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DISCUSSION ARTICLE

Finding the fun: Towards a playful archaeology

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Abstract
Games and other forms of play are core human activities, as vitally constitutive of cultural and social practices in the past as they are today. Consequently, play, games and fun should be central in archaeological theory, but our review shows they are anything but. Instead, very few studies deal with these concepts at all, and most of those that do focus on how the affordances play offers link it to ritual, power or other 'more serious' phenomena. Here, we offer an explanation as to why play has taken such a backseat in archaeological thought and practice, relating it to the ambivalent aesthetics of having fun with the past in our own discipline. Building on our own playful practices and those of other scholars in the ancient board gaming and archaeogaming communities, we propose a move towards a more playful archaeology, which can provide us with a new window into the past as well as into our own professional practices.

Keywords: Play; games; archaeogaming; professional practice

Introduction
In *Homo Ludens,* cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1938: xi) famously argued that 'civilization arises and unfolds in and as play' and asserts that play is the cornerstone of human experience, development and culture. Since then, this thought has had a significant impact in diverse fields such as media studies, pedagogy, psychology, history, anthropology and, of course, play and game studies.[1] In this position paper we want to take this perspective a step further by working from the premise that play offers a rich and critically important locus for examining and engaging with material and immaterial cultures both in the past and the present. To get there, we will introduce the concept of fun as a relation of care, commitment and attention. These fun relations with others and things provide the grounds for play or playground. As we will discuss below, these concepts can help us understand how people played in the past, but we have a more radical proposal: to make play into one of the pillars of archaeological practice.

As part of this ludic quest, this article reviews how past play practices have been studied archaeologically and how this can and needs to be developed further if we mean to study the diversity of human experiences in depth. Subsequently, we will discuss how the study of video games, also known as archaeogaming (Reinhard 2018), has emerged as a prolific, innovative but still niche archaeological scholarship, aiming to find new sorts of fun within archaeology (Politopoulos et al. 2019; Politopoulos and Mol, forthcoming). We will argue that playing in and with archaeology, as is the case in archaeogaming, can be a positive force for change where there is a widely felt need for the scholarly, professional and societal reorientation of the discipline (Morgan 2015; Borck 2019; Flexner 2020). Before we get there, however, we will take some time to develop a common framework of what play is with reference to *Monopoly*. *Monopoly* is a very contemporary board game, and as we shall discuss below, analysing its forms and patterns of play provides

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meaningful understanding about our world. We also include this example because it is a game that is familiar to many and is therefore suitable for showing fundamental features of play: It is about having fun through creating an imaginative world. As an example, it demonstrates that play is autotelic (Huizinga 1938) – it has no purpose outside itself – which is exactly where fun resides, and also why, paradoxically, play is such a powerful cultural expression and material experience.

The 'magic circle' of Monopoly

Play is an essential part of being in and making sense of the world as well as of making worlds (Sicart 2018). We, you and everyone who came before us have all played, by ourselves and in all likelihood also with others, and had fun doing so. Precisely because play is constitutive of and ingrained in culture, it is a complex phenomenon that comes in many shapes and forms. Even so, play was initially defined by Huizinga through just five constitutive elements: (1) play is voluntary, liberating and superfluous yet (2) is based on rules, which (3) are taken seriously by all who play. Furthermore, (4) play is a specific performance and mirror of regular life but is (5) set aside from it in time and space, taking place in a 'magic circle' (Dutch *toovercirkel*). As worlds in a world, magic circles thus offer regulated spaces to realize culture (Huizinga 1938: 5–15).

As an example, consider *Monopoly*, a quintessentially 'modern' game many of us will have played or know about – and even if you loathe the game, as many do, please play along with us for now. In *Monopoly*, you roll two dice and move a token around a board accordingly, landing on spaces on the board, named after real-world places and things, which you can buy, own and rent out with fake money in a bid to bankrupt all other players. Owning property – certainly at the scale and of the type *Monopoly* asks us to imagine – is something that is not given to the overwhelming majority of us, but it is an activity we recognize as culturally mimicking 'market economies', and, specifically, rentier capitalism. *Monopoly* is, at the same time, very unlike capitalist economies, because the game is based on clear rules that you voluntarily agree to follow if you decide to play. During the game, money and property change hands, the rich get richer, the poor go bankrupt, feelings may get hurt and, after the game is over – after we leave the 'magic circle' of *Monopoly* – the whole financial shakedown is forgotten and (hopefully) forgiven. The point is that playing *Monopoly* is only fun if you are not really trying to bankrupt your friends and family, if it is in a magic circle. It shows Huizinga's idea of play as voluntary, rule-based and set aside, as if experiences can aptly describe a lot of what is happening when we play.

Yet anyone who spends some time thinking about play or playing will recognize that this definition, while useful at first, is simultaneously reductive and obfuscating.[2] Huizinga's insight that play *is* culture still stands largely uncontested, but play as cultural practice is too wildly idiosyncratic to be contained by easy definitions. Play is certainly not, in any direct way, 'magical'. Instead, it hinges on multiple layers of personal interpretations, relations, socio-cultural settings and other dynamics in form and performance that change over time. Even simple, modern games with well-established rules and aesthetics are not as stable as they may seem at first glance. For example, *Monopoly* has one official ruleset and a simple board, but is played differently across many contexts in alternative editions and due to 'house rules'. Do *you* get a double payout when you land on Go? We do, but this is nowhere to be found in the rulebook. Beyond such tweaks, *Monopoly* also has quite a rich cultural and social history, showing that it not just mimics culture but can propagate certain beliefs and ideologies (Pilon 2015).

Monopoly started out as *The Landlords' Game*, designed by Lizzie Magie, a writer, game designer and Georgist.[3] *The Landlord's Game* was an unequivocal critique of landlords, their land-grabbing and rentiership in the early 20th century United States. The version we know now, Hasbro's *Monopoly*, has shed this critical history and instead has given generations of players the experience that it is fun to be a landlord. Over time the 'classic', American iteration has branched off into all sorts of locational remixes, such as the *Monopoly* board we play on in

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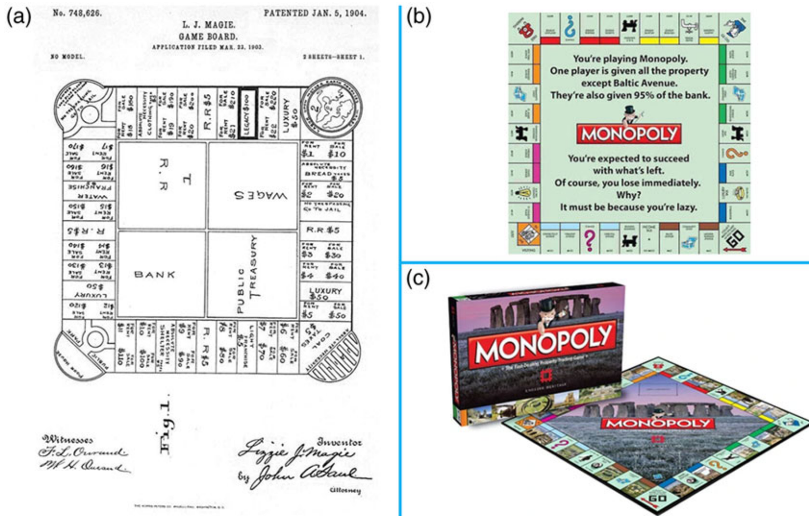

Figure 1. *Monopoly* and its as-if representation of the world. (a) The board of *The Landlord's Game* designed by L.J. Magie, (b) an internet meme on the game of *Monopoly* as a proxy for capitalism, and (c) the box and board of *Monopoly: English Heritage Edition*. *Source:* Figure by the authors.

the Netherlands – introduced during the Second World War because the Dutch could no longer import boards with American and English place names (Dings 2011). The last decades saw a growing diversification of versions, including the rise of intellectual-property-based *Monopoly*, such as *Monopoly: The Lord of the Rings Edition* and *Monopoly: The Disney Edition*. By now, there is hardly a real or imagined place you cannot own in *Monopoly*. There is even a *Monopoly: English Heritage Edition* (Hasbro 2013), in which you, as the back of the box says, 'tour a selection of English heritage properties from prehistoric Stonehenge to the modern-day Dover Castle Secret Wartime Tunnels – all are up for grabs!' It is exactly this greedy celebration of appropriation that makes many reluctant to play *Monopoly* because it is completely out of touch with their values and the experienced realities of capitalism. Indeed, making fun of *Monopoly* and its as-if representation of the world has become a kind of game in itself (Fig. 1).

This mini history of *Monopoly* illustrates the point that play is culture and culture is constituted by play(ing). It also shows how enriching and complex it would be to study the wider historical and material cultural entanglements of even a game such as *Monopoly*. Play is rule-based as well as spatiotemporally placed, and the way we play is dynamic, embedded, ephemeral and highly subject to change, and therefore requires careful contextualization. Play resonates with many other phenomena studied archaeologically, such as power, ritual, gender or economy. As we shall argue below, play *is* frequently present within such phenomena, and these things can form constituent parts of play. Just look at Mr. Monopoly, a wealthy, white man in the 'ritual' attire of an early-20th-century robber baron. He embodies how gender, class and racial power structures are all at play in this popular board game. Yet even if play, as a total social fact, is entangled and can be understood in tandem with many other cultural phenomena, there is still something we need to answer if we want to study it archaeologically: How can you find it?

Fun and how to find it

The playful archaeology that we work towards here has the idea of fun-finding at its core. While fun is not the only ingredient of play, clearly the two are closely related. Therefore, we propose finding fun offers a good, maybe the best, starting point for a playful archaeology. Furthermore,

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a playful archaeology should include fun because it not only is central to play but also offers a practical way to tease out socio-cultural complexities and human interactions in a relatively unrestrained, experimental and free(ing) manner, in the past as well as the present. Still, this leaves us with questions along similar lines as the one above: Where does fun reside, and how do we find it?

Semantically, 'fun' is found in a dense constellation with analogous terms such as 'pleasure', 'joy', 'delight' and 'happiness'. 'Fun' also has more negative connotations in its sense of 'to make fun of', 'to jest' or 'to joke' – it has its roots in the Middle English *fon*, or 'fool' – and is semantically close to 'frivolity', 'silliness' and 'idleness' (Blythe et al. 2004; Sharp and Thomas 2019). Fun, according to present mores, is supposed to take place at specific times (of the day, week, year and our lives) and is the thing you can look for when you are not supposed to be doing other things, especially one's job (Graeber 2018). Imagine being in the middle of an excavation, taking out a *Monopoly* board and suggesting playing a couple of rounds. If you did, you may have to find a new job. Barring recent trends of gamification and playbour (McGonigal 2012; Hjorth 2018), in most of our professional activities, play and fun are still kept to the minimum and are deemed counterproductive and frivolous. While such specific boundaries of fun and play are socio-culturally dependent, what play and fun is and where it will take place will always be grounded – in values, social roles and places. Play needs play*grounds*, so to speak.

Playing and otherwise finding fun is an ambiguous and epistemologically slippery task: It is hard to 'know' the playgrounds without putting play into practice (Sutton-Smith 2001; for an archaeological discussion see Voorhies 2017, 14–15, and DeBoer 2017, 286). What was so fun about that one game of *Monopoly*? It is hard to convey this to others after the fact. Moreover, play is experienced differently by each participant (Taylor 2006). For example, *Monopoly*'s mechanics create a frequently unbridgeable schism between the players who have and those who have not. The winning player, who generally keeps on reaping the rewards of some fortuitous early game rolls of the dice and decisions to buy, probably feels pretty good at that moment. Losers, however, are locked in a long downward spiral of ever-increasing in-game poverty and despair. Even so, it is still possible that all players would claim that they were having fun. Things that often do not sound like much fun in fact are, if you understand their 'magic', by knowing the playground.[4] The challenge in finding the fun archaeologically is identifying the fun things that could be grounds for play and finding out the ways people could make playgrounds out of them. This refers to the people, practices and artefacts we study, but also to archaeologists and how they creatively approach sites in different ways to reconstruct the past in the present.

This is, not coincidentally, also one of the central challenges for game designers. In this profession, 'finding the fun' is a well-known dictum that refers to the process of making your own game fun by closely and carefully studying fun in other games, by playing them. Additionally, game designers also draw inspiration by considering what parts of regular phenomena are fun, extracting these from their non-fun parts and focusing deeply on making them even more fun (Meier 2020). In practice, this also means playing game prototypes again and again to know what things to weed out that are not fun and polish those things that are. Finding fun thus entails careful, considered and attentive searching, in addition to putting play into practice. In other words, to identify and have fun, care, commitment and attention are necessary. Through this process, game designers manage to find fun in all sorts of things, from rentier capitalism to easter eggs. In *Play Anything*, the game designer and media scholar Ian Bogost even claims that we can, indeed, have fun and play with anything by relating to it with care, commitment and attention (Bogost 2016).

As *Monopoly* shows, if we have the grounds and the place for it and commit to it with care and attention, it is even possible to find fun in something that (to us at least) is as decidedly unfun as rentier capitalism. This insight is a crucial point of departure: We need to play, both in general and in specific forms, to understand this complex cultural experience. To play, now or in the past, entails a relation of care, commitment and attention with people or things, with grounds for play.

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Playthings and playgrounds of the past

To find the fun in the past, at least archaeologically speaking, we should be looking harder for the material manifestations of such relations. In our *Monopoly* example, we have the grounds for play – values, places and the practice and experience of playing this game – as well as its playthings: the pieces, dice, fake money and board. What an archaeology of play has to develop is a way to connect playgrounds and playthings in the archaeological horizon. The following review underlines that we already have a lot of material to work with and that the major hurdle for an archaeology of play is, in fact, conceptual. To find the fun, this field has to go beyond the idea of the playful as merely a function for something else. So, what are the things we need to find play and fun, and what is the context in which we should interpret them?

One of the material manifestations of play that first comes to mind is, naturally, toys: toys and the tinkering with objects to turn them into toys, such as pebbles as marbles, a pig's bladder as a ball, or an astragal as a die. A recent article on the popular news website *WIRED* caught our attention in regard to how archaeologists tend to think about toys (Cassidy 2020). The article was about the invention of the wheel, a big turn in the course of human history. It argues, based on the discovery of a toy, a wheeled coyote figure, that the first wheel and axle was actually invented to make a toy and for no other functional reason. The author then mentions that 'The archaeologists I spoke with are hesitant to believe such a remarkable insight could have been made in the pursuit of something as frivolous as an object for play', even though archaeologists have actually made this argument in the past (Ekholm 1946). So to find the fun here requires a creative and courageous approach of the archaeologist, being prepared to foreground the fun in things. It asks us to be serious about fun as a constitutive part of past cultures, even, or especially, when they are as fundamental as the wheel. In the perception of the unknown archaeologists quoted here, playthings and their grounds for playing are considered 'frivolous' and thus are not of any creative value in and of themselves, nor do they have any serious function. The wheel, in this case, is also tied to a child's toy, a type of object which supposedly cannot spark remarkable and significant insight. All of us who have played as or with children, know this to be false.

This hesitancy to value toys in the archaeological record might be related to the fact that childhood has seen relatively limited study in our discipline (Crawford and Lewis 2009). In fact, the archaeology of childhood has emerged only recently as a field focused on the experience of being a child in the past (Grabs and Parkin 2013; Crawford, Hadley, and Shepherd 2018; Hassett 2022). Even so, play, and playing with ancient toys today, is rarely a main focus of these studies, which seems like a missed opportunity (although see Sommer and Sommer 2017). Instead play is frequently understood as a secondary activity, supporting the cognitive and social development of children. Play and toys are predominantly seen as instrumental for educating children because they provide them with lifelong skill sets or experiences (e.g. Kyriakidis 2018). In this framework 'play should be understood as an integral part of skill transmission and the enculturation of children into society' (Garroway 2020, 55). Along the same lines, children's play and toys are seen as strengthening existing power structures (Eiselt 2018) and ritual and religious practices (Sillar 1996; Kohut 2011; Morley 2018a) and as a means for cultural and ideological reinforcement (Hall 2014; Morley 2018b; Freidel and Rich 2018). In other words, toys and tinkering are seen through a functional lens, for what they can potentially offer to a child outside of play but not for what they essentially are: *fun*.

These views also wrongly assume that toys are predominantly for children or, worse, that play is restricted to childhood. Toys for grown-ups seem to be another blind spot for many archaeologists. Recently, in an online Let's Play of the video game Sid Meier's *Civilization*, the authors of this paper had a discussion regarding the invention of the steam engine and its effects on industrialization. Aris brought up the fact that the steam engine was first invented during the Hellenistic period. The aeolipile, the name of the Roman steam engine, was probably exclusively used as a curiosity, as a fun thing to look at – one could say for frivolous purposes – not as a means of

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production. One of our viewers pointed out that this was a 'missed opportunity'. Why did people of the time not enter the industrial period already then and there? Our viewer was not alone in this question. Aage Gerhardt Drachmann had also assumed that 'This toy [Aeolipile] was not the forerunner of any real steam engine, then or later. Such devices represent technical ingenuity but not technological progress' (Drachmann 1967, 55–56). This interesting what-if assertion begs the question: Why is using a steam engine for other than functional ends a missed opportunity? Understanding such objects chiefly through their currently understood functional potential entails a teleological view of history, sidelining fun as an essential factor in human experience. Additionally, this is part of a pattern in which specific forms of play are valued based on (perceived) status. Games of elite groups are frequently idealized, while games of the 'people' are being trivialized (Voorhies 2017, 15).

Such an issue is at stake when we speak of ancient sports. These have garnered more attention in archaeology, particularly in the case of the classical world. The Olympic Games, surviving through to today, are a good example of something that has been studied extensively, as are Roman gladiatorial games. Such events are, in fact, studied from various perspectives: the aesthetics of sports, the physical qualities of artifacts and places for sport activities, and sports as part of religious but also economic and political affairs (Valavanis 2004). The politicized nature of sports in the past is a particularly prominent thread in such studies, framing sports within a political arena and as powerplay between city-states and empires (see Spivey 2004). Even if such sportive political conflicts must have been underlain by personal and communal passion for physical play, they have rarely been related to as such. So, while sports have been investigated as gymnastic activities, as politics or as means to approach the divine, few archaeological studies focus on the fact that sports are fun.

Theatre is another case in point. Its role in classical antiquity has also been discussed extensively, and we see a similar trend to sports: It is analysed through its aesthetic, ritual, religious, political and social functions (see e.g. Csapo et al. 2014). Although we do not deny that theatre had such functions, less attention is being paid to fun and play, the more mundane and quotidian sides of theatre – the sides that involve rehearsals, playing with masks and costumes, joking around with friends and of course the play that goes on in front of and with the audience (Barba and Savarese 2019). What we would like to point out is the fact that ancient theatre is predominantly discussed for its qualities as 'high' art, or at least its conceptualization as such (see, for example, Goldhill 1997). While theatre studies have engaged with the spectator and the experience of watching theatre (Woodruff 2008), archaeology has not worked much with this perspective. Is it not peculiar that even something that is called a 'play' is not researched as such in archaeology?

A subtle shift in our stance towards play and fun can be seen when ancient board games are investigated, especially in recent years. Because of surviving boards, pieces and casting devices, as well as textual evidence, the playground offered by these games is more tangible, and more direct information is revealed about the fact that we played in the past. With the Royal Game of Ur (Finkel 2007a) standing as a prominent example, ancient board games have enjoyed sustained attention from archaeologists. Works on the topic already started in the late 19th century, resulting at first primarily in board game typologies (Becq de Fouquières 1873; Deveria 1897; Davies 1925; Austin 1934), with more comprehensive and comparative studies being relatively new (e.g. Kurke 1999).

Board games have seen a renaissance in the last 20 years, which also sparked new interest in the study of ancient board games. The works of Irving Finkel, curator of the British Museum, have been very influential in this regard. Through symposiums, reviews of textual evidence and collaborative works, Finkel has produced a number of edited volumes that explore board games across regions and time periods from Europe, Africa and Asia (Finkel and Mackenzie 2004; Finkel 2007b). In addition, Irving Finkel has been particularly active in outreach using videos to share knowledge about ancient board games with a wider audience. Notably, this includes a popular video with Tom Scott that attracted more than 5 million views on YouTube (The British

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Figure 2. Participants at the Past-at-Play Lab playing with various replicas of the Royal Game of Ur. *Source:* Photo by Aris Politopoulos.

Museum 2017). Jests, provocations, laughter and frustration are a constant feature of the video, presenting what to us seems like a typical experience of playing the Royal Game of Ur.

We have a pretty good grasp of what constitutes a typical playthrough of this game, as we observed hundreds of people playing it in our Past-at-Play Lab (Fig. 2). Working under the premise that to understand play one needs to play, we developed a public-facing project in which people were invited in to have fun while playing and learning about the past through this board game. These play sessions were mapped through video and audio recordings, as well as surveys and post-game discussions. An in-depth discussion of the results of this project is beyond the scope of this article and will be published at a later date, but we can confidently say that the vast majority of play sessions were similar to those of Irving Finkel and Tom Scott, filled with laughter, discussions about rules, probing of the strategies of the opponent and convivial but still quite intense competition.

The recent work of Walter Crist has also shed new light on ancient board games, including but not limited to the Royal Game of Ur. Two reviews of the material evidence of ancient board games from Cyprus (Crist 2019) and Egypt (Crist et al. 2016a) present a comprehensive corpus of board games from the Near East and beyond. Through the work of Crist and others, such as Alexander de Voogt, board games have been investigated as objects for cultural transmission and as 'social lubricants' (de Voogt et al. 2013; Crist et al. 2016b). Yet importantly, Crist's study is part of a larger project that primarily seeks to understand how these board games worked. The overarching

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Digital Ludeme Project has developed an artificial intelligence (AI) that plays ancient board games with unknown or broken rulesets. Rule variants, based on previous archaeological and historical knowledge of what those rules may be, are supplied, and the AI evaluates them by playing many games using this rule variant. This interplay between computers, archaeology and game design theory results in a new understanding of the range of viable rules for ancient board games (Soemers et al. 2019).

Graeme Wilson's work, finally, is a rare example of an archaeological study that investigates board games in their past and present contexts simultaneously. His work, focused on first millennium A.D. Atlantic Scotland, reveals the multiplex and subtle negotiations between humans and (play)things. He does so both by considering evidence from the archaeological record as well as by participating in local games of chess (Wilson 2018, 15–31). He shows that, within the archaeological context he worked on, playgrounds can be found everywhere, not only through board game paraphernalia but also by being open to the playful affordances of all sorts of other objects, from tools to beach stones (Wilson 2018, 134). This results in a new understanding of how these 'magic circles' structure everyday life and vice versa. Play, he concludes, is not set apart from society but rather permeates it. Like us, he also makes a clear case that, to find play in the past, we need to play more in the present (Wilson 2018, 139).

These more recent studies show that the study of play in the past has a lot of potential, and there are multiple routes to take it forward. This involves taking play seriously, creatively using existing theories and methodologies as well as employing new heuristic lenses and playful methods (Lammes and Mol, forthcoming). We are convinced our current inability to study play in the past is not a matter of lack of evidence. We already have plenty of available archaeological evidence – about board games, toys, curiosities, sports and theatre – and games are being contextualized within larger cultural histories. Playthings are recognized in the archaeologies of childhood, politics, religion, trade and social contact, yet they are rarely studied on their own terms: as a cause for or result of play. So, blind spots will only be overcome when we shift the focus to play and fun. As we have argued above, play is related to commitment, attention and care with specific things, places and people, and the relations these create. So, how can we study something as elusive as having fun when playthings and playgrounds are not immediately obvious?

For that, we do not have all the answers, but as a start, we would like to share a small anecdote about sling pellets. Sling pellets are objects that are mostly associated with violence against humans or other animals. So, how can they be fun? Recently one of the authors, Aris, participated in the excavation of a Neolithic ditch in Greece. The ditch was relatively empty, except for a decent amount of sling pellets. It seems like a strange find: Why are all these tools for violence found together in a ditch? From a playful archaeology perspective, an interpretation readily presents itself: The pellets were there as the result of people having fun in the past. We could imagine those who lived there would have also used the ditch as a playground made up of these pellets and some sort of aim – this could be a target, or another kind of more open-ended fun, for example, much as we play pétanque, skip stones on the surface of water, or engage in absent-minded play. When Aris shared this thought, one of the local workers was immediately convinced of this idea. He told a story from his childhood when he and his friends would make slings from a small piece of leather and reeds from the nearby swamp, and playfully shoot some pellets. We made such a sling and pellets from local clay and had some fun shooting at a wall in the evenings. Although no hard conclusions can be drawn from this freestyle experiment, it shows how thinking playfully and sharing play experiences can draw us into old and new relations of care, commitment and attention.

It is true that fun and play are experiences, and experiences are difficult to reconstruct, as they are culturally contextualized and idiosyncratic. As with a game of *Monopoly*, play and playing in the past has ephemeral and situated qualities that do not always leave material traces. Yet this makes it even more important to give playful experiences a place in archaeological thought. Archaeology has already addressed similar questions regarding multi-sensorial, ephemeral or

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ambiguous experiences (Hamilakis 2014; Rutecki and Blackmore 2016; Renfrew et al. 2018). The work by Tarlow on bereavement and commemoration particularly makes the salient point that self-reflexive practice and a study of the emotional and sensorial lives of others in the past each require their own guidance and attention (Tarlow 1999). Future work on the archaeology of play would need to find its own specific guidelines and limits for play as archaeological practice. This is important because this move can be understood as part of a recent effort in archaeology to pay attention to diversity of experience, non-linearity and creative experimentation with new forms of archaeology, such as is the case in archaeogaming.

Archaeogaming

In the last six decades, video games emerged from the early computing research labs in which they were first made and played, and rapidly rose to cultural prominence as one of the main entertainment media of the digital era. People are creating, engaging, consuming, playing and having fun with video games at an increasing rate. Digital play started as a niche activity but is now part of the daily life routines of millions of people who play games on computers, consoles, tablets, smartphones and many other digital devices. Within this large field of digital play, playing with the past has a central role. Video games that incorporate (aspects) of the past – sometimes called 'historical games', even if some of them are set in prehistoric times or allow you to create alternative timelines – are among the most popular and enduring titles. Games such as Sid Meier's *Civilization*, *Assassin's Creed*, or *Battlefield* sell millions of copies worldwide, amounting to many billions of hours of playtime in popular historical periods and places and with well-known historical events and figures (Mol et al. 2021). Indie games – games with smaller, independent development teams – go beyond such 'histories as usual' and provide such diverse play as a future with Aztec 'cyber-stone', as in the game *Aztech*, and American road trips during the Great Depression, as is the case with the game *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*. In short, millions of people are having all sorts of fun with the past in these contemporary, digital playgrounds.

This engagement with the past through video games has been picked up by a growing and vibrant community in the field of archaeology, heritage and video games, known as 'archaeogaming'. The term 'archaeogaming' was coined by Andrew Reinhard in his blog of the same name in 2013. It has been defined as 'the utilization and treatment of immaterial space to study created culture, specifically through video games' (Dennis n.d.). Recently, we suggested that archaeogaming can be seen in a broader way as a 'movement born in and out of playful, digital scholarship [. . .] the fun of sharing a (scholarly) playground, one that is itself constructed or built on digital playgrounds' (Politopoulos et al. 2019, 165). This aptly reflects the core argument of this paper: Conducting research on the playful past requires play and an openness to fun.

The field of archaeogaming, we argue, encapsulates and illustrates how research can be done through and as play – similar to how archaeological television shows have demonstrated how you can do archaeology as entertainment (Holtorf 2007). Archaeogaming emerged as a small community mainly through social media (and particularly Twitter) and blogs. It consisted of passionate people, mostly Ph.D. students and other young researchers, who wanted to talk about and connect their passion for play and video games with their passion for archaeology and the past. It was a grassroots initiative from people committed to two aspects of their lives in which they saw a valuable connection. Examples of such blogs include the eponymous *Archaeogaming* blog by Andrew Reinhard, *Gingerygamer* by Meghan Dennis, *Gamingarchaeo* by Tara Copplestone, and *Electric Archaeology* by Shawn Graham. These blogs highlighted the connection between video games and archaeology, and sparked discussions about how archaeology can be applied to the study of video games, but also about the potential of video games for archaeological research and outreach.

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Because of its grassroots nature, archaeogaming could be mistaken, and has been in our experience, for being less than serious. Social media and blogs are hardly considered spaces of serious academic output. Quite the opposite, they are often seen as hobby projects, superfluous spaces of frivolous activity. In combination with a modest but persistent disregard for video games as a serious medium, it is easy to see why archaeogaming was seen as a quirky subject, something that can be done 'on the side', but not as an actual form of scholarship.

Be that as it may, the field of archaeogaming has produced, since its inception, a significant amount of academic output. Very early on, Colleen Morgan (2009) was working on a digital reconstruction of Çatalhöyük in the video game *Second Life*, as a multivocal experiment in the process of building and rebuilding ancient sites in digital environments, as well as discussing the representation of the past today. Andrew Reinhard (2018) has been the strongest advocate for the use of traditional archaeological methods in relation to video games by setting up the *No Man's Sky Archaeological Survey*, but also through his involvement in the Atari burial ground excavation. Various other scholars have also engaged with video games using digital archaeological methodologies. Notably, Shawn Graham (2020) has used agent-based modelling in video games, but also video games and video game design concepts to improve and reshape archaeological models. In contemporary digital archaeology, John Aycock has broken new ground with his reverse engineering approach to the study of old video games (Aycock 2016; 2021).

The interventions of archaeogaming, however, are not only methodological but also theoretical. Tara Copplestone (2017a; Copplestone and Dunne 2017) problematized the linearity of archaeological narratives and their dependency on materiality for their production. She argued that interactivity, which is core to video games, can advance multivocal, nonlinear archaeologies. Florence Smith Nicholls has explored themes from games (studies) and introduced these into archaeological thinking such as queer phenomenology, dark tourism and (archaeological) mapping (Smith Nicholls 2018, 2021). Finally, indigenous scholars and communities have made extensive use of video games as a medium to tell their stories (e.g. Cook Inlet Tribal Council 2017) and critically review the opportunities and challenges of bringing and translating indigenous heritages to digital media (Hughes 2017; Bird 2021).

These are only some of the examples of scholarship produced within the field of archaeogaming and published in what can be considered 'standard' academic outlets (i.e. articles, conferences and edited volumes).[5] At the core of archaeogaming, however, is playfulness and fun. Most, if not all, of these scholars came into the field driven by their own relations of commitment, attention and care for video games and the past. Andrew Reinhard (2013) has a poignant 'origin story' about it: While he initially disliked the popular game *World of Warcraft*, it was only when he saw the archaeological opportunities of such a virtual world that he found a new passion for both games and the past.

The playfulness of the field of archaeogaming can be evidenced by its collective activities, which are often unorthodox, experimental or not in line with what academia would normally look like. The online *un*conferences, organized by Tara Copplestone and Shawn Graham in 2015 and 2017, offer a fine example. Our own experiences also align with this. We started with archaeogaming on a winter afternoon, sitting on a couch playing *Never Alone* and *Bloodborne*. This eventually resulted in the creation of VALUE (of which two of the authors are founding members), a foundation that works at the crossroads of video games and archaeology, through playfulness, openness and sharing knowledge. As VALUE, we organize the Interactive Past Conferences, a series of meetings that have become unorthodox hubs of fun, playfulness, openness and inclusivity (Copplestone 2016), as well as numerous other research and outreach activities. Having fun together remains a core research activity to this day, an enduring collaboration that is created from committing to attentively and carefully studying contemporary digital play archaeologically.

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All work and no play?

We started this paper with an idea from the 1930s that has become mainstream, but not in archaeology: Play is central to culture (Huizinga 1938). As such, it can be seen through particular lenses such as those of power, economy or ritual, but this takes play outside of its primary playful context and grounding, which is exactly what most archaeological studies addressing play have done. This is not because it is inherently more difficult to study play. As we suggested, we can start finding the fun by looking at playgrounds and playthings, places and things that evidence relations of commitment, care and attention in the archaeological record. What is more, as the avant-garde – but still niche – field of archaeogaming shows, this ludic quest is not only possible but also theoretically and methodologically reinvigorating. So, if acknowledging and practicing play is important, possible and enriching, why is it not already a central subject in our study of the past?

One major reason is that archaeology arises from and is still embedded in cultural traditions that have had deeply ambivalent attitudes towards play and fun in general (Sharp and Thomas 2019). Play is frequently cast as the antithesis of productivity, seriousness and piety. It is, as a result, consigned to closed-off spaces and times, becoming, by necessity, a magic circle. In fact, the steady decline of play in early-20th-century society prompted Huizinga to write *Homo Ludens*. Fast forward some 90 years, and playing and having fun have become central to the lives of many. Even so, the rules of our labour-based capitalist economies are such that play for its own sake is still undesirable in most professional, educational and other serious aspects of our lives.

Not coincidentally, the same argument is often made about our own discipline: If archaeology is to have a place in society – or more narrowly, if it is to be paid for, or if it is to be done as work – it should serve a function higher than itself. Archaeologists continuously run the danger that non-archaeologists will evaluate their occupation as 'nothing more' than a pastime. Even if, or perhaps because, archaeology originally arose as a pastime for 19th-century elites, anti-play sentiments were an early part of the professionalization of archaeology. A good example of this can be found in this lament about the state of the discipline in the 1950s by Arthur C. Spaulding:

> '[Truth is] determined by some sort of polling of archaeologists, productivity is doing what other archaeologists do, and the only purpose of archaeology is to make archaeologists happy. This is simply a specialized version of the "life is just a game" constellation of ideas, a philosophical position which cannot be tolerated in a scientific context.' (Spaulding 1953, 590)[6]

Archaeology still is inhospitable to fun, play and games, instead valuing things such as heavy labour, being tough and roughing it out. We have always been taught that serious archaeologists and their students do not devote too much – if any – time playing around. Archaeological field*work* – with many of its terms drawing from the strenuous nature of military campaigns – is perhaps the best example of this: Excavation and surveying is supposed to be tough, productive and rigorous. This even pertains to the type of 'off-work' fun that is seen as most meritorious in archaeological academic communities: rowdy activities that let us blow off steam. Often, it is this rough play that includes, but is not limited to, drinking and pursuing romantic and sexual relations (Heath-Stout and Hannigan 2020; Voss 2021) that perfectly encapsulates a discipline-wide hypocritical attitude towards play and fun. It is also in this light that we should reconsider such infamous quotes as 'archaeology is still the most fun you can have with your pants on' (Flannery 1982: 278). In short, having fun and playing is only tolerated in the periphery of scholarly practice as performative and rough play. It is also permissible if it serves a 'higher' purpose, for example, to draw more and younger visitors to a museum or site, or in the classroom, if games are deemed serious enough and support educational outcomes. In archaeology, autotelic play – playing around for the sake of it – is seen as antithetical to what our discipline is about and even a threat to its essence.

To draw from our own experiences, colleagues are bemused, or even a bit confused when they find out that our research and teaching involve playing games during work hours. In addition,

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Figure 3. A picture of Aris having fun at the excavation of Chlorakas-Palloures, Cyprus, that would otherwise never have been published. *Source:* Photo by Zoë van Litsenburg.

often when we discuss games with our students, they remark on the fact that they do not play games (anymore) because they are serious about their studies. In our courses on play and games, students can have a challenging time taking the conceptual leap we ask of them, namely to understand play by playing, because they simply have never been asked to do this. Recently, a colleague with whom we worked for a grant gave the following feedback on a draft proposal: 'I would not talk too much about playing and game jams, as this sounds as though we are having way too much fun ***(which we will have!)***' (emphasis ours). With the risk of getting a bit meta, we feel the need to show that 'we have done the work' for this paper – by introducing and carefully contextualizing the history of research into play – much more so than if we would provide an intervention on another 'less frivolous' theme.

Such sentiments are ubiquitous: We are not supposed to show how much creative fun we have in print or other formal outputs. Yet in many professionally interstitial spaces – the text between parentheses, the offhand joke in a paper presentation, the post-conference dinner, or fun excavation photos that will never be part of a paper (except this one in Fig. 3) – the fact we delight in our

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work frequently takes centre stage. It may not be its only purpose, but archaeology certainly does seem to make archaeologists happy. The practical reality is that most archaeology and other heritage work is actually a *lot* of fun, not in the least for those who get to do it.

A large part of what we do is engaging with places, things and people with care, commitment and attention – in other words, through relations which we have identified in our paper as being fun. As an extension of this, it can even be said that archaeologists and other heritage professionals spend a good deal of their time on playgrounds. The difference is that these playgrounds do not have slides, balls, dice, game controllers or any other generally recognizable playthings, but are magic circles drawn out of the contents of excavation units, survey fields, labs, museums and classrooms. Viewed in this way, it is not strange to say that play and fun is an integral part of the discipline. On the contrary, it is strange to act as if it is not.

One of the results of this strange aversion to archaeology as play is that, save some notable exceptions, we have mostly neglected to develop an archaeology of play. This means that archaeology has built up a considerable blind spot to this core human activity, and we end up telling incomplete stories of the past. In addition, we miss out on potential interdisciplinary collaborations. The understanding of the historical trajectory of (specific forms of) play would benefit from archaeological collaborations with play, game and media studies, to name just a few (Aycock 2021). Even if only from a scholarly perspective, it is important that we work harder to find the fun. If we do so, recent board game studies and archaeogaming have shown that, to understand play, it is important to play. This can be done through replaying ancient games, as we did in our Past-at-Play Lab or as the AI in the Digital Ludeme project has been doing (Soemers et al. 2019). We should also broaden the scope beyond board games and other obvious inferences of play and look at other places and things that evidence relations of commitment, attention and care as potential playgrounds. For this we can use a range of playful methods, including making, playing and sharing ancient and contemporary games as part of theory-building and evidence-based studies (Copplestone 2017b; Graham 2020; Mol 2020). This shows that, as with Huizinga's idea about the constitutive link between culture and play with which we started this piece, playful archaeology can and should also 'arise and unfold in and as play'.

Yet there is another important reason to start talking seriously about fun. As part of a larger 'game of *Monopoly*', ostensibly focused on growth, function and efficiency, archaeology is continuously asked to show how it contributes to society and, in particular, the economy. This request takes the form of things that are frequently hard to have fun with – measuring impacts, writing tenders and grant proposals, or concocting 'business' cases for education – you name it. Most of us end up performing this game of *Monopoly* reluctantly most of the time, with results that, predictably, are devoid of care, commitment and attention (Graeber 2018). Here, public archaeology, critical heritage studies, game studies and anarchist archaeologies have been showing ways forward. For example, our idea for archaeology as play is analogous to the recent call to re-enchant archaeology (Perry 2019), or mutual aid initiatives (Black Trowel Collective 2016).

Playful archaeology: a double move

To some, it may seem that we have been playing on two boards in this paper by sketching out two distinct concepts: an archaeology *of* play and archaeology *as* play. An archaeology of play allows us to study this phenomenon in the past, while archaeology as play allows us to revel and allow others to revel in the fun that comes with engaging with the past in general. Yet, the two are more than complementary: We can use one to tackle the challenges inherent to the other, and in that process, both will be enriched. Play and fun are constitutive of culture, and as such they deserve to be studied archaeologically. To do this effectively, however, we should investigate playthings and playgrounds not only circumstantially but on their own terms, understanding play *as* play and through playing. The first step towards an archaeology of play is to better understand its role

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in our own contemporary professional practice. Secondly, we need to foreground play and playful methods in our analyses to become better at finding play in the archaeological record. Showing how prevalent and diverse play in the past was would be a bold move against those who would only have us play *Monopoly* and other economic games in the present.

With the way things stand, in our discipline and its larger socio-cultural contexts, playful archaeology asks more of us than simply adding another vector to our analyses. It asks us to place and keep relations of care, commitment and attention to the past at the core of our profession. How many times have we, or you dear reader, been excited about that small find that enriched your understanding of how things were? How much fun have we had by matching two pottery fragments together, by striding across muddy fields or by chipping away at a flint core? A playful stance to archaeology is not only about enjoying our work but also about sharing such fun experiences with the past with others. Inclusive, diverse and democratic studies of play can be a fulcrum for that. It can create relations that allow for more voices to be heard – voices that are otherwise often silenced, such as those of local kids playing with slings in the swamp or of other historically even more underplayed ones. A playful archaeology is then also an aspirational move, one that wants to make archaeology more open, accessible and diverse in how it relates to things, places and people in relations of care, commitment and attention. We feel that, given the chance, the vast majority of us would embrace doing this fun thing we are already secretly very good at because we have a deep interest in it and are trained for it. So, let's play!

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Notes

1 Anthropological work, in particular, has shown not only that play is foundational to culture, but even more to the point, that playful activities are a way to profoundly (re)negotiate social structures (Mauss 1923–24; Geertz 1973; Gray 2014; Graeber and Wengrow 2021).

2 Of course, the insufficiency of Huizinga's definition has been commented on by people who have studied play since. After Huizinga, the idea of a 'magic circle', namely that play mimics but is separate from society at large, became one of the cornerstones and major bones of contention of game development and game studies (Huizinga 1938: 10; Tekinbaş and Zimmerman 2003; Juul 2008; Lammes 2008; Zimmerman 2012). Furthermore, not all play is an entirely voluntary act. Game addiction, professional sports and gambling are examples of such involuntary play, as is the group pressure to keep playing when you really want to stop. Play can also emerge from breaking or bending rules, sometimes referred to as counterplay (Apperley 2010; Christiansen 2020; Mol 2020). Play is also not simply taking place in a closed 'magic circle', as it is directly constitutive of and impacted by 'external' power structures, ideologies and identities.

3 Georgism is the ideology that value derived from land should be shared equally. This Georgist game was thus meant as a practical lesson in these excesses. It turned out that, somehow, the game was (and judging from its perpetual popularity still is) fun to play. As a result, the rules and mechanics of *The Landlords' Game* were copied – even if it was protected under patent. One such copy was bought by the Parker Brothers (now Hasbro's) and became the game most of us will know.

4 Naturally, the magic circle is not the only lens for understanding how we have fun. For example, being in a state of 'flow' has also been said to be quite important, according to those studying, making and having fun (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). This explains why it is possible to play *Monopoly* and other games for much longer than it feels like. Flow, moreover, is only one of many emotional or mental states that can be fun (Isbister 2016). It is also notable that *Monopoly* is fun as a social game: The presence of others is also naturally fun to many of us. Moreover, you may also experience a kind of sensorial, bodily fun in playing *Monopoly* as you handle its unique tokens and the dice and make clockwise cycles around the board. We reiterate: Play and fun have many sides, but to make sure reading this paper is still fun, we need to contain ourselves a bit.

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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.

Sybille Lammes is professor of New Media and Digital Culture at The Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS) at Leiden University. She has been a visiting Senior Research Fellow at The University of Manchester, and has worked as a researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick, as well as the media-studies departments of Utrecht University and the University of Amsterdam. Her background is in media studies and play studies, which she has always approached from an interdisciplinary angle, including playful and creative methods in mapping and media practices. She is co-editor of *Playful Identities* (2015), *Time for Mapping* (2018), *The Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research Methods* (2018), *The Playful Citizen* (2019) and *Failurists. When Thing go Awry* (fc. 2023).

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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 Politopoulus, Angus A. 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

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