

Games of our Past | EXARC

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Guests

Justyna Neuvonen (FI) and Aris Politopoulos (NL)

Introduction

Ready player 1? Archaeological interpretation is often focused on the physical objects from our past, either in excavation, replication through experimental archaeology, or exhibition in museums. But what other ways are available to interact with the past? In this month's episode of Finally Friday, we speak with two experts focusing on the exciting new ways that videogames can be used in archaeology. **Justyna Neuvonen** is an archaeologist and game designer studying at the South Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences. **Dr Aris Politopoulos** is an archaeologist currently working at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. His research focuses on the intersection of video games and archaeology.

Transcript

Matilda: Hello and welcome to #FinallyFriday, this chat session is run by EXARC, the society for archaeological open-air museums, experimental archaeology, ancient technology, and interpretation. My name is Matilda Siebrecht, and today I am joined by two specialists from our EXARC community and abroad focussing on Archaeo gaming. Justyna Neuvonen is an archaeologist and game designer studying at the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences. She is currently working on multiple projects, including the launch of a museum-focused game called Urajärven Kartano, a concept design of an AR game for the village of Sysmä and is currently leading a project for Rajamuseo, the Border Museum, where she is developing games for museum exhibitions. Her work focuses on creating a link between game design and archaeology and creating accessible and innovative platforms for museum visitors to interact with the past.

Dr. Aris Politopoulos is an archaeologist currently working as a lecturer in archaeology of the Near East, at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. As well as his research into Mesopotamian archaeology, he is a founding member of VALUE, which conducts research on the intersection of video games and archaeology. He is also a postdoctoral researcher at the [Past-at-Play Lab](#), which not only investigates how past civilizations may have culturally expressed themselves in play, but also how contemporary games deal with the past as a subject matter. So welcome to both of you. I have a sort of quick question to start you off. So combining gaming and archaeology seems like living the dream for a lot of people. Definitely a lot of my colleagues in archaeology I know are very into gaming. How did you both become involved in this subject? Perhaps Aris, you want to start us off?

Aris: Sure, thank you for inviting me as well. Yeah, for me, it was a bit like a natural fit. I am a gamer. I've been a gamer since I can basically remember myself and I've been spending too much time playing video games, especially during my PhD. Maybe a bit more than I should. But there's such a natural connection between games, playing video games and archaeology specifically, that I thought I might as well do something with all of this. I picked up a couple of things that I found interesting. I did a presentation at the Archaeological Forum back then at Leiden University. And all of a sudden there were two, three more people that were actually interested in this and we decided to pursue it further and see if it's actually a place where we can do research. And it turned out that it was, so for me it was very easy to sort of get to do it first as a hobby and then more and more as research and outreach projects.

Matilda: Was it similar for you Justyna, were you also a gamer?

Justyna: No, this is very interesting for me because for the first time I have been an archaeologist. So this was my first, biggest love, and I haven't been playing games at all. But while I was working at the museum I was getting interested in graphic design and while I moved to Finland from Poland I decided that, well, I need to change my occupation. So I managed to get to the university and the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences was actually having a very interesting option to study in English. It was in game design and in that case, I understood that there is a quite clear link between archaeology and game design and I decided to go ahead with that idea. So I'm almost finishing after two and a half years of studying and I am lucky enough to start my own game with the Urajärven Kartano, with the museum, which is one of the oldest mansion museums in Finland. I'm preparing a very small mobile game there. And I also got a job in Finland, in my university, to actually lead a project with the Rajamuseo, so Border Museum, where we are preparing games for an exhibition for the museum. I also recently got the funding for the concept idea for the game ArcheoSystmä which you have already mentioned. So this is how it is. I'm still not a gamer, but it's a very interesting subject.

Matilda: And so yeah, you mentioned you're still not a gamer. Do you think that it's important, for example, for people to have experience in playing video games? Have you sort of forced yourself to play a little bit more before starting research in this topic?

Justyna: Well, to tell you the truth, for a game designer, it's important to play some games, but you don't need to go through the whole game. So the most important is to play different games at least till the level 2-3, to understand the mechanics of how the games work and the other things are just the good ideas. So I do play now a little bit more but I'm still thinking that it's much bigger fun to create games than to play them.

Matilda: Coming from the other side, Aris, what do you think in terms of sort of experience of having played different games, when starting research in this topic, have you broadened out into different kinds of games or is it still similar ones that you're playing?

Aris: I've definitely broadened up because when doing research specifically in video games, then you sort of have to broaden up because you have to have more experiences, but to get into the research or to understand how games can assist in archaeological research or archaeological outreach, you don't necessarily have experience in video games. It's more of an idea of playing in general. So even for people who don't play video games specifically, people play as a fundamental concept, right? So playing is kind of an inherent experience with everyone. And then playing video games is just another form of play. So if you start realizing that, hey, we can do something with video games, you need some adjustment to the digital environment, but everybody knows how to play.

Justyna: I don't agree because there have been done very interesting experiments about people who are actually not playing, have never been playing games. And they were introduced to play a game and it turns out that, well, there is a lot of problems with people who have never been playing games. They just don't get the concept of how to play, meaning that starting from understanding where to go with our character, how to use the keyboard, how to use the mouse, how to use even tapping. And it's really hard for people who have never been playing to start to play a game.

Aris: You mean to play video games specifically?

Justyna: Yeah, basically, even like a simple 2D platform might be very challenging for a person who has never been playing a game and it's actually quite a lot of people like that. So it's an interesting thing that actually people who are not playing games in the game design industry, they are highly appreciated because they do think in a bit different way. Well, the thing is that the game is giving you just the false idea of having like a possibility to choose. And the truth is that you don't have basically a lot of choices and people who are not playing they just don't go in the stereotypical way how experienced players will be actually interacting with the game.

Aris: Yeah, no, for sure, that is of course a good point. I mostly meant it in a more fundamental way that people tend to understand play as a concept, not necessarily video games. Although I have to say in my outreach projects at least, where we mostly do stuff with Minecraft, people tend to pick it up relatively easily, even people of older generations who might be a bit more hesitant. But of course what you're saying is absolutely correct, that there is a necessity within the industry, a necessity for people who don't play games, because then indeed people who don't play games tend to think about it differently. And that also goes in game design as well, that people who don't play that much with the games tend to design differently because they are not sort of hooked in the necessities of the industry.

Matilda: Actually sort of a bit related to that, I mean, for example, one of the typical examples of people who can't play either video games, but even, I guess some of the more modern board games that are a bit more complex, you know, trying to teach your grandma how to play something that she's never played before can be a big issue. Do you see a big difference in the ages of the audience members who engage with your projects? Perhaps Justyna you want to start?

Justyna: Well, yes, there are a lot of differences in the age groups and the target groups of course. First of all, for example, we can't introduce the games which are having, for example, complicated mathematical issues to the school children. We need to test our ideas every time on our target group because this what we assume, for example, in a game for Rajamuseo, which we are now

actually developing, we have been thinking that the player is supposed to be checking also the date of expiry. For that, we just decided that we're going to do some obvious date of expiry of the passport, which is for example, like 1000 year, of the year 1000. So obviously it's like a 1000 years already behind the expiry date. But then we understood that not all children from the age of seven to eight actually understand the idea of time. So, they do understand that 1000 is much smaller than 2000, but some of them don't know the numbers even. So we had to actually resign from that one part. Or at least we are still in a testing actually phase. So we are not really sure if we're going to have it, but rather we are going to be resigning from that one point.

Matilda: That's an interesting point, there are sort of things that might be indeed more normal for older generations than for younger generations exactly, a difficult concept to understand. You already mentioned, Aris, that actually your audience members seem to pick up Minecraft quite quickly. Do you also see a variation? Is it mainly younger people, older people?

Aris: It is interesting that there is some variation indeed in how people tend to pick things up. So especially, we do a lot of museum setup projects, mostly using commercial games. So in our Minecraft projects, where we tend to do reconstructions for cultural heritage and we create maps and people can come in and build specific cultural heritage for the most part, of course the younger generation knows how to play Minecraft already for the most part, or if they don't, they know how to play with the games better. So they are more keen on doing it. They are more ready to just jump in and do it, even if they make a mistake. And the older generation generally is either a bit more hesitant or a bit more scared of making a mistake, which is really interesting because the kids don't really care. They just want to build, they just want to play the game and maybe they are interested in the content, but they are primarily interested in the play aspect of things. And it starts going the opposite as people get older, they are more interested in the content and less interested in actually building, or more hesitant in building. And then people are oftentimes, especially a bit older in the like fifties, sixties, or even seventies, because our audience tends to be quite broad, people are more convenient...are more actually at home when they sit back and watch other people build, or when they're just using the virtual reality experience or just build for a few minutes, just to get the experience of doing it and then leaving it as is. For the most part the kids are the ones that are the champions of building and the champions of putting the imagination in. But that creates a very interesting interaction between parents and kids and grandparents and kids, or even grandparents and parents sometimes, because you see how they start discussing about the project differently, about the cultural heritage differently. How much the kids want to put in much imagination, how much the parents are trying to sort of put in the information that we provide them with. And this creates a very interesting playground of constant interactions, where oftentimes we as archaeologists are not even needed, as long as we have provided the information, because it's this knowledge interaction that's happening and it's being built up on the spot.

Matilda: Yeah, no, that's really interesting. And you mentioned sort of a little bit about target audiences and how yours is very broad, I suppose, because you're not necessarily focussing in on a particular group, you're just kind of presenting the research and seeing who 'bites'. Is that a fair assessment or would you disagree?

Aris: Again, it depends a bit on the project. In this Minecraft project specifically because we do them in museum spaces, or we do them in plazas, or in other public spaces in general. So we have a set of different PCs, like three or four PCs, and we sort of take it from museum to museum or from library to library or municipality to municipality, and set up there. And people can come in and build the heritage of their own city, of their own town or their own province. But because they are so open and they're often part of museums or part of festivals, these events, people come in as families, usually, or come in as groups of friends. So it's either the audience that is present currently at a

museum or at a festival or at an event. But these tend to be mixed audiences. So we try to design with all audiences in mind. So make the content and the supplementary materials accessible for kids, but also interesting for parents as well. The play experience, make it both like playful enough within Minecraft for kids to be free to build whatever they want, but also with certain constraints so we don't lose focus of the goal, which is to build the cultural heritage of that specific location or province. And so it's not very easy to accommodate everything, but yeah, we're trying with the Minecraft events to serve a bit for everybody. So everybody has the opportunity to learn something through these events. When we're doing streaming or some other stuff then it's usually geared towards a more younger audience because, generally, younger audiences is present in live streaming video games. But again, it really depends.

Matilda: And so Justyna, I guess, because your work is focussed more for particular projects or for a particular museum, do you find that you do have to have to pick a target audience or can you also keep it broad?

Justyna: When we are creating a game we have to figure out the proper target audience. This is the most important part of creating a game. Choosing a target audience for a museum and for commercial projects are two different things. For commercial projects it's basically heavily related to the age group and how people are actually interacting in those age groups with the game. And in the museum spaces, we have to think about the age but also about the educational aspect, ethical aspect, and then also about who is visiting the museum and what is the museum goal to achieve, for example, raising up the amount of visitors. So in that case, we need to really think about the actual visitors of the museum and what the museum is actually aiming for. So there is a lot of problems with that because there are people who are going to the museum very often and there are people who are going there only occasionally and there are people also who are not going to the museums. And we have to think about how to engage all of those people. So for example, usually they are coming in pairs or with the families. And in that case, we have to build a game which is enjoyable, not only to play, but also to watch. And then there is also a thing about the timing of the game. So we can't create a very complicated game in that case. If the museum visit takes more than an hour, it's usually coming with the very big exhaustion and people just don't want to play. So the games need to be very fast and they need to also be accessible for people who are having like different disabilities. Of course we can't design a game which is totally perfect for everyone, but we have to try to be as inclusive as it's possible with keeping also with the narration of the exhibition. It's kind of a different way of designing than normal designing of the game and the commercial one. There is also one extra thing which I really do love while I'm designing games for the museums, is that the monetization is not getting into that. Monetization is actually a big mechanics for the game. And I do understand that people have to earn for the game, especially if they are giving you for free, but in some games, especially hyper casual games, it went to extreme and I don't think that it's ethical now, actually, how it goes. I'm really happy that the games for museums are more ethically friendly.

Matilda: Do you see any changes in... improvement or otherwise, in how more popular games are being used to depict the past? Do you think they're able to balance the kind of authenticity and the kind of realism of the information that they're showing with, for example, wanting to make money and wanting to make these games popular? Aris, I know that you do a lot of work with streaming games and discussing how different games are played through the VALUE project, I think it is.

Aris: One thing that we can say for certain is that people want to learn history or want to learn about the past through video games. We did quite a big survey this time last year, it was a global survey, where an overwhelming amount of responses said that the players were actually very interested in, or at least somewhat interested in learning about history through their game. So we

know that people are interested in that. And we do know that games are not 'exploiting' this, necessarily, but video game designers and large game projects tend to use the past as a playground, as a digital playground to set their games in or both because it's a nice place to set your play in - it's fun to play in the past - but also because people are interested in it. Now to what extent these recreations of the past are accurate or authentic, or should they be, is of course the next level of the discussion. And that is a big one, both within the gaming world, but also within archaeologists who research video games or who use video games in their projects. I think that there has been change, especially from, let's say the historical games that we had at the end of the eighties or the early nineties, when we saw sort of an uptick in the first historical games, until now both in terms of content, in terms of the actual historical information being present in the game, but also in terms of ethics and representation. So if that's the goal, then it is getting better, but we also have to keep in mind what Justyna said, that a lot of these companies are in it for the money, especially the big AAA studios, Ubisoft and whatnot. They are multi-million or even multi-billion dollar companies. So it's a difficult discussion when it gets to that, you tend to see developers trying to shy away, for example, from politics in their games. And they tend to say, 'hey, people are trying to put politics in our games and we don't really want that because, well, because it's bad for business', is the truth. And even though there are political choices, there are ethical choices in their games. I would say that there is a significantly bigger improvement in the independent studios, in the indie games that are being produced, where there's a lot more creativity. There's a lot more engagement. And there, you see how stories and games, narratives set in the past are actually thriving significantly more and we're seeing different things being discussed. We're seeing different interpretations of the past being discussed. We see a much bigger involvement of scholars within these studios because it's both easier for scholars to talk to independent developers than the AAA studios. And it's also easier usually for smaller companies to reach out because they don't have all these bureaucratic layers. So I would say if somebody actually wants to look at the newer things, the more interesting things that are happening when it comes to the gaming world and the past in general, I think then the indie games are where the innovation is right now.

Matilda: I don't know if you have anything you want to add to that, Justyna?

Justyna: Yes, I do think that recently the quality of the games are growing, thankfully, especially with showcasing the different parts of the history and the research is getting better. But at the same time, I have a feeling that it's still not deep enough, in my opinion, there's a lot of space to make it better. The story-telling is now in the game industry a big thing but at the same time, for example, if you ask designers, if they have been in the museum in the past year, they probably will say like 'yeah, once'. So it seems kind of sad that game designers have problems with understanding the past because they still have this feeling from the school that the past is kind of boring and maybe not necessarily that fascinating as for the scholars. And I also noticed that there is a problem with the language, that there is still not enough common terms that can actually be understandable by the archaeologists and the game designers to find like the common platform, a common place, where we can speak about it. Quite often, scholars are using too hard language for game designers and game designers are having problems with understanding why something has to be designed in that way and not in another way. So indeed it's getting better and I hope it's going to be going better and better every time, but it needs a lot of work from both sides. Both the archaeologists and the game designers have to think about how to communicate properly to create good content.

Matilda: I think that's a really good point. And actually then..., you two are both coming from the perfect angle, really, because you're coming from the archaeology side and going into the gaming or the game design aspect, so I imagine that's probably given a very different perspective to if you had just come from a predominantly game-focused way. You mentioned already that games are sort of very engaging, therefore they could indeed be the perfect way for..., I mean, you mentioned that

scholarly research is quite often not as well communicated to game designers or is less easy to understand, not just for game designers, but for the general public - I think that that's a major problem in general in archaeological research in my opinion - and so you could argue that indeed games is the perfect public outreach platform to try and encourage people to think about the past and what it involves, not just in a fun playing way, but in terms of finding the past interesting and seeing how cool it can be and all this kind of thing. Do you see an increased interest in the past or in the events from people who are participating in your different projects, perhaps Aris, you want to start?

Aris: I do think that there is an increased interest in general in the past when people play with it, I wouldn't say this is necessarily something that's happening now. That's something that's been happening over time for as long as video games have been streamed and also have been set in the past, which is, let's say, for the last 20-25 years. One already can see from games like Civilization, Age of Empires and Moving Forward, people have been getting into the past in a way through these games. When it comes to our projects and what we're trying to do, of course, we would like to think that we are doing something good there, and over time we have seen an increased interest in this, both from the public perspective and people who are finding out that 'hey, there are actually scholars dealing with the thing that we like, games, and the past, the other thing that we also like', and there is also an increased interest from the scholarly perspective, so within at least sciences about the past. Because of course there is already scholarly interest in the game studies and the game design research, but now more and more it's happening in the sciences of the past. So archaeologists are getting more interested in it. Historians are getting more interested in it and what the video games do for communicating the past, for thinking about the past, and you see this interaction happening in different spaces. In the academic classroom, outside, in your bar. So I think there is something happening and it is shown by the ever increasing number of archaeogaming, either conferences, publications, outreach events, museums being more interested in incorporating games, other kinds of outreach projects being more interested in incorporating games. But I think we still have quite a long way before this is something that, not necessarily becomes mainstream from within the academia towards the outside or vice versa, but we have quite a long way until people appreciate the importance of video games in modern day popular culture. There is still a little bit of stigma on video games, I would say, not as much as there was in the nineties when I was growing up and people would scoff at you for playing video games. Now it's significantly more mainstream available. People play games on their phones. People play games on their tablet, on their PC, whatever. There is much more of a gaming culture, but there is still a bit of a stigma. And especially when it comes to academia, we have to get over it a bit more to be able to fruitfully appreciate and use video games in research and [others], because from a popular perspective, people already appreciate games quite a bit I would say.

Justyna: Yes, indeed. There is a lot of people who are thinking that games mean obviously only fun, nothing else. And indeed in the commercial games the way how you design the game, it means that you have to make the game fun for the audience. But for example, when it comes to the museum exhibitions, you can play against the rules because the game might be so frustrating, might be so irritating for the player that he will actually have a bigger immersion to your narrative design exhibition. It is actually very important..., we have to understand that a game doesn't necessarily means only fun. It might also mean education. It might mean inclusion. It means good storytelling. So there is a huge work which have to be done between archaeologists, museologists, historians to translate the scientific language into the popular culture and game designers need to understand that, well, without understanding also the history, the games, even if they have only historical background, they are not fully done. And I think it's starting to be more popular now that the games are more into the historical backgrounds. So I hope that it's going to be growing, this

idea. Plus there is also one more thing. If you have a museum exhibition, which you have invested in so much money, creating a game is also pretty expensive, but it gives you one more thing. It is scientifically proven that if the visitor is given flyers, if the visitor is seeing videos, if the visitor can interact with your exhibition, he learns more. About six different kind of publications should be shown to the visitor. He or she will not look, watch, play everything. But if he is presented with the variety of different publications, different interactive things at the exhibition, he or she will learn more from it. So creating a game might actually be the forum of having fun for children, for adults who would like to have a bigger immersion to the exhibition, and games are good in that. It also has been proven that people who are playing games are memorizing the historical facts better, and memorizing them in the long term memory. So there are only good things.

Matilda: All positive! That's a good ending point, I think. I do have one final question. So you mentioned the projects you're doing already, but do you have any projects coming up or that have only recently started that you'd maybe like to tell us about? And also, how can the EXARC community, those people listening in today help do you think to make a difference in regards to those points that have been discussed today? Maybe Aris, if you want to start?

Aris: We just started the Streaming the Past project. Now we've just entered the third week. The Streaming the Past project is our new outreach project, funded by the Science Communication Agenda of the NWO. We've hired three amazing students from Leiden University who are streaming games and talking about history and archaeology three days a week, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. So if you go to streamingthepast.com, it will direct you to our Twitch channel and you can watch all the amazing content that's coming from there. Also, if you're in the Netherlands, we're still running the Past-at-Play Lab and we still need a lot of people to help us with the experiments on ancient board games. So if you want to play ancient board games, go to pastatplay.com and book a session and I'm sure you're going to have fun with it. And I think for the EXARC community and for those people who are interested in video games and the past, I think the best thing to do is - if they are of course interested in the research component of it or in the outreach component of it - best thing to do is to actually do it. It sounds a little bit too obvious maybe, or even counter-intuitive, but at least in my experience and from the stuff that we've been doing over the last five, six years, is that not everybody will immediately take you seriously when you try to combine video games with anything, because people tend to not find video games too serious, but there is so much research to be done. There are so many angles that can be taken, both from a research perspective and from an outreach perspective, that you can very easily find something that you would like to do and just start doing it or try it out and see if this is research that you like pursuing further. It doesn't necessarily have to be 'oh, is this game accurate? Or is this game true to history?' because this is the thing that archaeologists tend to do for the most part in a way, right? We like to nitpick and so we go into Assassin's Creed and say, 'hey, actually, this is not accurate'. But video games have way more to offer than just being nitpicky about historical facts. They are one of the best mediums available for communicating to a wider audience and for thinking in different ways about the past, for telling different stories, for telling diverse stories, for telling more inclusive stories. So I would say, just go out there and try it out and see what kind of crazy ideas you can come up with when combining video games and archaeology.

Justyna: When it comes to me, well, the Urajärven Kartano mystery mobile game is halfway developed and I hope we are going to be launching it soon, next month, I guess. Another thing that Rajamuseo just also started three months ago, so we are now in this phase where we are preparing first game and testing it and preparing like paper mock-ups and blocking playable mock-ups and so on. So this is also starting. ArcheoSysmä it's just starting, really, just now. But my future project will

be launching my own company, which will hopefully be making games for the museums. So, go ahead and find heritagegamesstudio.com. And if you need some assistance or you would like to make a game for your museum I am available.

Matilda: Sounds excellent!

Matilda: We will now be having a live question and answer session with all of you who've been listening in to the discussion so far. We already have a couple of questions here, so I'll start working my way through them. Our first one is for both of you: does archaeogaming help in archaeological outreach only or can it also help archaeologists and archaeology students, perhaps, to better understand archaeology as a profession? So can videogaming make people better archaeologists do you think? Perhaps, Aris, you might be a good one to start with this?

Aris: Sure, hello everyone. I would say yeah, 100%. I personally am using video games a lot in my teaching anyway. So I can say from experience that there is potential in using video games to make people better archaeologists. And also from my experience there are a lot of ways to use video games in archaeological research. I could give examples, but we would talk for a very long time. But if people are interested we could talk a bit more about it, but in general I would say very much, yes, video games can help archaeologists conceptualize and understand the past in general a bit more differently, let's say.

Justyna: I really loved this idea with Andrew Reinhart doing the excavation in No Man's Sky inside of the game. I was totally blown up with the idea.

Matilda: Oh, so they actually had an excavation going on as part of the game?

Justyna: Inside the game, yeah.

Matilda: That's very cool.

Aris: No Man's Sky Archaeological Survey, it was called. And they were going from planet to planet looking for digital ruins.

Justyna: Yeah, it was so cool.

Matilda: So it can almost be used as digital fieldwork, I suppose, in a way?

Justyna: Yeah, they have also doing some excavations after the battle was happening on one of the games, I forgot the name. And they were also like checking it in that way. So it was fun.

Matilda: Very good, yeah, sounds interesting. Aris, I have another question for you here. What is your best example of archaeogaming from a gamer standpoint and does this match up with the best example from an archaeologist's standpoint?

Aris: That's an interesting question. I would say, from an archaeologist's standpoint... if somebody would ask me what's the best example of how to use the past in a game? I would say it's Never Alone. It's this indie game made by the Iñupiat tribe in Alaska. And it's basically their culture and an oral history is being put in the game by themselves, in collaboration with an American company. So from a heritage and archaeological point of view I think this is by far the best example, also commercially it was hugely successful. From a gamer standpoint, I would say every game... people love to play Assassin's Creed, people love to play Civilization, people love to play Age of Empires. From a gamer perspective, it's not by necessity... they don't value exactly the same things

necessarily as archaeologists would do. From our surveys, the most popular games tend to be Assassin's Creed and Civilization for people who like games related to the past. But I would say any game that's related to the past can be a favorite for the gamer.

Matilda: Anything with a small hint of archaeology!

Aris: People just like to get hooked in the concept.

Matilda: Justyna, I have a question for you as well. What are some of the hurdles that you see to wider engagement with heritage gaming specifically? Can you imagine a future where these are games in their own right or do you think that they'll always be played at or produced through the encouragement of heritage organizations such as museums?

Justyna: If we want to think about the very ethically built heritage games or games with the past, which are supposed to reenact or make people feel the past in the proper way of hundred percent, it might be a little bit tricky. So in that case, I think that those games might be done usually by municipalities, museums, or heritage sites or whatever organizations like that. But I do see a wider engagement in those heritage games as also Aris was speaking, there is more and more games, even those very highly successful, which have a historical background and it's getting better every time. In my opinion, there is a need and there is more and more people who would like to see history in a proper way in games. So I think it's going to be improving every time.

Matilda: This one's for both of you: what are your thoughts about accessibility in gaming that was mentioned at some point during the discussion, talking about how online gaming is a lot more accessible for some people. So it's about accessibility in gaming and the way that heritage organizations, or sort of cultural matters can reach those typically excluded audiences, such as those with mobility or developmental disabilities.

Justyna: So, while I'm working now on Urajärven Kartano Mysteries and I'm making their user interface design, I'm learning more and more about the accessibility and how it is actually measured, how it should be shown and the same is happening while we are making the game for Rajamuseo, so the Border Museum, for this exhibition. These are very short games and the amount of data which we need to consider while we are designing, it is huge, there is a lot of research doing, a lot of good books to read and implement about the usability and how we can with the design help disabled people to play those games and to learn and be engaged in the museum as activities. So yes, those games are very much helping people with different kinds of disabilities but they have to be very wisely designed and people who are doing it should really be careful and try to do best of course, because you can't do one thing which is fitting to everyone, obviously, but you can go very close to the perfection, definitely.

Aris: Yeah, I think games in general are a good way to enhance accessibility to all sorts of stuff. Not only heritage organizations, but particularly in this case, I think it is a good way to do that. And if one looks at stuff that have been developed also for increasing gaming accessibility, there are peripherals and other things that can be developed or can be used in development to increase accessibility. So I think in general gaming has a lot of potential in that regard.

Matilda: Okay, thank you. We still have plenty of time for more questions. So we have another one here. Can gaming help a group of museums, for example, like EXARC, to form and maintain an international audience and would that at all work? Perhaps Justyna...?

Justyna: Yes, there are ideas slowly growing about creating such kind of a platform where museums could choose types of games or even apps and parts of the apps, which they could use. So these are just like very loose ideas. And it's because the creation of the game, for example 2D platform, or like very short one, like five to six levels, might cost even up to 50,000 or 60,000 euros. So it's a massive cost. So to reduce the cost we have to reduce the cost of the coders usually, because in other ways, the code would stay the same for a lot of museums. And there's like puzzles, museums can choose different things which they want to have, and then create an app from that or, for example, some other company can create an app from those puzzles. In that case the cost will be lowering because we already have pre-done a massive part of the code and the testing and other things. In that case, for example, creating such a game like, for example Geocaching AR, in Europe over the open-air museums might be possible totally. So you can just be a happy person and catching up AR, for example, characters in different museums. This is possible, definitely. You can have like games inside there and go to different museums, play games and have like an international leaderboard for that. So I can see a lot of ideas.

Matilda: Which is good... if you're starting your company then, it's nice to have these ideas. That was from a game designer's perspective, I suppose but Aris, would you have any more insights or ideas or suggestions from an archaeological research perspective or I guess heritage research perspective?

Aris: Yeah, all of the things that Justyna said are very much correct. Designing and creating the games yourself is difficult, is costly and it requires a lot of expertise. From the perspective of things that we're doing with existing gaming experiences it's also very much doable. It also requires some resources and some investment, but games like Minecraft or even museums can collaborate with gaming companies, like Ubisoft has been collaborating with a lot of museums to talk about games or the past in general within museum environments. There is a lot of potential out there. I think as a broad question I think gaming as a concept can very much help also to maintain this wider network, to bring people together in a way, yeah, because it is a shared experience, right? So for example, museums can do Minecraft. I'm using Minecraft because it's a very familiar example, both to me, but also to tens of millions of people out there who play Minecraft, right? But museums can reconstruct themselves in Minecraft and then open up the servers for people to visit these museums in a Minecraft setting. And then you can have networks of museums that do this thing with Minecraft...and you can you can visit like museums from all around Europe or all around the world in a Minecraft server.

Matilda: Yeah, that sounds like some nice suggestions. The next question from Caroline is similar I think, to what you were both just talking about, but maybe you might be able to elaborate. So, you mentioned the idea of gamification to drive better engagement with players, which it seems in apps is oftentimes really closely tied to monetization. How do you each imagine effective gamified playing experiences, which are not monetized so that players can choose to engage for longer or more frequently?

Justyna: Well, recently Apple launched the Apple Arcade store. Especially the mobile games are turning into the arcade mode, so more or less the same as Netflix. You pay monthly 20, 30 euros or 10 euros, depends. And you play as much as you want. And it doesn't necessarily make the developers to search some extra monetization assistance and engagement is always in a game. It depends only about how good the game is. And then we have like a better or worst engagement. And if a player is somehow blocked from playing and he's really still very much engaged... here comes the monetization usually, but the truth is to make player stay for long, meaning that they will stay for longer than one day, two days or three days or a week, we have to make players to stop to

play. When it comes to mobile games, the best time is 20 minutes. So we have to make them not to play longer, that they need to wait to play longer so that they will be coming back every day. But this is also possible to do without the monetization, no problem.

Matilda: Yes, I guess a problem is indeed that a lot of the time you do need to make some kind of profit from it, or you do need to have some kind of feedback in that respect.

Justyna: Yeah, I don't mind the games which are like very honest, meaning that if you want to play the game, pay those two, three euros, it's fine. But those which are making children try to pay something and while children have no idea that this is real money, it's totally not fair.

Matilda: Aris, I don't know if you have anything you wanted to add to that question?

Aris: From my perspective, the question mentions the concept of gamification and I view gamification and games as a different thing. So gamifying an experience is not necessarily the same thing as making a game. It could be, but it's not by necessity, right? Gamifying something means to add game elements to it and from my experience gamifying things is not always the best avenue because, especially kids who engage with the gamified experience, they understand very well when something is a game and when something is not a game, but it's something that just tries to teach them something by fooling them into playing a game. So in that sense, I would say it's not about gamifying experiences, although there is some value in gamifying parts of museums, but it's a different concept. I think when we really are talking about games and whether there is a possibility to do this in museum settings, without necessarily putting the money aspect in it, it's something that has to come through research, something that has to come through the museums themselves, that would be willing to invest into making such a game.

Justyna: But the museums do this gamification aspect since I don't know, definitely a long time, since actually first those activity papers for children came.

Aris: Yeah, absolutely.

Justyna: Gamification [full mouth] actually.

Aris: Yeah, of course they do and it's often very effective. But I think it's..., at least from my perspective, I think that actual games - not gamifying an aspect - but actually making a game out of something, would be even more effective, in a way, would drive the engagement further.

Justyna: Well, my Urajärven project is having that you're first playing the game and if you play it full, you're getting also artefacts to your gallery and to finish the game, truly finish the game you have to go to the museum and find all of them in reality. So this is kind of gamification.

Aris: But it's also a game, you're thinking about this as a game. You don't think about this as 'oh, I'm gonna gamify the museum'. You're thinking 'I'm going to make a game and I'm going to incorporate the museum in it', which I think is the correct approach.

Justyna: Yeah, you're right.

Matilda: Aris, we have a question for you here about the Twitch streams. Which kind of engagement do you have in that channel? Are you mainly interacting with archaeologists or gamers or a bit of both?

Aris: So currently there are two streaming things happening in the same channel. We have our usual weekly streams with the VALUE Foundation, which happen Tuesdays and Thursdays in the evening. But we also have the Streaming the Past project and we have hired three student assistants who are doing the streaming as well. So if you want to tune in we literally have five days a week or four days a week, we have streams in there. The kind of engagement that we get is extremely diverse because Twitch is such a diverse place. We do have some archaeologists, friends as well who like to watch us fail in games, but we also have a lot of gamers. We have history enthusiasts. We have people from completely different academic backgrounds. We have some engineers that have been hooked to our streams so it really is very, very diverse, but the center point - and that's our goal as well - is people who are interested in the past and are interested in games and how the past unfolds in games.

Matilda: It sounds like a nice audience, nice mixture. We have a slightly different question here. So we've talked a lot now about video games more than anything, sort of the digital side of gaming, but we have a question here: museums are getting more and more interested in digital games as well as in other types of digital tools inside exhibitions. But what about more traditional games, for example, board games, which might be more affordable for smaller museums and could also be used to engage groups of visitors more physically. So what would you say are the advantages and the disadvantages of digital versus traditional games in this sense?

Justyna: Well, I think that when it comes to board games, there are actually museums which are very interested in board games and they are producing board games also of the heritage background. A great example for that is the game called Kolejka, the Queue, which is supposed to show the life in the communism time in Poland, when people just need to organize a party or go for a holidays and buy all those needed items and they have to queue in different shops. This kind of games, there is a quite a lot of this kind of games. So museums do use it, but to get actually a very successful game, you have to think about it very well. And as the same as with the video game, the card games and other board games are very hard to design. And also they are not very cheap to design because, in the same way they need a lot of art and they need to have a lot of assets. I guess that the printing is not super cheap, but it's not very expensive, like super expensive either. So it might be some option, but at the end you will probably end up with a product which the museum will have to sell. I'm not really sure if museums can do ad hoc this kind of things. I think that there should be professionals doing it. And when it comes to putting board games for an exhibition, from my experience, it was a bad idea for a few museums. People were afraid of touching it because they had no idea that those games are not artefacts. Plus it was very hard for them to learn them.

Matilda: Aris, I think this is quite a big focus of your research at the moment, sort of presenting people with a board game and seeing what happens.

Aris: Yeah, so we're running Past-at-Play-Lab in Leiden but starting next year, we will also be popping up in museums in the Netherlands with the Past-at-Play-Lab, exactly to have people play ancient board games in museum settings. Which is interesting, I have a very different experience. People tend to... - at least the games which are specific ancient board games, which I'm not going to reveal in case anybody from here wants to visit the Past-at-Play-Lab - they tend to pick them up relatively quickly. I guess it depends on the kind of board game. If we're talking about newly designed board games, of course you can always design them with a purpose to fit the timeframe you want people to spend in that particular part of the museum. But I would say that, especially when it comes to ancient board games, there's a lot more that can be done by museums and especially antiquity museums, but also ethnography museums. People tend to make versions of board games all around the world and across time. So there's always something that can be placed

in there in that regard and people like it. Most of these games survived for a long time for a reason, because usually they are good games, or fun to play, at least to some extent. So I would say there's a lot of potential in the ancient board games component as well. Also I see ancient board games as a good vessel to teach about the past, because you know when we think about the past, we tend to not think about the everyday life, we think about the past in big terms and in big men, unfortunately, usually, so we don't think about what happened on a smaller scale, how people had fun, how people enjoyed themselves and playing board games is a good way to enjoy yourself, right? So in that sense, allowing people to play an ancient board game and understand that 'hey, people in the past actually did have fun' I think is a good way to immersing people in whatever period you want to talk about.

Justyna: Yeah, especially on the events. It's a very cool thing. Like what I've seen on museum exhibition, people were kind of afraid of board games, unfortunately, although it's a cool thing, but...

Aris: It is a very cool thing.

Justyna: Yeah. It needs to have like also a good design to put it properly in the museum exhibition so that people would know that this is the place: sit down, have a rest and play.

Aris: Yeah, it requires a bit of a setup and the museum that does such a thing needs to understand how to fit a board game within an exhibition.

Matilda: And Aris, if I understand correctly... so the Past-at-Play-Lab, you mentioned just then that you don't want to say the name of the games in case people are listening in and find out. So it's almost a secret, you don't say anything about the rules and people just have to work it out for themselves.

Aris: Oh no, when people come in, we do say the rules, but because we have different games that people can play, we don't want to, I mean, if it'd be known the game beforehand, that's also fine, because some of these ancient board games are relatively popular or at least to some extent that people who are interested know them already.

Matilda: I've seen a few mentions indeed to the Hnefatafl...

Aris: Yeah, for example. If somebody knows it, that's perfectly fine, they can just sit down and play the game. But we want everyone's authentic experience, whether that authentic experience is either 'I know the game and I play it', or 'this is the first time I'm seeing this game, so I'll have to learn it'. In our research, because our research focuses on the experience of play as a concept, how these ancient board games make you feel, what kind of experience you get out of playing it. So we want everyone's authentic experience. And that's why I'm keeping it on the low which kind of games we have there.

Matilda: Ah, teasing us...

Aris: Yeah...

Matilda: Always leave them wanting more...that's good.

Aris: Yeah, exactly.

Matilda: I actually just have one question that I'm curious about is the stigma against video games and sort of the way that different games are perceived by the audience in terms of authenticity et cetera. How difficult is it to promote your work as, shall we say, serious research projects or project

ideas or proposals considering that the topic is essentially playing video games or games in general and many archaeological researchers or heritage institutions might not consider that as indeed as a serious topic worthy of study. So how have your experiences been in that case?

Justyna: Well, from my experience now I have a feeling that there are a few types of museum clients I could have. I'm really happy that I didn't find the second type. The two of them is like a good client and a bad client. A good client is a client that wants to have a game. And then there is the bad client which doesn't want, and it means, that when I go there, to the museum, and I try to introduce myself and I'm getting out with the proposition of some game or creating something for them, they are interested and they want to do something. And of course there are museums which are more involved in the process of making the game and less involved in that. And it's perfectly fine in both cases, as long as the outcome, meaning the game, is launched and it's fun and it's playable and people, so the visitors, are happy with it. When it comes to those clients who don't want to have a game... Well, I don't think there are such museums still, because I can't imagine if somebody is coming and saying, 'hey, I would like to make you a game' and they are saying like, 'no, we are too serious to have fun in a game'. Even in the museums which are having a very serious subject, like the Second World War and so on, there are places where you can have some meaningful games, some places where you can have like this immersion also through the playable elements. So, it's possible.

Matilda: Fingers crossed! But that is indeed, yeah, you have a point there that from a museum perspective, if you're approaching them as clients or as people you're proposing this idea too, that yeah, like you've mentioned before as well, they've always been more involved in engaging the audience than necessarily having serious research topics that I suppose it is easier to promote in those contexts, perhaps. But when we see, for example, Aris, I mean, congratulations on getting the NWO funding for your big project. Was it difficult to persuade people that it was a worthwhile topic?

Aris: It has been difficult for sure. People still don't take it too seriously and even if I have two successful, relatively large grants so far, I also have a bag full of rejections, exactly because people think sometimes that this is not serious enough, that this does not promote archaeological research, particularly when it comes to research it is significantly more difficult because also as Justyna said, and as we were discussing, with museums or when it comes to engagement or outreach, it's a little bit easier to convince someone that 'hey, games are played by billions of people. So we might as well try it out'. But when you're trying to convince somebody that 'hey, maybe we should make this game that actually is about archaeological research and we want archaeologists to play because it makes them think differently' or 'we want to make a game out of an excavation' or something like that, then it's a little bit more difficult to convince people that this is a valid idea, what I generally call 'playful methodologies'. But we're getting there and I think slowly and surely people appreciate video games more. And I think people start realizing that video game research can also happen outside of game studies, that it can happen within other fields and it's useful within other fields. So I think we're at the beginning of a point where things will be easier. Also, the more people apply for these kind of things and the more people make their potential research visible, the more chances eventually we will all collectively have to be more successful or to have more opportunities.

Justyna: What I want to add, yesterday I have been playing with..., excavating on my own bed, dinosaurs. So I definitely...

Matilda: Sounds like you need to clean your room a bit, Justyna...

Justyna: It was just on my bed and it was so fascinating! Definitely we have to do that experience with excavations.

Matilda: Sounds good. Well, thank you very much, to Justyna and Aris for, for joining us today and sharing your experiences and your expertise. I see already that at least one of our listeners has been inspired to incorporate games into their own teaching modules as well. So hopefully those of you who are listening to the podcast episode are also inspired in this way. I definitely learned a lot. I'm sure that everyone else did as well. If anyone's interested in finding out more about things that are currently ongoing, by both Aris and Justyna that we talked about today, they can be found in the useful links channel of the Discord server. And they will also be posted on the final podcast page. Thank you to everyone for listening to this episode of #FinallyFriday by EXARC. If you would like to become more involved in EXARC, you can become one of our many members. Alternatively, you can also make a small PayPal donation. We've learned the importance of monetization today and you know, all us poor heritage researchers need a little bit of help every so often. So you can make a donation through the website to help support EXARC in its endeavours and also suggest any projects that you are interested in starting as well. So please do get in touch with us, we'd love to hear from you.