Keywords

archaeology, archeogaming, education, digital pedagogy, Egypt, Ancient Studies

Video games may not seem the most scholarly pursuit, yet the study of archaeology in that format has been the subject of academic interest since at least 2016, when the first conference on the topic was organized by Leiden University.¹ Since that time, video games have been the theme of several sessions at established archaeological conferences such as the American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR), as well as many webinars and live-streamed events.² While the role that franchises such as Indiana Jones have played in
encouraging students to pursue the field of archaeology has long been recognized, the growing popularity of archaeogaming as a scholarly field indicates another source of media inspiration that was previously viewed as primarily for children or just a way to relax.

Video game designers early on recognized that users might want to learn more than game play could teach them, leading developers of games such as *Sid Meier’s Civilization* to include an encyclopedia of additional information—which did not necessarily make playing the game easier, but simply filled in what users might wish to learn, such as the history of gunpowder or the length of time that the Assyrian king Assurbanipal lived. Developers recognized not only that video games can be educational but also that students often become interested in the ancient past, specifically, due to their introduction through video games. On the other hand, some scholars have worried that what games convey about the past can be misleading or even damaging, so that students come away from the game with incorrect information and cultural assumptions that will stick with them for life. Studies have proven that if students are to learn substantive facts from a video game, they must be guided through structured activities. The company GlassLab was launched in 2012 for just that purpose, receiving a three-year, $10.2-million grant from the Gates and MacArthur Foundations to develop educational assessment tools for video games, but its efforts were unsuccessful at reaching a wide audience given the lack of assessment tools geared toward testing standards in schools.

The developers of the popular video game *Assassin’s Creed*, Ubisoft, began creating video game-centered learning modules in 2017, aimed at teachers as well as students. At various points in the game, the player is presented with a guide, generally a famous historic or other figure integral to the game. The tours provided by the guides are interactive, and players can take a quiz at the end to test what they have learned. Ubisoft collaborated with McGill University’s Technology Learning & Cognition Lab to produce extensive teaching aids with clear objectives to accompany the game play. In the past these tours were offered for free, but currently the cost is $19.99 for tours of ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, and the Viking age. While the efforts of Ubisoft are to be applauded, and there is much to be learned from these tours, the imagery and lessons sometimes collapse time by including anachronistic artifacts and places.
In addition, at times the animation does not adequately explain techniques, such as those used to make pottery.

In 2021 another popular game franchise, *Age of Empires*, created “Hands on History” for the fourth edition. This component is free to anyone who pays the roughly $60 price for the game. Mini-documentaries relevant to the player’s place in the game cover topics such as horse archery and illuminated manuscripts, created with the assistance of experts in the field as well as diligent research by the developers.

The Save Ancient Studies Alliance (SASA) was founded in 2020 by a group of ancient studies scholars with the goal of increasing access and knowledge about the ancient world as well as reimagining pedagogy in the field. The organization decided to try their hand at video game–based learning and developing free materials for educators. While there are many initiatives pioneered by this group, the one that best illustrates their commitment to digital access as well as digital pedagogy is their series of Archaeogaming Educational Modules. The aim of this initiative is to teach students ages nine to twelve about a single topic in the ancient world using video games as an essential vehicle. They provide educators with a variety of tools and information on a subject curated by professional educators and topic experts and headed by a production team made up mostly of volunteers. In order to explain what this entails and the process involved, I interviewed Dr. Briana Jackson at the Pratt Institute and Kate Minniti at the University of British Columbia regarding their module “Building the First Cities: Urbanism in Egypt and Mesopotamia,” the most recent to be produced by SASA.

For this module, Jackson and Minniti each submitted a proposal to SASA that was focused on the first settlements—urbanization and the development of the state in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Based upon these themes, they chose several video games to mine for content, including *Children of the Nile*, *Pharoah*, *Nebuchadnezzar*, *Sumerians*, and *Assassin’s Creed Origins*, all of which are currently available on the cloud-based gaming platform STEAM. While playing these games, they recorded content using Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) and Xbox Game Bar that would underlie their discussions of rivers as a central resource, the emergence of agriculture and animal husbandry and its societal
consequences, the development of industry, social stratification, and the
development of writing. While games like *Assassin’s Creed* and *Age of Empires*
have produced arguably higher-quality recordings than some of these other
titles, and their developers have the budgets to hire many more experts and
staff, those games are also limited to the footage and the specific topics of each.
As SASA has every game at its disposal, experts are able to to choose a topic
such as river settlement and explore it across the world and across gaming
platforms.

In choosing to produce a river-settlement module about the Nile in Egypt and
the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia, Jackson and Minniti wanted to
indicate that the flooding of these rivers was integral to the development of
cities, even though the flooding could have negative consequences. Thus, they
leaned heavily on the game *Children of the Nile*, in which flooding provides the
necessary silt for crops but also, at other times, destroys buildings and
infrastructure. With the Tigris and Euphrates, the designers were able to focus
on the fact that the flooding of those rivers is usually far more predictable and
manageable. The river-settlement module allows teachers to compare and
contrast the development of each area given the types of flooding that each
experienced.

Industries and production were highlighted as essential to eventual urban
development, including mud-brick creation, beer production, quarrying, and
animal husbandry. The importance of beer to the Egyptian economy and
lifestyle also outweighed Jackson and Minniti’s concerns about whether the
subject would be appropriate in a module for the targeted age group. The
designers also examined the way in which architecture was an expression of
political power, which Jackson believes is a particularly important lesson to
 impart to students.

While the experts guided and formatted the development of the module, the
process of developing the script for the educational video, as well as educator
tools such as short quizzes, word searches, and craft activities, was an iterative
one undertaken by Jackson, Minniti, and the SASA production team. The module
is expected to be a stand-alone tool for educators that can be adapted to the
time available. The thirty-one-page course packet includes student-centered
activities, together with scholarly articles and links to museum websites with relevant resources on topics such as the basics of hieroglyphs and cuneiform as well as chapters from Oxford Handbooks.

With these types of resources, studying the ancient past becomes of greater interest to children, who learn faster with visual and video aids. And modules such as that of Jackson and Minniti encourage teachers, who are already tasked with the preparation of other curriculum materials, to expose their students to important topics in ancient studies. To submit a proposal for a module, contact the current Archaeogaming team leader at SASA, Paige Brevick, at pbrevick@saveancientstudies.org.

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Notes

1. The proceedings were published in Angenitus Arie Andries Mol, Csilla E. Ariese-Vandemeulebrucke, Krijn H. J. Boom, and Aris Politopoulos, eds., The Interactive Past: Archaeology, Heritage & Video Games (Leiden: Sidestone, 2017). [^]
2. See 2018 List of Approved Sessions, ASOR, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.asor.org/am/list-of-approved-sessions-2018/#vidgame. [^]
4. https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Civilopedia, accessed September 13,
2022. [^]
9. Among the best places to follow these developments in Archaeogaming are the Twitter feeds of scholars such as Dr. Tine Rassalle @Tine_Rass. [^]
11. Zoom interview with the author, September 9, 2022. [^]
12. All of the games mentioned in this article can be found on STEAM. [^]