

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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Figure 1. Bedrock panel in Finntorp (Tanum 184:1), Sweden. The large circle with the cross is approximately 50 cm in diameter (interpretation based on a visualization of a photogrammetric model by Rich Potter; <https://tv.t.dh.gu.se/>).

interesting. However, I find myself in disagreement with the discipline immanent in the changes that Politopoulos and colleagues propose, which are rooted in a few blindspots and underexplored concepts. In my comments, I want to address the following points: evidence and context, fun and violence, unreality, games and learning, and the relationship of seriousness and fun.

The authors lament that the study of play has received limited attention in archaeology and that the interpretation of finds as the outcome or part of play is generally seen with scepticism. Rather than ignorance, the simple reason for this may be the availability of evidence and the context of finds that may initially be seen as related to gaming. The importance of evidence becomes obvious from the chosen case studies – e.g. there is solid evidence that the discussed boards were for the Game of Ur (Finkel 2007). Where such evidence is clear, games are studied in their own right and in conjunction with other aspects, for example, the various gaming boards carved into rocks at Gebel el-Silsila, Egypt (Voogt et al. 2020).

This raises the question of how we should deal with finds that lack such evidence. On a bedrock panel in Finntorp, Sweden (Fig. 1), bronze age carvers made hundreds of cupmarks (semi-spherical depressions), which fill a circle separated into quarters through crossing lines (Horn and Potter 2020). This could arguably have been a gaming board. However, if we consider the wider context (i.e. crossed circles on high-prestige metalwork), the use of cupmarks to portray, for example, the heads of boat crews, the strong downward slope of the panel in Finntorp itself and the general context of Scandinavian bronze age rock art, then the interpretation as a gaming board becomes increasingly unlikely. Along similar lines, I submit again that archaeologists may not find

the idea that the wheel was invented through play unlikely due to ignorance but rather because they consider the context in which wheels were invented in other parts of the world.

Another aspect of the text that had me baffled by the naivety was the sling pellet example. Their critique of previous interpretations culminated in the question of how they can be fun when associated with violence. There are two aspects to consider. First, violence can itself be entertainment, i.e. play and fun to millions of people that enjoy, for example, martial arts, first-person shooter games, hunting and numerous other activities (for example, Ferguson and Olson 2013). Secondly, what is considered fun and play is contextually, socially and even individually situated. For example, gladiatorial games in ancient Rome were fun and play for one group (spectators), but were presumably less fun for the competitors who faced the prospect of death (Guttmann 1998).

The connection of play and fun to violence is a stark example of two other aspects that are either un- or under-explored by the authors. Engaging and having fun in games is often related to their unreality – i.e. most players have fun in first-person shooters because they are well aware on some level that it is not reality (Guttmann 1998). This unreality is an important source criticism, especially in the archaeological study of video games (Horn 2019). However, unreality is also important for board games such as *Monopoly*, which the authors discussed, but also, for example, *Risk*. Not only do we not really try to bankrupt or militarily defeat our friends, but most of us are not actually billionaires or generals. This divorce from reality is what makes play ideal for learning because no serious, real-life outcomes are expected. For example, video games can be used for moral pedagogy because players can experience potential real-life consequences of their actions without risking them actually becoming reality (Staines 2010). An archaeological example could be a wooden sword discovered in Grosetter, Orkney, dating to the local Late Bronze Age (Stevenson 1960) which may have been used in play, teaching children the basics of sword fighting without the risk of real-life serious harm, similar to the well-known Roman example.

This leads me to my final point, and that is that the authors do not consider that there may be a connection between seriousness and fun. As we have seen with the brief discussion of play and learning above, fun and play do not have the expected outcome of real-life consequences, although they may happen occasionally. This brings it outwardly into contradiction with science, which seeks to obtain real-life outcomes usually in improving the human condition. This could be material improvements, such as a new medicine, or immaterial improvements, such as contributing to a more peaceful future by studying the deep past of warfare. To do this it is necessary to be serious, for example, about research ethics. This is also – luckily – what funders and in a wider sense the public is interested in – i.e. they expect real-life outcomes from our fields and are not interested in funding archaeologists just so that they can have fun. In this regard, I find urging people to dispense with seriousness in favor of fun incredibly unhelpful because it not only damages the public image of archaeology but goes directly against its *raison d'être* as a science, i.e. to have an impact on the real world.

It is of course possible to have fun with archaeology or while working as an archaeologist, and it is good to be reminded that this is so. However, in my opinion, it is important to see seriousness and fun in a dialectic relationship, i.e. both work together. I will give a personal example: After more than eight hours of sitting in meetings, writing endless reimbursement forms, and engaging with reviewer 2's comments, I seriously look forward to having some fun. Currently, this could be playing the video game *Humankind* with my son, or *Brotato* solo, or painting some *Warhammer* plastic miniatures. This is fun because it happens away from real life and its consequences, but some of this even has some real creative outcomes, i.e. a nicely painted miniature or having taught my son something about the Mycenaeans. Imagining that I would have to do any of this for more than a couple of hours a week is a nightmare because then it would be just another daily chore. That means engaging in boring or annoying serious archaeological work makes fun and play even better. By the same token, this also raises the fun we can have with our archaeological work; for example, working through annoying comments such as my own is probably not much fun, but

when it is done, the authors will have fun presenting a high-quality article to their colleagues and friends. Lastly, there is yet another dimension to seriousness and fun. Incredibly, there are fun serious tasks, and what they are depends on the individual archaeologist. We know that the authors find it hard to have fun writing grant proposals, but I consider creating a new research project and writing it down to be one of the more fun activities. Summarizing the last two sections, I would urge every archaeologist to give serious tasks (boring, fun, annoying or otherwise) the same care, commitment and attention, and to avoid prioritizing solely to maximize fun, as this is what enables us to have fun in the end and heightens the enjoyment we can get out of it.

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Thoughts on moving forward towards a playful archaeology: a commentary

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In their paper, Politopoulos, Mol and Lammes discuss the lack of play, games and fun in archaeology, striking a playful yet serious tone and noting that ‘we have mostly neglected to develop an archaeology of play’. In doing so, they define and discuss the role of play as twofold: *archaeology of play*, which focuses on the study of play, games and fun in the past as a discipline, and *archaeology as play*, which seeks the fun of engaging with the past as an inherent action (perhaps a method or even a playscape). The authors attribute the lack of an established archaeology of play primarily to the fact that archaeology is rooted in cultural theories and practices that treat fun and play with scepticism, often viewing them as the opposite of productivity.

I therefore think to myself: We live in a capitalistic world, and at least in the UK, academia is one of the most competitive, yet least rewarding, fields where scholars must constantly prove their ability to funnel money into their departments against a backdrop of funds that fall short of the amount necessary to send students on summertime excavations (which are of course massive playgrounds chock full of archaeological fun in their own right). I wonder: How on earth can one play and get compensated to do the same? It would arguably be an act of resistance to experience the archaeology of play and archaeology as play under these circumstances.

It is indeed – as the paper points out – much easier when we play and have fun for the purpose of public engagement and outreach or to attract more students to the university. This is particularly true since archaeogaming (if tied to digital archaeology or digital humanities – industries currently experiencing a growth in interest and hence funding) is beginning to shine through as a ‘catchy’ field for undergraduate students (for a review on current discussions in digital archaeology, see Morgan 2022). One can of course argue against this as well; from my own personal experience, undergraduates let out a hearty chuckle whenever I tell them my research is based on archaeogaming. They go on to suggest that the field sounds more like fun and less like actual research (which is quite hurtful and very untrue), as if research should be an excruciating endeavour with little to no room for play-based fun. I am therefore interested in reading more from the