

Burying E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial: Undoing Game Archaeology

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ABSTRACT

On Saturday 26 April 2014, Microsoft spokesman Larry Hryb announced via Twitter that the expedition to find the buried cartridges of the 1982 video game *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Atari 1982) had been successful. The story of the game attained the status of urban legend in video game culture. As reported in many texts about the history of the medium, the video game *E.T.* was developed by Atari after a highly anticipated deal with film producer Universal Pictures, which gave Atari the rights to release video games based on the successful film directed by Steven Spielberg. However, the game turned out to be very disappointing, and it was released in a period, the early '80s, when the video game industry was struggling to sell sufficiently to maintain itself (Herz 1997, Kent 2001). As the legend goes, Atari decided to eliminate the unsold cartridges by burying them in the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico. In 2014, Microsoft and the film company Fuel Industries obtained the rights to excavate the area to try to find proof of this legend and as part of a documentary project on video games.

The story of the discovery of Atari's dumped cartridges, as it has been told by Microsoft and other press sources, can be taken as an example of the ways in which historiographies of the medium of the video game often tend to operate. In fact, the excavation was attempting to discover evidence of a story already written and repeated in several contexts, more or less official, where the events around game company Atari were analysed. The archaeological endeavour was aimed at providing proof of something that was already expected to be true – that copies of the game *E.T.* had been buried in the desert. The contemporary knowledge about the story of the game company Atari was seen as the point of destination, as the safe arrival of the archaeological research.

In this presentation I offer a re-interpretation of the notion of archaeology as interpreted by Michel Foucault (1972, 1981, 1991). From this perspective, I propose to reconsider how archaeology has been understood and *narrated* in the context of game studies, particularly by Raiford Guins (2014), Huhtamo (2005) and Huhtamo and Parikka (2011). Ultimately, I propose to take seriously the question by Kyle Orland in the online magazine *Ars Technica*, which presented the finding of *E.T.*'s cartridge through this question: 'Why are we so interested in some buried hunks of plastic and silicon?' (Orland 2014). Taken as a non-rhetorical question, it exposes the problem of addressing why is it that we so often understand the history of the medium of the video game as the history of an industry and of its successful and failed products.

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In Foucault's later work the focus of his research will move from the study of constant reappearances of concepts (the 'archaeology of knowledge') to a study of what is regularly excluded by the structuring principle of a specific age, the 'regularity of dispersion' proper of the genealogical method. Genealogy was not, as Foucault puts it, about finding the origins of an event in order to restore its apparent unity. It was concerned with the present time, and the contemporary conditions for saying the truth about the past. Foucault does not attempt to colonise the past with the questions of the present but to challenge our own notion of the present time (1991: 81).

I see the narratives surrounding the expedition of *E.T.* as confirming the established notions of the present, an approach to historical reconstructions that reinforces the knowledge we already have. In so doing, such narratives reinforce the categories of contemporary discourses as given unities. In this presentation I will look instead at how those unities could be destabilized, and how the truth about the history of gaming changes according the conditions of its enunciation. Immediately after the discovery of the cartridges of *E.T.*, rumors were circulating online that the finding might have in fact been staged, for the sake of finishing the documentary. While trying to confirm the myth of the burying of *E.T.*, entirely new conspiracy theories were generated, which brought the reconstruction of the history of the game to a new and unstable territory.

In this process of undoing of the archaeology of *E.T.*, online communities have been questioning the reason why these stories were told, thus introducing the problem of the present. The present became, as in Foucault's genealogy of knowledge, an unstable position from which to look at the past, giving new lives to the urban legends around the video game *E.T.*

Keywords

Media archaeology, game history, performativity of language, cultural studies

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