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Archaeogaming: A Review

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This book marks a new phase in the history of archaeology. We are now in an era in which archaeological techniques – survey, excavation, stratigraphy – are being applied to the digital realm. The Artefacts of this era are at once material and immaterial: part physical media, part code and on-screen image. As an experiment, the results of this work are bound to be mixed, but then, almost every chapter is setting the groundwork for a new subset of the discipline. Andrew Reinhard describes himself as a 'classically trained' archaeologist, referring to his specialism in Attic ceramics.

When he started his blog in 2013, the term 'archaeogaming' was a provocative neologism referring mainly to the depiction of archaeology in videogames (Archaeogaming 2013). A year later, he became one of the world's first videogame archaeologists in the Alamogordo, New Mexico city landfill, where his team of 'punk archaeologists' excavated a trove of Atari game cartridges and paraphernalia dumped in 1983 (Reinhard 2015). Since then, the focus of Archaeogaming has changed dramatically. He is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of York treating the virtual world of the videogame as an archaeological site.

This book sets out to define archaeogaming as a legit subdiscipline within archaeology, covering a broad swathe of related research areas. It is pitched at a general audience, and consists of just four central chapters, setting out a stall rather than serving as a monograph. A strong introduction defines games as 'digital built environments' deserving of archaeological study for what they tell us about the cultural implications of 'human-computer interaction' (5), fast becoming the primary area of study across the social sciences. The subsequent chapters deal with the study of physical videogame hardware and related material culture as artefacts of late capitalism; the portrayal of archaeology within videogames;

experiments with archaeological techniques within the videogame as played; and ways in which digital material culture is increasingly intruding into the physical world. It is, patently, too much for a single book, and a slim one at that, but this doesn't stop it from being an exciting journey. The book covers archaeology in both 'meatspace and metaspace', that is, the physical and digital realms, though heavily weighted toward the latter. Only chapter 1 deals in 'meatspace', consisting of an insightful discussion of retrogame shops as proto-museums, "curiosity cabinet[s] where everything is for sale" (35). This sets up an interim account of the Atari excavation of 2014, for which we eagerly await full publication, and a

heartfelt plea for the recognition and conservation of videogames as cultural heritage. Videogames are expressions of our time, good and bad, and are a vulnerable resource in an age of planned obsolescence. I also like that we now live in a time where we have archaeologists with experience excavating videogame cartridges. It's a lesson in how the act of excavation in the public eye transforms its value: Atari's E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial sold for $39.95 in 1982, and within a year of release was effectively worth less than nothing, leading to the destruction of unsold stock in the Alamogordo landfill. Existing cartridges sold for pennies online until 2014; a damaged cartridge from the Atari dump would go on to sell for up to $1,535 on eBay (Kreps 2015). Excavated E.T. cartridges are now displayed in museums around the world. Chapters 2 and 4 deal with archaeological themes in videogames, from the portrayal of archaeologists to in-game museums, showing the ways digital material culture elicits similar responses to physical artefacts and landscapes. The exhaustive list of archaeologists in videogames in chapter 2 feels like the culmination of a generation of articles and blogs on the matter going back to what he identifies as the first peer-reviewed archaeogaming article by Ethan Wattrall (2002).

Coming in at 73 pages (31% of the book) is chapter 3, on video games as archaeological sites. Here he forcefully lays out the capacity for code to be excavated and documented using a modified form of the Harris matrix. He then demonstrates the theoretical possibility of documenting machine-made landscapes through an extended case study of the No Man's Sky Archaeological Survey, focused on a 2016 game by Hello Games which generates its open world dynamically as the player moves through it. This project also features heavily on his blog, and the static format of the black and white page does not really do it justice. A short but insightful conclusion notes that archaeogaming is now a global community, and compares it to the formation of the Theoretical Archaeology Group as part of the disciplinary landscape. The evidence comes in the form of a thriving and enthusiastic group of scholars who are actively   organising sessions at major international conferences and publishing at a frenetic pace (eg, Mol et al 2017; Interactive Pasts 2018). This book captures the moment well by pushing the limits of what archaeology can do, which is, really, what we should all be doing, always.

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Photographs

P 25 — In-game excavation in progress, No Man's Sky (A Reinhard, https://archaeogaming.com/2018/07/25/an-end-of-an-era-in-no-mans-sky-next/)
https://archaeogaming.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/no-mans-sky_20180726235721.jpg

P 26 — The world's first videogame excavation in Alamogordo, New Mexico, 2014 (taylorhatmaker/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-2.0)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Atari_E.T._Dig-_Alamogordo,_New_Mexico_(14039287425).jpg