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Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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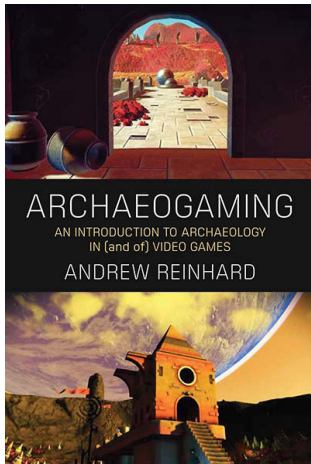
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Archaeogaming. An Introduction of Archaeology in and of Video Games

[by Andrew Reinhard]

Berghahn Books, 2018
ISBN: 978-1-78533-873-1
224 pages

When I wrote “Watching Video Games: Playing with archaeology and prehistory” a decade ago for volume 1 of this same journal, archaeogaming was still three years away—if we take as its starting point the creation of Andrew Reinhard’s self-titled blog. And, the excavation of the Atari cartridges at a landfill in Alamogordo, New Mexico had not been carried out yet.

I do not intend to proclaim myself discoverer of anything by pointing to this fact; on the contrary, after writing that article, my idea of an archaeology of video games was still taking shape, leading to the publication of *Yacimiento pixel. Los videojuegos como cultura material* [*Pixel site: Video games as material culture*] in 2017.

By the time I started writing the book, I was already fully immersed in the works of Reinhard, Richard Rothaus, Raiford Guins, Brett Weber and William Caraher, the excavation of the Atari cartridges, and the digging up of video games. What this proved, once again, is that science, knowledge, or philosophy, if you will, evolve and advance through convergence.

My vision of an archaeology of videogames differs in some very important ways with archaeogaming, in the same way that archaeogaming is fixated on frameworks and analyses that I had not encountered, as we will see below. Knowing that I was not alone—and that the idea of an archaeology of video games was not that crazy—was the intellectual boost I needed to finish writing *Yacimiento pixel*.

I got in touch with Reinhard via Twitter, and he, an ardent supporter of open access, was excited to help me with my questions on archaeogaming and its theoretical and methodological framework, while also facilitating access to all of the documentary material and records of the excavation of the Atari cartridges.

I knew he was also preparing a book, and I followed with interest every related tweet. My book came out at the end of 2017, his in the middle of the following year. The order matters little, however, because both texts obey to a single reality: videogames have become empirically important for archaeology.

For those unfamiliar with the field, Reinhard's *Archaeogaming: An introduction to archaeology in and of video games* is the only book, together with *Yacimiento pixel*, on video games and archaeology published internationally. Reinhard is the publications director of the American Numismatic Society, and an archaeologist who, after excavating European and American sites, prepared his doctoral thesis on digital heritage at the University of York. Along with Rothaus, Guins, Weber and Caraher, Reinhard carried out the excavation of the Atari cartridges in the Alamogordo landfill in 2014. His book reveals the theoretical, methodological and epistemological framework of archaeogaming, the archaeology of and in video games.

First, we must address this combination of archaeology and video games. Reinhard distinguishes between studying video games as material culture of the real world, and studying (im) material culture within video games. What he calls archaeogaming of the real world would include, for instance, the excavation of the Atari cartridges. It extends this type of archaeology to videogame museums (public or private, amateur or professional), retro videogames stores, amusement arcades and, even videogame

developer studios. It is in these “games spaces” that you can find juicy archaeological information about videogames—not as an important part of the cultural life of the present, but as carriers of information from the past.

There is no doubt that these archaeological sites of video games are interesting as sources of information on the present or the contemporary past. But at the same time—and this is where my archaeology of video games differs from archaeogaming, or as Reinhard may call it, the study of contemporary material culture—it seems to me equally, if not more relevant from an archaeological point of view, to study the production of videogames.

This is something that neither Reinhard nor others studying archaeogaming do, not in this book and not in any of the other texts they have written. Aspects such as the extraction of tantalum—the raw material necessary for the manufacturing of consoles and computers—and its use from coltan; the manufacturing of videogame hardware in developing countries like China; as well as other aspects of the production of video games, are totally ignored.

This is not a trivial matter, but a reality that has already been pointed out by many archaeologists and theoretical anthropologists in contemporary archaeological studies (i.e. García-Raso 2017; González-Ruibal 2008; Schiffer and Mjewski 2001; Wurst and McGuire 1999). Perhaps unknowingly—as it does not cite any such works—archaeogaming has fallen into the same net of postmodernism as Daniel Miller (i.e. 1987; 1997; 1998; 2001), in which the interest is always consumption and the consumer, and never in the production.

So, although Reinhard claims that “archaeogaming requires a foundation in archaeological theory, from positivism through post-processualism and beyond, taking from each to create a hybrid theory from which it can operate” (p. 200), the truth is shown as insanely postmodern in this aspect. This becomes odder still when Reinhard says that “a video game is a complex site-artefact, created through an interdisciplinary mix of creativity, coding, and manufacturing, *all within a sociopolitical context of when and where the game was made.*” (p. 176, emphasis mine).

Aside from this empirical dissonance, where Reinhard's genius really shines in *Archaeogaming* is when he focuses on archaeology in video games—namely, archaeological practices carried out in the synthetic virtual reality of the video game. A few pages are dedicated to how archaeology and archaeologists have been portrayed in video games, which does not differ much from portrayals in film or television. But Reinhard—as I have pointed out in a previous article—calls for a closer collaboration between videogame developers and archaeology professionals to achieve unprecedented pedagogical and informative potential.

The most interesting part of the book, and the theoretical and methodological triumph of *Archaeogaming*, is the conception of video games as archaeological sites. Reinhard summarises this idea in three points. First, "A video game is a discrete entity where the place can be defined as the space in which the game is installed... The past activity is the coding that created the game" (pp. 90-1). This leaves the door open for archaeology to study videogame programming—its code—as a material record, and thus observe the decisions made by its developers, which, together with the possibility of speaking with the developers themselves, is doubtless essential for the archaeological study of videogames and, also, for the conservation of digital heritage.

Secondly, "Video game installation media (e.g., a tape, cartridge, or disk) is not only an artefact but also an archaeological site" (*ibid.*). In connection with the first point, archaeology can also analyse the directories, files and structures of videogames, or in other words, the digital information they contain. And lastly, "The game-as-played, which is accessed via installed digital media, is also an archaeological site" (*ibid.*). The synthetic world, the reality of each video game, is in itself a great archaeological site with its own material culture, which can be studied, analysed, chronologically ordered, and even taken out of that synthetic world and converted into the material culture of the real world through 3D printers.

The last point is especially interesting from two perspectives. First, there is the possibility of exercising an ethical code within videogames. Many videogames have objects of great value within their own synthetic cosmogony, which we could call the heritage of each playful universe. Most of the time, the player can choose

to plunder those objects (selling them to the highest bidder, for example), or deliver them for conservation.

Reinhard believes that if the game were to impose an ethical code of respect for heritage, it could function as an educational tool without precedent. And he is right, save for the possibility of gamers turning a blind eye. The possibility of creating communities or guilds dedicated to this task in massively multiplayer online games and other online games would be a great achievement in terms of respect for heritage and, at the same time, a tool for the preservation of digital heritage.

Secondly, the possibility of recording the history, material culture, and mythology of videogames, and conceiving them as a huge archaeological sites in which it is not necessary to excavate, but from which things can be extracted (i.e., 3D printing), results in the registration and conservation of digital heritage, and broadens the professional and interdisciplinary horizons of archaeology.

Many other interesting arguments and ideas are put forth in Reinhard's book. The main axiom, however, is not so much the need for an archaeology of videogames, understood within contemporary archaeology, but that videogames, by themselves, deserve their own archaeology, just as there is an archaeology of death or zooarchaeology. All this is to preserve its artistic, cultural, technological value, so that digital heritage is not left in a few thousand hard drives and servers. Because, as Reinhard noted while excavating the Atari cartridges, archaeogaming "is archaeology, media archaeology, and public archaeology all in one" (p.93).

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Edited book

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Section in book

McEwan, C., Silva, M. I. and Hudson, Ch. 2006. Using the past to forge the future: the genesis of the community site museum at Aguablanca, Ecuador. In H. Silverman (ed.), *Archaeological site museums in Latin America*. Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 187-216.

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Cover Image: *Cacaclismo* (Jaime Delgado)

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ISSN: 2171-6315

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