

5 For a full review of the field of archaeogaming, see Politopoulos and Mol, [forthcoming](#).

6 This review by Albert Spaulding was part of a very specific back and forth between him and James Ford with the methodological rigour of a new benchmark study on Midwestern US archaeology as a bone of contention. Funnily enough, while the scientific particularities of this discussion have not stood the test of time, his quote has (e.g. Binford 1968; Gaither and Cavazos-Gaither 2012, 90).

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Angus is active in VALUE, an interdisciplinary collective of archaeologists, historians, museologists and game designers who aim to share our knowledge and appreciation of the past through playful outreach projects, including RoMeincraft and Streaming the Past. He is also a member of the Leiden Ludic Collective, an Open Research initiative on play in all its diverse cultural and social forms.

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Do we need rules for a ‘playful’ archaeology?

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In their position paper ‘Finding the fun: Towards a playful archaeology’, Aris Politopoulos, Angus A. Mol and Sybille Lammes pursue ambitious goals: articulating an archaeology of *play* and promoting the pursuit of archaeology *as play*. The argument grows out of the authors’ own practice of ‘play and an openness to fun’, which they posit as key to recognizing evidence for play and the experience of fun in the past. It is a thought-provoking and bold effort, but falls short of the mark in key respects, in no small part owing to the difficulty of what its authors undertake. That said, the paper raises

interesting questions of epistemology, practice and theory, only some of which I can address in my brief commentary. I will first consider the implications of aspiring to an archaeology specifically of play, and then the potential for the kind of ‘playful archaeology’ the authors envision.

An archaeology of play

I will cut right to it and admit that I question the value of formulating such a focused archaeology, attempting to zero in on fun, aside from the functional categories (e.g. ritual, social status, politics, education and war) in which play and games have featured in existing literature (e.g. Voorhies 2017; Ignatiadou 2019; Fabregat et al. 2021; Carè et al. 2022; cf. Gray 2009 for ethnographic literature on the profoundly integrated nature of play across hunter-gatherer societies). The authors express concern that play and fun have been subordinated to supposedly more serious categories of human experience. I am inclined to think it is less a matter of play being deemed frivolous so much as its observable material correlates having been enmeshed within such functional categories. Extant literature highlights the difficulty of isolating play explicitly *because of* ludic materials’ intersectionality with other behavioural categories, with investigators citing the multifunctionality and ‘polysemic value’ of figurines, tokens, engraved slabs and other materials that may have been used as playthings but equally appear to have served ritual, social and political aims (Phialon 2022). As the authors themselves concede, what constitutes ‘fun’ varies widely across cultural and temporal contexts, hinging on ‘multiple layers of personal interpretations, relations, socio-cultural settings and other dynamics in form and performance that change over time’. This makes foregrounding the ephemeral experience of fun in the past a challenging ask, indeed. It would seem that their own definition of fun delineates far too much variability to permit universal, or even broadly generalizing, rules for identification.

The authors suggest that the ability to discern fun in ‘past playgrounds’ may be cultivated through mindful gameplay. While understandable given their own commitment to a regular gaming practice, both recreationally and in formal educational contexts, it strikes me as uncomfortably close to suggesting that we can best – or even only – identify in the past what we know from direct personal experience in the present. Taken to its extreme, such a position threatens a core premise of anthropological archaeology: the notion that armed with a toolbox of critical theory and careful practice, we can, in fact, make sense of what is ‘other’. The authors make extended reference to Parker Brothers’ *Monopoly* game to define what they mean by fun, and to demonstrate the myriad complexities in how humans experience fun through gameplay. This choice of game strikes me as rather unhelpful in advancing their argument. Perhaps more than any other game I can think of, *Monopoly* is predicated on a specific understanding of human society in modern, western, capitalistic terms. It simply is not clear how the insights gained from even the most ‘mindful’ game of *Monopoly* would contribute to interpretation of archaeological sites from the culturally and temporally distant past, especially in the absence of written or visual interpretive aids. What is more, playing the game of *Monopoly* today can be discussed – as the authors do – within a framework of fun ‘for fun’s sake’, pursued in leisure time that contemporary humans in at least some societies do, in fact, set aside simply for the purpose of play, as opposed to designated ‘work time’. In trying similarly to identify points of ‘pure’ fun in the prehistoric past, we cannot simply assume comparable perceptions of time and how it should be divided into such mutually exclusive activities. I personally do not see this as problematic. Is not our overarching goal as archaeologists to understand past cultures on their own terms, through the lens of those cultures, to the extent that we can work out how to do so?

Finally, the authors’ selection of criteria for detecting play and the experience of fun in the past strikes me as curiously imprecise. Their oft-repeated mantra of upholding ‘relations of care, commitment and attention’ hardly seems robust enough to support their project of identifying play, specifically. One would hope – expect, even – that all professional archaeology proceeds under such baseline standards of rigor. To this end, I would have liked to have seen the authors

expound a more detailed set of guidelines for practising an archaeology of play. Indeed, I see a great deal more utility in their one-time statement of the importance of ‘taking play seriously, creatively using existing theories and methodologies as well as employing new heuristic lenses and playful methods’. Expanding on exactly which ‘existing theories and methodologies’ and ‘new heuristic lenses’ would seem to yield a more actionable set of guidelines for archaeologists seeking the ephemeral signs of fun in the past and hoping to make sense of them in the present.

Playful archaeology

I wholeheartedly agree with the authors’ mandate to enhance public engagement with archaeology, and believe that ‘sharing such fun experiences with the past with others’ is an effective means of doing so. Broad public interest and support is vital for all sorts of reasons, ranging from the economic to the political and ideological exigencies of doing archaeology in the 21st century. But I would argue that we already are closer to that everyday reality than the authors allow. As Cornelius Holtorf (2007) long ago pointed out, archaeology is a well-established and largely positive popular culture entertainment brand already. Hollywood (and several blockbuster film franchises in particular) have played their part in this, unfortunately tending on the big screen to pervert what archaeologists do into formulaic loot fests fuelled by deadly combat and high-speed chases. I think the authors are absolutely right to highlight the opportunities afforded by millions of individual small screens to create new and exciting pathways for more realistically engaging with the past, in digital playgrounds where people are having fun already.

To the possibilities posed by archaeogaming, I would add another burgeoning entertainment sector: documentary television series which present history as mystery, delivered in a storytelling format that invites viewers into an (admittedly contrived) journey of discovery which nonetheless corresponds to the real practice of archaeology – inevitably an unfolding process, both in the field and post-excavation – far more realistically than does its big screen counterparts. Broadcast to tens of millions of lay enthusiasts looking above all to be entertained, such programming is perhaps uniquely positioned to convey just how much fun we archaeologists can and do find in our work; it is also one of the most broadly democratic and scalable channels for sharing that joy with the largest possible lay audience.

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Archaeologists just wanna have fun

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The authors emphasize the role of play and fun in the past and the present, and aim to make it a central topic in archaeology based on Huizinga’s (2016) seminal work on the topic. It is of course hard to disagree with this, just as it is for other contributions that urge us to pay more attention to aspects of past lives outside of those studied by the mainstream, including light, sound, childhood, etc. Giving play in the past the attention it deserves will enrich archaeology and make it even more

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