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Jaime Almansa Sánchez and Elena Papagiannopoulou



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Daniel García Raso

Yacimiento píxel.
Los videojuegos como
cultura material

[by Daniel García Raso]

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Today I am writing despite some of the ethical principles that should rule my role as an editor and professional. Besides this journal, I have been editor of many volumes and publications over the last eight years, most of them under what is my own publishing company, JAS Arqueología. Some were part of the routine in the job while others represented an investment in topics and authors that I believe deserved it. This is the case of Daniel Garcia Raso and the book, *Yacimiento píxel*, that I am reviewing here and was published through JAS Arqueología.

I met him over a decade ago during another editorial venture in a fully open access online journal of archaeology; *ArqueoWeb*. Back then he was already exploring very interesting issues beyond his interest in first hominids and the development of culture such as his love of video games. So when this journal started, I reached out to him to see if he was interested in writing something about the image of archaeology in video games. During my research on the contemporary uses of the past I had noticed video games where also a very interesting part of the picture, so his acceptance was a joy for me. You can read that paper, entitled *Watching video games. Playing with Archaeology and Prehistory*, in our first volume.

Some months later I knew about what was about to become his first book for JAS Arqueología, *Los otros hijos de Hefesto. Uso y fabricación de herramientas en animales no humanos*, compiling cultural and technological habits in non-human animals with a powerful background—but I knew there was more coming. One day he told me he was working in a new manuscript, which was to become the book I am reviewing here; *Yacimiento píxel*. The result was more than satisfactory and some of the conversations we had during the editorial process were truly enriching. I cannot say the book is perfect and you should all buy it, as this would actually be wrongly biased. However, for a Spanish reader it can represent an encouraging work that reviews current studies in material culture and applies them to the non-traditional field of video games. In this volume, Daniel also reviews *Archaeogaming*, by Andrew Reinhard, and the complementarity of both titles is clear. This is why, after a short description of the contents, I would like to focus on the main issues that *Yacimiento píxel* can offer for the English reader.

The book starts in the origins of Daniel's research, discussing the actual concept and evolution of 'game'. Linking with his previous research, the topics of culture, game, humanity, and other basic concepts are analysed to frame the main focus of the book. In very fresh and appealing writing, the second chapter explores the history of video games, from their early origins to the latest trends and developments. A first glimpse on the historical context and the ideology behind the market—as it soon developed—starts to reveal one of the main focuses of this book in contrast with Reinhard's work. The third chapter focuses on contemporary archaeologies, material studies, and mass consumption from a critical approach. The next chapter is maybe the main convergence between both texts, going back to actual video games and including a review of archaeogaming as a discipline. Then finishing with two applied chapters that return to ideologies, contemporary society, and culture, as well as the alternative uses of the video game in some of the less known applications of these interactive tools, such as motor rehabilitation in hospitals after a stroke or the development of ALS.

If archaeogaming is an archaeology of and in video games, *Yacimiento píxel* goes a step beyond in the definition of the discipline and its deeper implications and consequences on which represents

a serious critical analysis of all aspects of these worlds—both real and digital. Why? There are many details to point out, from the extensive preliminary frame of video games within culture, to the experience of playing itself as a cultural dynamic. But if I had to highlight two topics that make this book valuable they would be 'production' and 'ideology'.

Where do video games come from? There are many myths around the production and consumption of videogames. Archaeology has traditionally been a myth buster in many areas of history, and video games' is full of them. Maybe the method is not as clear as in the Atari dig that Reinhard and his colleagues practiced, excavating a dump full of discarded Atari products, like the reviled E.T. game, but if we actually understand the video game—software and hardware—as material culture susceptible of archaeological analysis, we can/should follow the production-consumption process from its beginning to its end. This way, different theoretical approaches can help us ask and answer a lot of questions that challenge some of the most extended or popular ideas around this industry. Speculation, conflict, working conditions, clans, frontiers, myths... and ideologies—will come back to this point later on. Rare metals are in the plot of most conflicts worldwide nowadays. Economical and physical. They are essential for the production of video games but so are coders and even miners—soil and digital. The social dynamics that generate from these situations are strong enough to define very specific traces that we can follow archaeologically—maybe not in the most strict sense of the term "excavation". But the same way we try to explain the societies of the Bronze Age's understanding of the extraction of metals or the production and distribution of pottery, we can actually explain many issues in contemporary society through the production and consumption of video games.

Ideology plays an essential role in this context, because video games are not strictly a capitalist or even ultra-liberal tool. They exist under other regimes and even challenge radically Western conceptions of the world. *Tetris*, for example, comes from a Communist regime, as other productions from Cuba or North Korea, but other radical games go beyond mainstream politics to address contemporary issues like gender, colonialism or other inequalities in society. In a context where we address conflict and politics as

archaeologists, the analysis of these kinds of video games represent also a powerful tool towards a transformative practice, in this case, from the frame of archaeogaming, or at least the archaeological understanding of contemporary culture. Furthermore, it helps to understand current society, politics or other cultural and economic trends, in line with other features within popular culture.

The development of eSports or streaming channels can show the capitalisation of gaming within mass media—even with special channels for them. Able to support, justify or challenge the status quo, the strength of video games as part of contemporary culture goes beyond their more artistic or entertaining side. Serious games play an essential role in education nowadays, even some popular series like *Minecraft* or *Fortnite* are becoming part of formal education. But if we understand the underlying message on video games as some sort of implicit education, the impact is deeper.

“Put all this together, as well as, of course, their role as a vehicle for ideologies; their capacity to foster critical thinking; their idiosyncratic aesthetic performance, merging science, arts and technology; the exquisite challenge for cognition of their ludic and narrative nature; their moving and emotive strength; their educational and medical potential; their foul-mouthed attitude to challenge hegemonic trends and moral convictions... and we will realise then, that the future has the shape of a video game” (p. 413-4, my translation).

So, we can excavate video games, physically and in the digital world; we can use our archaeological methods to describe these alternative worlds we can live in into video games; we can even develop new tools for archaeology while playing in virtual scenarios provided by video games; but, and here is the main value of *Yacimiento pixel*, we must also go beyond to understand the production/consumption of video games, also with archaeological tools, to better understand the social, political and economic dynamics of our world.

BLOG REVIEWS WITHIN VOL 8

García Raso, D. Playing Prehistory with Far Cry Primal – 7 October

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Book

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Edited book

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Section in book

McEwan, C., Silva, M. I. and Hudson, Ch. 2006. Using the past to forge the future: the genesis of the community site museum at Aguablanca, Ecuador. In H. Silverman (ed.), *Archaeological site museums in Latin America*. Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 187-216.

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Work reports and reviews will not need to pass the peer-review process, but will be commented by the editor.

We will be publishing one volume per year (first trimester) and although we are willing to receive papers the whole year, full articles for next-year's volume should be sent before October in order to complete the process with time.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact the editor at: jasarqueologia@gmail.com

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