participants to share their stories and even perform were organized as early as 1997 (Gibb 2000, 1), and archaeologists have long told stories while having fun in the process, either when sharing present archaeological data with the public and other scholars or as a tool to help them interpret the past (Grima 2017, 76). On a similar note, the use of play and games in archaeology is perhaps viewed in the same way with duality (if not multiplicity) in mind: as a medium to engage with the public, students and other academics, and as a tool to explore and interpret the past. In this regard, the paper offers a refreshing perspective on play in archaeology and thus almost strips away the guilt of those who enjoy playing and having fun in our field: which is in itself a beautiful playground and often exactly the reason we became archaeologists in the first place, affording us the chance to play with dirt under the sun, discover exciting artefacts from the past and interpret them, creating stories about the people who were here before us.

Fun in ruins: Archaeology's serious rut

Walter Crist

Department of Advanced Computing Sciences, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands
Email: walter.crist@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Archaeology could be a lot more fun, and certainly people in the ancient past had a lot more fun than might be evident from archaeological scholarship. I should say from the start that I share the goals of Politopoulos et al., but I think some points are worth exploring in greater detail to fully understand the study of play in the past, and how we can find ways to study it in a better way.

Since we examine the past through its material culture, we have to engage with the materiality of play and how it becomes the archaeological record. Politopoulous et al. touch on some of the most obvious examples of play that have been addressed by archaeologists: toys, sports, theatre and board games. These are all forms of play that have left an easily discernible material trace in the archaeological record: from game boards, dice and toys (Dasen and Vespa 2021; 2022) to architecture such as ballcourts (Blomster and Salazar Chávez 2020), stadia, and amphitheatres (Christiansen and Kyle 2013). To this list of archaeologically visible forms of play, I would add music and dance, though dance perhaps is mostly visible when it appears in art. Indeed, dance is a good illustration of how so many forms of play are immaterial and thus will forever be invisible to us as archaeologists. Word play, jokes, many kinds of athletic competitions, singing and hand games, among many others, are all kinds of play that require nothing more than one's own body to participate. But even where objects are required for play, these items largely were not created specifically for play but taken from the surrounding environment and used in an ad hoc fashion. Stones, shells, seeds and even dried animal droppings are readily available materials that have been shown ethnographically to be commonly gathered small objects that, when employed on a series of holes scooped out of the ground or lines drawn in the soil, become a board game (e.g. Béart 1955, 429–473). We can see shades of this in the ancient world, in structures where pavements are present or on stone outcrops where boards were carved into the surface (e.g. de Voogt et al. 2020). These are discoverable by archaeologists, but we will (probably) never find a game board that was once dug into the sand, or be able to identify seeds or pebbles as belonging to a game. Thus, even

where a material culture of play and games existed, it may not be visible archaeologically. The authors' goals of more readily finding play in the archaeological record is greatly challenging.

However, this is not to say that play is altogether inaccessible. As the authors recognize, our own approaches to play have been coloured by the ways in which we do archaeology and by the questions that are deemed to be important by our colleagues. Many other aspects of the daily life of ancient people leave similarly ephemeral imprints on the archaeological record, but we have still found ways to explore them. The tradition of archaeological investigation which emerged in Europe and North America during the early Industrial 19th century remains informed by attitudes around work and play that arose from structured work time and play time, which were crystallized around the need for industrial workforces (Cross 2008). Though attitudes against frivolity and idleness were not new – games have been discussed as a waste of time since at least the Roman era (Purcell 1995) – our modern approach to work and the questions relating to them are considerably informed by this transition. The authors describe these attitudes towards play as ambivalent; I would go so far as to say the attitudes are dismissive of the role of play.

Nevertheless, there remains a considerable amount of public interest in the games of the past, and so people *have* studied games in a certain amount of detail; however, until the 1990s these were largely stuck in a culture-historical approach that is anachronistic with modern archaeological practice. In particular, H.J.R. Murray in the early and mid-20th century gathered the historical, archaeological and ethnographic evidence for board games known at the time into two volumes (1913; 1951), which subsequently became the basis for most research on board games ever since. Murray's simplistic diffusionist and deterministic discussion of the history of games was outdated even in the 1950s. But, since historians and archaeologists have not yet offered methodologically and theoretically informed alternatives, his works, and those which build from his assertions, remain some of the most commonly cited sources repeated in popular histories of games (e.g. Bell 1979). Without more recent authoritative – and, more importantly, accessible – alternatives to counter these narratives, they persist.

Despite this, not every type of play has been ignored equally. Certain forms of play have received scholarly attention, but only insofar as they can inform larger social practices (e.g. Renfrew et al. 2017). This is why sports, in particular large sporting events, have received a large degree of attention since there is a considerable investment in economic and political capital into these spectacles that informs how those processes work in a given society. This also makes them very visible and difficult to ignore. Research on board games recently has taken a similar approach, discussing and conceptualizing board games in ways that are more informed by the advancements of archaeological research over roughly the past 70 years. But since we are very reliant on ethnographic analogy to interpret the past, the parallel relative disinterest in play from ethnographers has compounded the stunted growth of this area of research, though this is changing (e.g. Malaby 2003; 2009).

As stated by Politopoulos et al., to understand play you must play. Nevertheless, our experience of play in the Digital Age is likely to be different from that in the past, or even other societies today. This extends to circumstances beyond the different kinds of 'house rules' that can be used for particular games. For example, a board game that takes many hours may not be seen as ideal or even fun for some players (though some gamers revel in a marathon-like game), whereas among the Ju|'hoan in Botswana and the Yei and Nama people in Namibia, mancala game players may use a game as something to pass time rather than reach a goal in a 'reasonable' amount of time. The game itself may continue on for many hours, with players leaving the game and being replaced by others as interest wanes or other responsibilities call (de Voogt, personal communication). Also, games such as chess, which are often seen as contemplative and quiet, might also be played in a raucous atmosphere as players and spectators taunt one another in another cultural context (Pankhurst 1971, 152–153). Societal norms surrounding play, which vary in different places and times, are thus important to consider when trying to understand how our behaviours and expectations during play may be different. How do we apply our own playful experiences to the study of other playful pasts?

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!

This was fun!

Aris Politopoulos Angus A.A. Mol and Sybille Lammes

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