thersites JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES & DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

[REVIEW]

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Review of Andrew Chapman, Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice (New York & London 2016), xii + 290 pp, with 13 b/w illustrations.
ISBN: 978-1-138-84162-8, £ 115.00 (hb), £ 36.99 (pb),
and
Andrew Reinhard, Archaeogaming. An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games (New York & Oxford 2018), 236 pp. with 21 b/w illustrations.
ISBN: 978-1-78533-872-4, $ 150.00 (hb), $ 27.95 (pb),
in: thersites 8 (2018), 171-181.

VIDEO games are increasingly at the centre of a new field of research in the study of the human past. This is eminently laudable, as video games have surpassed movies and television shows as the premier vehicle for public engagement with history; the total value of the global video game market in 2017 was around $ 140 bn—as compared to the less than $ 50 bn in global box office sales.[1]

A new subdiscipline called Historical Game Studies has slowly been established by scholars ever since the publication in 2005 of William Uricchio's seminal *Simulation, History and Computer Games*.[2] This chapter, which analyses the depiction (or, in his words, "representation") of historical processes in computer games, particularly in the genre of strategy games, was extremely influential, in that it opened other researchers' eyes to the possibility that, 1) video games could be a subject for 'serious' study and, 2) that video games were a means of engaging with history, of 'doing' history. In considering the unique attributes and characteristics of this medium, which is considerably different from 'passive' forms of reception in that is requires significant interaction by the recipient, Urichio paved the way for Historical Game Studies as a form of historical reception.

In the intervening years, this new discipline, influenced and inspired by the research undertaken in the field of Game Studies—itself a new field that arose from 1980s and 90s Media Studies—has grown rapidly. An increasing amount of research articles, monographs, essay collections and PhD theses published in the last fifteen years have attempted to make sense of video games in the context of either historical research, didactic employ in school classes and lecturing theatres, or public engagement.[3]

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1 NEWZOO Global Games Market Report for 2017 (https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global-games-market-reaches-137-9-billion-in-2018-mobile-games-take-half, accessed 6 November 2018) and cf. Film and Movie industry statistics and facts at https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film (accessed 26 November 2018).

2 W. Urichio, 'Simulation, History and Computer Games', in J. Raessens & J. Goldstein (eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 2005) 327-338.

3 A good introduction to the field is A. Chapman, A. Foka & J. Westin, 'Introduction: what is historical game studies?', *Rethinking History* 21 (2016), 1-14. DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2016.1256638

As far as Classics, Ancient History, or Classical Archaeology were concerned, however, progress was far less rapid. Though the manifold interweaving and diverging approaches of scholars researching Classical Reception (which, so far, cannot be called a homogeneous field) would seem perfectly suited to the study of receptions of the ancient world in video games, this has not been done in any quantitatively significant or systematic way yet. This is nothing less than a giant missed opportunity. Classical Reception studies—not to be confused with the more traditional study of the 'classical tradition'—, based on reception theory, which posits that "meaning" of, e.g., a work of art "is always realized at the point of reception".[4] In other words, that work—any work—is incomplete until it is 'received' and thus completed. For a medium such as video games, which are, after all, fundamentally and explicitly built on and around the interaction of recipient and object, such an approach from this theoretical view is actually a perfect starting point. Nevertheless, the total scholarly output on the representation of the ancient world in video games amounts so far to less than 20 research articles and one monograph.[5]

There is much to be done, then. In the absence of a systematic study of classical reception in video games, the two monographs presently under review will likely prove an inspiring starting point for researchers endeavouring to approach video games from the perspective of a classicist/historian/archaeologist. Adam Chapman and Andrew Reinhard have delivered two very different approaches to the subject matter, both of which, however, prove to be strikingly original.

Chapman's 2016 work, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, as the (slightly) older one, will be discussed first. The result of a PhD thesis written at the

4 For classical reception studies, see C. Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), quote at p. 3, and cf. C. Martindale, 'Introduction: Thinking Through Reception', in C. Martindale & R.F. Thomas, R.F. (eds), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell 2006) 1-13.

5 See C. Rollinger, 'Playing with the Ancient World: An Introduction to Classical Reception in Video Games', in C. Rollinger, *Classical Antiquity and Video Games: Playing with the Ancient World*, (London et al.: Bloomsbury forthcoming) for earlier research. This volume, incidentally, will almost double the number of publications in scientific organs—a striking indication of the lack of attention paid to this area.

University of Hull, *Digital Games as History* aims at nothing less than establishing historical video games as "a historical form". Chapman regards video games as belonging firmly to the category of popular history, as a way to "make meaning out of the past" (7). His book, a formalist analysis of digital historical video games, provides readers with a set of methodologies and approaches that can be useful in studying these games and understanding the mechanisms and processes behind their 'simulation' of history. In doing so, he connects historical video games to other "systems for historying", by which he means a "dialectical and dialogic" process of engaging with the past (22). In this view, the player-recipient becomes the "player-historian" that is one part of video games as a "historical form" (the other being the "developer-historian" (15). The book is divided into four parts which reflect the author's approach as well as his core aims: "to offer a framework for the analysis of historical digital games …, to describe the nature of historical representation in digital games …, [and] to describe digital games' potential use as systems for 'historying'" (265f.).

Part I ("Digital Games as History") lays the foundations of Chapman's model of video games as popular/public history and introduces the reader to his central notions of the "player-historian" and the "developer historian", which engage in 'doing' history in what he terms "(hi)story-play-spaces"—that is games as the meeting ground between developer-historians and player-historian, as the place where "historical narrative production" happens (51).

Part II ("Digital Games as Historical Representations") is a formal analysis of common methods, means, and processes employed by game designers and video games to represent history, providing "an analysis of form in which analysis of content can be grounded" (19). In four chapters, he focuses in turn on "Simulation Styles and Epistemologies" (59-89), the representation of "Time and Space" (90-118), "Narrative in Games: Categorising for Analysis" (119-135) and "Historical Narrative in Digital Games" (136-172). The formal and analytical framework provided by Chapman in these chapters is useful and will doubtlessly serve as a starting point in future studies. Instead of adhering to industry terms or the hitherto somewhat undertheorized categorisations of video game genres, Chapman establishes a fluid scale at either end of which are the dual poles of 'realist' and 'conceptual' simulations. The former "aim to show the past as it appeared to agents", are

marked by "visual specificity" and a "concentration on the audio-visual aspect"; they imply a "reconstructionist epistemological approach to history" (82). The 'conceptual' simulations, on the other side, are characterised as trying "to tell us about the past without purporting to show it", as mostly taking the form of "abstract audio-visual representations" (e.g. as maps or menus), and implying a "constructionist" view of history (83).

As regards the passing of time and the different means by which games evoke this passing, Chapman differentiates between "play time" (i.e. real time), "fictive time" (the narrative time of the game), and "past time" (the timeline of events in the past as they are understood to have occurred), while at the same time identifying two overarching spatial structures that are typically employed in video games: "narrative gardens" (wherein space is a function of narrative storytelling) and "space as canvas", wherein space is a resource used by games and players to "craft historical narrative" (104). In his analysis of game narratives, Chapman understands narrative as "a discursive interaction between developer and player" (131) and separates "framing narrative" from "ludonarrative", a term pioneered by Marie-Laure Ryan and Tom Bissell but adopted here to mean precisely the in-game narrative created by the interaction of players with lexia ("narratively charged units", such as "objects, processes, scenery") and game mechanics (132).[6]

Part III ("Digital Games as Systems of Historying") opens with the statement that "games, as well as being a form of media, can offer structured access to types of historical practice." (173) In order to provide an analytical framework to study these types of historical practice, Chapman turns to the "ecological approach" pioneered by Eleanor and James Gibson, which addresses "the reciprocal relation between humans and the environment", with the environment being a digital one in this case, "which offers the individual different ways of acting."[7] Borrowing the term from Linderoth, Chapman calls these offers "affordances", of which he identifies three separate types: games as "heritage experiences" (173-197), as "reenactment" (198-230), and as "(Counterfactual) Narrative Historying" (231-264).

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6 M.L. Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2006). T. Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Vintage 2010).

7 J. Linderoth, J., 'Beyond the Digital Divide: an Ecological Approach to Gameplay', *ToDIGRA: Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 1 (2013), 85-113 (quote at 3f.); cf. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York and London: Psychology Press 1986).

Part IV consists of a concluding chapter entitled "Digital Games as a Historical Form" and intends to reinforce Chapman's main hypothesis: that, plainly put, playing historical video games is a form of 'doing' history, that is of engaging in the act of making meaning out of the human past.

Credit belongs to Chapman for pulling together diverse and widely-spread research trends and methodological approaches that have been 'field-tested' individually;[8] here, they form part of a coherent whole and provide the newcomer to Historical Game Studies with a gamut of options for his own research. In doing so, as has been rightly pointed out, Chapman significantly contributes to the still-ongoing process of establishing Historical Game Studies as a research field in its own right, proposing, as he does, "the start of a formal language for the field" and "providing researchers with useful tools and concepts to further expand on and develop."[9] In this, he is widely successful. It will remain to verify whether his other, more far-reaching conclusions about the impact and potential of Historical Video Games will likewise convince other researchers. As another reviewer, Angela Schwarz, has pointed out, much of his view of digital games as historical forms are unsupported by empirical data: there are (as far as I know) no studies that engage with player responses and player receptions per se, though several such projects are in the works.[10] As Schwarz rightly notes, Chapman's work could "eigentlich erst auf der Basis breiter empirischer Wirkungsforschung fundiert [unternommen werden]".[11]

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8 See, for instance, S. Bender, S., *Virtuelles Erinnern. Kriege des 20. Jahrhunderts in Computerspielen* (Bielefeld: Transcript 2012) for an example of video games as "heritage experience"; B. Rejak, 'Toward a virtual reenactment of history: video games and the recreation of the past', *Rethinking History* 11 (2007), 411-425 for video games as digital reenactment.

9 E. Wright, 'Rev. Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice. Adam Chapman: Routledge 2016', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50 (2017), 1451-1453. DOI: 10.1111/jpcu.12614

10 For one example of a project focusing on "audience/player learning practices and their engagements with, and responses to, classical content", see for instance the PhD project of Sian Beavers (https://iet.open.ac.uk/people/sian.beavers#biography, accessed 26 November 2018).

11 A. Schwarz, 'Rezension zu: Chapman, Adam: Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice. London 2016', *H-*

This should by no means detract from the fact that Chapman has written a timely and important book that presents a very significant contribution to a field that is still forming and that has a dire need of the kind of methodological groundwork that Chapman provides.

The second book under review here is Andrew Reinhard's 2018 *Archaeogaming. An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video games*.[12] Archaeogaming is many things: 1) "the study of physical video games as well as the metadata [read: cartridges, packaging, booklets, etc.] surrounding the games themselves", 2) "the study of archaeology within video games", 3) "the application of archaeological methods to synthetic space", 4) "the approach to understanding how game design manifests everything players see and interact with in-world", and, lastly, "the archaeology of game mechanics and the entanglement of code with players" (3).

The main four chapters of the book are devoted to fleshing out these definitions, starting with "Real-World Archaeogaming" (23-61). This may be the part of the book that readers are most familiar with; at least those nostalgics who, like me, have watched the 2014 Netflix documentary *Atari: Game Over*, which depicted the archaeological excavation of the now famous Alamogordo burial of large numbers of defunct Atari game cartridges by the publishing studio itself. This chapter is also perhaps the most accessible to readers unfamiliar with Archaeogaming or video game culture as such; it reads like a mixture of urban legend detective story and 19th century archaeology. Reinhard contends that video games have a material culture that is worthy of archaeological study (as all material culture is) and which includes not only the physical remnants of actual video games (i.e. cartridges, tapes, floppy disks, CDs, DVDs) but also the attendant "metadata", such as packaging, marketing material, booklets, instruction leaflets, etc. Video games in their physical form, as Reinhard rightly emphasizes, are archaeological artifacts; problematically, however, not all video games are now published as physical media. Instead, through distribution portals such as Steam, players can download games as pure code, with consequences for how such 'digital' artifacts can be analyzed and, importantly, preserved

Soz-u-Kult 16.01.2016, <www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-26231>, accessed 26 November 2018.

12 Reinhard coined the term Archaeogaming in a 2013 post on his eponymous blog, *archaeogaming.com*: https://archaeogaming.com/2013/06/09/what-is-archaeogaming/ (accessed 26 November 2018).

(30).[13] Another facet of 'metadata'—though one that is closely connected to the question just raised—is the question of gaming spaces such as retrogaming stores, museums, GameLabs, or even the physical offices of video game developers (32-41). No less important is the adaptation of established archaeological methodologies to the real-world study of video games, such as, e.g. the establishing of typologies that can be used to date video games where no positive date is otherwise attested. Reinhard's contention that a video game equivalent of UNESCO World Heritage Site designation will be established in the foreseeable future is bold; we will have to see.

The second chapter, "Playing as Archaeologists" (62-87), is, in Reinhard's own words, "the reception studies approach, where we see how games, game developers, and players project and perceive who archaeologists are and what they do." (3) Beginning with well-known video game 'archaeologists' such as Indiana Jones and Lara Croft, Reinhard provides a list of game titles wherein the player assumes the role of an archaeologist (64-70; they are surprisingly many), while adding that players also sometimes encounter archaeologist NPCs (non-player characters) in other games. With reference to the work of Cornelius Holtorf, Reinhard rightly notes that certain genres of video games, especially action-adventures (or, rather: adventure games), are, in a way, an epitome of the archaeological process: they feature the gathering and interpretation of clues, the solving of puzzles and occasional mysteries, and end by the locating and safeguarding (read: stealing) of in-game artifacts (71).[14] Reinhard also briefly skirts the importance of genre definitions and conventions in video games, though more could have been done here.

The next chapter "Video Games as Archaeological Sites" (88-161) is, to this reviewer at least, the most innovative one. For Reinhard, video games

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13 Though this is by no means a recent problem, as the example of literally hundreds of early 70s and 80s videogames, whose codes have been completely lost along with their physical media, shows. Cf. the example of The Sumerian Game, recounted in T. Winnerling, 'Jäger des verlorenen Spiels – IBM: The Sumerian Game', *Spielkult* Blog, 08.01.2018 (https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/1547, accessed 26 November 2018) and T. Winnerling, 'Projekt Sumerian Game: Digitale Rekonstruktion eines Spiels als Simulation eines Modells', Gespielt blog, 09.01.2018 (https://gespielt.hypotheses.org/1796, accessed 26 November 2018).

14 Cf. C. Holtorf, *Archaeology is a brand!* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press 2007).

are not only themselves archaeological artifacts; their gamescapes are, rather, themselves, worthy of being turned into the object of archaeological research: "A video game is also an archaeological site." (88) This goes well beyond the archaeological study of video games in their physical form (tapes, cartridges, disks) or their physical and technological surroundings (installations on computers; memory space on gaming consoles). Instead, Reinhard sees "the game-as-played, which is accessed via installed digital media" (91) as an archaeological *site*.[15] He intends this to mean much more than just ruminating on the significance of archaeological material culture that is sometimes presented in video games (e.g. ruins in game landscapes). Instead, Reinhard proposes to systematically apply archaeological methods to virtual worlds in-game, taking his clue (in terms of the archaeological method) from Martin Carver's guide *Archaeological Investigation*.[16] Using his own experimental work on a project he termed the *No Man's Sky* [the title of the video game in question] *Archaeological Survey* (NMSAS, esp. 130-148)[17], Reinhard uses this chapter to detail his own experiences, to propose specific methodologies and approaches such as different forms of archaeological surveys (flyovers; walkthroughs; etc.), mapping and measuring, 'excavating', and documentation procedures (108-124), and finally discussing appropriate means of publishing syntheses and preserving the results of such studies.

One readily obvious weakness of conducting such research is the fact that, for the most part, gamescapes and digital game worlds are the result of a specific and meticulous developing program; in other words, everything—from ruins, to objects of material culture, and even including program errors such as glitches or bugs (148-155)—that is in game worlds is there because it was put there (deliberately or inadvertently) by the game designers. Reinhard naturally is very aware of this (102); digital archaeological surveys such as the NMSAS are intended to be proving grounds to develop adequate methodologies for when, inevitably, video games will be

15 Cf. A. Reinhard, 'Video Games as Archaeological Sites: Treating digital entertainment as built environments', in A. Mal et al., *The Interactive Past: Archaeology, Heritage, and Video Games* (Leiden: Sidestone Press 2017) 99-107.

16 M. Carver, *Archaeological Investigation* (New York: Routledge 2009).

17 See also https://archaeogaming.com/tag/no-mans-sky-archaeological-survey (accessed 26 November 2018).

centered not on human-designed worlds, but will be set in completely procedurally generated worlds, "where the cultures that players encounter have never been considered by the game's designer(s), instead created from a complex set of rules that, when mixed, together, create emergent cultures distinct from one another." (102f.) Such games exist today, though in a very—*very*—rudimentary form (e.g. *No Man's Sky*). Reinhard's foresight in attempting to prepare the ground is inspiring[18], even if his prediction as to the timeframe ("by 2020") seems more than a little optimistic.

The fourth chapter ("Material Culture of the Immaterial", 162-196), is such a drastic departure from the lofty insights of the previous chapter that one wishes the internal ordering of the book was different, in order for the reader to be 'released' on a high note. Instead, they are decidedly brought back down to earth and acquainted with the material culture of gaming and its various manifestations in genres and occupations that are more remotely connected. Video game museums such as Rome's Vigamus are touched on and their role in preserving video game culture and facilitating the sharing of video gaming 'oral histories' is discussed (172). Reinhard then briefly engages with real-world application of video games or, rather, game technology. This includes what he terms 'experimental archaeology' (178-180; 188-192), by which he means digital reconstructions of ancient sites, technologies, processes or methods, as well as 'cosplay' culture (185-188), which is a phenomenon of modern pop culture that consists of fans dressing up as characters from popular media (including video games), often at considerable costs in both money and time.

In his "Conclusion" (197-202), Reinhard reiterates his main theses and contends that "video game archaeology is not really all that different from the archaeology of other things, materials, places, and cultures." (197)

The individual approaches of these two monographs are obviously very different. They are similar, however, in that both studies provide an extremely important service for the research areas that they wish to promote and help formalize (Chapman), or to establish (Reinhard). By providing a common framework and language of formal analysis and by laying the groundwork for a new direction in archaeological research that is yet at the

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18 Cf. p. 103: "One day we will have a Turing test for cultures to determine what is real. How will we determine that level of reality, and if a new, born-digital culture thrives, what obligations do we have to interacting with it and, ultimately, to preserving it?"

very beginning, Adam Chapman and Andrew Reinhard are doing essential work.