

# The Atlantic

## Why We Dug Atari

"Punk archaeologists" explain that they went looking for more than just video-game cartridges in a New Mexico landfill.



Atari's dumped games unearthed

Raiford Guins

**WILLIAM CARAHER, RAIFORD GUINS, ANDREW REINHARD, RICHARD ROTH AUS, AND BRET WEBER**

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There we were at a trash dump in New Mexico: archaeologists, a documentary film crew, Alamogordo city representatives, security and safety teams, a French gourmet food truck, a bevy of hundreds of curious onlookers, and reporters and

photographers from Reuters, CNET, and other media outlets. Everyone was there to witness the rather unceremonious cracking of a sealed deposit of Atari Inc.'s e-waste on April 26, 2014. There were hundreds of old games buried in the landfill, casualties of a collapsing video-game market in the early 1980s—and some terrible game-making.

The media outlets—BBC, NPR, CNN, NBC, and many others—would go on to make the dig an international news item, just interesting enough, just weird enough, just nostalgia-inducing enough, to make the final minutes of broadcasts around the world.

But the stories about the buried games were more complex than the outputs of the media flurry.

The residents of Alamogordo, the town that houses the dump, have their version. The recent attention to their southern New Mexico city validated their first-hand accounts of the actual disposal from September 22–24, 1983. All exhumed remains supplied “concrete evidence” to quiet those who dismissed the disposal of Atari cartridges and hardware as urban legend.

Game collectors have their story, too. For them, the dig provided the extraordinary opportunity to get to the bottom of the “infamous Atari landfill.” Nostalgia had its role, playing upon the remembrances of 40-somethings hoping to reclaim a restorative piece of a childhood that Atari helped define.

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## **Searching for them reversed the expectations of a culture that values the past only if it is old and unique.**

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Then there is the face of the “Atari Legend,” an Atari 2600 game called *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, which was subjected to merciless production constraints that resulted in its dubious reputation as the “worst game ever.” Many (mistakenly) hail the game as Atari's death knell—if not *the* catalyst to the death spiral of the entire North American games industry. The validation of the dumping ground provided

them with an authentic grave upon which to dance. The game's creator, Howard Scott Warshaw, attended the dig, which tempered the cynicism and fed a real sentimentality toward the man, the game, and the game's alien. For many, finding the games "brought E.T. home."

There were, of course, economic interests as well. The dig was seen by some as a publicity stunt by the city of Alamogordo to cash in on its happenstance claim to fame and to generate profits by auctioning souvenirs to the highest bidders. And there was the fairground ballyhoo for Xbox Entertainment Studios and Lightbox Entertainment to promote *Atari: Game Over* (working title), the first in a new documentary series that [may also be its last](#).

It was an extraordinary media blitz to say the least. Much of the frisson came from the dig's presentation as *archaeology*, but few outlets focused on the actual work we, the archaeologists, did.

And we'd like to explain ourselves.



Courtesy of the archaeology team

Here we all are. From left to right, we're Andrew Reinhard, Richard Rothaus, Raiford Guins, Brett Weber, and William Caraher. We're a collective of Punk Archaeologists. The punk moniker harkens back to the suburban culture of the late 1970s/early 1980s that drove Atari to prosperity while simultaneously declaring a critique of those consumerist and materialist values. And, just as punk resisted any unified identity or agenda, our archaeological team embodied a range of motives,

perspectives, and theoretical commitments that made us want to be there when the excavation machinery rumbled to life.

This is why we did what we did—a summary of our intentions and reflections on the aftermath.

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To Reinhard, the leader of the archaeological team, it felt like a possible mistake, an out-nerding of the nerds to get beyond the velvet rope to see the Holy of Holies. Reinhard and Guins, completely unaware of one another's actions, first reached out to Fuel Entertainment after it had acquired permission to excavate the landfill in June 2013. Their initial contact was motivated by personal research interests in video games, archaeological science, and video game history. Reinhard was ultimately asked to be the lead archaeologist for the project while Guins joined as the team's historian based upon the field research on the landfill conducted for his book, *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*. For some, the dig was seen as a tomb raid, but Reinhard wanted to expose the stratigraphy of the landfill and the interplay between domestic trash and the corporate dump of Atari products. As noble or scientific as those goals might have been, the team also operated out of enlightened self-interest: This excavation put archaeology on the global stage, and raised its profile and capital. After so many “digger shows,” the team sought to document this salvage excavation according to disciplinary standards. We pursued our work under the popular media microscope, distinct from looters in terms of intention, methods, and outcomes.



Richard Rothhaus and Andrew Reinhard documenting the first *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* recovered (Raiford Guins)

While generally agreeing on the larger mission, our team members had different expectations about what would be found and how the work would proceed in the brief window allocated by New Mexico safety restrictions. There were also varying concerns about likely tensions between scientific method and documentary filmmaking. The project was largely dependent on the overarching story and schedule of the director even as team member's professional interests and intellectual investments in the histories and archaeology of late capitalism's contemporary past exceeded the subject matter of the documentary.

So why did we, the archaeological team, dig Atari? Rothaus quipped, "Why not?" The games were not rare, but common. Searching for them reversed the expectations of a culture that values the past only if it is old and unique. The desert landfill would not provide clean emptiness, but the overwhelming toxic waste of the late 20th century. Instead of a stupidly over-hyped "here is why Mayan civilization collapsed!" or "look, the Santa Maria!" or "a sunken Mycenaean town!" we turned

our efforts to things that are so common they can be found on eBay for \$1.99. We would shout over the dust storm, “value lies in experience, in memory, not just in the object.” We would fight fetishist fanboys who forget that *context* gives these games meaning.



An issue of the *Alamogordo Daily News* from September 25, 1983 with the headline, “Tons of Atari games buried: Dump here utilized” found mixed in with the subject of its front-page story. (Raiford Guins)

Why dig? Not to determine if Atari games were really buried in Alamogordo, as so much coverage of the dig has implied. We knew that the games were there. This was a fact largely confirmed by Ricky Jones of Alamogordo, who ransacked the landfill on Thursday, September 22, 1983 before Atari Inc.’s products were crushed a few days later. No, rather than confirming a falsely-named “urban legend,” the Atari excavation offers a unique look into corporate history and end-of-lifecycle for products. Companies tend to hide the locations of disposed surplus and damaged goods. To most people, returned, overproduced, and undersold products just vanish, unnoticed. Last year’s models, failed releases, and returns contrast with the hyped sales figures, new advertising, and marketing plugs surrounding new products. Contrary to Atari’s long-dead corporate expectations, the publicity for its

unsold titles came—unwelcomed and enduring. The so-called legend of the Atari dumping just would not die. The company either underestimated or simply never imagined the staying power of a brand in the minds of devotees raised on 1980s careless consumerism.

A combination of enthusiast verve, corporate ambivalence, and rumor-milling tumble-weeded for 30 years, making the process of locating the deposit a fascinating puzzle. Joe Lewandowski, Alamogordo's resident solid waste management expert, obsessed over the this puzzle, working from memory, landscape, and photographs to lock in where the games were actually buried within the landfill. On April 26, 2014, city staff, contracted labor, and fandom unearthed the physical remains of a multi-national corporation that mismanaged its consumer electronics division, a moment in game history when the executive "suits" of Warner Communications culture clashed with Silicon Valley creative types accustomed to hot-tub Fridays and flip-flops. From 1976 to 1984, the imaginary entity nostalgically referred to simply as "Atari" was really "Atari Inc." a subsidiary of a multi-billion dollar media empire. The cracking veneer of the North American games industry included a rapid descent from the January 18, 1982 cover headline of *Time* when video games were "blitzing the world" to the hushed 1983 convoy of semitrailers depositing the forsaken.

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## **Eventually, a layer of earth covered the trash that covered the games, and they evaporated into myth.**

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Departing from an otherwise featureless building in El Paso, Atari's products passed through the hands of numerous retailers, consumers, and gamers. Warehouse workers packed them on trucks and retail employees then took them from nondescript boxes of six or 10. Gamers brought them home, opened the cardboard packaging, pressed the hard plastic cartridges into Atari game consoles, and then gripped rubberized joysticks to press their lone red button.

Within a year or so, some games made their way back to the warehouse, others remained unsold on the shelves or storerooms of retailers, and others never boarded trucks.

The most anticipated game of the 1982 holiday season—*E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*—did not perform as expected and was, along with other Atari products, transported to the dump. The retail dispersal was reversed and in 1983 a convoy transported and then transformed Atari products from objects of desire into waste.

Alamagordo's landfill operators then buried the games under concrete and tons of domestic trash with their price stickers, return receipts, and their original packaging intact. Eventually, a layer of earth covered the trash that covered the games, and they evaporated into myth.

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*Maze Craze* with "Defective" tag intact (Andrew Reinhard)

Thirty years later, over the course of a weekend of digging and sorting, the games—mostly too damaged to function as such—were transformed once again into the material record of the past. Properly catalogued, arranged, and conserved, the



materials serve as evidence to help document the political economy of games. The extracted, crushed game cartridges and gnarled packages reveal a stage in a product's lifecycle beyond design, consumption, and utility. Brought to the surface, they prove intentional destruction: game software not as “revolutionary” invention but as discarded stuff along with mounds of plastic bags, bottles, cans, cardboard, newspapers, old Play-Doh, a porn mag, and domestic rubbish.



*Missile Command, Defender, and Phoenix* mixed with other landfill trash (Raiford Guins)

City staff, locals, eccentrics from across the nation, filmmakers, and archaeologists collectively witnessed the perilous moment when these objects made the leap from abandonment to return. Exceeding the scientific enthusiasm of an earlier generation of archaeological garbologists, the discarded games moved from rubbish to artifacts of study and then on to museum objects—evidence of past events preserved in the present, a *memento mori*. Some of the former trash will appear for sale once again as collectors' items, or become part of museum collections (once the City of Alamogordo offers its gifts), and very possibly molder in a secure storage room of the community of Alamogordo who took possession and responsibility for the games as they came out of the earth.

Participating in the transition of these games from object of consumer desire to museum artifact, we became the archaeologists of these objects' life history.

Our work transgressed the arc that most objects trace as they move from desire to discard. The team's investment in this enterprise was neither to shout "eureka" nor to myth-bust, but to help ensure that excavated materials live on in cultural institutions, defying consumerist erasure.

The subversive act of resuscitating objects intentionally interred and forgotten draws upon the same punk intellectual tradition that celebrates squatting or repurposed, anachronistic melodies. Punk Archaeologists understand that the reinvention of 1950s pop by 1970s punk bands like the Heartbreakers, the MC5, and the Ramones exemplified the value in objects discarded in favor of newer, better, and faster models. For Caraher, the three-day excavation schedule for a deposit less than four decades old reinforced the ever-accelerating pace of life in late capitalism. Recycling, in a way, and recognizing the value in these discarded objects offers the opportunity to slow the pace of 21st century capitalism by reminding us that our actions can produce value in objects. Just as we can laugh about our involvement in an excavation funded in part by Microsoft, we can also see our work as undercutting the rapid commodification of experience by moving an object from being cast off to being venerated. Even the most disposable of objects pushed aside by rapidly changing tastes and technologies can become desirable once more, offering a post-ironic critique of our culture of discard.

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It was not just the processes of bringing objects back to culture's persistent gaze that piqued our professional interests, but also the games themselves: crushed, twisted, deformed, amalgamated, degraded, and even sometimes intact software that escaped the tread of a bulldozer.

Guins in particular wanted to eat his own words. In *Game After*, he adopted a cynical view on the integrity of the Alamogordo remains, doubting that recognizable artifacts could be retrieved should the landfill ever be excavated. Guins' doubt stemmed from what he learned of the measures the landfill took to discourage scavenging: the crushing of games mixed with waste, dirt, and globs of cement (no smooth layer was ever poured). He imagined ecofact not artifact, mulch not mummies preserved in the anaerobic bowels of the landfill. He was glad to be proved wrong—largely because of the desert-dry conditions and lack of waterlogged waste in this particular cell in the landfill. Atari catalogs, manuals, warranties, packaging, controllers, and cartridges were vacuum-sealed and ripe for documenting.



Multiple bucket loads of landfill trash displayed on the surface (Raiford Guins)

Having such a vast range of legible materials confirmed Ricky Jones' account of his scavenging trip back in 1983: *E.T.* shared its coffin with many other Atari titles. Also present: Howard Scott Warshaw's more celebrated titles like *Yar's Revenge* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, both of which sold millions of units. The pallets that arrived at Alamogordo were loaded with games developed by other Atari programmers as well. Also exhumed were Tod Frye's *Pac-Man*, Rob Fulop's *Missile Command*, *Space*

*Invaders*, and *Night Driver*, Larry Kaplan's *Air-Sea Battle*, Carla Meninsky's *Warlords* and *Star Raiders*, Bob Polaro's *Defender*, and Warren Robinett's *Adventure*, along with the creative labor of numerous other programmers. These intentionally abandoned products unearthed on April 26, 2014 had production runs spanning the period from 1977 to 1983, from the launch of the Atari VCS to the games crash.



Many games were recovered in their original shipping packages while thousands of loose cartridges dotted the surface. (Raiford Guins)

The sample we processed reveals a broad range of titles, but most importantly it demonstrates that Atari Inc. didn't play favorites. They dumped the lot—regardless of any single title's market performance, or lack thereof. Landfills don't discriminate and they don't lie. They are great levelers. The story of this particular dig and this particular layer is one that no amount of collective nostalgia and *E.T.* memorabilia can now shroud.

Once one sidesteps nostalgia, other fascinating connections between the dumping of Atari Inc.'s products and U.S. history begin to materialize. Over the last three years, Caraher, Rothaus, and Weber have been working on the [North Dakota Man Camp Project](#), which documents the social and material culture of man camps

(temporary labor housing) in North Dakota's oil boom counties. Spurred by new technology and higher oil prices, the boom has made the state into an economic powerhouse. But at the same time, long-term residents remain haunted by the economic crashes that killed previous booms in this remote and sparsely-populated region. The three found interesting parallels between the ephemeral nature and frenetic pace of extractive industry activity in North Dakota and the surreal experience of the weekend dig.

The historian-cum-social worker of our group, Weber was particularly interested in the media circus, the intersection with frontier settings, and the uniquely American relationship with the boom-bust business cycle. The mystique of the desert was part of the attraction that weekend; after all, it was an X-Files style cliché that filmmakers and archaeologists were in New Mexico searching for buried aliens. But he also considered the American fascination with success, the readiness to denounce failure, and the tempering of both with the love of an underdog.

The Atari boom of the 1970s and 1980s came about as youth culture transitioned from baby-boomers to Gen Xers, from 45s to home computers. There was also the fading excitement about—or maybe even a hangover from—a Space Age that no longer held the same fascination as the earlier race to the moon, but instead flirted with a less pragmatic, more romanticized and almost maudlin notion of discovering and joining life from elsewhere in the universe. This all came together in the fall of 1982, leavened by the lingering hype of Spielberg's summer blockbuster and proofed by the consumerism of the hotly anticipated Christmas season. Many who unwrapped Christmas gifts during those years clearly remember the magical name "Atari."

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Atari's bust coincided almost simultaneously with the peak of the 1980s recession, when unemployment in the U.S. hit its highest level since the Great Depression: 10.8 percent during the Christmas shopping season of 1982. Like so many boom-era companies before it, Atari Inc. suffered from corporate hubris: Skyrocketing sales fed a sense that they could do no wrong. A frantically compressed production schedule for the *E.T.* game failed to produce a quality product, and nevertheless overshot the deadline to be included in that year's Sears' *Christmas Wish Book*.

Economic booms, corporate hubris, and fading dreams of the galaxy are insufficient explanations for the excitement at exhuming them in the spring of 2014. There was talk about the 30th anniversary of the dumping of the games, but that date had already come and gone. Maybe the social and economic standing of the aging gamers had more to do with it—the young players of 1982 were now old enough to be nostalgic, and wealthy enough to finance an indulgence in fabricated memory. Capital, time, rose-colored memories... such resources flowed more freely and widely in the age of social media. The revered Atari had fallen and *E.T.* became "the worst game ever."

During that weekend in April, many waited for the resurrection. The filmmakers and their sponsors could create buzz in a way that would not have been possible when the games were originally dumped. And it wasn't just those players. The city councilor in Weber reflected on the city of Alamogordo's decision not just to *allow* this strange excavation but actively to engage with it. He wanted to see how they would try to brand and market trash dug up from thirty feet below their closed landfill. Economic development is always a tricky puzzle for small cities in sparsely populated areas, and Alamogordo lacks the artsy aura and mountain mystique of Santa Fe. So Weber was curious to see how the city was going to play this.

Like everyone, Weber was curious to see the games, but he also wanted to see the concrete, the liminal space between product and trash, the threshold between the legend and the spoiled treasure. After Ricky Jones and his friends had gone "shopping" in the open landfill in the Fall of 1983, Atari had allegedly sealed the deal by encasing the layer of games under concrete. In reality, it seems they just

puddled enough concrete atop it to discourage the resale of products still stocked on store shelves. The heavy equipment operators working in 2014 did not find a concrete floor that needed to be cracked, no tomb to break into. Instead, there was only limited evidence of concrete (at least in the sampled area), as though Atari had pissed on its product in disgust one last time.

In the media storm that followed the actual dust storm at the dig site, the archaeology was overlooked by most newspapers, wire services, and bloggers. The story was (and will likely remain) that filmmakers had found the games (or, *the* game, *E.T.*). A not-untrue statement. But the filmmakers had also engaged archaeologists as scientists, and looking back on the weekend in the desert, one can choose between a cynical or an optimistic view. On the one hand, the filmmakers understood that the excavation offered a genuine, golden opportunity for archaeologists, garbologists, anthropologists, and historians to get a glimpse into a modern landfill, excavating our recent past while watching the audience react to the discovery. Would that hundreds of cheering people be the norm for any moment of discovery as it happens! Cynicism sets in with the view that the team merely served as props in “archaeology theater,” adding a new dimension to the documentary, a new tension as scoop after scoop of trash was sifted, and ultimately a kind of scientific validation over what was originally tagged by many as a publicity stunt.



Brett Weber and William Caraher documenting *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* games on April 27, 2014. (Richard Rothaus)

Talking with the documentary director Zak Penn, along with others associated with the project suggests we might blend these two outlooks together. The documentary earnestly seeks to explore the near-destruction of the gaming industry, focusing on the Atari Dump Site and burial of *E.T.* as a very real metaphor for its failure. As archaeologists and historians, we treated this event with sincerity while recognizing the project for what it was: entertainment largely produced for gamers and geeks. It was a compromise, but one we made gladly. None of us had ever excavated e-waste, and digging a landfill with archaeological methods is still (and sadly) a once-in-a-lifetime event. We were more than willing to work in front of the cameras for a career day in the field.





Andrew Reinhard documenting various titles and game controllers on April 27, 2014  
(Richard Rothaus)

In a symbiotic effort, all parties got what they wanted. The archaeologists got to excavate and record the Atari material—eventually we will publish our work for both the general public and for the professional archaeological community, opening up our data and images for free use by anyone who remains interested in what we recovered and observed. The filmmakers got the footage they needed for their documentary. The city enjoyed worldwide attention that weekend. The audience was vindicated when the first games were recovered from the landfill. Fans of Atari rejoiced in their recovered cultural heritage. Ours was a salvage in these many different senses.

We dug Atari because this spectacle provided the necessary means to directly access the contemporary past for purposes of archaeological and historical research. How could we refuse?

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**



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