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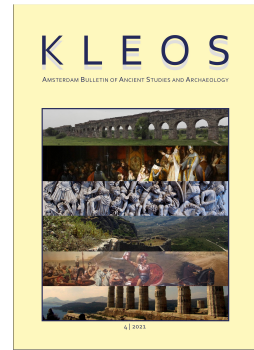
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Climbing on Culture: The Public Opinion on Archaeological Heritage Management through *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*

Marijke van Kempen

ABSTRACT

The use of video games is a relatively new method in researching archaeology, history, and archaeological heritage management. In this paper, the results of a survey on this subject in regard to the franchise *Assassin's Creed* are discussed in order to examine what the opinions of players are on the way in which video games can be used for archaeological heritage preservation. Although the educational value of video games has been researched as early as 2002, it is not clear what the public thinks of this and how it differs from the opinion of experts. Moreover, it might be advantageous to understand how the educational value of games has developed in the last decade, and if points made by K. Squire (2002) and A. A. Leonard (2008) can still be implemented. The main opinion of the participants in this survey is that Ubisoft portrays archaeological heritage accurately and that games like *Assassin's Creed* could be useful as educational tools. However, many partakers also noted that game developers could have a more active role in archaeological heritage management, and that this must be done critically and ethically. Experts are even more critical, as they note that the violence in video games might overshadow the educational use, and that the way in which game developers portray the past might be anachronistic. It is clear that some points made in the last decade are still applicable today, yet many new problems have also developed.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists, historians, and archaeological heritage specialists continuously try to connect the past with the present. The way in which video games portray the ancient world is a relatively new topic of interest. Some investigation has been performed on how the past and its authenticity are represented, on the ethics

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Figure 1

Screenshot of a sim analysing an Omiscan artefact (*The Sims 4 Jungle Adventure: Official trailer*, 0:09; ► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZTgULEZqgk>).

involved, and how video games can help preserve the past.¹

This can, of course, only be done if game developers take interest in archaeological, historical, and patrimonial topics. For instance, archaeology is presented as a skill in *Sims 4* (2014). In the expansion pack *Jungle Adventure* (2018), the player can visit *Selvadorada*, a fictional holiday location based on South American cultures. The virtually simulated persons (sims) that the player controls have the ability to dig for 'Omiscan' artefacts in the jungle and learn about the local culture by talking to locals, thereby increasing their 'Archaeology' and 'Selvadoradian Culture' skill. When a sim reaches a high level in this skill tree, the sim can write a skill book on archaeology, establish dig sites, and give archaeology lectures. A sim could be asked to authenticate artefacts too, establishing whether they are real archaeological artefacts or fake duplicates (figure 1).

Another good example is the *Tomb Raider* franchise, where the player plays as *Lara Croft*, a (pseudo)archaeologist (figure 2). In the video games, the player travels to various destinations searching for 'lost' artefacts. The video games mainly focus on solving puzzles, exploring tombs and temples by climbing, and fighting enemies with the use of guns rather than portraying what an archaeologist might actually do.

Lastly, in games like *Minecraft* (first release 2009; continuously updated since), the player is able to rebuild archaeological sites. The game is a survival sandbox, a genre in which the player explores their creativity to complete tasks, often set in an open world with no linear storyline.² In the game, the player is able to collect raw materials and is encouraged to build items or construct

¹ Bembeneck 2013; Salvati/Bullinger 2013; Mir/Owens 2013; Fothergill/Flick 2017; Hughes 2017; Glas et al. 2017.

² Breslin, 2009.



Figure 2

Lara Croft exploring a tomb in Japanese Yamatai in *Tomb Raider* (2013) (image from ►<https://www.mixedgrill.nl/recensie-tomb-raider/>).

a house.³ While playing in 'survival mode', the player encounters enemies, however when playing in 'creative mode', the survival aspect of the game is not present. Players are able to create buildings by generating the raw materials they need instead, such as stone or wood. This is often done in an online server, where multiple people can build in one world at the same time. Because players are able to build whatever they want, Minecraft has been implemented in education and public outreach. In the Netherlands, RoMinecraft was set up by the VALUE Foundation of Leiden University in cooperation with the Province of Zuid-Holland. In this project, children were able to learn about the ancient Roman civilization in their own country and were invited to reconstruct Roman forts in the game.⁴

Archaeology and archaeological heritage can be implemented in video games in various ways. Two more recent examples of the entwinement of archaeology, education and entertainment are Ubisoft's acclaimed titles *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018). The adventure and action-driven games are set in late Ptolemaic Egypt and Classical Greece. The player can fight, sneak, or climb, and even enter buildings in the digital environment. The player is able to take part in historical events or meet notable historical characters and can even encounter creatures from Egyptian and Graeco-Roman mythology.⁵

Video games like *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Odyssey* take years to make partly because of the intricate research. The video game developer Ubisoft employs historians and archaeologists to digitally recreate ancient worlds. According to franchise historian Maxime Durand, the games are based on research and plausible.⁶

3 Ashdown, 2012.

4 Schenk 2019.

5 Benden et al. 2019.

6 Durand in Nielsen 2017.



Figure 3
 Screenshot of the game
Assassin's Creed Origins
 (image by author).

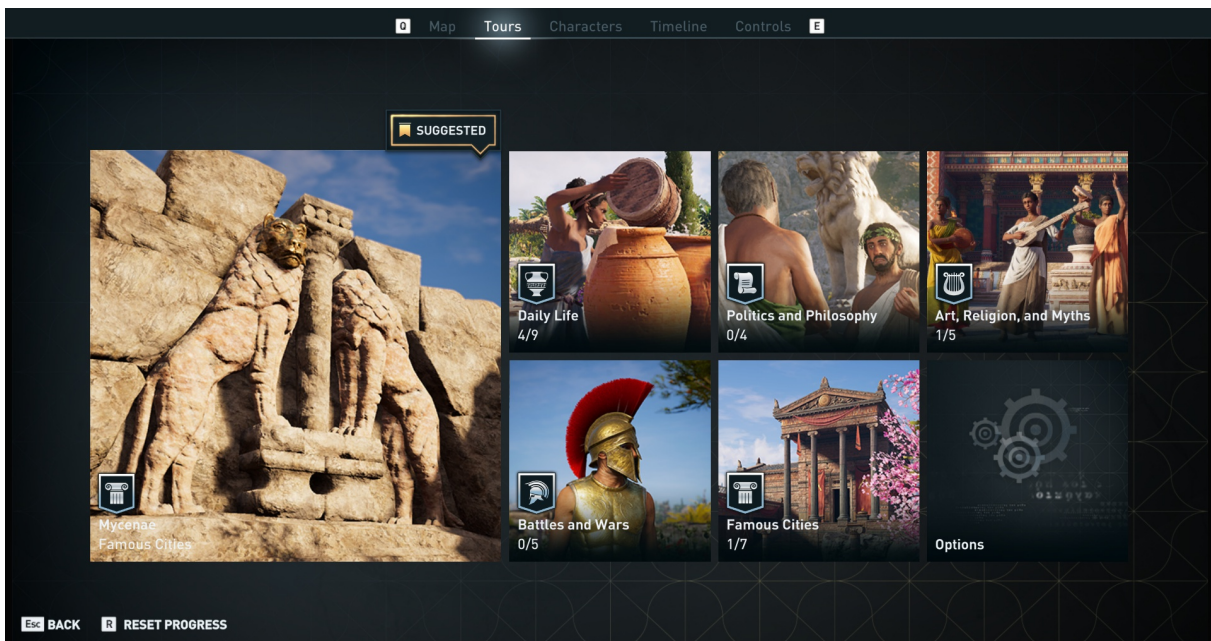


Figure 4
 Screenshot of the types of
 Discovery Tours in
Assassin's Creed Odyssey
 (image by author).

He explains that for *Assassin's Creed Origins*, Ubisoft consulted Egyptologists, such as renowned archaeologist Jean-Claude-Golvin and other specialists to include as much accurate information as possible. However, Ubisoft stresses that they do not want to replace history books and that their main goal is to encourage people to visit museums more often.⁷

The company tries to achieve this goal through the inclusion of the so-called 'Discovery Tours', featured in both *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. In this mode, the player is unable to fight and is encouraged to take a closer look at the history of sites and buildings. The player, for example, learns about the ancient education systems, the role of women in society and pottery production (figure 4).⁸ An archaeological object may be featured, together with find numbers and information on where

7 Nielsen 2017.

8 Mol 2018; Walker 2018; Benden et al. 2019.

House of the Arrhephoroi

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The arrhephoroi were selected on the basis of noble birth, so only high status girls had the privilege of serving Athena during the feasts of the Arrhephoria and the Panathenaia.

Pausanias wrote that the two girls – whose designation meant “Bearers of Mysteries (Sacred Offerings)” – performed a special rite during the Arrhephoria. Their main duty was to descend from the Akropolis to a precinct of Aphrodite, carrying secret objects on their heads given to them by the priestess of Athena. Once at their destination, they left the objects and received something else in return. Neither the arrhephoroi nor the priestess knew what any of the objects were, as they were always covered.

The arrhephoroi’s other duty was to assist the temple’s priestess in the sacred act of weaving Athena’s peplos (garment). This ritual took place over 9 months, before the garment was finally offered to Athena at the Panathenaia.

Employing young, inexperienced arrhephoroi guaranteed the purity of the sacred robe. It also gave the girls the chance to learn how to spin and weave, which were the two most important tasks required of Greek women.



SHOW TRANSCRIPT PLAY AUDIO HIDE TEXT CLOSE

the item is currently displayed (figure 5).

It is clear that video games can present the past in an interesting and entertaining way. Yet, the debate whether people can learn from video games has been going on for a long time. One of the first articles on the use of video games as educational means was written by Squire (2002). In his paper, he argues that many issues around the value of video games have been overlooked. He stresses that people should study how gaming is part of a person’s life, and notes that the pedagogical aspects should be examined. He agrees that games might be able to teach players certain things, yet he also states that games should be used as tools that might aid people, rather than full-fledged out teaching methods, as video games cannot always portray absolute reality. Squire concludes that in the future video games should better transfer information and help individuals with the ability to solve problems.⁹

Leonard (2008) also lists how he wants video games to be used in education. He highlights how video games mainly focus on sight and sound and hopes that more might be possible in the future. Contradictory to Squire, he argues that video games might be able to replace textbooks. He argues that distance education and virtual schooling are important, noting that games might be able to put an instructor and students in the same digital environment.¹⁰

Since these two publications, the gaming industry has taken massive steps, not only graphically, but also in terms of production

Figure 5

Information given in the *Discovery Tour on the acropolis in Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (image by author).

9 Squire 2002

10 Leonard 2008, 234–237.

and public perception. By examining looking beyond the opinion of experts, this paper seeks to understand what the broader public think of the potential use of video games in education and archaeological heritage preservation, something that has been lacking in previous research. Moreover, it might be interesting to compare the results with the ideas presented more than a decade ago, and whether people from different backgrounds and genders have different opinions. As Ubisoft also states that intricate historical research has been done for the games *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, these games function as useful case studies.

METHODOLOGY

Public opinions on the engagement with antiquity in *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and how video games preserve archaeological heritage was gathered through a survey. In total, 33 questions were asked.¹¹ Participants were encouraged to write down what they would like to see or do in video games that are partly focused on antiquities. This was done to understand whether the opinions of experts differ from the opinions expressed by a more general public.

In total, 256 useful responses were gathered. In order to reach a broad public, the survey was posted on social media (Facebook pages and groups, Instagram, Twitter). Of the total number of participants, 196 responses were of people born in the Netherlands. This means that the survey largely focused on how Dutch people feel about the use of archaeological heritage in video games. Moreover, mainly young adults participated in this survey. The two youngest age-groups (19-24 and 25-30) comprised a total of 213 reactions, responsible for 81.9% of all responses. The age category <19 was not chosen by the participants, meaning that it is unknown how teenagers might have thought about archaeological heritage in video games. Of the total, there was a more or less equal gender division: 120 men and 128 women participated. Six other responses did not fall into either male or female categories whilst two responses excluded their gender identity.

In order to see whether the distribution of responses was statistically significant, Chi-Squared tests were performed. These types of tests are performed to research whether two or more distributions differ from each other and if these differences between those groups are of any statistical significance. A statistical significance means that two or more distributions differ so much, that the difference cannot be a coincidence. If results of a Chi-Square test are not statistically significant, distributions are

¹¹ See appendix 1 for an overview of the questions.

relatively even or similar to each other. By creating a contingency table of the various groups (gender, age, agree, disagree), Chi-Square (χ^2) can be calculated, as distributions are put opposite to one another.¹²

SURVEY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first questions were concerned with the participant's archaeological heritage and that of other social groups (Fig. 3, Appendix 1). A total of 225 participants answered that they were interested or highly interested in past societies. Of these, 107 were women and 110 were men. The distribution of answers between genders, as shown in Table 1, was not statistically significant when a χ^2 test was performed ($\chi=0.3772$, $p=.539119$, $n=1030$). As the 'other' category was greatly underrepresented, performing χ^2 tests was redundant, because comparing these groups could result in a skewed image of how the responses were distributed.

In regard to the participant's archaeological heritage, 137 of 196 people born in the Netherlands agreed that Dutch archaeological heritage is of interest. Of the people born within Europe, but outside of the Netherlands, only 11 out of 43 people (25.6%) were uninterested in their own archaeological heritage. Of the people born outside Europe, 5 out of 16 people (31.3%) responded as being indifferent about their archaeological heritage or finding it uninteresting. All in all, it seems that most participants (70.3%) agreed that their own archaeological heritage, in the most general sense, is interesting.

Moreover, 210 out of 256 respondents (82%) agreed that people need to act in preserving the archaeological heritage of others. Responses were more divergent in regard to the statement that archaeological heritage was presented in an uninteresting way to the public (Table 2), as 76 respondents were neutral on the subject. When χ was calculated for the Netherlands and rest of Europe between the people who greatly disagreed or disagreed (categories 1+2) and those who agreed or greatly agreed (categories 4+5), the result was not statistically significant ($\chi=0.6508$, $p=.419834$, $n=168$). The same result was present when χ was calculated for the Netherlands and Other categories ($\chi=0.2964$, $p=.586121$, $n=150$). Between the categories of Rest of Europe and Other, testing the different categories also resulted in no statistical significance ($\chi=0$, $p=1$, $n=42$). This suggests that the majority of all participants disagree that archaeological heritage is currently presented in an uninteresting way, and agree that it is important to preserve the archaeological heritage of other civilizations and people.

¹² Fletcher/Lock 1991, 129.

| | Positive responses to questions on archaeological heritage | Negative responses to questions on archaeological heritage | Total responses |
|--------------|--|--|-----------------|
| Man | 110+99+84+101+21=415 | 1+9+7+7+66=90 | 505 |
| Woman | 107+114+89+103+26= 439 | 3+4+14+4+61=86 | 525 |
| Other | 6+4+5+5+2=22 | 0+4+0+0+2=6 | 28 |
| | 876 | 182 | 1058 |

Table 1
Contingency table distribution of responses in different gender categories (image by author).

| Taking action | 1 – greatly disagree | 2 – disagree | 3 – not agree, not disagree | 4 – agree | 5 – greatly agree | Total Responses |
|------------------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Netherlands | 45 (23%) | 57 (29%) | 58 (30%) | 32 (16%) | 4 (2%) | 196 |
| Europe excl. NL | 10 (23%) | 10 (23%) | 13 (30%) | 6 (14%) | 4 (9%) | 43 |
| Other | 3 (18%) | 5 (29%) | 5 (29%) | 1 (6%) | 3 (18%) | 17 |
| Total | 58 | 72 | 76 | 39 | 11 | 256 |

Table 2
Contingency table distribution of acting in archaeological heritage preservation between nationalities (image by author).

The questions on archaeological heritage concluded that the participants are generally content with how archaeological heritage is currently portrayed, that they are interested in past societies, and that they agree that active preservation is of importance. There was no difference in opinion between the genders and nationalities of the participants in this survey.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE IN VIDEOGAMES

Of 256 responses, 161 people answered that they often played videogames (62.9%). Of these, 137 agreed that video games could prompt people to care more about their own archaeological heritage. Moreover, 125 responses agreed that video games could interest people in other cultures. Of the people that regularly played videogames, 121 people agreed that they could be of use in high-school history classes. At the same time, 130 individuals also agreed that video games could play an active role in digitally preserving archaeological heritage. These are important findings, as not all game developers employ experts when actively promoting archaeological heritage in their game. For example, no specialists are mentioned in the credits of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. The only steps that were taken in using archaeological heritage was to serve as inspiration for tombs that are featured in the game, which was expressed by the game's art team.¹³ Artifacts and sites have little to no educational value. In another game, *Ryse: Son of Rome*, Rome also serves more as a historical backdrop than an environment in which a player is able to learn about Roman civilization. Although the developer Crytek argues that the team

¹³ Corriea 2015.

went to Rome in order to see the architecture and archaeology, it is also clear that the game was a mash-up of different events, because only the favorite events from team members were selected and put into the game.¹⁴

Not all participants were gamers, however. 59 responses indicated that they did not often play video games. Only eight individuals had never played or seen a play-through of a game that features archaeological heritage. So, it is clear that this survey mostly attracted people who played video games. The implication is that people might have had a biased opinion on how video games can help in preserving archaeological heritage. In order to understand whether this was indeed the case, the responses of people that did not often play video games were examined.

Of the group that disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they often played video games, 34 out of 59 (57.6%) participants answered that video games could be useful in the preservation of archaeological heritage. Moreover, 42 individuals (71.1%) also answered that video games could help people care more about the archaeological heritage of other societies, while 31 participants (52.5%) agreed that video games could cause people to care more about their own archaeological heritage. A total of 35 participants (59.3%) agreed that video games could be of use in history classes at high schools, as well as 33 responses (55.9%) indicating video games could encourage people to become archaeological heritage specialists. Lastly, of the people that do not often play video games, 48 participants (81.4%) agreed that more video game companies should employ specialists in order to portray archaeological heritage accurately. The questions where the response was around 50%, most respondents (n=16 in the question on enthusing people's own archaeological heritage and n=10 for the use of video games in history class) felt indifferent. This high number could have occurred as this group has indicated they do not often play video games, and therefore may not have a strong opinion on the matter, or simply did not know how to respond.

When asked how the video game industry could preserve archaeological heritage and what players would like to be able to do and see in-game, more than 50 people wrote that the accuracy and 3D rendering of sites is essential for the preservation. They also agreed that this could enthuse people to care more about their archaeological heritage and encourage younger generations to become more aware. A couple of participants also stressed Ubisoft's role in the rebuilding of the Notre Dame in Paris, which

¹⁴ Hall 2013; Freeman 2013.

was partly destroyed in a fire in April 2019.¹⁵ One participant noted the following:

“It would be interesting to play with the idea of various stages of a site, so the original state and the later decay and how it is situated now. That way people become more familiar with the archaeological work and circumstances. This might be more a more accurate way to show people what archaeologists deal with.”

Several important points were raised by others, including that commentary in the Discovery Tours could provide the player with real facts instead of glorifying the past. Someone noted:

“It'd be better if videogames made the archeological elements something you are involved with rather than mere decoration. Give it a purpose, make it a part as important as the characters themselves. Not something you loot/destroy (looking at you Lara Croft) but something to care about. Although I do think that videogames have done huge improvements lately towards the representation and use of archaeological heritage.”

Participants were also critical of how antiquity is presented in video games. For example, ten people mentioned that games need to include non-male and more People of Colour,¹⁶ and needed to focus less on Western history. Moreover, many also agreed that the use of archaeological heritage as a political tool within the video game industry needs to be taken into account and that video game might strengthen thinking in stereotypes (for example by means of Orientalism):¹⁷

“Before thinking of “preserving” archaeological heritage, the game industry should first reflect on how presenting archaeological heritage is inherently political, and its own role in politicizing the past. What narratives are created, reinforced or suppressed by the representation of

15 A previous game in the franchise, *Assassin's Creed Liberation*, focused on the French Revolution in Paris and contained a digital representation of the cathedral of Notre-Dame.

16 Note to a comment: Capitalized because of a recent trend to avoid biased language. See <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>.

17 Orientalism, a term coined by Edward Said, is the definition given to the way in which Western countries or civilizations perceive the East, often connected with inequality. This kind of ‘othering’ causes that the East is perceived by Western eyes as sensual, primitive, mysterious and even feminine, while the West is seen as rational and civilized in order to strengthen Western culture and Western identity. For more on this subject, see Said 1978.

archaeological heritage in video games?”

Many responses show that video games can be of use in educational settings, but they should not replace textbooks altogether. More attention is given to what kind of information is presented rather than how video games can be of use in education. Participants also are critical of how these games are created and want a more ‘immersed’ way of playing games in an educational way, as many noted that more VR should be used in the development of video games that feature archaeological heritage.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE IN ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS

A total of 166 participants had either played or seen someone else play *Assassin’s Creed Origins*. In regard to architecture, 82 people answered that the buildings in-game looked accurate, while only three people disagreed with this. Concerning whether weapons and armour looked accurate, more people disagreed (N=28). However, 43 responses still agreed that these materials looked accurate. Only a few people (N=7) disagreed that the layout of cities was accurate, while the majority (N=60) agreed that the cities were planned out accurately. This reflects the ideas that were presented at the start of the paper, namely that Ubisoft tries to portray weapons and armour as accurately as possible.

Moreover, regarding the Discovery Tours featured in-game, the majority (N=52) agreed that the information on these tours was accurate and agreed (N=75) that these Discovery Tours could be of use in high schools. The vast majority also agreed that the game had enthused them to visit sites in real life (N=78) and museums that feature material culture similar to that featured in-game (N=65).

Yet, in a recent paper, Araújo de Lima and De Paiva Bondioli question whether Discovery Tours in *Assassin’s Creed Origins* are useful for education as a kind of virtual museum.¹⁸ The problem that they have observed lies in details, namely that the nudity of classical statues that are visible in-game is censored in the ‘normal’ gaming mode. Genitalia and female breasts are namely covered by seashells, it is not exactly clear why the developers chose to censor these.¹⁹ However, Ubisoft’s audience is largely based on the North American market, and this might explain why they adhere to cultural specificities that are based on Judeo-Christian ideas in which nudity is linked with sex. This results in an anachronistic attitude towards antiquity, which could result in students missing out on scientific, but also aesthetic decisions that may have been

¹⁸ Araújo de Lima/De Paiva Bondioli, 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

important in antiquity.²⁰

At face value, therefore, the Discovery Tours in the game seem to be of good use in educational settings according to the participants of the survey. When inspecting more closely however, it is clear that there is an underlying problem. The culture that surrounds us might implicate how we perceive the ancient world, resulting in anachronistic thinking. It might prove to be difficult to evade cultural bias in the creation of a video game, yet educators could introduce their students to these problems. In this way, games could still be useful for education, but the way in which we could perceive the past is also considered.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE IN ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Of the total of 256 people, 110 individuals had played *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. The majority agreed that the game accurately portrays architecture (N=84) and materials (N=47). Concerning city layout, 64 individuals agreed that the game accurately portrays cities in Classical Greece and its islands. A total of 62 people agreed that the Discovery Tours in the game gave accurate information, and 78 participants agreed that these tours could be used in history classes at high schools. The majority also agreed that the game excited them to visit the sites presented in the game (N=77), and that they were enthused to visit a museum with similar material culture (N=64).

Even though the public is positive, experts have expressed that the Discovery Tours are non-interactive museum visits where the player only passively receives information about the ancient world. Moreover, in the story, violence quickly overshadows what the player learns about the ancient world and its historical characters. As the player is tasked to kill unnamed characters, they are often disconnected from historical reality.²¹

When studying academic opinions, it seems that *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is less anachronistic than *Assassin's Creed Origins*. However, this game in the franchise also has some problems in the sense that the Discovery Tours are not interactive for the player, as they only go from station to station and passively gain information by listening to a narrator. Lastly, it is clear that to get the entertaining and the educative aspect, one needs to play both the story line and the Discovery Tours in the game, which not everyone might decide to do. In regard to the opinion on accuracy between the studied games, a χ^2 test was not statistically significant (Table 3; $\chi=0.0336$, $p=.854592$, $n=373$). This was also the same for the opinion on the Discovery Tours (Table 4; $\chi=0.008$, $p=.928903$,

²⁰ Ibid., 318.

²¹ Benden et al., 2019.

| Accuracy | Positive responses | Negative responses | Total Responses |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| AC Or. | 66+35+45= 146 | 3+21+6= 30 | 176 |
| AC Od. | 69+40+53= 162 | 4+24+7= 35 | 197 |
| Total responses | 308 | 65 | 373 |

Table 3

Contingency table response distribution in regard to accuracy between studied games (image by author).

| Discovery Tours | Positive responses | Negative responses | Total Responses |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| AC Or. | 45+61= 106 | 9+4 = 13 | 119 |
| AC Od. | 55+ 63 = 118 | 4+11 = 15 | 133 |
| Total responses | 224 | 28 | 252 |

Table 4

Contingency table response distribution in regard to Discovery Tours between studied games (image by author).

| Enthusiasm | Positive responses | Negative responses | Total Responses |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| AC Or. | 62+50= 112 | 10+12= 22 | 134 |
| AC Od. | 61+ 52 = 113 | 9+13 = 22 | 135 |
| Total responses | 225 | 44 | 269 |

Table 5

Contingency table response distribution in regard to evoking enthusiasm between studied games (image by author).

n=252), and the games ability to evoke enthusiasm (Table 5; $\chi=0.0007$, $p=.97849$, $n=269$). According to the public, one game is not better than the other. This means that the public might also not see the underlying problems visible to experts.

QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Through a survey, this paper has tried to gather information on people's views on video games and how they aid the preservation of archaeological heritage. The survey also wanted to understand how the general public thinks how games could excite people to get to know more about archaeological heritage.

In general, people are excited about archaeological heritage. An overwhelming majority of people answered that they enjoy interacting with their past or the past of others. Many people had also played games where archaeological heritage was featured in or had played *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Participants were overall quite happy with the way in which Ubisoft employs archaeological heritage specialists and portrays archaeological heritage in-game. Many people agreed that other game developers should follow this example, as well as emphasizing that there should be more focus on non-Western civilizations. Specialists and public, opinion agreed that some improvements could also be made. Specialists especially noted that that the ancient world is perceived through modern, Western eyes and that cultural ideas might influence what people learn about archaeological heritage in games. Violence can overshadow the educational use of video games and it may be necessary to point this out to the public.

The concept on how video games can be used in classes to educate people on archaeological heritage has greatly developed in the last decade, although some of the initial ideas still persist. Many participants of the survey note that 3D renditions may help in displaying the ancient world in video games. This is already done in the Scottish Minecraft group Crafting the Past, a group visualizing local archaeological heritage in Minecraft.²² By interacting with these organizations at gaming conventions, more people could come into contact with their own archaeological heritage and might even participate in related events. Moreover, in the wake of social distancing due to COVID-19, video games may have a role in teaching people about history and archaeological heritage in an entertaining way, while staying safely indoors. This has been considered in publications a decade ago.²³ What these articles have not discussed lies in how video games will develop in correctly using archaeological heritage and if the wishes of the survey's participants can ever be fulfilled. However, by calling out game-developers and bringing attention to the issues, a step can be taken in the right direction.

²² See ►<https://www.craftingthepast.co.uk/>, last accessed on 13/09/2020.

²³ Leonard, 2008; Squire, 2002.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

- ▶ <https://www.craftingthepast.co.uk/>, last accessed on 13/09/2020.
- ▶ <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>, last accessed on 13/09/2020.

APPENDIX 1: FORM QUESTIONS

| Question type | Questions regarding archaeological heritage |
|---------------|--|
| Scale (1 – 5) | I am interested in past societies. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | Visiting museums bores me. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | My own archaeological heritage is interesting and enthuses me. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | People need to take more action in preserving the archaeological heritage of others. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | I think the presentation of archaeological heritage and how people are taught about it is uninteresting. |

| Question type | Questions regarding archaeological heritage and videogames |
|---------------|--|
| Scale (1 – 5) | I often play video games. |
| Yes/No | Have you ever played or seen a playthrough of a game that features archaeological archaeological heritage? (such as <i>Skyrim</i> , <i>Tomb Raider</i> , <i>Civilization</i> , <i>Age of Empires</i> etc.) |
| Scale (1 – 5) | Video games could cause people to care more about their own archaeological heritage. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | Video games could cause people to care more about the archaeological heritage of other people or other countries. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | Video games could be of use in history classes in high schools. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The way in which the videogame industry presents archaeological heritage specialists in-game (researchers, archaeologists, historians) could aid in people wanting to work in this field. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | Like Ubisoft, more videogame companies need to employ archaeological heritage specialists in order to accurately portray archaeological heritage. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | Video games could play an active role in preserving archaeological heritage digitally. |
| Open | How do you think the videogame industry could preserve (archaeological) archaeological heritage? What would you like to see or be able to do? |

| Question type | Questions regarding archaeological heritage in AC Origins and Odyssey (same questions were asked for both games). |
|---------------|---|
| Scale (1 – 5) | The game accurately shows what architecture looked like in the past. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The game accurately shows what weapons and armour looked like in the past. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The game accurately shows what cities looked like in the past. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The information given in the Discovery Tours is accurate. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The incorporation of the in-game Discovery Tours could be of use in history classes in high schools. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The game has enthused me to visit the sites featured in the game in real life. |
| Scale (1 – 5) | The game has enthused me to visit museums where the material culture similar to that featured in-game is presented. |

| Question type | Question regarding recommendations or comments |
|---------------|--|
| Open | Any recommendations, comments or questions? Drop them here! |

Climbing on Culture: A Response

Aris Politopoulos

In this piece, Marijke van Kempen performs a survey to gauge the interest of the public on archaeological heritage in relation to video games. Her research comes to reinforce a growing body of studies.¹ Having as point of reference the responses to the survey, Van Kempen explores a number of other aspects related to video games, archaeological heritage, history, and archaeology (the last three of which I will collectively be referring to as ‘the past’) that I would like to comment on in this response.

Before continuing with the topic, however, I think it is important to recognize the power that lies within video games as a medium. One could reasonably wonder, why do video games matter in the discussion about the past? Video games are currently the leading entertainment medium globally with a gross income that surpasses the music and film industry combined, giving it an incredible reach to a very wide audience.² In addition, despite the stereotype that gamers are predominantly young males “living in their mother’s basement”, data show that the gender distribution among gamers is almost equal, something that is reflected in Van Kempen’s survey as well, while the average age of a gamer is around 33 years old.³ The growth and reach of video games, alongside their impact on a wide and diverse audience makes them worth studying and understanding their societal implications.

At the same time, the past, as Van Kempen demonstrates, is already very much present in video games. Historical games are widely popular, with titles such as the *Assassin’s Creed* series and the Sid Meier’s *Civilization* series selling millions of copies as early as the first weeks of their release. So then, people are interested in games, people are interested in historical games in particular, and there exist popular games that include the past at their core. Let us explore these two points further.

Dr. Aris Politopoulos is a lecturer for the Archaeology of the Near East at the University of Leiden. Besides his study of the phenomenon of imperial capital creation and the archaeological study of imperial capital cities, Politopoulos has done research on the archaeology of play, both through the study of ancient play (e.g. ancient board games), as well as through the study of contemporary video games that deal with the past. Currently, Politopoulos runs the Past-at-Play Lab together with prof. dr. Sybille Lammes and dr. Angus Mol, an experimental project that focuses on the study of the past in and as play.

► [Profile page](#)

¹ Mol et al 2016; de Lange 2018; Boerboom 2019; Tibboel 2020; Mol et al (forthcoming).

² Stewart 2019.

THE PASTS THAT PEOPLE PLAY

Starting with the fact that people are interested in games that deal with the past: this can be easily demonstrated simply by looking at the success of historical games. But how or why are they interested in these games? This requires further exploration that can be done with studies such as the one performed by Van Kempen. Her findings are consistent with the results of other surveys: participants are interested in the past, enjoy the past being portrayed games, and value the experience of playing in and with the past. Participants also seem to agree that video games can be a positive force and have a positive effect on the way people perceive, learn about, and experience the past.

The next question to ask then is what are the pasts that people value in video games? Well, one can argue that the existing representation of pasts in games is already being highly valued. The Assassin's Creed series for example enjoys critical acclaim for its 'authentic' representations. Van Kempen, however, interestingly highlighted a number of critical remarks in the surveys. It is noted, for example, that participants found the histories present in historical games too focused on the west, a point that has been noted in other studies about historical video games as well.⁴ In addition, responses focused on how the pasts are being (intentionally or unintentionally) politicized in games. So, it can be argued that people do want to experience the past through games, but the lack of diverse pasts present in games is a point of concern. To put it simply, people want to play with the past, but people also want to play with diverse pasts.

THE PASTS THAT PEOPLE MAKE

Let us move on now to the second point, which deals with the way pasts in video games are being produced. For that, let us return to the point about the politicization of the past. There is a growing discourse in the video game community, among both players and developers, as to whether video games are political. It is my strong position that video games are indeed very much political. As a form of art that aims to create and re-create worlds and human experiences, it becomes, by necessity, political. While a growing number of gamers seem to agree with this idea, video game companies, and particularly large video game corporations seem to want to distance themselves from the fact. To quote Ubisoft (the company that makes Assassin's Creed) COO Alf Condelius:

"People like to put politics into [our games], and we back

³ ESA 2020.

⁴ Mol et al. 2017.

away from those interpretations as much as we can because we don't want to take a stance in current politics. It's also bad for business, unfortunately, if you want the honest truth ... ".⁵

Sid Meier, the creator of the Civilization series, holds a similar position. In an interview he argued that:

"[O]ne of our fundamental goals was not to project our own philosophy or politics onto things. Playing out somebody else's political philosophy is not fun for the player".⁶

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, however, the histories that the Civilization series portrays are very much political.⁷ Developers might want to distance themselves from politics because "it is bad for business", however the games will always be political, and as demonstrated also in Van Kempen's survey people are interested in the political aspect of games, by asking for more diversity.

CAN WE MAKE BETTER GAMES?

This brings me to my last, probably most critical point in regard to Van Kempen's paper. A fact that must not be ignored is the fact that historical video games are already hugely successful. Whether they are political or not and with or without the consultation of archaeologists, historians, and heritage experts, historical games will continue to be made and be popular. Van Kempen points out that "not all game developers employ experts when including archaeological heritage in their game", which is indeed true. The reason they do not do this, in my opinion, is because they do not necessarily need to do it. The Rise of the Tomb Raider which is mentioned as an example was extremely popular, despite the fact that no experts were included in its creation.

At the same time, even when experts are included in games, it needs to be questioned as to how this expertise is being included. The Assassin's Creed series does employ historians for its reconstruction of the past. This has helped the company sell the games as much more historically accurate. But it begs the question, despite the aesthetic value of authentic representations, how does the employment of experts help shape a better game? It is true that in Assassin's Creed: Odyssey, for example, we have one of the best, most aesthetically pleasing reconstructions of classical Athens we have seen. But is this authenticity integral to the game,

5 Taylor 2018.

6 Tharoor 2016.

7 Mol et al. 2017; Mol and Politopoulos (forthcoming).

or does historical authenticity become a backdrop to a game that is, in the end, about violence?⁸

The Discovery Tour exemplifies this sense of historical accuracy as a backdrop. The Discovery Tour in the latest *Assassin's Creeds* does offer the opportunity to become a tourist in the pasts it represents and enjoy the scenery without all the violence and the killing. In order to do so, however, it removes the play aspect. It becomes a tour in a museum and not a game.

Despite these issues, such games remain hugely successful. So, what are we to do about it, if the developers do not really need us to produce these games? Van Kempen notes that specialists and the public highlight that improvements can be made, indeed, but how? I think that the answer lies with action. We, specialists in the sciences of the past, need to go out there and seek game developers and demonstrate that we can, in fact, offer positive change to their games. That science of the past is not about being picky, pointing out all the flaws and saying, "this is not accurate". Because accuracy is not necessarily what makes a good game that offers diverse and insightful views of the past.

Some of the most insightful games about the past actually are quite far away from the historical authenticity of games like *Assassin's Creed*. *Valiant Hearts*, a game about World War I, offers such an example. Despite its cartoony graphics, and its relatively simple gameplay, it offers great insights in the histories of the people who lived during World War I, histories that are often ignored. *Never Alone* shows that you do not need to be a large studio to create impactful and engaging archaeological heritage experiences of indigenous populations.⁹ On the contrary, I would argue, it is precisely these smaller gaming studios that have the most care about the histories they place in their games.¹⁰

To achieve this, we are the ones who must reach out to developers. We are the ones who need to create bridges with a gaming community that craves to learn about the past. It is crucial to get out of the academic ivory tower and engage with play, play creation, and players. Listen to what they have to say and value what game development has to offer to the sciences of the past. The best way to create authentic, impactful, and respectful archaeological heritage experiences through games is by working together with developers, not against them.

8 Politopoulos et. al 2019.

9 CITC 2017.

10 This is not to say that individual developers in larger gaming studios do not care about the games they make, but to argue that smaller gaming studios do not have the same monetary concerns as larger corporations, and enjoy a larger degree of creative freedom.

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Climbing on Culture: Final Thoughts

Marijke van Kempen

The initial research in the article 'Climbing on Culture, The public opinion on archaeological heritage management through *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*' focused on understanding how people thought video games help preserve archaeological heritage and generate enthusiasm. Although the majority of the participants agreed that they enjoyed the interactivity with cultural archaeological heritage through a gaming experience, many also agreed that there is room for progress. Moving away from the survey itself, it is useful to reflect on the relationship between the gaming industry, scholars, and archaeological heritage in a more general sense. In doing so, archaeological heritage may be represented in a better way through means of video games. Two main points will be briefly discussed, namely what the contribution of academics and specialists could be in the production of games and how to achieve cultural diversity in video games.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMICS IN VIDEO GAME PRODUCTION

In the article and the response from Politopoulos, the point was raised as to whether or not academics are needed in the development of video games. Ubisoft, to name one example, is a game developer that already consults archaeological heritage specialists as well as ancient historians and archaeologists. This is especially necessary in the current age. Nowadays, an increasing number of people have access to information and are able to travel to archaeological sites. Academics need to realize that archaeological heritage can be used outside of academia in many different ways. Scholars are not the only ones that can spread historical information, and many voices and opinions can be heard in reflections of the past. In the digital age that we currently live in, it has never been so easy to obtain information and spread it amongst the public.¹ This is not only through video games but also

¹ Rigney, 2010; Kleinberg, 2017.

through movies, documentaries, blogs, podcasts, and YouTube videos: the list truly does go on and on.

The fact that knowledge can spread very quickly means that many members of the public can be educated on archaeological or historical subjects. Even though this might be good for the understanding of one's own archaeological heritage, it can also have an adverse effect when the wrong information is spread. After all, fake news spreads six times faster than real news.² The result is that this could have a big impact on how people see the past and the archaeological heritage of others.

Game franchises like *Assassin's Creed* can help in distributing real facts or ideas about the ancient world. Games with a historical setting have the potential to educate people in a fun and interesting way about the past, while combating misinformation at the same time. This is why the implementation of video games in high school history curricula could be of great use as a supplement to learning from the history books.

However, games cannot replace books completely as their main goal is to entertain. Gaming professionals may make certain choices based on entertainment or even present-day values. An example of a decision which reflects the present-day situation, rather than the historical reality is the player's ability to play as a female protagonist in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*: they are able to attend Pericles' symposium as a guest. This would obviously not have been the case in Classical Greece, where female attendees were often either servants, musicians, dancers, or prostitutes. This is not necessarily an example of 'fake news', it just does not reflect the 'real' standards ancient Greeks had. Similarly, the player is able to have lovers from either sex. As a result, players might believe that same sex relationships were also tolerated in antiquity. Subsequently, players may not realize that homosexual relationships were bound by many rules in antiquity.³ However, the decision to not steer players in a certain direction on the basis of what is known about relationships in the ancient world, might be made because a game-maker wants to let the player make choices that offer them the possibility to let their characters resemble themselves. The game could in that way become more entertaining to play or be more inclusive following present-day values.

A happy medium is therefore most favourable: games should be entertaining and informative at the same time. Including

² Vosoughi et al. 2018.

³ See for example the erastes-eromenos relationships in Classical Greece, where an older man that took on a younger lover and often taught him as well. For more information, see for example Percy Jr. (1996), *Pederasty and pedagogy in Archaic Greece*; Ormand, K. (2018), *Controlling Desires: sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome*.

archaeological heritage specialists in the production of a video game helps in making a video game focusing on archaeological heritage fun to play. Simultaneously, it helps in spreading the 'right' information to the consumers. This is also reflected in the survey, where many participants wrote that they enjoy how Ubisoft portrays the ancient world and that the game does positively affect their enthusiasm of visiting sites and museums to see similar objects to the ones presented in game. The inclusion of the more 'educational' Discovery Tours also results in players being happy to learn and to play in a digital environment that reflects the ancient world and ancient archaeological heritage.

Furthermore, the survey's results show that, if the past is presented in a way that is more or less recognizable, people might become more interested in knowing about the past. For this reason, it is important that specialists in ancient history, archaeological heritage and archaeology also realize that a video game should be as accurate as possible from an entertainment standpoint, instead of it exactly following academic standards. If games are not recognizable at all and only rely on academic knowledge, a consumer might not develop an interest in archaeology or ancient history, as it then becomes near impossible for the player to relate with the surroundings of the game. A too-academic impetus behind creating the game then might even hinder archaeological heritage preservation. By presenting games as both informative and entertaining, consumers may get more involved in the conservation of archaeological heritage. Therefore, even though academics are definitely able to contribute to a large degree in video game production, it should be noted that the entertaining value of video games and the creative liberty of video game developers to make a game interesting, are equally important.

DIVERSITY AND THE WEST

The article and response also pointed out that the current game industry still focuses largely on Western archaeology and history. In the survey, participants mentioned that they wanted more diversity. How can the game industry move forward towards a more inclusive space, where not only Western culture is explored and celebrated? Some small steps are being taken in using video games and in studying the culture of minorities. Although not really a true 'game', virtual reality for example has helped the Native American tribe of Tejon in reconnecting with their past. The rock art that has been painted by this tribe is found on sandstone structures or in caves and are badly visible and highly fragile. Virtual Reality allows these people to see the cultural footprint their ancestors have left and helps preserving these rock paintings

for future generations.⁴ These forms of digitalization could also prove to be useful in other remote regions, bringing them to the attention of other people outside of this culture, as is done with the Tejon rock art. This could be done for example by introducing these technologies to archeology and anthropology students.⁵ If these inventions were to be accessible to all (and possibly through video games!), a larger audience may get into contact with a culture of which they were previously unaware.

However, waiting for this to happen might not be the right approach: consumers and archaeological heritage specialists need to take on a pro-active attitude and openly stress the fact that video games are largely based on 'white' history when developers use the past in their productions. Actively calling out these developers to become more inclusive might speed up the process, because games presenting ancient far-from-home cultures already appear to be seen as interesting. This can be attested by considering the quantity of copies the game *Tomb Raider* has sold. Games where people can play as non-Western individuals and explore far-away countries are popular, such as Sid Meier's *Civilization*, where one could play as the Inca king Pachacuti. The game *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*, in which the player enters the world of Aveline, an Afro-American woman that fights the Spanish in Louisiana prior to the American Revolution, has also been well-received. By studying the number of sales, these kinds of stories seem to interest large audiences.⁶ Actively showing support in using these histories might encourage game developers to branch out to other cultures when considering using archaeological heritage for the development of a video game.

Academics could help in preserving archaeological heritage by using digital methods and making them public. By providing information that is accessible to all by means of open access, people could be able to get more in touch or become more familiar with their own culture or the culture of the 'other'. Moreover, by implementing non-Western or minority cultures in university curricula that focus on archaeological heritage, such as archaeology, anthropology or history, future academics might become interested in these cultures and provide accurate information through the research they carry out. This, in turn, can help when working together with game developers, as cultures might be represented more accurately than when, for instance, Western academics mainly do research on Western archaeological heritage.

4 Cassidy/Robinson 2017.

5 Ibid.

6 Sledge 2016; Makuch 2017.

Another way of moving away from a Western worldview in the current game industry is simply by studying how non-Western cultures could be portrayed in a video game, and how these archaeological heritages can be digitally preserved. Moreover, these cultures would not be understood as strange or weird. This is apparent when the East is viewed in an Orientalist way. This is a prejudiced viewpoint in which the West is perceived as superior, and the East is seen as inferior. The idea took shape in the 18th and 19th century, in the form of prejudiced Western attitudes of European imperialist missions towards indigenous cultures.⁷

The media industry does, in some cases, move away from an Orientalist viewpoint. An example in which entertainment producers have introduced a minor culture to a large audience, while also speaking with communities of a certain culture to understand a non-Western culture prior to the production phase, was the development of Disney's film *Moana*. This animation film focusses on the journey of a girl from Polynesia.⁸ Implementing this stage of production could be of use in game development as well. Academics could help in finding the right resources or could invite game developers to visit museums or sites with them, as the living population of a certain ancient culture might obviously not be alive anymore. After all, academic knowledge reflects the most up-to-date understanding of culture.

CONCLUSION

Two things can be taken away from this discussion piece. Firstly, by opening a discourse with game developers, academics are able to provide the most reliable information about the past to these developers, who then can reiterate this knowledge in the form of a video game. However, it is important to keep in mind that game developers are creators who also want to entertain their audiences. For this reason, the goal is not presenting a digital world that reflects the ancient one in full detail, but to create a digital environment that might reflect the ancient world as accurate as possible. It is important to keep in mind that it should be somewhat relatable to the audience in order to entertain and educate them at the same time. Academics can, through their research, help in reconstructing the past accurately. Due to the symbiosis of academic research and creative output by game developers, games can be educational and entertaining at the same time. Secondly, both game developers and academics should move away from a Western viewpoint. Game developers should move out of their comfort zone and talk with minorities that are

⁷ Said 1978.

⁸ Deitchman 2016, 32–33; Giardina 2016; Sarto 2016.

not much represented in media, and they need to be pressured to do so. Academics could help in diversifying the ancient world and popularize it. This is not a process that can happen in one day, but it is much needed to show non-Western cultures in popular media, so that members from these cultures might feel more represented. A way to excite academics in researching these cultures might be to diversify student curriculums, but also to introduce research on non-Western cultures through symposiums, monographs or through museum collections.

By popularizing archaeological heritage, people might become engaged in protecting certain aspects of archaeological heritage. In addition, games could preserve a part of a culture when this is an integral part of (the development of) video games. Video games, then have the ability to connect people from different cultures. They can get players interested in learning more about non-Western civilizations when they enter mainstream media in an accurate way. We live in a world where people come from many different backgrounds: it is time that this is reflected in video games as well.

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