infrastructure worldwide, about how to maintain species. So, it's a huge topic

2 Wreden Davey. *The Beginner's Guide*. Everything Unlimited Ltd. PC/Mac. 2015.

to try to make people experience in a very short amount of time. That's maybe also like the whole question about how to balance it. And what do we want to communicate from all this?

MH: Thinking about what you said – when does the setting become scenography? For example, we can have a love story like *Romeo and Juliet*, and then the time period and setting can become almost like a scenography. When does the setting become the central topic?

YG: That's a crucial question, and it may not have a clear answer. But something you mentioned, Sophia, about practices of collecting – especially why we keep things – stood out for me. Your game reflects this question: people often keep items to prevent loss, so we don't forget. But beyond preservation, why do we collect in the first place? Why do we keep family photos or heirlooms? Maybe, for some, it's to pass things to future generations, though that's not always possible. People may have lost things, or they have no one to pass them on to, or they face other barriers. Still there remains a drive to collect and preserve.

The tension between personal and public purposes in preservation is powerful and could be explored further through your game, highlighting the intersection of private memories and public history.

YG: Because it becomes a question of control, doesn't it? I mean it's quite absurd in a way, to think that we can pick and choose what species survive and are preserved. It's very very definitive, and very powerful. So, then it comes down to... what we are really asking is: what are we doing with that power? That idea of control puts the light on responsibility, ability and power. It is terrifying and also extremely poignant in talking about animal collections.

SG: I really agree. I also think that the weird thing about this is about control. And it has something to do with how we domesticate. I think that's really interesting in relation to how we collect and if these things are intertwined in some way. We had a lot of good conversations with Annika about the storage space and about what the future would be. Because they have also been influenced at Malmö Museum. Influenced by time. An idea in time that at some point they should collect a lot and now they are simply running out of space. And it takes a lot of energy to maintain the warehouses, like the temperature for example.

MH: As you said, this is currently a very big question in the museum world because it's very difficult to get rid of things. There is also a cost for maintaining storage spaces. It has become an ethical question of how much electricity and money should we spend on just having these warehouses and storage spaces?

SG: And that is influenced by where we are now in society – with the discourses about how much energy we use. Some time ago it was probably not something that needed to be talked about very much or at least not to the same extent. Which I think is super interesting because then the decisions you take are also influenced by the time you're in.

YG: Yes, this also ties into control. The ability to decide what is preserved or erased, like removing a species from a collection, carries enormous responsibility.

I mean, we could discuss at length how museums and archives handle these decisions, particularly in response to narrow, state-led collection strategies. Efforts to preserve materials from minority groups serve as counterpoints to official collections that might exclude diverse histories. Here, I think, critical perspectives are crucial especially if restrictions like environmental concerns or limited funding lead to downsizing collections. Such 'unarchiving' could risk cultural loss or even oppression.

ME: Going back to something you mentioned before; that it is so important for us not only to understand the incentives behind decisions museums are making, but also how games are reshaping our understanding of history as they are using historical artefacts but also always put playability first³. So, that is something I wish we could have delved into more deeply. I think there's a huge importance in understanding that and actually exploring the games, playing them – critically.

YG: I realise I sound a little bit bitter when I say that one doesn't actually learn anything about history when playing these games. And I genuinely think that it is a problem. But I also see the potential in the game. When it really works, when you hit that sweet spot between materiality, questioning, interaction, exploring, using metaphor or, you know, something more textually explicit. This has been part of some of the research that I've done, attempting to figure out why games are not utilised in more creative and dynamic ways. The commercial game industry is very pragmatic, which is why I think initiatives like this workshop are so important for developing what it means for something to be a game.

Because I do think that games have a lot more potential to be disruptive than is currently the case, at least in the mainstream and commercial area,

3 Grufstedt Y and Trenter C, 'Cultural Heritage and Game Design : A Discussion of Natural Friends', in *(Un)contested Heritage : Archives, Museums and Public Spaces*, Malmö: Malmö universitet, 2023, 190–199.

and I don't know how to reconcile this. The structure, as it stands in terms of game culture and game industry, doesn't necessarily allow that.

SG: One of our discussions was also about who we play in a game. I think that it is very interesting that you are playing as someone, which could be yourself or someone else. We decided that you're playing as yourself. But for example, in *Assassin's Creed*⁴, you're playing an assassin. It is also very difficult to create a game where you play yourself because when you enter this 'magic circle' of gameplay, assuming another identity helps you understand and engage with the game. This connects to our discussion on control and who decides what to keep. If you are the one deciding, it opens a conversation about choice and agency. But there's also an illusion – especially in a game with immersive mechanics – that the player has complete control. You might forget what role you had because you start doing the things that are asked of you in the game. And I think that has also been a big thing in our conversations. How do you design a game that keeps the person's body in the game? Positioning it so you don't forget your own place in the world in the game. Many of our conversations about the mechanics also dealt with that: Who are we in this game? Should you pretend to be somebody else in the game?

YG: I don't know if there's a clear answer, and I think that's part of what makes your game so interesting. At some point, it becomes intentionally ambiguous, which requires you to consider these things, you know, what the rules are, and your position as a player, both in the game and outside of it.

MH: In the conversations Sophia and I had, we also discussed that we might approach it as a participatory performance where you go in with your body. Inspired by a game, but like a sliding scale between game and performance.

YG: And I think this question of figuring out what your game is can be interesting as a starting point to problematising what a game can and cannot be. There's a lot written on that and it's all very theoretical and definitions of games vary depending on perspective. Personally, I think it's very uninteresting because almost everything we've talked about today contains notions of play and interactivity and immersion to some extent. I just think games and play are eternal and ephemeral. I think the question is really good as a starting point for discussion about what the elements of gaming and play are. But then not to get stuck in that definition of like, does this qualify as a game?

⁴ Ubisoft. *Assassin's Creed*. Ubisoft. series, 2007.

MH: But I think Sophia and I had this discussion when we were really testing our ideas through a game lens. Then, we said no, we have to think more about this like play, like *theatre play* and *playing*. Not as a game, because with the text, quotes and reading, we leaned more towards play. It's also interesting how in English, you have these two words 'game' and 'play'.

YG: Yes, and in Swedish 'spela' can mean to play, for example, instruments. So, it's a conceptually fascinating field, and I think that's something to utilise. I think you've done that actually.

MH: It helped us to explore how this could be a playful experience. You sit down and you just start it. Then, of course, it can be about a super serious question.



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