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The archaeological fête in ludic space

Michał Pawleta

Abstract
In this paper I propose to approach archaeological fêtes as part of the ludic sphere, taking the distinction between 'playing the past' and 'playing with the past' (cf. Kantor 2010a) as a starting point, I analyse forms of popularizing archaeology, as well as how the general public learns about the past. I also present ludic behaviour during such events, which in my opinion constitutes a crucial component of a fête.

Keywords
Archaeological festival, play.

Introduction

Play is a natural and common element of human activity, making it an important factor in culture, in which ludic tendencies can be observed in every sphere. Play and entertainment are an integral part of today's consumer society; they are increasingly becoming a product, service or goods 'for sale' and as such are subject to the laws governing supply and demand, as are education and scientific knowledge (cf. Kantor 2010b, 192; Paleczny 2011, 9). As far as archaeology and the knowledge derived from it are concerned, the situation is no different. Even cursory observation of the contemporary functioning of products of archaeological knowledge and the forms of their presentation and popularisation for a mass audience, leads us to acknowledge that the distant past, which is the subject of archaeological investigation, is within its domain a significant element of consumer society. In the common perception ludism denotes not only ways for humans to refer to the past, but also a changed context for the past, for archaeology and resultant knowledge, as well as for the preservation of archaeological heritage, can be used or 'consumed' (cf. e.g. Bagnall 1996; Baillie *et al.* 2010; Goulding 2000; Talalay 2010). Archaeological fêtes are one of the domains, in which the phenomena mentioned above are clearly visible.

In this paper I suggest approaching the archaeological fête – disregarding at the same time a number of other, significant functions it fulfils – as an element of the ludic sphere, a form through which the needs of entertainment are realised, in other words as an event, organised as entertainment or featuring many elements of play. Archaeological fêtes are the fulfilment of the *homo ludens* idea, satisfying the tastes and needs of the contemporary audience, as their unabated popularity and high attendance prove. As a phenomenon either containing or referring to ludic elements, archaeological fêtes will be considered from the perspective of changing forms of education and attitudes towards ways of conveying knowledge about the past. The said initiatives have an important role in education and dissemination of knowledge by 'teaching through play'. In this modern formula for learning about the past emphasis is on active participation and sensory experience of the past, based mainly on the attractiveness and spectacularity of how this knowledge is communicated. It is a form of 'playing' the past, which may be placed in the ludic sphere. Unfortunately, it rarely has much in common with reliable and scientifically–based education about the past, being an example of entertainment dominating education. Furthermore, it often duplicates a stereotypical and anachronistic image of the past.

Playing with the past

Play is a natural and common element of human activity and therefore an important part of culture. In contemporary society, sometimes also described as the 'play' society (cf. e.g. Kantor *et al.* ed. 2011), play is considered an integral element, also as a way through which culture can be received, and in a broader perspective, as a form of education. Ludism, which is the cultural conditioning of an inclination to play, regulates significant areas of human behaviour, not necessarily related to ways of spending free time. Therefore, ludism understood here as the need/inclination for play or to play should be seen above all as a cultural phenomenon. It is called upon most often as a distinguishing feature of contemporary mass culture and consumer society, describing the ability to fulfil the needs of entertainment; it is also related to a hedonistic approach. However, ludism is in fact a much broader notion, referring to a whole range of other phenomena, attitudes and cultural values, although play forms an essential element.[1] Numerous definitions of play exist, the most famous one being perhaps by Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1985, 48–49), who stated that it is *a free activity or pursuit, performed within certain set limitations of time and space according to freely accepted but absolutely obligatory rules, it is an aim in itself, accompanied by feelings of expectation, joy and awareness of 'being different', 'different' to 'everyday life'.* Another well–known researcher into human behaviour, Roger Caillois (1973, 301), believed that *play should be defined as a voluntary activity, one which provides pleasure and entertainment*. He divided games into four categories: a) *agon* (competition): competitive games based on identifying a winner; b) *alea* (chance): games involving

[1] Play and entertainment are not the same notions. Insofar as play stresses activity, entertainment emphasises the passive reception of communicated content (Kantor 2011, 31).

an element of chance, luck, risk; c) *mimicry* (simulation): role–play, pretence; and d) *ilinx* (shock): play based on thrill–seeking, altering perception, intoxication.

A person's attitude toward the past, being an element of a given culture, is defined by sensitivity or historical culture. Andrzej Szpociński (2010, 16) indicates that human historical culture in the present visual era is dominated by non–verbal communication, images, happenings, performance; it is not intellect, but mainly the senses, which play a key role in experiencing the past, providing the audience with specific aesthetic experiences (cf. also Woźniak 2010, 239). These elements are likewise visible in archaeology, especially in the way knowledge about the past is popularised, which on one hand is currently due to archaeology's social obligations and on the other, to cultural or economic conditioning related to how archaeology functions with the framework of a market economy and also the transformation of archaeological heritage into a 'cultural product'.

For the purpose of this paper I propose two theories: 1) in contemporary consumer society the past can be a source of certain types of ludic behaviour, an element of entertainment and consumerism, although it is not usually about specific events in the past, but has more to do with a general connection with the past. An archaeologically created past can inspire the search for pleasure, which is one of the more popular ways in which to experience, feel and understand this past, mainly through the widely–understood medium of play (cf. also Pawleta 2010b; Pawleta 2011); 2) in the contemporary world the past, or to be more exact, the ways in which it is brought into the present, reconstructed or re–enacted, the range of its functioning and consequently the very forms of its presence, were to a certain extent subject to logic and the rules which up till now had governed entertainment and consumerism. This depends on, among other things, advancing the commercial success, attractiveness, spectacularity or ludic aspects of various initiatives and enterprises at the cost of scientific aspects and rigour, which are pushed lower down the scale. I am referring to both the efforts of professionals (archaeologists, museum employees, historians) in this field and the growing range of amateur initiatives, which not only challenge the scientific milieu, but also affect ways in which scientists present knowledge about the past.

From the perspective of this paper Ryszard Kantor's reflections on the 'ludification' of history in contemporary consumer society gain relevance (2010; 2011, 46–49). He clearly differentiates between two aspects of this process: the 'ludification' of history, which is the exploitation of the findings of historical research for the purposes of play, and 'playing with the past' or 'playing the past', which describes games or entertainment using the past, regardless of whether it is imagined or recreated on the basis of scientific knowledge, as a canvas (Kantor 2010a, 135). Kantor suggests that 'playing the past' means *using props, figures and past events in order to play*. This includes historical clothing and costumes currently used in games, historical re–enactments and archaeological fêtes. These are spectacles serving the purpose of play, characterised by mass appeal and media–friendliness. A clear division of participants into actors and audience is observable and there is a clearly commercial aspect (Kantor 2010a, 136). Kantor considers 'playing with the past' to be a form of passive entertainment which does not deepen knowledge of the past, nor does it aim to do so. Such games are autotelic, they are meant entertain, provide pleasure and this is how they are judged. The visitor does not have to meet any entry requirements, have any knowledge of history (the past) in order to participate; the significance of such events is due not to their historical credibility or avoidance of anachronisms or fantasy, but primarily to their spectacularity (Kantor 2010a, 142). However, 'playing the past' is defined as a *clearly distinct type of human activity (play involving participation, active), longer–lasting and deeper* (Kantor 2010a, 136). This includes participation in re–enactment societies and other group activities connected with the past. Playing the past is a hobby, a passion, and for those who participate, it fills a large part of their lives. A significant feature is the attention paid to historical accuracy; this demands study of historical facts, analysis of artefacts and familiarity with scientific experiments, carried out as part of experimental archaeology. Playing the past is *recreating and being (in part) in the reconstructed world* (Kantor 2010a, 136), it is an attempt to 'immerse oneself', with more or less success, in the past. It is not passive entertainment or simply superficially interactive participation in the event, but *a whole line of time–consuming activities, triggering a very broad range of human enterprise* (Kantor 2010a, 142). Apart from the fact that they satisfy a sense of belonging, of community, of fulfilling a passion, such undertakings also happen to provide pleasure: participants end up thoroughly enjoying themselves (Kantor 2010a, 149).

Archaeological fêtes as a ludic phenomenon

Even though I am exposing myself to criticism for reducing or overlooking the multi–dimensional and complex nature of archaeological fêtes, I will restrict myself to their ludic aspects, at the expense of other important functions which they may well fulfil, including scientific, popularising, educational and economic aspects (cf. e.g. Piotrowski 2004–2005; Borkowski 2005; Grossman 2006; Brzostowicz 2009). This is, however, intentional, for the constraints of this publication do not permit other aspects to be developed and above all, it is the result of the approach to the subject outlined. Selectivity is an integral part of the practice of archaeological interpretation (as it is of every other scientific practice) and depends on the selective discussion of issues and taking into account only that information or data which will directly serve the presentation of, or solution to, a particular issue.

Archaeological fêtes and similar *open–air events with an archaeological–historical theme* are one of the arenas where it is currently possible to observe an accumulation of ludic phenomena (Chowaniec 2010, 208). Their numbers,

huge popularity and social reach make fêtes currently one of the basic forms of contact for contemporary humans with the distant past and/or archaeology. As the most ludic form of the popularisation and presentation of knowledge about the past, it sometimes arouses quite distinct opinions. Different types of fêtes or festivals, not only archaeological, increasingly oriented towards the public, are becoming a popular way of spending free time for many people, providing experiences which are absent from their everyday lives (Ratkowska 2010).

The word festival in itself, as Paulina Ratkowska points out (2010, 114), comes from the Latin *festivus*, meaning happy, lively, joyous or festive. The modern understanding, notes Ratkowska, is that a festival is an organised event, incorporating a series of performances or shows connected by a common theme, a review of the best presentations in a given genre. A festival can be an event presenting one or many forms of art, in the style of a competition or revue. Furthermore, there is a sense that it is unique, extraordinary, it has a rather special atmosphere, regardless of whether it takes place only once or periodically (Ratkowska 2010, 114–115). It is significant that such events are not usually highbrow with the purpose of providing the audience with an aesthetic or intellectual experience, but rather closer to pop–culture, aimed at a mass audience, aspiring primarily to ensure a good time and some intellectual stimulation on occasion, and playing on strong emotions (Ratkowska 2010, 126).

The fact that archaeological fêtes and the shows, workshops, demonstrations etc. which popularise archaeology and knowledge about the past in an accessible and attractive way are addressed to children mainly does not mean that adults do not find them equally enjoyable (Chowaniec 2010, 209; Wyrwa and Kostrzewska 2010, 214). Let me recall Kantor (2010, 142), who included fêtes in 'playing with the past', serving only passive entertainment. The play function of fêtes is in fact indicated by the etymology of the terms used to describe it, such as festival, feast, fair, public holiday, assuming therefore it is something pleasant, entertaining, bringing joy, connected with festive periods. In his analysis of the complex genesis of historical shows including fêtes, Wojciech Borkowski (2005, 33–34) indicates that interest in such forms of activity stems from six entertainments or elements which are an inseparable part of it: a) street theatre performances; b) folk art and craft fairs; c) knights' tournaments; d) concerts and performances by folk groups; e) experimental archaeology demonstrations; f) psychological premises, that is, role playing. Furthermore, Borkowski points out that one of the values of such an event is entertainment and play. Similarly, Danuta Piotrowska (1997–1998, 277–279; 2004, 139–140), discusses the festival in Biskupin as satisfying perfectly the needs of contemporary *homo ludens.*

The past and the forms in which it is referred to are one of the sources of ludic behaviour in today's consumer society, which according to observers is becoming a society of play. This is reflected in the trend towards considering the function of the past in contemporary popular culture, in which play is becoming an element of entertainment and consumerism (Krajewski 2003, 205–245; De Grott 2009). An archaeologically created past may likewise inspire a search for pleasure, for entertainment and play (Jasiewicz and Olędzki 2005, 183). There are many ways in which a fête can deliver pleasure; a festival is in fact an 'accumulation of spectacles', an extravaganza (Ritzer 2004, 183–221). It is possible to find enjoyment not only in passive observation of the happenings and demonstrations, but also by actively participating in them. Note that as in historical reenactments, the past presented at festivals is usually more aesthetically pleasing; it is a cleaned–up version where only those aspects which can draw in the crowds are shown. It is a specific image, sterilized for the mass audience and served through the lens of entertainment, encouraging participation in the 'experience'. Such events are also characteristic because they are totally accessible and open: it is not necessary to know anything about history, nor learn anything about it, in order to play it; there are no prerequisites for visitors (Kantor 2011, 48).

First of all, the way of learning about the past is a pleasant experience in itself. In archaeology, this depends on the skilful combination of entertainment and education, during which abstract content is simplified and undergoes objectification, although this is necessary in order for the message to reach an average member of the mass audience. Archaeological fêtes fulfil an important role in education and popularisation. They are a modern formula for informal education and the popularisation of knowledge about the past, emerging beyond static exhibition in museum showcases in favour of open–air demonstrations and showing the 'past in action' or providing a 'how–it–was–in–reality' experience, as well as direct contact with a faithful copy of an artefact or the staging of scenes of past life. A catchphrase often heard at most festivals is 'learning through play', where the activities on offer have mainly an educational purpose and learning takes place via interactive workshops, experimental archaeology presentations, competitions, demonstrations and re–enactments etc. (Brzostowicz 2009, 296; Bursche and Chowaniec 2009, 74; Chowaniec 2010, 211). A leading motive in fêtes is education through entertainment, strongly emphasised by both organisers and creators alike (cf. e.g. Wrzesiński 2008, 182; Zajączkowski 2009, 80–82). A review of the VII Archaeological fête at the Castle in Liw in 2009 commented: *as in earlier years it connected education with entertainment. Visitors could find out how people lived in the Middle Ages, what kind of customs they had, what they did, ate, and what their battles were like*[2]. The opportunities on offer here, to participate directly in the events or demonstrations, to actively learn and involve all the senses (touch, smell, hearing) directly in the process, are significant. Knowledge is presented in an interactive way, fêtes offer contact with the past along

[2] http://www.liw–zamek.pl/index.php?page=tresc&id=31, quote taken from the webpage.

Figure 1. Battle reenactment. 'Medieval Fair' in Chudów, Poland, 2008 (photo M. Pawleta).

Figure 2. Locked in the stocks – an example of amusing activities in a recreated medieval scene at "Jarmark Księcia Siemowita" in Gliwice, 2011 (photo M. Pawleta).

the lines of *pick up an artefact, try to make a copy and feel history* (Bursche and Chowaniec 2009, 75; Chowaniec 2010, 210); you can touch everything, participants can often experiment further, make a given object by hand or see how something works for themselves (Borkowski and Brzeziński 2001, 82). In order to support the educational value, the demonstrations are often accompanied by a commentary given by the reenactor referring to, for example, the methods of fighting shown, the armour, how given objects are made etc. Visitors drawn in by such forms of presentation change into active participants, which means that fêtes *are not a boring lesson about the past, but a game with plenty of things to see and do during which educational aims are realised through the presentation of fragments of our history* (Wróblewska 2008, 327). Part of this 'playing the past' depends not only on discovering the secrets of ancient handicrafts, but also raising visitor awareness of the work of archaeologists in the field through the recreation of an archaeological excavation site. Fêtes therefore also realise the idea of play as an important part of contemporary education processes, reflecting the trend towards *less didactic forms of instruction, where affective, sensual and mediatised stagings combine with a culture of instruction to produce a*

synthetic form often termed 'edutainment' (Edensor 2004, 115). These activities are a form of informal education, lasting a lifetime, the aim of which is to combine learning with entertainment, where the governing idea is to 'teach through play'. Their task is to pass on set educational content to a particular audience, for entertainment is an interesting, absorbing and audience–friendly form of information transfer. Thanks to this people find it easier to internalise knowledge, they have pleasant associations and memories of learning, and therefore return to it more willingly. 'Edutainment', as a canon for contemporary child and adult education, with the correct balance of education and entertainment, is an effective learning tool for the 21st century; it provides opportunities for audience interaction, makes the knowledge communicated more memorable and enables participants to find a personal interpretation of the content (cf. Roberts 1997; Johnson and Maxson McElroy 2010).

Secondly, pleasure is part of the definition of archaeological fêtes. Here I am referring to the understanding of play as an autotelic activity, typically ludic, which often has little, if anything, in common with a recreated past or with education about the past, but which is closely tied to this type of event. As Mirosław Pęczak (2008, 67) points out, fêtes, including archaeological events of this type, have a flavour of their own, which comes from their folk–plebeian roots. As a result they should be treated as their name suggests, as a holiday which people will remember and look forward to taking part in next year. Consequently, I also propose viewing archaeological fête as an initiative focused mainly on play and providing entertainment. The past here is exploited under the pretext of a defined type of ludic behaviour; participation in a fête then is a form of ludic celebration, a pleasurable experience thanks to direct contact with play and a way of spending leisure time.

Fêtes and the games they offer attempt, in a certain way, to relate to elements of the past and in the assumptions of their organisers contain an educational potential, although this is often rather doubtful. Fête organisers provide a whole range of attractions, both in the form of presented entertainment and events in which the public is invited to participate. The first group includes, above all, a whole scope of battle re–enactments and warrior and knight tournaments, which are amongst the more spectacular activities and are obligatory at every event of this type (Figure 1). A perfect illustration of the second group of entertainment are plebeian games and individual or team competitions: stamping your own coin, trying your hand at archery, a ribbon–weaving race, or field games based on going around the festival, quizzes, guessing games, charades, art competitions, games of physical skill based on games once popular in the past (Brzeziński 2000, 153; Bursche and Chowaniec 2009, 75; Chowaniec 2010, 212–213). Commenting on the attractions to be found at the 12th Slavs and Vikings from Wolin Festival Agnieszka Gawron–Kłosowska (2007, 98) wrote: *the historical music and dance groups lent a splash of colour to the event, at the same time teaching the dance steps and inviting volunteers to take part. There were also boat races, many games and competitions, e.g., walking on oars (it's rather simple: if you fail to make it across you get wet)*. In such activities we are mainly dealing with two types of games according to Caillois' classification: *agon* – competition and rivalry, and *mimicry* – emulating past activities. These games have their own rules; they may contain elements of improvisation and creativity, but above all they possess their own conventions and are in a certain sense fake (Golka 2004, 22).

Fêtes contain plenty of fair–holiday type or strictly ludic elements, which are devoid of educational values and popularisation goals, for which the fête is simply an attractive surround or 'backdrop' (Golka 2009, 66). Included here are all the stalls serving beer, French fries, sausages, grilled black–pudding and sweet desserts, often under the guise of *ye olde traditional fayre and beverages*. This sort of attractions also include prize draws, temporary 'old style' tattoos, bathing in wooden tubs, tug–of–war games, firework displays or being locked into stocks (Figure 2). Folk–dance groups and bands playing traditional music of the epoch (Figure 3), souvenir stalls (Figure 4) or those selling toys for children, such as plastic swords, bows and arrows or helmets, stands with handicrafts and organic food complete the whole. Seldom but known to occur are additional attractions in the form of bouncy castles, inflatable slides and trampolines for the youngest

Figure 3. Copies of prehistoric pottery as tourist souvenirs being sold at the 'Medieval Fair' in Chudów, Poland, 2009 (photo M. Pawleta).

Figure 4. German folk band Fidelius performing medieval music at European Heritage Days festival in Toszek, Poland, 2010 (photo M. Pawleta).

visitors. Looking at festivals from this perspective, one must acknowledge the critics who claim that fêtes follow a formula which is a cross between *a family fun day and a historical show* (Czubkowska 2006, 11).

A rather interesting proposal from the perspective of the issues raised in this paper has been put forward by Łukasz Dominiak (2004). It refers to Mikhail Bachtin's concept (1975) of 'carnivalisation' from the point of view of its ludic nature. According to Dominiak, the archaeological fête can be regarded as an element of the carnival for the following reasons: a) like a carnival it happens once a year; b) serious scientific rules and boundaries are suspended; c) there is a holiday atmosphere; d) mythical (half science, half popular) stories can be heard during a fête; e) the majority of festival events are *agon*, that is, they are based on competition; f) there is creative chaos and forms are mixed up; g) as in a carnival, a fête is 'time beyond time' and a 'place beyond place' (Dominiak 2004, 86). Dominiak, however, is rather critical of the declared educational aspects of fêtes, highlighting the dominance of ludic elements: a fête is a sort of secular holiday mainly involving entertainment and play. He indicates the hybridisation and 'ludic muddle of codes', attempts at reconciling orders which do not fit together (elements of high culture with low, education with entertainment), the implosion of time and space. the result is in a complete jumble in the context of the presentations, turning into a 'postmodern collage' (e.g. Mesolithic hunters performing alongside a medieval herbalist, displays on Ancient Egypt in a Lusatian stronghold etc.). Moreover, he also highlights the abolition of the distance and seriousness of the scientific message and the suspension of time and role reversal, all made possible thanks to the carnival atmosphere of these sorts of events. According to Dominiak (2004, 84), fêtes are an example of entertainment which has long lost its educational role, thus *the attractiveness of 'playing the past' comes from the attractiveness of the play, not the past in itself*. The desire to participate in the games on offer during a fête is not an indication of interest in the past as their organisers wish to believe; it is motivated solely by the desire to take an active part in play.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one should say that archaeological festivals meet the majority of formal requirements defined by Caillois (1973) as regards their conformity to ludic phenomena (they are, among others, an event isolated in a specific time and place, accompanied by a sense of a special, extraordinary reality etc.), as well as the basic categories of play and games he identified. Autotelism as one of the fundamental indicators of play and in this instance the autotelism of archaeological fêtes is beyond discussion, in my opinion, as entertainment, play and the accompanying pleasures constitute their inalienable element. By creating the illusion of time travel and promising the chance to experience something extraordinary, archaeological fêtes offer a pleasant and memorable experience (Holtorf 2009). They have also become part of education, teaching the past through play, as well as becoming an inseparable feature of this type of event through their setting in strictly ludic behaviour. I am of the opinion that entertainment is not only a side effect of the 'learning though play' process, a manifestation or an index of commercialism, but it is an element immanently contained within, aimed at satisfying

ludic needs and providing pleasure, and this should be the criterion for their evaluation. The fact that the content they deliver is easy and pleasant does not take away their educational or didactic value, although the conviction that above all they 'teach history' is, as Kantor (2011, 49) points out, *much exaggerated (...) as though the fact that they only, or certainly mainly, provide pleasure is to depreciate their value*.

Wojciech Piotrowski (2008, 322), however, indicates that entertainment as part of the convention of fêtes, thereby connected to commercialism, is a threat since *uncontrolled, it introduces a holiday atmosphere and becomes grist on the mill for supporters of so–called 'pure' archaeology and the enemies of mass events, which outdo science in popularising knowledge of the past*. I agree with the above statement and, in my opinion, the obvious element of entertainment frequently leads to commercialisation and increasingly banal displays. It also leads to fêtes being excessively focused on market needs, where practically everything can be shown and sold, if it can only be made interesting enough for the visitors, which in consequence inevitably results in a reformulation and loss of meaning of the past (Jasiewicz and Olędzki 2005, 203). Such a form of education and popularisation of knowledge of the past responds in part to the challenge of the contemporary world and consumerist culture , the 'instant culture', in which one immediately receives whatever one desires, even knowledge (for a critique of this topic cf. Postman 2006, 202–218). The message must therefore be readable and clear, featuring experiences and emotions transmitted in attractive, media–friendly and spectacular ways (Kowalski 2007, 34–37). However, the accepted formula for presenting knowledge of the past, as realized by archaeological fêtes, often leads to the domination of form over content, spectacularity and attractiveness over scientific reliability. In consequence, educational ideas are lost in favour of fast development and shallow information, accompanied by teaching which demands no effort. Therein lies the real danger, especially for unprepared spectators, who may well end up creating a false image of the past based on information received. It can also pose a threat to archaeology itself, as the results of scientific archaeological reconstructions of the past can become in general public perception either trivialised or redefined by a perpetual round of entertainment (cf. e.g. Brzeziński 2000, 153; Brzostowicz 2009, 295–297; Nowaczyk 2007, 507; Pawleta 2010a, 65–74).

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