

[For DEBATE section]

An archaeology of digital things: social, political, polemical

Colleen Morgan*

* Department of Archaeology, University of York, UK (Email: ✉
colleen.morgan@york.ac.uk)

Aycock's (2021) interdisciplinary intervention into digital archaeology is very welcome. My own investigations of digital 'things' affirm their importance, and my collaborations with computer scientists have provided considerable insights into the affordances of digital media and their impact on knowledge creation in archaeology. Aycock's identification of the importance of archaeological investigations of digital things is reflected in my early research, which interrogated a digital photograph, video and 3D reconstruction through object biographies structured by a feminist, emancipatory framework (Morgan 2012). The investigation of digital things has been central in my subsequent research on the impact of digital technology on archaeological knowledge production (and the attending analogue echoes), investigating how digital technology can reveal interstitial spaces for new experiences of and connections to the past, and on how archaeologists can interpret digital things. In my response, I focus on how archaeologists can better understand digital things and the social and political implications of an archaeology of digital things.

Archaeologists do need help to create, trace, understand, curate and archive digital things. We have always been consummate bricoleurs of theory and method, with diverse interdisciplinary collaborators. My understanding of digital things is no exception; here I integrate ideas suggested by Gilles Deleuze (2001) into a discussion of the sandbox video game *Minecraft*. Deleuze's work has been rapidly taken up by archaeologists (for a summary, see Harris 2021), and I argue that many of his concepts are particularly relevant for an archaeology of digital things. Aycock (2021) is correct in noting the utility of archaeogaming for animating these discussions, and the example discussed here draws on this energy and resonance. Finally, I follow Russell (2020) in using the term 'AFK' (away from keyboard) in lieu of 'analogue', 'real world' or IRL (in the real world) to note non-digital things or experiences, as it highlights the slippage in a dualistic construction of digital/non-digital, de-centring the perception of AFK as 'real' and emphasising the realness of digital experiences.

Minecraft is a popular game for archaeological reconstructions and outreach, as players may mine resources, breed and kill animals, cultivate crops and construct or destroy buildings, landscapes and things. For recent outreach events (YorNight in 2014 and 2015), I reconstructed in *Minecraft* the Vale of Pickering landscape to enable children to create the Mesolithic site of Star Carr (Morgan (2015), as inspired by the excavations described in Milner *et al.* (2018)). Relevant to this discussion, I set up a ‘match the tools’ table, wherein children would identify various AFK tools by their *Minecraft* representations (Figure 1). A bucket, shovel, pickaxe (and a stand-in mattock), compass and a nodule of flint were set out next to their *Minecraft* in-game equivalents. Many of these tools were relatively easy to translate between AFK and digital—arguably these were a Deleuzian ‘copy’ linked to the original artefact by resemblance and in-game function. The AFK flint nodule disrupted this easy connection, and the children were surprised when its in-world identity was revealed. While this was only a casual observation and not structured research, I argue that the nodule of flint could be described as a simulacrum—a copy that has lost resemblance to the original “so that one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy” (Deleuze 2001: 69). *Minecraft* players mined and used flint to create in-game arrows and ‘flint and steel,’ a tool to create fires. Yet they were astonished to find that the AFK version was “just a rock”.

<FIGURE 1, 20cm colour, place landscape>

As archaeologists, we characterise things both in terms of their similarities and their differences. Deleuze (2001: 220) further encourages us to forefront these differences and note the spaces created and altered by these differences wherein singularities are condensed and there is an acceleration or deceleration of time. The *Minecraft* bucket, shovels and pickaxes could be conceived as representations of their AFK equivalents, repeating their appearances in game. Yet these repetitions have deviated significantly from their afk tethers. The *Minecraft* flint is also a repetition, but is markedly distinct from the afk flint—a thing, in itself, unmoored by representation. But would knowing about afk flint really tell us more about the digital flint? How can we understand *Minecraft* flint as archaeologists?

Aycock (2021) advises us to partner with computer scientists to examine the code. This is, of course, advisable for us to understand how the *Minecraft* flint was created, how it changed over time and is linked to other in-game affordances. We could document and potentially ‘excavate’ the Java code for the game, as Aycock and other archaeologists have done. The code, however, is one part of the assemblage that the *Minecraft* flint comprises, and I am equally interested in the other constituent parts. A prefigurative, embodied, feminist post-human approach—also known as cyborg archaeology (Morgan 2019; by way of Haraway

(1985) and Braidotti (1997))—would encourage us to investigate the political implications of *Minecraft*, as its play is based in an extractionist settler colonial understanding of the world (Brazelton 2020), accompanied by a call to reconfigure the game along kin-based networks. An embodied approach would explore the effects of the digital on our bodies: on posture, bone spurs, and microplastics in our organs. A climate-aware archaeological investigation of scale and environment could help us understand how digital mining of a different kind, for example, bitcoin, is hastening global warming (Mora *et al.* 2018).

Aycock (2021: ■) advises archaeologists that “there is a storm coming”. I acknowledge that there is unchecked growth in the creative application of technology, and that this yields exciting connections and things that need investigation in their own fullness; digital things are not a pale imitation of afk things and experiences. Although there has been and will be tremendous data loss, archaeologists have great skill at sifting through the remains. That these losses will probably reflect afk structural inequities is also notable. What will be investigated and archived? What will be preserved and what will be lost? What will be the digital monumental state statuary and what will be the ephemeral wooden toys, the colourful cloth and the emotive gestures? Furthermore, I caution that a full preservation and documentation effort would increase our own participation in the mass extinction event currently occurring under “Empire,” what Bergman and Montgomery term as the “organised destruction under which we live” (25, 2017; see also Morgan 2021).

Instead, let us reimagine an archaeology of digital things through anti-fascism, decolonisation, craft, degrowth and prefiguration. This should draw from Flexner’s vision of archaeology in the ruins of capitalism, with archaeologists

as expert cultural recyclers, applying knowledge in how to systematically dismantle, identify and explain what objects from a partial and fragmentary material record were in their original context, and what they might mean or be used for in a future context. (Flexner 2021:18)

Can we record, arrange and transmit our understanding of these digital things in a way that foments connection, a “circle of relationships” with humans and “non-human kin—from network daemons to robot dogs to artificial intelligences” (Lewis *et al.* 2018: 2)? It is our task, and that of our interlocutors. As such, I welcome interdisciplinary interventions, as long as they stand with me as an accomplice.

References

- AYCOCK, J. 2021. The coming tsunami of digital artefacts. *Antiquity* 95: ■–■
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.84>
- BERGMAN, C. & N. MONTGOMERY. 2017. *Joyful militancy: building thriving resistance in toxic times*. Chico (CA): AK Press.
- BRAIDOTTI, R. 1997. Mothers, monsters, and machines, in K.C.N. Medina, N. Medina & S. Stanbury (ed.) *Writing on the body: female embodiment and feminist theory*: 59–79. New York: Columbia University Press.
- BRAZELTON, B. 2020. On the 10-year anniversary of *Minecraft*: two interventions in extractive colonialism. *Cultural Geographies* 27: 491–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474019890319>
- DELEUZE, G. 2001. *Difference and repetition*. London & New York: Continuum
- FLEXNER, J. 2021. Archaeology, anarchism, decolonization, and degrowth through the lens of Frase’s four futures. *Archaeological Dialogues* 28: 16–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203821000027>
- HARAWAY, D. 1985. A manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. *Socialist Review* 80: 65–108.
- HARRIS, O.J.T. 2021. *Assembling past worlds: materials, bodies and architecture in Neolithic Britain*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367814786>
- LEWIS, J.E., N. ARISTA, A. PECHAWIS & S. KITE. 2018. Making kin with the machines. *Journal of Design and Science*. <https://doi.org/10.21428/bfafd97b>
- MILNER, N., B. TAYLOR & C. CONNELLER. 2018. *Star Carr volume 1: a persistent place in a changing world*. Leeds: White Rose University Press. <https://doi.org/10.22599/book1>
- MORA, C. *et al.* 2018. Bitcoin emissions alone could push global warming above 2°C. *Nature Climate Change* 8: 931–33. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0321-8>
- MORGAN, C. 2012. *Emancipatory digital archaeology*. Berkeley: University of California.
 – 2015. *Minecraft for archaeological outreach*. Available at: <https://colleen-morgan.com/2015/09/28/minecraft-for-archaeological-outreach> (accessed 20 July 2021).
 – 2019. Avatars, monsters, and machines: a cyborg archaeology. *European Journal of Archaeology* 22: 324–37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eea.2019.22>
 – 2021. Save the date for future mourning. *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 10: 1–5
- RUSSELL, L. 2020. *Glitch feminism*. New York: Verso.