

# Designing the Past (Together)

## On the Gaming Industry's Contribution to Archaeology and what We Can Contribute to the Gaming Industry

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### Introduction

Archaeology's association with media and video games has never been satisfying for most archaeologists. This may go back to the fact that figures like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft had developed "the idea that archaeologists slash through jungles and prowl through caves searching for golden idols, precious work of ancient art, and magical charms." (Orser, 2015, p. 133). The obscured expectations on the work of an archaeologist that are presented to the public may be one issue. Another aspect that has been always discussed by archaeologists and historians as well is the accuracy of the content that is presented in digital games; to which extent can the past be generalised, what are the repercussions or does it even matter? (Chapman, 2016. Reinhard, 2018).

The visualisation of past realities in which nowadays people can immerse in became "increasingly significant in tourism, entertainment and education" (Holtorf, 2017 p. 3). Hence video games like the *Civilization* series or the *Assassin's Creed* series have been trying to offer past experiences to a growing community of players. These games do not just let players immerse into historical events but they also visualise a material past based on archaeological evidence. The representations and reconstructions of material heritage have huge implications for our society and its collective memory as most children grow up playing video games already in an early age.

The direction in which the archaeological framework develops has been always influenced by socio-cultural realities (Trigger, 2006) and therefore it has been only natural that many scholars like Angus A. Mol and Andrew Reinhard had been discovering the conjunctions between archaeological science and video games since recent years. While Reinhard tried to explore how to apply archaeological methodology on digital games (Reinhard, 2018), Mol has investigated on how video games could be used for didactic purposes in the context of heritage and archaeology (Mol et al., 2017).

However, an aspect that has been not much studied was the role of video games as part of public archaeology and how archaeologists can actively participate in the visualisation of past realities for the public. A cooperation between archaeologists and the gaming industry could have immense benefits for both sides.

### Approach & Methods

The aim of the paper is to address the possibilities and chances on the cooperation between archaeologists and the gaming industry to forward a progression on the field of Public Archaeology. To accomplish that a recapitulation on the history of video games that visualised the past for the last two decades is necessary. For that various cases were chosen to illustrate the different aspects in which video games can represent past. Therefore, Chapman's distinctions on historical game type classifications will be applied (Chapman, 2016).

Further, the focus will be laid on the game industry's contribution for archaeology. For this reason, three factors that mark the industry's contribution are going to be discussed further, namely: a vital interest, the visualisation and an object of study. The vital interest consists of the awareness about the past that is transmitted by video games to the public (Mol et al. 2016, p. 14), the visualisation consists of the 3d-reconstructions of ancient sites, monuments and material culture that is being utilised for the prior factor and the object of study is the game in itself which can be seen from the perspective of contemporary archaeology as part of nowadays digital culture (Reinhard 2018, p. 59). For that *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and *Civilization 6* (see fig. 1) were selected to illustrate the aspect of the game industry's contribution. These games had been

mainly developed by the industry, though the latest games of Assassin's Creed had a historian in the development staff.

After that a similar approach will be conducted in order to define the potential contributions of archaeology to the gaming industry. The factors that will be discussed in this section are: content, inspiration and integrity. The first two factors are passive in being able to be exploited by the gaming industry without having an archaeologist involved while the third one is an active factor as an archaeologist needs to be involved to offer archaeological integrity to a video game. In the case of content every bit of knowledge about archaeological heritage is meant. From which function the buildings in the Agora of Athens may have had to how a Roman Legion under Emperor Claudius might have looked like. Inspiration is the factor that defines trends in the gaming industry. Inspirations for games that visualise the past are ambivalent and can evolve from either a lack of archaeological evidence or an abundant amount of archaeological evidence (How did Life in the late Palaeolithic looked like Vs. How did life in the early Roman Empire looked like)? Important to add is that those two passive factors can become active by the involvement of an archaeologist in preparing content and inspiration for game developers. The third factor which is purely active is the scientific integrity that video games can get by involving an archaeologist in their development. To illustrate this section the cases of the games *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Egypt: Old Kingdom* (see fig. 2) were chosen. These games offer a perfect example on how the cooperation with specialists (including historians and Egyptologists) can look like and improve the visualisation of historical or archaeological pasts in a video game.

The last section is dedicated on how joint projects can be established between archaeologists and game developers and bases on empirical investigations and interviews on game developer conferences during the years 2018 and 2019. This aspect will be concluded under the benefits for archaeology under the frame work of Moshenska's concept of *archaeological commodities* (Moshenska, 2010).

## Figures



Fig. 1. This is how the Great Library of Alexandria might have looked like (right) in Civilization 6. Also: An archaeological museum with dinosaur skeletons... (left) (© 2019 Screenshot by Benjamin Hanusek).



Fig. 2. Egypt: Old Kingdom, a round-based strategy game in which the player encounters historical and environmental events, developed by Clarus Victoria in cooperation with the Center for Egyptological Studies in Russia (© 2019 Screenshot by Benjamin Hanussek).

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