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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Doing Archaeology in “Meatspace” and “Metaspace”

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Reinhard, Andrew. 2018. *Archaeogaming: An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games*. New York: Berghahn Books.

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Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that video games are growing ever more entwined in every aspect of culture in the West and many parts of Asia, from work and education to recreation. So much so, that Muriel and Crawford (2018) have coined a term for this process: Videoludification of Society. It stands to reason, then, that archaeological studies of the recent past, present, and future will also need to take games and virtual spaces into account to better understand global cultures. This is where Andrew Reinhard’s book, *Archaeogaming*, comes in by presenting readers with an introduction to the major themes and methods to research this developing field.

Reinhard defines archaeogaming as the archaeology both in and of digital games and “the literal interpretation of games as sites, built environments, landscapes, and artifacts, no different than any place on Earth that has been manipulated, managed, and transformed by people past and present” (2). *Archaeogaming* discusses four major themes: archaeology in the real-world of video games and game spaces, depictions of archaeology in games, archaeology of the digital, and material culture of the immaterial.

Chapter 1 opens with an examination of the 2014 excavation of the Atari Burial Ground in Alamogordo, New Mexico with “the worst game ever made”, 1982’s *ET: The Extraterrestrial*. According to Reinhard this “was the first dig that solely featured video games, and as such it drew attention to what archaeology could mean when digging artifacts from the recent past in front of a global, public, connected audience” (27). Through engagement with garbology, the study of modern refuse and trash, Reinhard demonstrates how the discovery of over one thousand game cartridges provides insight into business

decisions, the life cycle of a game (from entertainment to trash and to artifact-as-commodities), and issues of electronic waste (the cartridges had not degraded at all). To further illustrate archaeogaming in the real world, Reinhard examines how retro gaming stores, arcades, and even closed development studios can be archaeological sites. Chapter 1 concludes by showing how archaeologists can aid in the preservation of games, including digital content, and track the changes to games through development.

Chapter 2 examines the ways in which players and developers perceive archaeologists and archaeology and how that manifests in the game. To demonstrate, Reinhard includes an alphabetical list of games with archaeologists as main characters, with a short description of each, including some non-playable archaeologists. In addition to noting some of the positive aspects of misrepresentation (e.g., increased interest in the discipline), he also notes how games can shed light on ethical concerns of the field (e.g., partage and looting). He argues that with a “lack of proactive communication by archaeologists to the public about what we do, we abdicate that job to media, specifically television” (73). Reinhard suggests an approach to change these perceptions with a combination of three things: recognizing there will always be disparity between actual archaeology and game depictions, the use of games to open a dialogue with developers and players, and by archaeologists making their own games.

Chapter 3 comprises the bulk of the book. Here, Reinhard presents an easy-to-understand guide to the methods and tools used in archaeogaming. He argues that the process is the same as archaeology: project plan, survey, excavation, documentation, and then synthesis and publication. Some of the tools recommended are grids placed over the screen, an app to help create standard measurements, and airborne methods of travel in game to act as drones, all of which serve to survey the site. While the general methodology is the same in both synthetic and natural world archaeology, Reinhard notes that stratigraphy could be looked at as the layers between game updates. Additionally, archaeogaming carries the benefit of having artifacts that do not need to be cleaned when found, nor is there a risk of contamination during excavation. Reinhard then instrumentalizes the guide with a case study of the game *No Man's Sky*¹. Through the case study, he cogently shows the reader how these methods work, discusses limitations and drawbacks, and even revisits the site a year later to see how updates have changed elements of the game.

Chapter 4 presents the challenges of studying digital games once the hardware required to play them no longer exists. Reinhard presents an examination of material memory, in that games can provide links to the past as well as memories triggered by the games. This is followed by an examination of real-world video game museums and museums in video games, and an examination of studying the game code. He notes that experimental archaeology also has a place here, such as when people try to create food recipes in the real world based on those in games. Looking to the future, Reinhard examines cosplay, imagining future archaeologists discovering the helmet of Master Chief from the *Halo* games, asking “will we know enough then to recall and understand the connection to the Halo universe? I can imagine pop culture and video game specialists on-site who were trained for this very moment of discovery” (187). The chapter wraps up with a discussion of the reconstruction of ancient sites within video games.

In *Archaeogaming*, Reinhard presents a passionate look at a cool subject, displaying his love for both archaeology and gaming. More importantly, he consistently manages to take his work further than simply being a neat idea to show the practicality of archaeogaming as a sub-field and method. Despite not being part of his stated themes, Reinhard manages to tie each chapter into a larger picture of archaeologists engaging with the public and how the future of the discipline may be impacted by a world in which the significance of material objects are tied to virtual spaces that leave no physical trace, as well how these virtual spaces reveal culturally significant ideas. Through these themes, Reinhard successfully and compellingly justifies the need for archaeogaming to be studied, as these discussions often have impacts reaching beyond the gaming world.

Overall, *Archaeogaming* is exactly what Reinhard claims it to be, an introduction. His focus on major themes creates an accessible entry point for anyone who may be interested in the topic, regardless of their prior knowledge about archaeology or gaming studies. As such, this book makes an excellent addition to both undergraduate and graduate courses, by both laying a solid foundation and opening multiple doors for future scholarship.

1. See www.nomanssky.com for more details

Notes

Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. 2018. *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*. New York: Routledge.

Bibliography

Kyle Bikowski, M.A. Student at Louisiana State University, studies the anthropology of video games, gender, science and technology, and nerd culture. His current research examines how the interplay between the virtual and actual worlds have helped shape the Gaymer identity.



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