

Atari, Archaeology, and the Media

The Alamogordo Atari Expedition was media project. Our access to the site was made possible because we were playing a role in a documentary about the search for the famous dump of Atari games in the Alamogordo landfill. The reason this kind of venture received funding likewise had to do with the circulation of various urban legends and conspiracy theories across the internet. This same connected web of computers was also positioned to disseminate the documentary via Microsoft's X-Box 1 gaming and media platform. At the same time, we digging in the Alamogordo desert in search of objects best known not for their physical form, but for what that form contained. The recognition that archaeology and the media have deep interconnection has garnered recent attention from scholars who have explored the relationship between various media, from photography and drawing, to television and documentaries, and the objects of archaeological investigation. There are also scholars, often from the fields cultural studies, who have offered a broadly construed "archaeological" critique of media that ranges from the careful examination of now outmoded or obsolete media to the considerations for how technology has shaped the production and consumption of media over time. While practitioners of "media archaeology" have been quick to distinguish what they do from disciplinary archaeological practice, the shared in the relationships between objects and concepts like the assemblage has led to a growing convergence in methods and arguments (Piccini 2015).

Raiford Guins' *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife* (2014) typifies the growing convergence between media archaeology and disciplinary archaeological practice. Guins' followed the tracks of video games from objects of desire to obsolete, and typically disposable, commodities and then back to being collectable items that often confound the efforts of conservators to keep them operational. He emphasized the materiality of cabinet arcade games contributed significantly to the experience of game play and argued that even the more modest and mass-produced console video games for home use sought to blend the aesthetic of cabinet gaming with the character of domestic space. The elaborate labels evoking the art on cabinet games and contrasted with the faux woodgrain present on the classic Atari 2600 console designed to fit into the cosy paneled family room with wood-paneled television.

For Guins, who was present at the Atari excavation, the excavating of the game cartridges was more than just the exhuming of obsolete media on which a video game was inscribed, but the recovery of part of the domestic gaming experience for those present. While the game cartridges recovered from the landfill were, in some ways, the equivalent of ancient transport vessels which derive significance largely because they reflect the trade in wine, olive oil, fish sauce, or some other typically liquid commodity, they were also inseparable from process of domesticating the arcade experience and the fabric of the late 20th century family room. The games were both the material trace the digital game, but also part of the larger experience. The game was remarkably frustrating to play and its reputation as a poorly designed game soon demoted it to various lists of worst games ever, and these things also shaped the experience of playing the game. All of this informed an ironic and not entirely accurate reading of the excavation itself: we excavated a game that was so bad that Atari buried it in the Alamogordo landfill. The uniqueness of our efforts, the game, and the nostalgia surrounding the experience of playing games on the Atari console, all contributed to the willingness of hundreds of people to pay money for games that, as far as we know, do not work.

If the excavated games are fragments of both the experience of playing the game and represent the digital game itself, our own work as archaeologists likewise operated at the intersection of representation and practice. There is no doubt that our presence at the dig and the remarkable access that we were allowed reflected our status as props in the documentary (for archaeology and the media see Holtorf 2007; Clack and Brittain 2007). In many ways, Joe Lewandowski did more of

the archaeological heavy-lifting through his creative efforts to identify the general site of the Atari dump and his appropriate use of bucket augur to locate the deposit of games itself. The Alamogordo Atari Expedition team, in contrast, largely worked around the documentary film crews and general media frenzy to document the excavation of the landfill and the context of the games themselves. Our formal place within the film, particular Andrew Reinhard who embraced his role as the public face of the archaeology team and its director, represented our role as archaeologists, which at times had to skirt the frantic work of the documentary filmmakers to coordinate both the filming and the public spectacle that surrounded the excavation of the games. The peripheral status of any real archaeological work hindered the consistent flow of information from the filmmakers to our team and frequently left us guessing about whether we were witnessing actual excavations or staged challenges, strategies, and discoveries meant to heighten the sense of triumph when the games were ultimately discovered. At the same time, we did what we could to play our role and to deploy our credentials as “real archaeologists” to legitimize the recovery of the games and to leverage our status as pros to attempt legitimate archaeological documentation.

The vibrant intersection of media and archaeology framed the entire Alamogordo Atari Excavation and documentary project. The urban legends surrounding the deposition of the Atari cartridges in the New Mexico desert initially gained a foothold on the internet in forums populated with fans of Atari games. The story’s popularity certainly benefited from the location of the Atari dump in a “remote” New Mexico town mere miles from the White Sands Missile range where some of the first atomic weapons were tested. Moreover, the New Mexico desert is part of a sparse, Western landscape populated with strange and secret places ranging Area 51 to Roswell. It is only a slight exaggeration to understand the New Mexico desert as the place where the Frederick Jackson Turner’s Western Frontier intersects with “the final frontier.” A landscape filled with alien encounters, top secret projects, and technological experiments presented a perfect setting for a narrative featuring a technology company, a remote dumping ground, and a game based on a movie featuring a lovable and hapless E.T. While many of the key narratives shaping this fantastic Western landscape existed in traditional print media and films decades before the emergence of the internet, communities interested in the various narratives converging in this landscape coalesced on the world wide web and developed more intricate and detailed arguments. As we will argue elsewhere in this book, the presence of archaeologists at the dig represented an effort by the filmmakers to appeal to standards of truth present in forums where conspiracy theories, myth-busting, and suppressed evidence tend to provide significant fodder for debate. Ironically, parts of the excavation process at the Alamogordo landfill appeared to draw upon practices spoofed by the director, Zak Penn, in an earlier mockumentary, *The Incident at Loch Ness*. In this film, Penn casts himself as a bumbling producer who seeks to add drama to an otherwise earnest documentary film directed by Werner Herzog by staging the appearance of the Loch Ness Monster during the film. This fictional film about a film played upon Herzog’s reputation for an earnest lack of irony even in the face of relentless absurdity (Cronin 2014). Our appeals to archaeological standards and efforts to document the excavation and recovery of the Atari games formed a similarly earnest foil against the frantic bustle of the stage-managed days at the Alamogordo landfill. It was never clear where the film ended the dirty work of production began. In other words, the presence of archaeologists at this project was both the product of our role of archaeology in documentary film, as well as the discourse and media in which conversations about the Atari dump took place.