Readers of the Lost Artifacts

The *Heaven's Vault* Video Game

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OVERVIEW

The award-winning video game *Heaven's Vault* stands out among a plethora of over-sensationalized representations of archaeology in video games and other media. The main character of the game is a woman of color named Aliya Elasra, whose primary weapon is her mind, which she uses to uncover a centuries-old mystery while unearthing the secrets of an ancient language. Set in a fantastical science fiction–inspired universe, the player engages in activities that gradually explain the game's world. With multiple endings and re-playability, *Heaven's Vault* offers an experience that is hard to pass up for fans of rich narrative, archaeology, and interactive puzzles.

Heart-pounding action, nail-biting tension, and supernatural threats: the *Heaven's Vault* video game has none of these, which is exactly why it succeeds where so many games fail in depicting archaeology accurately. Yet this game, developed by inkle Studios and costing $25, still engages the player in thought-provoking entertainment (Figure 1). In this review, I provide a brief overview of the game, contrasting it to other depictions of archaeology in popular culture. Then, I evaluate a central and unique aspect to the game play—the decipherment of a fictional ancient language. Finally, I investigate the creation of the game world and compare choices made by the designers to real archaeological examples. The intentionally patient pace of this game builds a sense of immersion and investment in the game's story. Contrary to others' criticism of the game's slow pacing, I believe that the pacing also gives players time to explore and appreciate the game's environments and to fully engage with the language-learning mechanics.

This is not to say that *Heaven's Vault* is a perfect game; there are faults, as with any artistic-commercial production, and it may not be of interest to everyone. However, given the appeal of video games and their ability to reach a range of audiences who might not otherwise encounter our academic discipline, it is important to shine a light on examples of media that do archaeology justice (Snyder 2022). In the world of entertainment, archaeology is often used as little more than set dressing. The persistent public image of archaeology is a holdover from the so- called golden age of archaeology, which has more in common with colonialism, grave robbing, and plundering than it does with the modern scientific discipline. Games featuring characters such as Laura Croft and Nathan Drake engage "certain stereotypical ways of depicting archaeology in an exotic, adventurous, and rather unrealistic manner" (Hageneuer 2021:632). These are essentially action-adventure games set in fantasy, science fiction, or survival genres, with "archaeology" acting as the catalyst for the ensuing adventure. Although the idea of an archaeological excavation can seem appealing to many an inquisitive mind, there are likely fewer who would remain so enthusiastic several days into the reality of an actual archaeological project. Every story needs a catalyst, and for video games, that catalyst must ultimately be presented as a game mechanic that demands the attention and input of a player (Landa and Thompson 2023).

The world depicted within *Heaven's Vault*, referred to as "The Nebula," is rich with an expansive area of outer space containing various planets, moons, and asteroids that the player can visit. The Nebula is populated by a diverse cast of NPCs (non-playable characters) taking inspiration from the diversity of ancient Rome (Ingold 2019). The player assumes the role of Aliya Elasra (she/her), a 33-year-old female archaeologist. The choice to have the main character be female and non-white counters any white savior fears that have plagued this genre for much of its existence with its mostly male-dominated fictional protagonists (Hageneuer 2021). Considering that the most famous female video-game archaeologist (Laura Croft) is a character who is depicted as upper class, rich, white, brunette, British, and hypersexualized, this is refreshing (Przystupa 2019). Aliya takes inspiration from Dr. Monica Hanna (Figure 2), a real-world Egyptian Egyptologist, whose work helped prevent looting following the Arab Spring uprising in the early 2010s (Reinhard 2019). Aliya is tasked by Myari, her adoptive mother and head of the University of Iox (a local moon), to play detective and investigate the disappearance of Renba Janniqi. Renba was a roboticist at the university who was attempting to unravel the mystery of several centuries-old robots that had been unearthed at dig sites. The idea of robots being uncovered through archaeological excavation gives new meaning to the study of ancient technologies.

Figure 1. *Heaven's Vault* title screen (inkle Studios 2022).

Figure 2. Aliya Elasra (inkle Studios 2022).

TOMB READER

Unlike the *Uncharted* and *Tomb Raider* game series, in *Heaven's Vault*, one will not find ancient aliens, supernatural McGuffins, or a Nazi in sight. In fact, as a strategy-puzzle game, there is no combat, nor is there a need to narrowly escape from logic-defying and centuries-old—yet still functional—booby traps. Instead, *Heaven's Vault* leans into the concept of the archaeologist as detective, which, as far as architypes of archaeologists go, is not too far off the mark. Archaeologists are, in a way, detectives of very cold cases. *Heaven's Vault* focuses on telling a grounded story about a world and people who feel very real despite the fantastical setting. There are numerous puzzles that encourage the player to think like an archaeologist, such as discerning the provenience of an artifact to understand its interpretation and using that knowledge to later help identify artifacts from the same location (Petrosyan et al. 2021). Through these puzzles, the player must pay attention to the fictional histories of the game world as well as the people with whom they interact. The central goal is to decipher the numerous inscriptions carved into artifacts, buildings, and books (Figure 3). The game attempts to reflect how real-world archaeologists and epigraphers understand forgotten writing systems.

When playing *Heaven's Vault*, I was initially hesitant about "learning" a made-up language, wondering how it could be implemented in an enjoyable manner. However, learning the language quickly drew my attention to the game. Instead of simply memorizing a series of symbols that represent words, the player is given a series of potentially related words based on similar morphological structures and patterns. As the player finds more inscriptions and deciphers more words, the player builds a vocabulary and a translation dictionary. After several attempts at the puzzles, the player gains confidence in the meaning of individual words, and each of these become "known" words, which no longer need to be guessed during each subsequent translation exercise. These gameplay mechanics that integrate language learning and translation are one of the most impressive aspects of

Figure 3. An epigraphy puzzle that requires the player to choose from four possible meanings for the highlighted word. The related word is the only hint (inkle Studios 2022).

the game. The process of deciphering ancient Nebula words and phrases requires a combination of logical thinking and contextual understanding, which makes the gameplay both challenging and rewarding. This approach to language learning is both engaging and effective, and it adds a unique element to the game that sets it apart from other titles (Hageneuer 2021).

As Aliya learns the meaning of more symbols and they are added to the player's dictionary, the player can translate entire sentences in the ancient script. As is the case with many real languages, the game's ancient language lacks formal punctuation, making it challenging to determine where one idea starts and another begins (Davletshin 2017). Rather than penalizing the player for guessing a word incorrectly on the first attempt, the game waits until Aliya uncovers a new inscription with the same symbol, giving more contextual evidence to either support or challenge the accuracy of the first attempt. In its new context, the player may find that a word they thought they had guessed correctly does not make sense anymore. As Aliya uses an object with a given symbol along with the context of its use, the player makes better inferences about its meaning. This process is visible in real archaeological contexts as well. For example, the Mayan symbol (glyph) for chocolate was deciphered thanks to its appearance on a jar containing chocolate residue (Stuart 2006). This type of analytical reasoning is not often found in video games, leading to the player feeling a sense of accomplishment when correctly deciphering a word. The game rewards the player by allowing the player to learn more about the world and the objects and their histories.

GAME WORLD

The world-building of *Heaven's Vault* is equally deserving of recognition. The game developer could have simply presented a single biome-themed planet as a science fiction setting. Instead, the mix of multiple diverse moons provides the game with a feeling of interconnected yet distinct environments and cultures. There are details that, although not impactful to the overall story, create a logical internal consistency that makes the Nebula feel lived in and realistic even for a fantasy world. The player gets the impression that deep historical narratives exist before the timeline portrayed in the game. In fact, that seems to have been an intentional choice on the part of John Ingold, the chief narrative director at inkle Studio, the company behind the game. Mr. Ingold is, coincidently(?), the son of Dr. Timothy Ingold, the well-known British anthropologist at the University of Aberdeen. For four years, the inkle team developed the geographical and historical (4,000-pluss years) narrative of The Nebula, asking themselves, "How did this world begin? How did it develop? How did people spread? Where did they go? Where did they congregate? Where did they avoid going? Where did society prosper? And where did it fail?" (Ingold 2019). These questions are commonly asked by archaeologists, and here, the player can discover the answers, demonstrating the value of when archaeologists work closely together with digital technologists (Cobb et al. 2019).

One aspect that stands out in the game world is the inclusion of socioeconomic stratification. In the real world, many archaeologists address questions of wealth inequalities to elucidate past human behaviors and understand the driving mechanisms of wealth disparities, which continue to be pronounced in our modern society. Wealth inequality can be evaluated by examining the variation and distribution of a population using measures such as household size (Thompson et al. 2021). Although we cannot measure the houses of The Nebula, there are obvious visual distinctions among them that allude to variations in wealth. One of the moons functions as a separate economy that relies on trade, which reflects how, historically, merchants sometimes rise to a level of wealth akin to that of the upper class and royalty, similar to

Pochteca in Late Postclassic Aztec society (Olson and Smith 2016). Within the houses on this moon, there are few evident wealth disparities. Were it not for the extreme patriarchal aspect of this moon, it would likely be the most egalitarian world in the game, similar to the perceived equality of ancient cities like Mohenjo-daro (Green 2020). Using a Gini coefficient on household size on all the inhabited moons would likely show very high inequalities among the moons while at the same time showing relative equality internally to each moon.

CONCLUSION

Heaven's Vault is a video game that presents a unique and refreshing depiction of archaeology within a realm of beautiful hand-drawn environments and character designs that evoke a sense of wonder and mystery (Hageneuer 2021). Unlike other games that glorify looting of cultural and historical artifacts, *Heaven's Vault* uses archaeological concepts and principles to create a compelling narrative experience. Moreover, the game injects subtle social commentary on various issues such as class, religion, and inequalities. Although it takes place in a fantastical world, it is still the most realistic depiction of archaeology in a video game that I have encountered. Although some scholars argue that unrealistic portrayals of archaeology contribute to "pseudoarchaeology" (e.g., Winter 2021), it is still essential to recognize that the primary objective of works of fiction is to tell a story. Therefore, the focus should not solely be on realism but on how it can inspire and engage the public in the work of archaeologists (Landa and Thompson 2023). As archaeologists, we should continue to strive to find innovative ways to inspire and engage the public in our work, even if the depictions may not be perfect (Emmitt 2022).

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