

This brings up the nature of games as a form of cultural heritage, and as such there are sensitivities that are relevant to the play of games from other cultures. The history of play is not all fun and games, as colonialism and capitalism have had effects on the cultural heritage of play. European board games have replaced local games, as pressure to behave in ways similar to Europeans led to the spread of football and cricket (Appadurai 1995) as well as the standardized European rules of chess, which were introduced to South Asia and replaced local versions of *chaturanga*, the original form of the game; moreover, reintroduced versions of local games (e.g. Ludo and snakes and ladders) were commercially appropriated in Europe and resold to their communities of origin (Mukherjee *in press*). Even today, video and commercial games are replacing traditional forms of play, leading to their disappearance. Organizations have begun to address this issue – again, largely focusing on sports. To date, only one board game has been inscribed by UNESCO on its list of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2020).

There is still much to accomplish to bring the archaeological study of play to where it should be, and to more completely integrate it into a holistic archaeological approach to understanding ancient life. After all, isn't the whole point of life, with all the economic, political and ritual choices we make, meant to be being able to enjoy ourselves – to have fun? This is not so different from life in the past, and recognizing this will lead us to better understand the motivations, interactions and daily lives of the people we study. We have a lot of work to do to solve this puzzle, so to echo the authors' sentiment, let the games begin!

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This was fun!

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When we originally set out to study the interfaces of past and play, in the Past-at-Play Lab project, we knew there was uncharted potential for a dialogue between the theory and practice of play and the study of the past. As one scholar of play and two archaeologists, we learned many new things from each other and also had a lot of misunderstandings along the way. This shared joy of emerging understanding through dialogue is part of what makes scholarly work so much fun. We thank our commenters for engaging in a similar caring, committed and attentive manner to our main argument: Play and other forms of fun can and should be found, both in the past and in the discipline of archaeology. Their comments reveal, in two different ways, that this dialogue is just the opening move for a playful archaeology. Much needs to be done to craft a framework and set priorities for an archaeology of and as play. We will be honest: If archaeology is to get this right, it is going to be a lot of hard and challenging work. We will first respond to those commenters that suggest there is really no reason to do this hard work. We disagree, and we will explain, following up on the ideas in our main article and the other comments, why studying play and playing will enrich archaeology.

You can spell fun without function

In her comment, Karen Bellinger does not bury the lead and flatly questions the value of an archaeology of play. Like us, she concludes that play and games have already been investigated

through other categories. She argues, however, that this study of play, ‘enmeshed within such functional categories’, works well and that there is no need to zero in on it. Christian Horn argues along similar lines, for example, suggesting that, by studying the function of the wheel in some places, we can understand its initial affordances universally, and there is no need to conceptualize the wheel as something that may have originated as fun. Both also question whether we can find play and fun in the past consistently because we lack the means to single it out in the archaeological record.

We will concede that, as our discipline currently stands, it is easier to focus on ‘functional’ elements of material culture; this is what many of our heuristics were originally meant to do, and that is still what we use them mostly for. This, however, seems to us too conservative of a theoretical and methodological position to study, well, anything new. Indeed, the examples in their comments lead us down well-beaten paths in which we view play through the facets of ritual, social status, politics, education and war (Bellinger) or through the lenses of seriousness and violence (Horn).

No serious scholar of play, from Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* to contemporary video game scholarship, would dispute these interfaces. After all, play is ubiquitous and is certainly part of other cultural practices such as religion or the development of technologies. Yet to focus on play in this way, we want to stress, comes with the danger that it will be subordinate to other aspects of life. Function and seriousness have such enormous gravity in our current-day reality that they can become inescapable vectors of the human condition, or at least our archaeological understanding of it. This can lead to some lateral intellectual moves. Supposedly, it is possible to scientifically study the material correlates of something quite as ephemeral or intangible as ritual or prestige, yet understanding the material affordances of play as central to culture is too challenging or even naive? Our own move is more straightforward: Let’s probe the possibility that people in the past played for play’s sake.

We are quite serious about this

Without understanding play and fun for its own sake, we end up with an impoverished understanding of what life in the past was like. As Walter Crist points out in his comment, if you do take play seriously, it will be accessible in the archaeological record. Of course, not all forms of play will reveal themselves through material traces. Yet even in those cases where it may remain mostly intangible, we should realize that playful affordances would have been all around – including in shells, stones, seeds and of course one’s own body. Even in the cases where we have clear material traces and historical records, such as the Royal Game of Ur, we might never have as complete an understanding of a game as we have of *Monopoly*. That we may miss some aspects of it does not mean we should ignore the realities that emerged through playful engagement with objects and places. Moreover, with all the usual caveats about subjectivity in place, we strongly believe that the realities and materialities of play may also (re-)emerge in the present through rigorously scientific, playful experimentation – as has been the aim of projects such as LUDEME and our own Past-at-Play Lab.

If we understand play in the past better, it will have a major impact on archaeological theory and practice. Crist brings up another crucial reason to do so, not addressed in our main argument: Play is underrepresented as heritage, at least in the lists of formal heritage organizations. The fact that only one board game is inscribed on the intangible cultural heritage list of UNESCO, and games as a whole are only a small category, clearly underlines the marginal role play has had in our field thus far. The capitalist and colonialist aesthetics and dynamics of this are effectively discussed by Crist. It is exactly these types of inquiries and actions that could be – should be – the remit of a playful archaeology. It also requires a serious consideration of the diversity of play, with a multitude of currently underrepresented voices and perspectives. This

understanding could even shape the future of play, shining a new light on alternative modes for new forms of fun. What could games look like beyond the capitalist realities and functions underpinning many of the things we get to play currently, such as *Monopoly*?

The stories we play

It will be fascinating to discover the new stories we could tell of and through past-play, and we have only begun to do so in this paper. In her comment, Despoina Sampatakou, rightfully points out that there is already a strong and clear connection between playing and storytelling, which is more established, even if not completely accepted, as archaeological practice. The example of the Heritage Jam – originally drawing on the idea of Game Jams in the game industry – shows how making and playing games and simply having fun is a very good way to create communities, promote interdisciplinarity, break down the hierarchies of academia and generally get people excited about archaeology.

As Bellinger rightfully reminds us, gaming is not the only way to do so. Her preferred medium of choice, documentary television series, has traditionally been used to great effect. We also enjoy plunking down on the couch after a long day with a nice documentary. The same can be said for popular science books. A key difference between these traditional storytelling media and games is the role of the author and the power that stems from it: There is one party who tells the story; the other party is the listener. This does not work the same way in games and other forms of play, where the relations of care, commitment and attention are shaped through interaction. Players, even when they would have no say in the making of a game, are required to actively engage with it to make it happen. By tapping into this power of play, we can create more democratic spaces and settings where archaeologists and the public have the opportunity to share the same playground, something that archaeogaming is actively doing.

This levelling of the playing field has its own dangers and risks. It is, as Sampatakou argues, a form of resistance, in particular to authorities, structures and mindsets that hold great sway over us. Resistance, like play, is voluntary but never futile. We understand, however, that the exciting but challenging proposition of playful archaeology is not for everyone. That is fine. To those of you who want to play along: This may get messy, but we promise it will be fun.

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