# Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames: Representation, Player Processes, and Transmedial Connections

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## Abstract

Videogames are a hugely popular entertainment medium that plays host to hundreds of different ancient world representations. They provide very distinctive versions of recreated historical and mythological spaces, places, and peoples. The processes that go into their development, and the interactive procedures that accompany these games, must therefore be equally unique. This provides an impetus to both study the new ways in which ancient worlds are being reconfigured for gameplayers who actively work upon and alter them, and to revisit our conception of popular antiquity, a continuum within popular culture wherein ancient worlds are repeatedly received and changed in a variety of media contexts.

This project begins by locating antiquity within a transmedial framework, permitting us to witness the free movement of representational strategies, themes, subtexts and ideas across media and into ancient world videogames. An original approach to the gameplay process, informed by cognitive and memory theory, characterises interaction with virtual antiquity as a procedure in which the receiver draws on preconceived notions and ideas of the ancient past to facilitate play. This notion of "ancient gameplay" as a reception process fed by general knowledges, previous pop-cultural engagements, and dim resonances of antiquity garnered from broad, informal past encounters allows for a wide, all-encompassing study of "ancient games", the variety of sources they (and the player) draw upon, and the many experiences these games offer. The first chapter demonstrates the interrelationships between cinematic and televisual representations of antiquity and their action-based videogame counterparts, illustrating the ways in which branches of the onscreen tradition are borrowed and evolved in their new interactive forms. The next collective of ancient games locates "general" ancient materials in role-playing videogames, where familiar signifying materials are deployed to confront players with colonial spaces. The next chapter investigates the other side of ancient gameplay in foreign lands by investigating at how strategy games can become entrenched within a standardised visual vocabulary to provide one-sided, even troubling, impressions of classical empires represented in these gameworlds. The final chapter concretizes the transmedial, broadly cultural approach to ancient games and their play processes by presenting first-person videogames as multi-layered, multifaceted texts in which disparate, but specific, nodes of interpretative traditions surrounding ancient materials are drawn upon to immerse players in stylised, narrative-rich and thematically deep experiences. This study therefore has three primary motivations: to see how antiquity is represented and made functional in the interactive medium; to see how this affects player reception of these ancient games; and to build an interconnected "big picture" of antiquity in videogames within a wider media environment.

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# Introduction

In the first century BC, a protector, or 'Medjay', traverses Roman Egypt, fighting occupying imperialist forces while gradually revealing a tragic past of conspiracy, loss, and death. In the twenty-first century world of today, a videogame player co-governs the actions of this Medjay, named Bayek, as this story and the world it takes place in is slowly revealed. Abandoning his hometown of Siwa, Bayek travels over sand-dunes and fends off bandits, until the horizon suddenly opens before him, a sun-kissed cinematic panorama of Alexandria materialising as the player presses 'forward' on her controller.[1] Everything seen here, from the famous lighthouse to the surrounding farmland, can be explored, touched, even climbed by the player through Bayek. From here, the player embarks upon a mission to drive out Hellenistic soldiers from his homeland and much of Northern Egypt, before encountering and combatting the newly invading Romans. Bayek's world is replete with Graeco-Roman architecture, material culture, politics, and people, and it is the player's task to free Egypt from these power-hungry forces by dismantling their governing structures, killing their leaders, and destroying their constructions. Bayek's own deeply personal story is revealed to the player intermittently in short, film-like sequences between interactive episodes, adding richness to the fiction and bringing a human element to this historical world. From meeting Cleopatra to assisting Vitruvius with his building programme and even murdering Julius Caesar at the Senate in Rome, twenty-first century technology here brings to life, in breath-taking detail, a virtual ancient world.

Despite its close association with historical and archaeological records and sources, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2017) (*AC:O*) is nevertheless a constructed fiction, a videogame. In the adventure that follows, the player will encounter historical figures known to us through the literary record and will discover a prehistoric alien technology as she explores pyramid tombs and the extra-terrestrial secrets buried beneath them. For Hellenistic Egypt, on the cusp of Roman occupation, acts as a background to a much greater celestial mystery. Alongside these two distinct-but-overlapping dimensions, at intervals the player returns to an Egypt of the present day, for Bayek is himself part of a simulation played by an in-game protagonist. In this in-game version of the real world, contemporary researchers access the 'genetic memories' of their ancestors and "play", just like real-world players, the past lives of their lineages. The player therefore controls another player, who simultaneously controls Bayek. *AC:O* is but one instalment in the science-fictional *Assassin's Creed* series in which players encounter rich, meticulously-constructed and detailed worlds of the past, which are themselves contained within a fictional, technologically

[1] The female pronoun is used throughout.

superior present, all of which is underpinned by the concealed operations of a mysterious alien race. Aside from the more straightforward associations with Roman-Egyptian antiquity in *AC:O*, and the similarly "accurate" virtualisation of fifth-century Greece in the forthcoming *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec, forthcoming 2018), there is a subtler "ancient" dimension to the franchise. The aliens appear as Roman gods, named Minerva, Jupiter, and Juno, and are clothed in long white robes and outlandish headgear. They exhibit behaviours typical of the Roman (and Greek) pantheon, following classical literary precedents wherein the gods squabble amongst one another while they express paradoxical concern for and disdain of humanity. These Roman-esque aliens speak of an apocalyptic catastrophe, their language couched in world-ending rhetoric and their terminology reminiscent of present-day issues of climate change, destructive human activity, and natural calamities. The player finds remnants of these aliens and their cryptic messages in the deepest recesses of the most secret of places, and over the course of the series, knowledge of these aliens is gradually and fragmentarily acquired. But the more the player plays, the more these histories, "real" and fictional, this story of modern-day conspiracy, and the actions of the alien-gods that overshadow these events, become intertwined. These "Roman" gods become less about being Minerva and Juno, evolving as the narrative unfolds into multifaceted compounds that respond to the fiction they are couched in. Minerva, Juno, and Roman Egypt continue to be seen and interpreted, but increasingly in relation to other in-game and real-world referents. It is within this dense interconnection of narrative content, representational strategies, and contemporary themes that the player operates, grappling with subtexts and meanings engendered by this multifaceted nexus and adding meaning to it as they co-operate with the story and complete the demands of the game.

*AC:O* is a product of layered appropriative strategies, a fiction that intermingles antiquity, an in-game modernity, and a mythological background, all experienced through a "real" present in which the player is situated. The ancient world itself, its constituents and its materials, are reconfigured to fit the moulds and needs of the game, narrative, and wider franchise. Furthermore, the games across the series repeatedly expound contemporary thoughts and agendas.[2] This means that although antiquity becomes entangled with other non-ancient materials, it does not get lost: instead, it is made to collaborate with other components of the game to create a complex play and narrative experience. The gods, for example, have been reconfigured to make sense within the wider demands of the narrative. Roman Egypt, even, must be presented in such a way as to connect with the themes evinced by the other periods represented by the game, and must be narratively

[2] For example, the Pope in *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2009) believes in science over religion, Compagno 2015: 1016, thus exposing his supposed hypocrisy. For contemporary Ubisoft's care in depicting non-white cultures, see Shaw 2015: 10-11.

consistent with the broader themes of the series. This complex interplay between layers of referents raises questions concerning the wider nature of games and how ancient pasts function within these complicated dynamics, and what roles the player, as active receiver, has while operating in these complex environments. To investigate the wider phenomenon of virtual antiquity, this thesis formulates and uses an approach by which to understand how and in what ways ancient games are made, presented, and interacted with by a player, and how that antiquity is changed by its in-game surroundings and the real-world demands placed upon it. I outline here the key concepts used throughout this study, before setting out to locate antiquity in its reconfigured state within interactive videogame texts, to ask how this impacts on the role of the receiver (the player), and to uncover what this means for broader questions concerning ancient Greece and Rome in popular culture.

## What is a videogame?

A videogame is an entertainment product, created by developers and co-operated with by a player. The player engages with the game, thinking about the situations presented and actively directing the events onscreen.[3] The physical mediator, the computer system or console, forms the connection between player and game. It is thus almost always audio-visual, and functions through a technological device.[4] This makes the game not unlike a film or television show, aside from one key medium-specific component: its interactive nature. 'In games, gameplay is king'.[5] A videogame is furthermore a media 'text' in its broadest sense:[6] it is an object that can be read so that the meanings within can be discerned by a player. The next chapter will investigate the many ways in which videogames have been approached, but for now the videogame can be considered a distinct type of text that requires the 'shaping presence of an author', because games prior to interactivity are always 'amorphous, incomplete' and so must be 'co-authored'.[7] The receiver, given agency, significantly and profoundly alters the gameworld and its events.[8] Games are therefore always dependent on player intention and input, though that input is nonetheless always constrained by that system.[9] Interactivity is thus the primary characteristic of gameplay, constituting a 'give-and-

[3] It therefore requires 'nontrivial effort' to function, Aarseth 1997: 1-2.
[4] Natkin 2006: 2.
[5] Fencott et al 2012: 26.
[6] Aarseth 1997: 20-1, 62. Ferri 2007: 468 calls games, in this light, 'single game-texts'. Atkins and Krzwywinska 2007: 3 delineate a 'triangulation of videogame, player and text'.
[7] Murray 1997: 204 and Cover 2004: 177 respectively.
[8] Murray 2004: 10 on 'Agency'; Murray 1997: 128 on 'our participation'. See Perlin 2004: 14 on games relying on our agency to make them work. See also Upton 2015: 59 on altering the 'game state'.
[9] Mateas 2004: 24.

take', a 'dialogue' of information flowing between player and game.[10] This therefore implicates antiquity within an urgent reception channel in which players have active roles in constructing the text. *AC:O* is not the first instance of an entertainment product showcasing a computer-generated Alexandria: for example, the *Agora* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2009) film treated viewers to large-scale, visually impressive CGI Alexandrian architecture.[11] It is, however, the first time a receiver has been able to direct an onscreen agent or actor to touch it and move around in it. However similar videogames might be to other media products, they are always defined by the interactive processes that "finish" it and make it whole. Interactivity constitutes a truly unique dimension to the medium: it must therefore be recognised as essential to all game studies, and so is central to the theoretical approach illustrated in Chapter 1.

The interactive process is dependent on the interpretative and cognitive capacities of a player, who must see, interpret, and input commands in relation to the programming of the game. This in turn means the researcher of videogames must appreciate both the channels leading into the creation of the game and the visualisation of its onscreen events, and the responses of the player herself. Questions of cognitivity, interpretability, and the potentially active properties of memory are therefore crucial to our understanding of the play process, since being a human receiver entails having, and acting upon, thoughts, feelings, emotions and imagination.[12] Videogame scholar Janet Murray and classicist Nick Lowe, for example, both separately use the board game Monopoly to suggest that players relate to the game using real-world, memory-based referents before acting upon the game.[13] The activation of memories through cognitive effort, here acknowledged by scholars from two separate fields, is fundamental to our understanding of how, specifically, games work. That some of the referents in a given game, by definition, exist in the mind prior to any play session, raises further questions as to how consciousness, recollection, and reflection on past experiences contribute to gameplay.[14] Antiquity, acting as a component of a game, must function within such parameters whereby it is recognised, recalled, and used, and by asserting this we allow space to reconceive the nature of antiquity as it is channelled into both the production and the playing of an "ancient game". When playing an ancient game, memories related to a wider antiquity must be used to complete, make whole, the antiquity onscreen. But these virtual ancient materials must also be interpretable to a wide audience. Antiquity in this form is therefore akin to 'collective

[10] Upton 2015: 23.
[11] See Elliott 2015b: 136.
[12] Sellers 2006: 20-1. For 'imagination', Meskin and Robson 2012: 213-4.
[13] Murray 1997: 143; Lowe 2000: 32.
[14] Crites 1997: 34-5.

memory', 'not history',[15] a memory/recognition process existing apart from formal historical endeavours and born from "informal" cultural sources. Complete pictures of ancient games, then, cannot be formulated without appreciating past and current instances of reconfigured antiquity: hence this project builds analyses of ancient games in direct relation to pop-cultural, fictional and real-world phenomena to characterise and understand them.

Immersion, furthermore, is also a consequence of the interactive process. This is a state of being achieved by the player wherein she focuses so intently on the game that she is effectively removed from the real world. The flow of information between a player and the game causes players to 'lose their sense of time'.[16] The memories and recollections outlined above as part of play, then, must be un- or semi-conscious, the player not actively referring to sources but engaging in subtle mental processes. If the memories used in those processes are therefore less tangible or "visible" to the player, the virtual antiquity represented becomes subject to 'unconscious absorption' and use as the game is played.[17] Videogames are therefore coded to manipulate and stimulate what might be called pre-programmed thoughts and feelings that assist in player co-operation with game and narrative.[18] This has potentially profound effects on the way antiquity functions in virtual-world environments, prompting the repositioning of popular virtual classics within a semi-realised, abstract continuum that engenders an equally complex process of reception-and-interpretation. These observations foreground the analyses throughout: for example, in Chapter 3, players become generic Greco-Roman heroes on epic quests to save the world; and in Chapter 5, players embody Helen of Troy, immersing themselves wholly into an entirely separate frame of mind. Players will at once depend on what they perceive to be "heroes" or "Helen", and establish their position in the game within that mental framework. Immersion during interactivity means that ancient-world content in videogames is intrinsically, dimly familiar, and assists in streamlining play so that players become intimately connected to both in-game constituents and the meanings they expound.

Sometimes as part of their storytelling videogames contain non-interactive sequences, known as cutscenes. Cutscenes are sections in which in-game agents become autonomous, as they are programmed to act out scenes *to* the player to elaborate on the narrative of the game. Complaints regarding the disruptive nature of cutscenes as removers of agency are not uncommon,[19] though they are ultimately necessary in providing respite for the player as she gets to

[15] Kannsteiner 2002: 180.
[16] Tavinor 2009: 51-2.
[17] Kannsteiner 2002: 180.
[18] Natkin 2006: 44.
[19] For a list, see King and Krzywinska 2006: 115.

grips with the story being told. Whether they incorporate motion-captured actors or models created on computers, these prerendered sequences add 'fictive richness' to the videogame, creating depth within the game experience while advancing player understanding of the story.[20] Since they communicate meanings through visuals and sound without a hands-on receiver, many associate cutscenes with films and cinematic techniques.[21] This is especially evident in Chapter 2, where action-based ancient games use both overtly cinematic cutscenes and player-controlled moments of frenetic, violent action. They are, consequently, explored as texts whose themes, tropes and visual motifs are concomitant with those found in ancient epic film and television. This behaviour is seen to extend beyond cutscenes and into the very operations of play, with epic fight sequences and bloody violent battles spinning out of the ancient (and modern) film tradition to let players control, rather than witness, revenge-fuelled murders and the destruction of monuments. The cutscene is a key component of these game experiences especially, now aligning them with cinema and now pulling the receiver in, interweaving the controlled actions of the player with the progression of the narrative through uncontrolled sequences.

To contain and partially guide this emerging complex play process, this thesis follows the practice set by developers, players and commentators who often organise and categorise videogames into genres. It may be said that 'antiquity' itself constitutes a specific genre, in that ancient-world media products share characteristics and seek to 'satisfy a set of audience expectations' in often similar ways.[22] Nevertheless, videogames are traditionally distinguished by the sorts of play experiences they offer. These playstyles are governed by genre affordances, play opportunities given to the player by each unique genre framework. Therefore, I characterise genre as '"orderer"', to quote Fencott et al, as a set of familiar categories that assist in creating and playing.[23] A developer will understand the genre structure they are creating within, 'combining or recoding… into attribute configurations',[24] which then generates a set of governances that partially guides the player through the cognitive activities they undertake as they interpret and act upon the game. Nearly all 'cognitive activity involves and is dependent on the process of categorizing',[25] so while the player operates with nebulous 'cascading' thoughts as they engage with onscreen events,[26] the player is further assisted in decoding those events partly through relying on genre conventions.[27]

[20] Tavinor 2009: 65.
[21] Bignell 2002: 182; Jankowich 2008: 126, 129-30; Gersic 2008: 145 on music.
[22] Margolis 2017: 405.
[23] Fencott et al 2012: 17. See also Gaines 2011: 27.
[24] Bruner 1956: 45 on literature.
[25] Bruner 1956: 246.
[26] Upton 2015: 147.
[27] Giddings and Kennedy 2006: 138; Upton 2015: 286-7.

While some see genre as engendering a 'mechanical and, often, involuntary response',[28] the structures that make up a genre should be seen as only one part of the complex gameplay process. Players will be aware of some, though not all, of the decisions they make and actions they take, as part of the knowledge/memory flow that constitutes interactive engagement.[29] Genre therefore helps to structure that flow and give it direction. If, however, ancient gameplay is informed by semi-rigid genre apparatus and by co-operation with 'previously tacit cultural knowledge',[30] this might imply a certain one-dimensionality: is the action-game destined to merely replicate cinema (Chapter 2)? Is a characteristic "Romanness" an inevitability in games of empire, military strategy and economic development (Chapter 4)? This thesis explores such questions by considering genre structures not as fixed sets of affordances, but as semi-flexible templates that work towards evolving, rather than simplifying, the antiquity within. Yet, in following this methodology whereby we estimate on the basis of conventions, we must also assume what people "tend to do" or are likely to find familiar. To make this analysis work, as Upton says, 'we must make assumptions about readers other than ourselves. This is tricky territory.'[31] Nonetheless, as will be shown, the unique capacities of virtual antiquity to be fertile creative ground is demonstrated by the simultaneous use and subversion of familiar antiquities within equally recognisable, yet partially malleable, genre frameworks.

## Classical reception approaches

An approach in which games are "read" as texts invites interrogation of videogames and gameplay through theoretical precedents set by classical reception studies. The perspectives this body of scholarship has generated allows ancient games to be embraced as artistic and intellectual reconfigurations of ancient material, wherein the contexts in which they are made and consumed take precedence.[32] The flexibility of reception theory also lends itself to fusion with other arenas of scholarship. A combinatory use of memory studies and classical reception theory assists in defining gameplay in Chapter 1, and throughout, as a means to understand "ancient gameplay" as a series of meanings co-realised and implemented by the player. Those meanings are informed by preconceptions about the antiquity found onscreen and are therefore located in player memory, while those memories-come-preconceptions are in turn related to wider and longer chains of

[28] Myers 2010: 34-5.
[29] Fencott et al 2012: 150.
[30] Sellers 2006: 21. Lowe 2000: 65 uses the term 'genre assumptions' concerning ancient literary genres.
[31] Upton 2015: 239.
[32] Hardwick 2003: 5.

reception stemming from the ancient world itself.[33] A hermeneutic approach, prioritising objects as texts, permits consideration of the cultural and historical impacts upon the text/product/game,[34] allowing for greater understanding of the wider circumstances the texts were created in, and the broader ramifications of using certain ancient materials in those contexts. It also allows us to track, loosely, the directions by which those preconceptions so essential to gameplay may have arrived from. Each reception text 'yields insights into the texts and contexts of ancient works, their subsequent interpretation and their situation in the modern context of reception'.[35] These texts, and the 'marks' or signifiers that constitute them, are themselves embedded within a 'cultural matrix'.[36] The game is therefore a text that contains antiquity yet is connected to other antiquities via complex relationships. Such a perspective avoids reducing texts 'to a system of arbitrary symbols',[37] and can instead help us to see how games and players relate to larger spheres of influence. It also centralises antiquity as a component of study: studying patterns of reception elucidates how perceptions of antiquity change or remain static over time.[38]

The introduction of a player into the reception process permits us to see how players engage with, even alter, subtexts found in ancient games, thereby taking an active role in the delivery of modern-day messages, morals and values. Postcolonial perspectives, for example, are consistently utilised in Chapters 3 and 4, as ideas about imperial pasts are explored both within the fabric of the games and within the practices implemented by the player. Chapter 3 demonstrates how certain Roman materials are structured within a role-playing framework to allow exploration of colonial ancient worlds, thereby confronting bigger questions that come with the movements and actions of (virtual) ancient cultures. Chapter 4, on the other hand, identifies many of the issues that come with representing empire: the destruction of cultures, player-led realisation of the supremacy of the Greco-Romans, and the potential for rehearsal of outdated imperialist concepts or the reduction of antiquity to standard contemporary capitalistic paradigms. Furthermore, it prompts us to ask what it means for antiquity to be involved in such subtexts, and for a player to intimately associate antiquity with them through play. A classical reception approach therefore allows isolation of an ever-changing antiquity in videogames, and permits us to see how, with its surrounding materials,

[33] 'Chains of reception' is a theoretical cornerstone of classical reception studies as laid out by Martindale 1993: 7, concerning literature.
[34] Meretoja 2014: 96. Also in Kücklich 2006: 104.
[35] Hardwick 2003: 1-2.
[36] Martindale 1993: 15; 34.
[37] Feared by Murray 1997: 274.
[38] Hardwick 2003: 10; Hardwick and Stray 2008: 2-3.

antiquity and the player both become involved with wider connotations, resonances and realms of meaning.

## Transmedia and popular culture

Drawing antiquity into this territory, wherein represented and interpreted virtual ancient worlds are interconnected with an array of other audio-visual materials, narrative tropes and post-antique ideas, where abstract realms of connotation and consequence surround the ancient materials, and where themes and subtexts move freely across time, space, and medium, requires a fresh approach to conceptualizing popular classics. The new media theory of transmedia narratives, popularised by Henry Jenkins and expanded upon by himself and other theorists from a variety of backgrounds, relates foremost to the telling of stories across different media platforms and so may be used to clarify this new perspective on popular, virtual antiquity. Jenkins demonstrates, for example, that fans of the *Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999-2003) franchise must move across films, comic-books and other resources to fully understand the story and the world it takes place in.[39] A transmedial perspective, then, reclassifies creative materials in these contexts as components of 'world-building' enterprises, wherein conceptual fictional worlds or universes exist abstractly in the mind of the receiver, and contain stories and materials.[40] This new vision of story-worlds brings to mind a network of relations, 'from the interrelationships between the various elements of the franchise in question, through to the role of creators, fan-bases and cultural commentators'.[41] This fits neatly with reception perspectives that see the transmission of meanings as existing within complex networks interacting within and outside themselves.[42]

Transmediality is not new, but its application to classical reception studies, and so to the present investigation, can offer new ways of seeing popular antiquity.[43] Nevins identifies ancient Greece as perhaps the first truly transmedial culture in which characters and places in myth and literature crossed over from one work to another.[44] This is not how the Greeks conceived of their worlds, but it is nevertheless how we, the modern observer, can retrospectively appreciate the way Greek materials intersect.[45] Transformative perspectives provided by transmedial theory let the

[39] Jenkins 2006a: 97-8.
[40] Jenkins 2006a: 21; 2009b; 2011.
[41] Harvey 2015: 34.
[42] Hardwick and Stray 2008: 5.
[43] As of 2018, transmedial theory has become of use to classical reception scholars, e.g. Diak 2018, throughout Blanshard 2018, and Baker 2018 on the transmedial Hercules. See Chapter 1 below for more on transmedia and classical reception.
[44] Nevins 2005; 2011b; Harvey 2015: 50-1.
[45] Johnston 2015: 292-3. Significantly more on Johnston and 'storyworlds' in the following chapter.

antiquity found in videogames move through boundaries and into new areas in significant ways that impact, with lasting consequences, on the lateral and horizontal trajectories of received and reconfigured ancient materials. Theoretically, an ancient character can be represented in a film, then represented similarly but for different reasons in a game, each taking both ancient and modern precedents, in different ways, to create that character. That character is therefore being transformed in relation to its fictional surroundings, and then takes its new connotations back into the transmedial continuum to inform future texts and encounters. Transmedia is thus not about telling one story, but about transmitting stories, characters, themes and even ideas around imaginative and imaginary space: the construction of a near-borderless multidimensional network in a creative continuum, drawn on, added to, and altered by people and texts. Chapter 1 in particular expands upon the benefits of looking transmedially, providing us with a new way to see the complex network of popular culture as a nexus throughout which popular antiquity operates.

The movement of materials from medium to medium, and across franchises, recalls the phenomenon of intertextuality. Intertextuality enriches texts, including games, where an author actively takes elements of other products and genres,[46] and inputs those specific materials to be recognised within certain contexts by receivers. Intertextuality, like transmedia, can also be implicit, rather than straightforward.[47] Nevertheless, a transmedial perspective sees the convergence and collection of references, themes and ideas as part of a conceptual, interrelating fictional realm: a reference to antiquity can be made implicit in a text, but that reference will be seen through transmedial analysis as existing abstractly with other related materials. That reference will furthermore interlock with a variety of other referents, engendering the creation of an abstract "universe" borne from the fiction(s). Transmediality is not a rule, so much as 'one logic for thinking about' present cultural phenomena,[48] a means by which content flows.[49] Intertextuality is more like an action taken with a force behind it, an inflexible rule, whereas transmediality is the multiplicitous result of those actions and so is perpetuated *by* phenomena like intertextuality. Both intertextuality, which can be witnessed when a game directly appropriates a classical source, and transmediality, where all manner of visual or intellectual content is mobile and interrelated, play a significant role in this study.

This approach invariably entails drawing antiquity into the "depths" of pop-culture, so we can witness popular classics not as a phenomenon operating alone but as a "world" within a network

[46] Atkins 2003: 32-3; Fencott et al 2012: 153.
[47] Kücklich 2006: 105.
[48] Jenkins 2011.
[49] Harvey 2015: 22.

of other, multiple, ancient and modern components. For good or ill, ancient Greece and Rome are now implicated in the corporate, profit-driven twenty-first century media world.[50] Videogames sell particularly well and are especially 'mainstream', enjoyed by huge audiences.[51] They are, perhaps consequently, traditionally characterised as a waste of time, antisocial, even unhealthy, leading to sweeping generalisations that all videogames are "bad".[52] But they are, in reality, a locus for creativity. At the point of writing, videogames continue to display increasing sophistication in their narratives and the worlds their stories play out in.[53] Independent games especially, which make up a significant part of this thesis, operate innovatively alongside those created by the 'giant conglomerates of the entertainment industry'.[54] Both types of games, big and small, are represented throughout this study, the contexts of their production often having significant impacts upon representational strategies and play experiences. Whether commenting on independent or Hollywoodian game experiences, I use television, cinema, other videogames, as well as the politics of modernity, ideologies of the twentieth and twenty-first century, and the classical content implicated within all of this to illustrate a new transmedial perspective on antiquity in videogames and wider media. As has been alluded to, analyses of action-based ancient games in Chapter 2 demonstrate connections between those games and other audio-visual enterprises. Chapters 3 and 4 both indicate how antiquity can become occupied with political ideologies, historical themes and imperialist narratives in very different ways and in very different game situations. These examples therefore continue to depend on signifying materials borrowed from other media, and agendas and subtexts drawn from the contemporary world, to diverse ends. Chapter 5 drives home the importance of locating networks of association and identifying the wider contexts surrounding virtual ancient worlds. There, first-person ancient games are treated as complex confluences of specific post-antique interpretations and notions surrounding certain ancient materials. Developers here reconfigure not just antiquity, but the ideas and readings applied to it over time, to immerse players (almost literally) head-first into surreal landscapes of alien-peoples and nightmare-worlds fuelled by psychedelic drug-taking. Whether a modern-day Eleusinian Mysteries or a radical reimagining of Polybius' Carthage, antiquity here is at the heart of interactive experimentation as it, and so the player, weaves in-and-out of the many possibilities that surround those ancient loci. As a result, the analyses reveal a new creative space where both the intertextuality of ancient sources and the transmedial free movement of ideologies, implications, themes, genre conventions and

[50] Sellers 2006: 9.
[51] Vorderer and Bryant 2006: 1; Lee, Park, and Jin 2006: 259.
[52] Atkins 2003: 150-2.
[53] Shapiro, Pena Harborn and Hancock 2006: 275-6.
[54] Murray 1997: 252.

visual signifiers generate strange, exciting and impactful experiences.

## Going forward

This approach considers as much as possible the things happening in the game, ancient and otherwise, that may affect it and make it what it is. With limited space, of course, the focus is necessarily narrowed: most ancient-world videogames, of which there are hundreds, are not here. Instead, this thesis focusses on specific examples that particularly illustrate the many ways in which videogames and their players interact with antiquity, streamlining the processes of investigation to allow for direct interrogation of the nature of antiquity in the videogame medium. Attention is paid to both large-scale and independent releases, hence a focus on the twenty-first century as the period in which big-budget and 'indie' games proliferate alongside one another. This period is furthermore where post-millennium theories of digital culture make most sense. Additionally, while some of the games investigated here are made outside of North America and Europe, there is unintended focus on games created and played in the broadly-termed "western world" (except for investigation into the use of classics in Japanese anime and manga contexts in Chapter 5). Nevertheless, in characterising games as products of cultural movements right now, we may come to understand ancient games as texts without boundaries, adopting both western and non-western materials and ideas and evincing more global themes and concerns. Since I endeavour for a broadly "cultural" vision of antiquity, Chapter 1, alongside constructing an appropriate methodology, critiques current terminologies and intellectual trends that seek to characterise videogames set in the past as intrinsically historical. Following Kannsteiner, representation in this study is instead linked with reception to recast virtual histories as constitutive of culturally reflective processes, a phenomenon of 'cultural production and consumption that acknowledges the persistence of cultural traditions as well as the ingenuity of memory makers and the subversive interests of memory consumers'.[55] The mirroring and expansion of cinematic dimensions in Chapter 2 are further complemented by the identification of contemporary messages encoded within the game, as they so often are in ancient film, which are perpetuated by a player engaging in emperor-deposing and god-killing play practices. Chapter 3 shows how generic antiquities allow, or disallow, co-operation or dismissal of colonial ideologies drawn primarily from imperial-era Europe and activated (or not) through virtual colonial spaces. Chapter 4 navigates a supposedly immovable strategy game framework that presents versions of Rome and its empire to players who construct make-believe capitalistic fantasies. Chapter 5 shows how varying uses of resonances and traditions of thought

[55] Kannsteiner 2002: 179.

applied to antiquity over time allow for the expounding of contemporary ideologies and agendas within multifaceted, complex game experiences. Ultimately, this study locates antiquity in diverse, surprising and exciting circumstances and environments, wherein ancient materials collaborate with all manner of broadly cultural, visual, intellectual, thematic and ideological phenomena past and present. Through this, we may see how antiquity has changed due to its implication in the unique interactive medium, and how it continues in this transformed state to reflect and have impacts upon the modern world.

It is argued by game scholar Aarseth in relation to videogames generally: 'When much energy is spent on showing that *P* is a perfectly deserving type of *Q*, the more fundamental question of what *P* is will often be neglected.'[56] Where *Q* denotes serious cultural artefacts, and *P* denotes the videogame, I argue that, at least where antiquity is concerned, the *P* is always communicating with an innumerable amount of '*Q*'s'. Each chapter, based on a broad genre of videogames and split into analytical case studies, uses the necessary ancient sources and their concomitant scholarship, patterns in popular culture, and approaches and theories from genre, media, classical reception, and videogame studies to allow for the interrogation of an array of questions. How is antiquity operating in videogames? How is it being reconfigured for different genre apparatuses, and to accommodate for different agendas and purposes? How does antiquity become an easily interpretable, readable, playable process for the receiver, and what does this mean for current and future attitudes towards the ancient past? What other modes, conventions, traditions and modern components are they operating within and alongside? Since videogames are not just representational, but interactive, both onscreen events and the active cognitive processes of the player are incorporated into the methodology. Through this multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach, a fuller picture of how these virtual ancient worlds work can be discerned, and a better idea of how players receive and collaborate with the events onscreen and the values and subtexts underpinning them can be reached.

[56] Aarseth 1997: 16.

# 1. Theories & Approaches

This chapter formulates a fresh approach to ancient gameplay that appropriately reflects the complexities of its functions while illustrating the "bigger picture" in which both games and play are situated. First, current trends in videogame theory and historical games studies are evaluated, their suitability assessed in relation to a conceptualization of antiquity as a dynamic, transmedial mechanism defined by broadly cultural processes. Following this, a hybridization of present theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary ideas assist in defining the ancient gameplay process as a phenomenon wherein players cognitively engage with onscreen events and tacitly recall memories to inform their in-game actions. Working towards what an ancient game is, and does, the aim is ultimately to demonstrate the ancient gameplay process as a nebulous and multifaceted practice made possible by assumptions and expectations concerning the ancient past as it exists in the collective imagination. This realm of assumptions, expectations and dim resonances of antiquity is then characterised as a "storyworld", an entity constantly moving and evolving within the broader transmedial cultural network. Doing so highlights the importance of ancient games' contexts, allowing us to locate how and why certain representational strategies are used, how and why play processes are implemented, and in what ways these procedures affect the game and the player. This approach thus typifies ancient materials in games as constantly fluctuating, defined by the contexts in which they are made and used, and co-developed by the cognitive and recognitional processes of the player acting upon them. This provides a basis for the thesis, which analyses videogames across four broad genres in relation to the connotations, values and conventions with which antiquity converses to formulate a game experience.

## 1.1 Approaching videogames

The history of videogame scholarship has, since its inception, played host to strongly opposing methodological approaches. In the first edition of the *Game Studies Journal* (2001), Espen Aarseth expressed his fear of what he called the academic 'imperialism' of videogame scholars, whom he believed were unwilling to treat games outside the parameters of their own field. 'The greatest challenge to computer game studies,' he states, 'will no doubt come from within the academic world'.[1] Having established videogames as mechanically organized texts,[2] Aarseth later described videogames as technologies based on 'logical rules', a definition of games foreshadowing Eskelinen's

[1] Aarseth 2001; cf. Eskelinen 2004: 36.
[2] Aarseth 1997: 1.

assertion that games were intrinsically ordered between 'user events and system events.'[3] Opposing this is the approach commonly attributed to Janet Murray who considers videogames primarily as vehicles for storytelling, and so positions them as a new form of literary text. Literary narratives, says the likeminded Ryan, 'constructed by the reader on the basis of the text',[4] inform a narratological framework for videogames wherein the gameplayer becomes a kind of interactive reader and co-creator in the fiction. In this way, the computer itself becomes what Murray terms a 'spellbinding storyteller'.[5] On the one hand is an approach which departs from crossdisciplinarity to define videogames on their own terms. This has since been criticized as fundamentally restrictive.[6] On the other, Murray's and Ryan's narrativity approach may well be too open, too relativist, one where scholars try to 'forge a story at any cost'.[7] While this scholarship has set the terrain for all studies of videogames (including this one), multiple opposing methodologies have left a field of study without a coherent framework to which a researcher can refer.

There have been many subsequent attempts to create a reliable basis for videogame studies after its semi-formal foundation between 1997 and 2001. Deeming the approaches of both Murray and Aarseth to be 'lacking',[8] Bogost defined videogames through the theoretical concept of unit operations, a literary term that sees texts/games as a set of interrelated components. Unit operations prioritise 'function over context'; however, while he claims they can 'help us expose and interrogate the ways we engage the world in general',[9] this outlook nevertheless brackets the play experience into a unified procedure. In this way, the representational dimension of videogames, which constitutes the ancient worlds represented in the games that follow here, becomes at best masked, at worst inconsequential. In a later publication, Bogost then claims that videogames must not be seen to 'extend farther than they really do', and that sometimes broader general contexts, such as ideological underpinnings and subtexts, cannot apply to videogames.[10] There is little mention of the player as a product of her environment, or her own unique role in processing the game, and despite the apparent desire to locate the real-world surroundings of the game and the player throughout his work, this method risks closing videogames off from wider cultural resonances. In 2005, Juul attempted to define videogames as 'rule-based' systems while maintaining the human element, the player, who '*feels emotionally attached to the outcome*' of the game.[11] In drawing a

[3] Eskelinen 2004: 40-1; Eskelinen 2001.
[4] Ryan 2001.
[5] Murray 1997: 2.
[6] Juul 2011: 16; Bryce and Rutter 2006: 7-11.
[7] Eskelinen 2001; cf. Champion 2011: 10-11.
[8] Bogost 2006: 99-101.
[9] Bogost 2006: 3-6, 40.
[10] Bogost 2016: 184, 187.
[11] Juul 2011: 36, his emphasis.

connection between rules and game fictions, Juul denies the chance to see those rules as 'building blocks' which inform the fiction within: an approach that, if taken, allows us to see games as 'texts', 'carriers and transmitters of meaning'.[12] Juul's approach is helpful in that it draws both sides of the debate into the same approach,[13] but his definition similarly pays too little attention to the variety of cultural, political, and other contextual meanings that permeate a game. However, it is useful to consider that, no matter how strict the game rules are, and no matter how expansive or limited the narrative dimensions of the game might be, the human player who interacts with the game is always a random and unpredictable element. There is nothing stopping the player of a game from assigning her own values to the things she sees on screen,[14] allowing space for subjectivity in gameplay and permitting the fictional environments generated by the game to move away from the code that, functionally speaking, makes up the game itself.[15] As arguably all above demonstrate, albeit in different ways, the player is the most crucial element of the play process, although a formalisation of the complexities of player interpretation, contemplation, and physical input continues to elude videogame theorists seeking consensus.

This brief discussion highlights the lack of appropriate theoretical apparatus by which we might capture the complex nuances of antiquity as it is received through play. There is, furthermore, little classical reception scholarship relating to videogames, though the body of literature is growing. In keeping with other reception projects concerning entertainment media, however, the papers that are available do place emphasis on the contexts of videogames. In 2007, Gardner identified the past as 'an arena for a particular kind of play',[16] hinting at the potential for ancient games to operate dynamically. He also raises issues central to the studies in Chapters 3 and 4, such as the 'flattening of cultural diversity' facilitated by a perceived anonymity of virtual people.[17] A study by Lowe (2009) provides essential theoretical background and is discussed in depth below. A short paper by Christesen and Machado (2010) also highlights the essential role ancient games have in introducing young people to the classical world.[18] McMenomy (2015) writes at length about games, specifically within the parameters of children's literature, and incorporates many different game examples. Through prioritising classical reception theory, many of these studies also highlight the contemporary political ideologies and cultural meanings that influence both the creation and playing

[12] Wells 2015: 540-1.
[13] Thus, engendering a necessary 'complexity', Lizardi 2014.
[14] Gee 2003: 40-1.
[15] Bogost 2006: 135, quote in De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2009: xxxv, insists against isolating videogames from the world outside.
[16] Gardner 2007: 257.
[17] Gardner 2007: 262.
[18] Christesen and Machado 2010: 107.

of the game.[19] The influence of the present-day "real world" is also central to the approach in this study. There exist ideas that are less in keeping with the aims of this study: for example, Ghita and Andrikopoulos' (2009) in-depth investigation of *Rome: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2004) is especially useful for its investigation of fan responses to and modification of the existing, commercially-released game. However, it analyses the game within the contexts of classroom teaching rather than as an entertainment product or text,[20] thereby couching the investigation in educational terminologies characteristic of the historical videogames studies approach described in the following section. As Section 1.2 of this chapter explains, this project aims for a different approach. Nevertheless, all of these studies offer ideas indispensable to this thesis. Nearest to a complete study is the edited volume *Greek and Roman Games in the Computer Age*, composed from a two-day conference and applying various interdisciplinary methodologies to ancient games and genres. Aarseth, writing the introduction, concedes that videogames have both 'semiotic' or 'representational', and 'mechanical' components.[21] This implies that approaches to videogames, and ancient games, are moving towards interdisciplinarity and openness. This chapter aims to build on these foundational studies to construct a framework that future extended studies of ancient videogames can be based on.

Lowe's theory of a 'literal reception' is especially useful, as it centres analytical focus on the medium-as-medium while exaggerating the importance of the player who is engaging with the antiquity represented onscreen.[22] He posits that players will literally engage with a virtual ancient world by acting upon it: drawing on Martindale's assertion that 'meaning… is always realized at the point of reception',[23] he implies that every time a player contemplates the virtual antiquity onscreen and reacts accordingly, meaning is being generated as part of a continuous, co-operative experience. The '*continued re-appropriations by readers'* now operates within the text,[24] the videogame, and is repeatedly reconfigured by each individual player as they engage and interpret. As classicist Jenkins argues, re-interpretations of meanings within texts proves Martindale's assertion that meaning is on the reception end of the process, as much (or more) than at the creation of the product.[25] When applied to gameplay, this perspective suggests the processes going into videogames by creators and the reception processes of players that go into the game constitute the co-creation of meaning-

[19] Typical of reception products, where one text can be appropriated for 'entirely different ends', Jensen 2012: 17.
[20] Hatlen 2012 also analyses *Rome: Total War* in the contexts of students (see Chapter 4).
[21] Aarseth 2012: 18-19.
[22] Lowe 2009: 65.
[23] Martindale 1993: 3; Lowe 2009: 65.
[24] Martindale 1993: 28, his emphasis.
[25] Jenkins 2015: 146-7.

making. Ultimately classical reception theory demands we see ancient games as multifaceted texts typified by fluid communication between developer, onscreen events, and receiver. It also requires us to see appropriated ancient materials as possessing a broad spectrum of possible meanings, since those materials are applied, reconfigured, and reapplied as development and play take place.

### 1.2 History in videogames

In recent years, a new approach has been developed to fully investigate, for the first time, representations of history in videogames. At its core is the notion that games which represent historical places, people, or events can covertly grant the player access to 'historical practices', and that players become 'player-historians' when engaging in those processes. This phenomenon, pioneered by Adam Chapman, designates the play process as a form of '*historying*'.[26] In games considered complex enough to faithfully represent world-systems and the development of countries, player procedures are characterised as distinctly historical in character: for example, when implementing economic strategies upon virtual cities, or having direct influence over the construction of specific historical events and chronologies, the player is said to be enacting historical processes through their role as pseudo-historian. Many scholars cite videogames' natural affiliation with counterfactualism, the playing-around with 'what ifs' to better understand what 'is', as proof that historical processes can and do operate in videogames.[27] This is considered especially the case for those games that allow for multiple pathways or permit players to make choices that go against historical "fact". Through this perspective, historical games are also associated with the tradition of historiographers who agree that historical narratives are ultimately subjective constructions.[28] In this way, the challenges the player faces, the strategies the player formulates, and the subsequent action the player inputs to overcome that challenge, are considered intrinsically historical, in that they appear to mirror the same creative interpretative processes as the formal historian. The player in this model interprets a historical situation in the game, thinks "historically", weighs up options and participates in that development.

Often in this region of historical games research there is particular focus on the historical component as, specifically, history. Spring claims that: 'With a game, the historian can engage research questions, incorporate primary and secondary source evidence, explore historical themes,

[26] Chapman 2016: 49 and 22, his emphasis.
[27] Alcazar 2010: 300-1, 334; Chapman 2016: 192-3; Clyde, Hopkins and Wilkinson 2012: 11. Lizardi 2014 characterises it as altering and playing with historiography/history-making.
[28] E.g. White 1978: 51.

present a thesis and make historical arguments.'[29] These are foremost the priorities of written academic history. While it is conceivable that many historical games are influenced by "professional" historical approaches, the issue is how major this dimension of the videogame is. There is a danger here of academicizing videogames set in the past. Some games can teach "facts", or provide information drawn directly from the historical record, but if some historical games' 'learning environment and activities as a whole instil knowledge of real-world historical events',[30] we are looking for something that *might* be in *some* games but is not necessarily universal to all games based in the past. 'Historying' as Chapman has it is a necessary reaction to academic elitism, a defence of (historical) videogames as a serious media form.[31] It also demands that this is a different kind of history being done, an alternative to the collection of historical data and the analysis and presentation of it to a wider audience, as "real" history is often typified.[32] But prioritising virtual histories as forms of "real" histories, even if different, has consequences. In these approaches to historical games, the imaginative, subjective factor which is produced and realized during gameplay and the contemporary resonances underpinning the games are potentially secondary to this "historical" experience, when that experience is said to centre around an in-game history navigated by a kind of interactive historian – rather than the player of a culture-infused media artefact.

Defining history is a tricky task, but with help from Collingwood we can begin to disentangle the history historians do and the kinds of histories operating within videogames. Composing histories and historical narratives is always more than just searching for the so-called truth of the past, even if this is the stated aim. Collingwood identifies in history-making an 'empirical semi-knowledge', derived from Greek thought, defined by our 'fleeting acquaintance[s]' with a complex world.[33] Judging only by this, we could understand historical games to be operating in line with this definition of historical knowledge. There are, indeed, shared elements of practice between the history of a game and that of formally composed history. Comparison can be made between game developer and historian, such as the way a historian plots material, narrativizes it, and shapes it.[34] The historian '*self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data from consideration*',[35] as does the creator of a game. Similarly, historical thought as a formal discipline is also connected with all manner of other dimensions of the real world, including its fictive dimensions,[36] and like the

[29] Spring 2015: 208.
[30] McCall 2016: 527.
[31] Clyde, Hopkins and Wilkinson 2012: 4 argue that the 'past as history' is as valid in videogames as in any textual form.
[32] Black et al 2014: 293.
[33] Collingwood 1994: 25-6.
[34] White 1978: 67. Also de Groot 2006: 403 and 411: History as 'fragmented', 'formulat[ed]'.
[35] White 1978: 46, his emphasis.
[36] Collingwood 1994: 403 illustrates his points about "history" by referring to the characters of Mark Twain.

videogame is always a construction. Development teams will operate in ways like historians in that they take 'story *elements'* and play with those elements to create a narrative based on the history in question.[37] The development of ancient historical scholarship furthermore relies on the harvesting of excerpts 'judged note-worthy'.[38] Despite these similarities, however, the motivation underpinning the desire to equate historical games with their "formal" counterparts masks the complex ways in which ancient-world videogames are mediated by and constructed with non-historical, or only indirectly related, things. While the history in the game is vital, it is necessarily one of many components within a constructed gameworld.

The practice of creating history, even within the open and subjective way described above, possesses fundamentally different functions from the characteristics of historical or ancient videogames and the processes of play that activate them. Where the search for 'historical truth' must 'discriminate history from fiction',[39] the historical videogame must do the exact opposite. It must obtain history and mould it into a game framework, attach bits of other fictions to it, insert "untruths" into the history to make it correspond to other elements in the game. Chakrabarty's postcolonial assessment, that 'European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations',[40] could be extended to this 'historying' debate. A vision of the past in videogames is necessary for us to play, but that vision is wholly inadequate for understanding the past "as it was". More recently, Munslow cites Collingwood and 'his emphasis on the historian seeing connections between data', alongside his desire to 'balance the empirical with the imaginative'.[41] Both developers and players may be said to undergo a similar process. However, the 'empirical' of the game relates not to a historical source but to the coded constraints set by the developer. The imaginative pertains to a certain *type* of historical representation within the game, one necessarily generated by the popular imagination to connect with a wide audience. While virtual history may in some senses constitute what Munslow calls 'pastness', a represented pseudo-history rather than an empirical, so-called "truthful" history,[42] the 'pastness' in videogames is not concomitant with that of historical enterprises. In those endeavours, a contemporary historian interprets the sources and the world of context around it. This open approach is wholly necessary for historians: Munslow's position 'places professional

[37] As White 1978: 84 describes the historian, his emphasis.
[38] Jensen 2012: 3. This is central to Rosenstone's 2012: 148-9 claim that filmmakers are also pseudo-historians who "harvest" historical fragments just as these historical game scholars suggest. See also Munslow 2014: 16-17 on film acting '*as* history', his emphasis.
[39] Collingwood 1994: 238-9.
[40] Chakrabarty 2000: 16.
[41] Munslow 2014: 17-18.
[42] Munslow 2014: 6: 'deconstructionist history' asserts that all formal histories 'only offer a representation of the past'.

historians and makers of historical fiction on a level playing field, contributing equally but differently to the shared cultural process of generating knowledge of the past'.[43] This assists in removing value judgements imposed upon formal histories and historical fictions and carves a progressive way forward for professional historians to conceive of the past. Nevertheless, we must always remember that they operate 'differently', too, as Munslow states above. Even the most liberal view of "formal" history is different enough to a past represented and played with in a videogame to warrant an alternative approach to studying it.

Consequently, this study treats videogames and their play processes as broadly cultural phenomena in which that world of context is ours, rather than any world of the past. The history represented in a game can only reflect a past of a specific present. This is not about simply locating historical accuracies: 'There is nothing more tiresome than critics who simply list historical errors without explaining why.' The purpose of this thesis, as Richards goes on to say, is to find out the agendas behind the alterations made to certain ancient pasts.[44] Most important to this study is that the remediated,[45] appropriated antiquity is altered for certain reasons, thereby informing us more about the period the text is made in than the period it represents. It has been noted that videogames may have 'a learning and persuasive intent' aimed at 'changing the players' evaluations and perceptions of a certain person, issue, or object',[46] but this 'learning' is more in relation to our own selves, our peculiar and popular imagining of the ancient past, and the modernity we currently inhabit, all of which is refracted *through* the history represented and played. This then alters the trajectory of the materials utilised,[47] thereby demonstrating the ability for antiquity to not just be culturally adaptive at the moment of text-creation but to be sent out into the popular realm ready to mean something different (again). To reflect this movement through present-day culture, representations of antiquity must be judged 'as complex and rich dialogues with the past whose value resides precisely in how the past is reformulated in the light of the present.'[48] Doing so disconnects ancient and historical games from historicizing procedures and instead moves us towards an understanding of ancient games as constructions that use the ancient to reflect the modern. To appreciate what that version of the past is actually doing in the present, we need to adopt a point-of-view typical of classical reception studies, wherein 'the idea of the non-specialist' as

[43] Hobden, forthcoming.
[44] Richards 2015: 20-1. Although claims to historical accuracy are useful marketing tools, inaccuracies are usually present in ancient film to meet the 'need to entertain'. So long as they are roughly believable, they are usually accepted, Stow 2015: 82-85.
[45] A term used by Bolter and Grusin 2000: 47; 49-50 to describe conversation between 'the new' and 'the old' in media products.
[46] Alhabash and Wise 2014: 1361.
[47] Thus engendering 'a notable change of direction in the tradition', Solomon 2007: 484.
[48] Joshel et al 2015: 2.

receiver is as important as that of the specialist (we, the scholars).[49] Distancing ancient games from "formal" terminologies not only situates them outside the purview of historical thought but allows us to see how uses of and alterations to histories reflect the bigger picture of the here-and-now.

Some believe historical games can assist in teaching in university modules and school classrooms due to the belief that they can teach historiography and 'complex historical concepts'.[50] While the use of games may offer an alternative to the tedium of learning dates by rote and single-stranded grand narratives found in textbooks,[51] the issue remains that represented histories will always deliver different kinds of historical processes to the sort the teacher wishes to present to her students. In 2016, teachers created a videogame named *Saeculum* and used it to teach Roman history to their class. The subsequent report identified that the teacher had to inform the student-player that whatever they were experiencing at any given time was but 'a microcosm of larger themes in Roman culture',[52] and that the game necessarily overstated singular dimensions of Rome. Even when made specifically for classrooms, the game had to be accompanied by a disclaimer or qualifier. This is because videogames, and this goes especially for those made explicitly for entertainment purposes, always possess different aims and mechanics to historical texts, written or otherwise. That videogames can be used in the classroom is not in dispute: some studies imply that while games are less effective in teaching than standard classroom practice, there may yet be a future use for videogames in the formal teaching process.[53] But in discerning the operations and meanings of ancient videogames we might avoid conflating the practices of the historian and/or the teacher with the comparatively new approaches to videogames we are now undertaking. Warnings have been issued for just such practices in classical reception studies. Paul identifies in ancient films that one can find what is '"there"' simply because 'I look *in order to find them there*'.[54] That is, there may be dimensions of the ancient game that are beneficial for the classroom, or similar to elements of historical practice, but this does not allow us to see what antiquity is doing in those games beyond their scholastic advantages. It would be useful to move into less familiar and non-academic grounds so that the features and operations of ancient and historical games can be connected with less tangible, popular interpretations of the past.

[49] Stow 2015: 75.
[50] Wainwright 2014: 579, quotation from 603. Also, Ghita and Andrikopoulos 2009 on ancient strategy games (see above), and Corbeil 2011: 419 generally.
[51] Doron 2016: 59; also, Kee et al 2009: 311-12.
[52] Fredrick et al 2016: 217.
[53] Black et al 2014: 290-1.
[54] Paul 2013: 25, her emphasis.

In short, we must appreciate the link between reconfigured histories and formal studies of the past without letting that formality guide our understanding of the pasts represented in popular entertainment. The historical processes/player-historian approach, for one, does not offer enough insight into the actual processes of the player. One 2016 study measured players' assessment of historical videogames as sources of historical knowledge. Ultimately, little indication was found that the participants recognised any historical processes or useful historical facts as they played. Though the writers postulate players may be unable to locate historical processes due to their limited ability to identify them,[55] another interpretation would be that the "everywoman" playing the game operates in a 'non-specialist' fashion referenced above. Their cognitive processes must therefore reflect the much broader cultural, political and social contexts which form their daily experiences, while the specifically "historical" dimensions of the game correlate with popular histories and standard understandings of the past gleaned from previous encounters with it. Chapman frequently champions the need to prioritise 'common knowledge', and popular history, a certain form of history that is intrinsically unfixed.[56] He also specifically wishes to avoid seeing history merely as 'formal' practice: the introduction to *Digital Games as History* argues the history within a historical game is always characterised by popular perception. This thesis is indebted to such a definition. However, the use of the term 'historying', and the use of the methods of analysis it arises from, raises potential problems. Within those parameters, historical game players are always 'actively engaging with history and historical practice',[57] rather than with an amalgamation of complex non- or pseudo-historical phenomena. To see historical and ancient games as the result of present-day resonances existing in the wider cultural mind allows us to characterise reconfigured histories in games as reflections of modernity, thereby allowing access to contemporary critique *through* the past. Chapman hints at this by suggesting popular histories may be defined by 'how we perceive it', that their character is provided when we frame those histories 'through the lenses of the present'.[58] But he goes on to compare the videogame to the 'practice of a history' and follows by presenting historical games as an intrinsically '*historical form*'.[59] This study therefore follows his lead with a focus on videogames, as he puts it, as 'mediators of knowledge and ideas',[60] but nevertheless diverges from the path set by Chapman to characterise those knowledges and ideas as broadly cultural in form, thereby designating ancient gameplay as a complex cultural, and contemporary, practice. The issue with the term 'historying' stems therefore from an ideological, rather than

[55] O'Neill and Feenstra 2016.
[56] Chapman 2016: 3, 5, 11-12. See below for more on 'common' or 'unofficial knowledges'.
[57] Chapman 2016: 5.
[58] Chapman 2016: 11, 13.
[59] Chapman 2016: 15, 17-18.
[60] Chapman 2013: 313 in Westin and Hedlund 2016: 4.

methodological, desire not to tacitly equate videogames to other 'serious' areas of study.[61] This can happen inadvertently: to claim as Taylor does, for example, that historical complexities in videogames correlates with 'the new math of historical process' ends up mechanising those games at the expense of the histories represented within.[62] Furthermore, in seeing historical games as carriers of history, we risk deeming them to be 'in bad taste' and 'anachronistic'.[63] To remedy this, we could characterise the antiquity interacted with in the games here as part of a different process of "knowing" and "interpreting" relative to the cultural climate in which the text was made.

This approach might initially problematize a study of ancient games, opening them up to 'a complex range of possibilities'.[64] The difference between this perspective and others is that while those approaches emphasise historical games' position 'in popular culture',[65] this project emphasizes popular culture's position in historical games to better understand the fluid complexities of antiquity as it changes shape in each videogame text. After all, we should neither want nor need historical games to be 'reposition[ed]… as something that belongs at the very center of the academy',[66] but instead to critique the games 'as cultural artifacts in and of themselves',[67] and recognise that although these games are not necessarily being historical, they are still far from easy to quantify and, as we will see, are certainly not divorced from their original historical sources. Structuralist anthropologist Levi-Strauss defines historical narrative composition in two parts: the selection of the material and the changing of it into a narrative, both of which alter the history for 'some infrascientific aim or vision'. This he terms 'history-for'.[68] Videogames, on the other hand, may be termed 'history-with': with the gameworld, the rules, the fiction, and the player. We could suggest that historical practice is at play in *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) (*LOTR*) because of JRR Tolkien's appropriation of antiquity: for example, the character Arwen is repeatedly described as 'white-armed', 'bright-eyed', and grey-eyed, language usually used to describe the Greek goddesses in classical literature.[69] But that would not tell us much about the character of that appropriation, what it meant within his world, nor what it might mean to the writer and the reader. Instead we could see *LOTR* as a fiction which incorporates and uses all kinds of histories and mythologies to create its

[61] A chief concern of scholars like Aarseth 1997: 106-7, who sardonically worries that games 'cannot possibly be taken seriously' nor attain 'sophistication' in the eyes of other academics.
[62] In relation specifically to 'non-linear outcomes' of historical events, in keeping with counterfactual logic, Taylor 2003.
[63] As Sobchack 2012: 332 defines the general attitude towards historical film. The concern for historical accuracy in virtual reconstruction is also a concern for Champion 2011: 13.
[64] Prettejohn 2002: 128 in response specifically to 'modern representation(s) of classical antiquity'.
[65] Chapman 2016: 279.
[66] Fredrick et al 2016: 218.
[67] De Zamaroczy 2017: 162.
[68] Levi-Strauss 1966: 247 in White 1978: 55-6.
[69] Tolkien 1954: 221.

world and tell its stories, to make it accessible and readable (as a developer would a videogame), emboldening the original work with familiar and powerful classical terms and so broadening its possible meanings. The reasoning behind the meaning, be it creative, political or some other agenda, can then be uncovered by an interdisciplinary approach wherein the historian's skills and knowledges about the past are still paramount but are nevertheless combined with other critical methods of analysis.

### 1.3 The gameplay process

It is necessary then to clarify the numerous processes that inform the ancient game and the procedures a player undertakes as she engages with it. The gameplay process involves recognition of onscreen events, some form of mental effort on behalf of the player, followed by a quick judgment or evaluation which prompts eventual physical input. Each playing of the game is different, because each player is different, and each player changes as they live their lives. As with any text, the player's 'interpretive processes' are 'loosed by the text in the reader's mind'.[70] However, the already-reconfigured antiquity in the game is then acted upon by the player who further changes the nature of the text and its content. This raises crucial questions about the role of player cognition in gameplaying and the contemporaneity of those cognitive activities that facilitate the play of all, including ancient, videogames. If a modern person uses her mental capabilities to engage with the game, it implies that everything from her personal politics, her knowledges about representation, her beliefs about gender and identity, and other such notions combine to inform the gameplay process.[71] Every memory, thought, and feeling is potentially valuable to the process.[72] It follows that each instance of interpretation and subsequent meaning-making is different for everyone.[73] Analysis of the role of the player is key to understanding how antiquity operates in videogames, and how it impacts upon (and is impacted by) the receiver. But how do we characterise the gameplay process as a series of cognitive events? First, consider the cognitive dimensions of the play process as a cycle of recognition, knowledge implementation, and action.[74] The cognitive activity might take a long time, as the player assesses a situation and devises strategies, or a near-automatic moment of quick decision-making. This primarily depends on the type of game being played, but the process is fundamentally the same across genres. The knowledge implemented by the player can be of any

[70] Bruner 1986: 7 on literature.
[71] Atkins and Krzywinska 2007: 5-6.
[72] As expressed in the introduction, thinking and feeling are important to the play process, e.g. Fencott et al 2012: 23.
[73] Bruner 1986: 153; Gerrig 2010: 362.
[74] Pillay 2002: 337. Also claimed in recognition of CGI-rendered visuals, Kozbelt 2006: 142-3.

type, from specific subjects to general trivia, all of which are partially governed by reader expectations contained within the text.[75] The ancient-world gameplayer therefore receives ancient material visually and cognitively and co-operates with and reconfigures it again, partially on their own terms, to motivate in-game events.

The specific antiquity represented in a game is subject to similar representational rules as other media: no interpretation of art can be extricated from other related, and sometimes unrelated, past experiences. Classicist Fred Jones describes the 'imaginative acts' of witnessing Roman gardens and their aesthetic content by contemporary Romans as an activity contributing to and 'continu[ing] the process of cognitive development'. Quoting von Stackelberg, Jones identifies the Roman garden as '"not just a place, it was an idea of a place"' in which literary and intertextual dimensions were at play in reinforcing 'myths of Romanness'. Aristocratic children of Rome experienced gardens and brought those intertextual and allusory connotations with them into adulthood, where they then experienced the gardens with a mixture of old and new impressions.[76] Reinforcement of ideal behaviours and associations was also achieved through literature.[77] We are not ancient Romans, but Rome is nevertheless a representational place for us; from childhood, we experience it through film and television, as well as other fiction, comic books, and, increasingly, videogames.[78] It is always being mediated through such representational avenues, thereby encountering other things: genre structures, for example, modern narrative techniques, covert political ideologies. Materials from antiquity are used now, as then, as a 'usable past' for certain purposes and agendas.[79] Just as the combination of new information and general knowledge instigate certain thoughts and values in the Roman child,[80] the player of a game representing antiquity moves between tropes and motifs from both the ancient world and the non-ancient territory within which it is situated. In a game these conditions are defined primarily by the developer, who encodes events for them to be subsequently remembered.[81] The player co-operates and collaborates with the encoded antiquity and so uncovers and rehearses the range of possible meanings attached to it, whether consciously installed by the creator, implied by the material itself, or brought along by the player.

[75] Emmott, Sanford and Alexander 2010: 377-8.
[76] Jones 2014: 783, 5; 795-6.
[77] Romans 'fashioned their own historical and educational narrative' through Homeric epic focus on virtue, Takacs 2008: 147, continued by Roman authors, 2008: 152.
[78] Joshel et al 2015: 1; cf. Hardwick 2003: 85-6 on film and television.
[79] As in film, Wyke 1997: 15.
[80] Jones 2014: 797.
[81] Nünning 2010: 215-6 in the wider contexts of fiction worlds.

If knowledge mediates the recognition of the player and her acting-upon the game, she must "know" antiquity in some fashion to comprehend it visually and cognitively. The antiquity in videogames, however, cannot derive from formal histories as it needs to be interpretable to a wide playership. Chapman states that we need to understand history as multiform and complex,[82] and this assertion serves as a basis for my characterisation of the knowledges used in ancient games. The production and consumption of knowledge in games must be different to that acknowledged by 'traditional historians',[83] and is here further characterised as "cultural knowledge", stereotypes, norms, values, phenomena used as part of storytelling and (game)world-creation that ultimately become points of reference.[84] That knowledge becomes known over time, informally, and is stored and internalized.[85] This general or recognisable antiquity is informed primarily by television,[86] by film, by other videogames, knowledges that are instilled in players of other videogames in the same genre, or different genres, and the knowledges that come with being a human being. While Munslow's *The New History* (2014, cited above) illustrates a similarly open approach to 'historical knowing', this is nevertheless set in the contexts of interpreting the past. I contend that players do not, consciously or otherwise, engage in this process, but in a different, less tangible process of receiving, conceiving and acting upon a representation of the past, informed primarily by the world of the (ancient) past specifically as conceived by the popular imagination and channelled through popular culture. Consider the 'small and superficial' knowledge of antiquity gained at school,[87] and, to quote Jenkins, the young people and 'high school students [who] today struggle with *The Odyssey*, because they don't have the same frame of reference as the original audience'.[88] People go through their lives picking up bits of history 'in dibs and dabs', as 'half-remembered incidents and events'.[89] Perhaps that vague understanding of *The Odyssey* is complimented by a film or documentary based on it. Ideas of which consumers are semi-conscious continue to bounce around a variety of cultural media and are now communicated and consumed quickly and automatically through digital means,[90] meaning notions of, for example, *The Odyssey*, are always being gathered and altered. Information can therefore be taken on, often unconsciously, anywhere from classrooms to entertainment

[82] Chapman 2016: 277 and 5-6 respectively. Chapman 2012 also openly wishes for a move away from 'book-history'.
[83] Antley 2012.
[84] Neumann and Ziebold 2010: 108.
[85] Calleja 2011: 41. This relates not just to antiquity, but the game's rules, and other conventions.
[86] Hobden 2016: 121.
[87] Gemra 2016: 91.
[88] Jenkins 2006a: 122.
[89] Samuel 2012: 5-6. He also mentions children 'learning' this knowledge through play in relation to 'Greeks' and 'Trojans', 2012: 12, as does Thompson 2013: 194 in relation to the whole corpus of Trojan War entertainment.
[90] Gaines 2011: 3, 61.

venues.[91] Such redefinitions of history as a subject perceived by non-professionals is not unlike the Foucauldian 'subjugated knowledges', those possessed by everyday operators in any given work environment or institution.[92] Yet, these ancient knowledges are only half-known, typically semi-consciously acquired over time. When Pillay tells us that videogame players operate with both the familiar and the unfamiliar,[93] we can identify antiquity in an ancient-world game as having both recognisable and less recognisable components: it must be partially ambiguous, yet partially recognisable, to create an interesting but playable game experience. Rather than using specifically historical knowledges, dim resonances are appealed to by developers and picked up on by players to facilitate the cognitive operations of gameplay, and to keep it fresh and partly unpredictable. This classification distances the type of history located and interacted with in games from formal types, and, as Westin and Hedlund have done, positions less-tangible expectations of the player as central to the play process. Those expectations manifest in a game that is explicitly removed from expert knowledge and into one generally recognisable by a wider audience.[94] Therefore, 'the *popular* understanding of the past' is what constitutes 'the expectations' of the receiver, and is perhaps the most useful tool by which we can discern the nature of reception instances.[95] It would be worthwhile to envision a "popular antiquity", a distinct and semi-realised abstract entity characterised by such "unofficial" and fragmented knowledges, as we ask how antiquity is represented and interacted with in videogames.

This vision of antiquity represented in games has several consequences for our understanding of the ancient world as it exists in media today. First, it defines the antiquity presented as a certain "type", '*a* history', not a 'real' one but one necessarily 'an essential, indivisible part of the narrative'.[96] Cultural knowledge of the past therefore supplants the kinds of knowledges necessary to determine "actual" history. There is some scientific grounding in this image of a distinct "popular" version of antiquity: it is noted that information pertaining to '"what"' is processed in a different part of the brain to '"where" or "how" information',[97] suggesting that the mental instruments and activities needed to comprehend ancient materials in videogames are separate from the mental facilities that interrogate historical "truths" and processes. This newly-formed category of "knowledge" is the product of 'culturally active processes',[98] which are both present in

[91] Bignell 2002: 171; Bruner 1986: 77-8; Kannsteiner 2002: 194.
[92] Foucault 1980: 81-82.
[93] Pillay 2002: 339.
[94] Westin and Hedlund 2016: 16-18 on *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2010).
[95] Stow 2015: 87, his emphasis.
[96] Menon 2015: 109-110.
[97] Kozbelt 2006: 143.
[98] A phrase used by Hardwick 2003: 112.

the gameworld and are brought by the player to co-construct the game experience. This proposal also means that any and all materials appropriated into the gameworld are always potentially significant to the player. In their analysis of the Japanese animation series *Saint Seiya*'s (Toei Animation, 1986-1989) use of Athena, Castello and Scilabra describe a work that 'can be considered a typical example of "pop-reception": 'single shreds of Western culture, coming from different traditions, are received and collected one by one and then rearranged among the different characters *without any apparent philological thread*.'[99] But the 'thread' that makes these appropriations worthy of our attention need not be historical or philological, only relative to some in-text process or exterior contemporary reflection. For example, Frankel recognises the issues and situations encountered by the titular characters of both the *Hercules* (Renaissance Pictures, 1995-1999) and *Xena* (Renaissance Pictures, 1995-2001) television series as aligned with modern political motivations from gay rights to pacifism, all of which is couched in modern speech.[100] The disparate, often "inauthentic" Greek materials present in the series are not bound by the constraints of ancient sources, but speak outwards instead towards late-twentieth and early twenty-first century concerns. Consequently, any and all 'shreds' of antiquity in a videogame, too, may mean anything to the interpreter. Seen as moments of storytelling and world-making that make up part of a constantly moving whole, antiquity can in this context never lose its potency, for when defined as always-available appropriable materials within a distinctly "popular" landscape will always be ready to change.

This diffuse and less tangible kind of "knowledge" has been identified, implicitly and explicitly, by game scholars. Folkerts illustrates the use of fantastical and Hollywood conventions, story devices and medieval-historical motifs in prompting play with the fantasy videogame *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004), which utilises vaguely medieval aesthetics to assist player interpretation as she fights through mythical landscapes. She is immersed in the gameworld but is always 'reminded' by objects that 'trigger associations'.[101] No matter how generic the signifier, those associations help the player to semi-consciously, cognitively act upon the game. But that association can furthermore only be characterised as vaguely historical, as well as ambiguously fantastical. In embracing this notion, we can conceive of ancient games as being more about 'ideas concerning' antiquity and can envision the represented antiquity within as a construction that allows access to the game through

[99] Castello and Scilabra 2016: 188, my emphasis.
[100] Frankel 2018: 117, 125. See Chapter 2 and 4 in particular on the respective refiguring of Pandora and Helen for contemporary purposes.
[101] Folkerts 2010: 108-9; cf. Florack 2011: 497, wherein players 'call up… previous knowledge'.

its intrinsic familiarity.[102] Popular antiquity, therefore, may now be seen as a distinct form of 'cultural memory'.[103] In the above example, the appropriated past is 'cultural' in the broadest sense, because it is both fed by generic historical (medieval) iconographies and a broader understanding of swords-and-sorcery heroic conventions. If the brain is 'reminded' of certain behaviours through onscreen prompts, as Gee suggests,[104] fragments of antiquity activated through the play process are not arbitrary, just different, and created out of general knowledges and pop-cultural tropes. When confronted with a text that requires mental effort to comprehend, the player is not filling in those experiential gaps 'from the actual world itself but from [our] actual world knowledge', projecting upon the text (or gameworld) what we know as people who live lives.[105] Knowledge, when defined in this way, loses its strictures and becomes fluid and useable, a characteristically general and widely-understood concept. Crucially, it can also be appreciated as a universally possessable and instrumental part of interpreting, playing, and understanding games.

We might then see antiquity in videogames as constituted by what Hardwick calls 'cultural processes',[106] rather than intrinsically historical phenomena. To denote a phenomenon as 'cultural' necessarily broadens its possibilities, and also defines the phenomenon as unfixed and dynamic. It also denies the represented past as having to fit within any definition of "historical", allowing it to become something reflective of the present via a reconfigured past, rather than as any form of commentary upon the past. Cultural processes, whatever their manifestation, contribute to both game construction and the gameplay experience. Cultural processes as defined by classical reception scholars also fit neatly into transmedial perspectives introduced earlier. Recent movements in reception studies draw attention to conceptual networks: 'chain[s] of influence' or 'an archaeology of influence'.[107] Hardwick and Stray describe the big picture of classical reception as made up of chronological, synchronic and 'lateral relationships',[108] demonstrating appropriation of antiquity not as a timeline but as a multidimensional conceptual space. Martindale similarly speaks of a 'cultural matrix'.[109] New media theorists furthermore demonstrate the necessity to locate texts in metaphorical networks, defining them by their relation to other media and the subjectivity inherent

[102] As Wells 2015: 541, 544 speaks about *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989) and its appropriation of 'ideas concerning' urban planning.
[103] Harvey 2015: 2. On the complexity and flexibility of this continuum, see Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman 2014: 73.
[104] Gee 2003: 74.
[105] Thon 2017: 292; also, Harvey 2015: 6-7, 'my… interactions with the wider environment'.
[106] Hardwick 2003: 107-9.
[107] Budelmann and Haubold 2008: 16-17. Also in studies of the 'classical tradition', considered somewhat separate from reception studies, Silk et al 2014: 12-13, though 'networks' here tend to be conceived as more linear.
[108] Hardwick and Stray 2008: 5.
[109] Martindale 1993: 34.

to them,[110] and relating them to other materials to avoid seeing them as isolated.[111] The philosopher de Certeau recognises 'a network of relations' that corresponds to everyday phenomena, that is, things that do not necessarily pertain to a medium.[112] This is echoed by theorists who locate reception processes within transmedial paradigms but do not consider them to be monolithic or linear procedures.[113] These many references illustrate the multidisciplinary desire to locate artefacts within near-intangible nexuses of broadly cultural phenomena. Classical reception theory, too, classifies antiquity not as an instrument to be inserted into the game but as a pervasive, fluent, multidimensional force. This fluidity is allowed only when we agree that 'there is no right or wrong… only what exists artistically'.[114] During interpretation, theorist White says, we move 'through *all* the structures of relating self to other which remain implicit as different ways of knowing in the fully matured consciousness.'[115] In the context of gameplay, this is indicated by our need to flicker rapidly through the many layers of our mind to "connect the dots" presented by the game, which implies that we are tapping into interconnected nodes across a network or matrix, a metaphorical or abstract continuum of varying information. Therefore, our definitions of playing (ancient) videogames must reflect the much wider spectrum of cognitive and cultural possibilities, upon which the networks of popular antiquity are now being theoretically mapped.

It is asserted then that the gameplay process must itself be 'familiar and typical', a space where background knowledges become active while the player is immersed.[116] That background knowledge is constituted by memories which are recalled 'from other media' when playing a game,[117] and that 'other media' is likely to come from the digital realm, since digital media 'privileges fragmentation' in the form of computer interfaces, videogames and other electronic arenas.[118] It is also drawn from other avenues of pop-culture consumption. As demonstrated above, this is set apart from the knowledges pursued by historians: according to White, the historian must rearrange fragments of history 'to make a whole of a particular, not a general, kind.'[119] The reader of an ancient text must be in 'possession of a correct text, the understanding of the language, and the reader's ability to make sense of mythological and historical references'.[120] The player of an ancient

[110] Hayles 2004: 257-8, 260, 279; cf. Cover 2004: 174 on '"non-linearity"' of new media; also Ferri 2007: 468.
[111] Bolter and Grusin 2000: 15.
[112] de Certeau 2011: xv.
[113] Thon 2017: 290.
[114] Solomon 2007: 488.
[115] White 1978: 11, his emphasis.
[116] Gregersen 2014: 170.
[117] Harvey 2016: 165.
[118] Bolter and Grusin 2000: 31.
[119] White 1978: 125.
[120] Bolgar 1974: 41.

game must have only the game itself, its equipment, and her own combinatory repertoire of general and specific knowledges. Most important, then, is the essence, rather than the actual, history.[121] A 'general' history has been alluded to in historical games scholarship,[122] and Winnerling in particular highlights that the '*feeling* of historicity' will 'exploit the reminisces they [in-game events] may trigger in players',[123] but it has not been formalised into a theory of gameplay. Antiquity in its general form is therefore a distinct type of knowledge,[124] instilled in players and reinforced as they recall that knowledge and implement it. The knowledges going into the creation of and playing with virtual ancient worlds is therefore 'the product of repeated abstractions leading to habits and general ideas'.[125] On ancient film, Paul asks: 'If we have watched *Troy* (2004) … to what extent does it act upon our next reading of the *Iliad*?'[126] This statement implies that the consistent employment and redeployment of assumptions and knowledges surrounding this vague "popular antiquity" continuously strengthens those assumptions as players move toward future encounters with the ancient world.

The ancient gameworld and the events and signifiers within cannot be unrecognisable, as this would obstruct the process of gameplay by which a player recognises, interprets, and implements, but must also sidestep consistent generalisations and the recycling of "usual" conventional techniques to thwart expectations and avoid stagnant moments of play. The many ideas above are perhaps best demonstrated by a brief ancient-world example. In the *Age of Empires 2: The Forgotten* (Skybox Labs, 2013) campaign, an add-on to the strategic war-based game *Age of Empires 2* (Ensemble Studios, 1999), the player is given control over Alaric, King of the Visigoths, who, through the player, has direct and almost telepathic control over hosts of barbarian armies as he marches on Rome. To historians the end of the Roman Empire was restricted largely to the west, and it is increasingly viewed as several, gradual changes from Rome-centric administration to several fluctuating monarchist states.[127] To the layperson, the end of the Roman Empire was a single cataclysmic event. Naturally the game must operate in "layperson" territory, so to win this game, the player must be complicit with this assumptive belief that Rome was broken in a single event, and that this was accomplished primarily by an individual leader. The player may only move towards

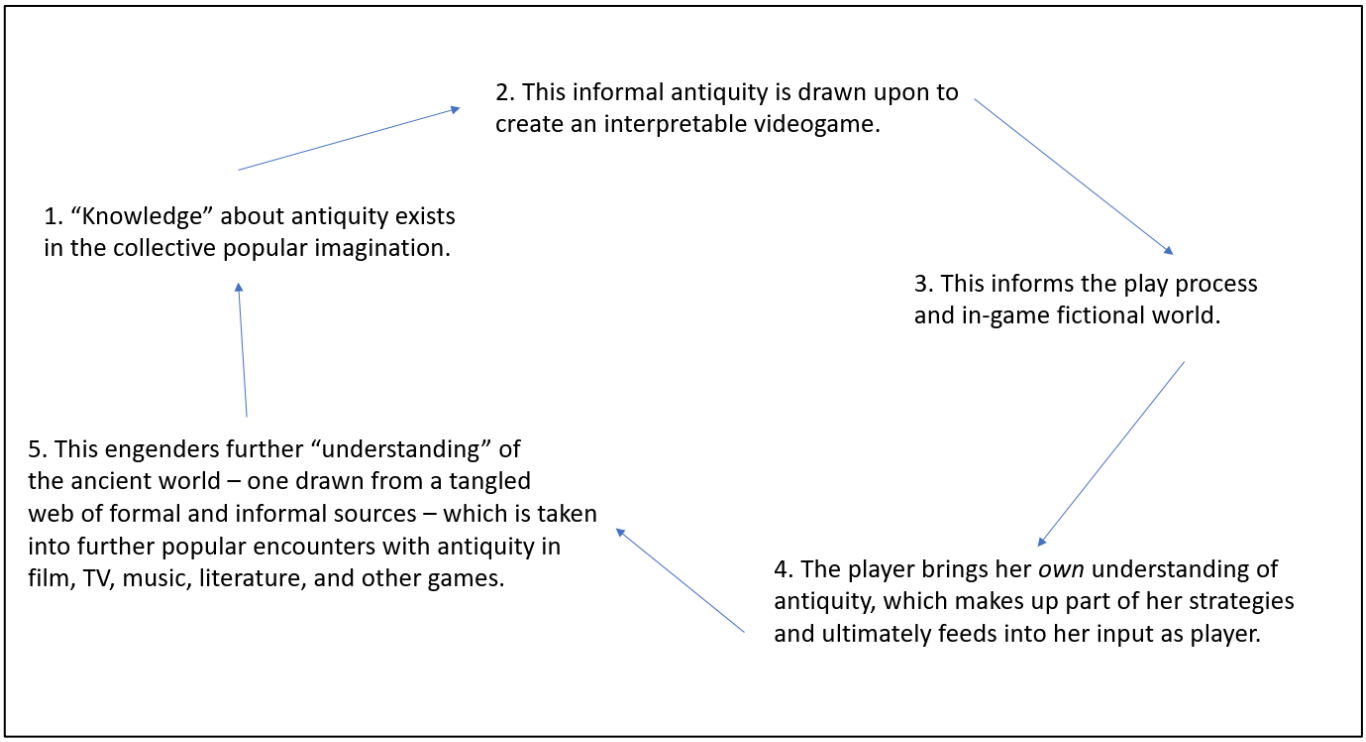
[121] Shaw 2015: 16 on how historical games 'preclude[s] really playing with history'.
[122] The 'general', Fogu 2009: 111; 'flavour of the time period', MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007: 205; 'a '"sense of history"', Mukherjee 2016: 3.
[123] Winnerling 2014: 154.
[124] Black et al 2014: 290-1 separate 'shallow' learning in classrooms from grounded, embodied cognition, but again link this to the potential for games to facilitate 'formal learning'. Nevertheless, this separation tacitly implies the standard cognitive activities in gameplay are of a different character.
[125] Eliassen 2010: 130.
[126] Paul 2008: 307.
[127] Wickham 2010: 95-6.

success by accepting and then implementing that assumption. The foundations of the game must, and do, align with the vague conception that Rome was sacked by the Goths. The activities of the player within are tempered by this vague resonance, along with other relative cognitive triggers: for example, the genre structure of the game, and a generic understanding of what "the Romans" means. Furthermore, players familiar with the film *Fall of the Roman Empire* (Anthony Mann, 1964) may implicitly or otherwise attempt to align their play processes with that version of the event.[128] In reality, of course, *Fall of the Roman Empire*'s history of the collapse of empire through a sequence of certain events is ultimately 'inaccurate'.[129] The videogame version of this history operates similarly, by definition, meaning the player laying siege to the city cannot be engaging in the "real" demise of empire, nor can she be replicating or exploring the processes that may have led to the fall of the "real" Rome. This is not some casual disregard for history "as it was". It operates in this way because, as Gadamer says, 'interpretation must find the right language if it really wants to make the text speak'.[130] To isolate the operations of the history in this videogame example, we need to recognise the history within as profoundly altered by the need to make it interpretable. The search for this generic "language" in which certain "facts" and assumptions are written into the fabric of strategic, war-based gameplay is a central purpose of Chapter 4.

Such a methodology allows us to see all the games analysed in this project as constituted by, and affected by, the diverse cultural processes surrounding the game and its ancient material, and the many interpretations and commentaries that have made a historical moment what it is today. A conception of a multi-layered, complex, "popular" antiquity needs to be understood as we get closer to understanding the character of ancient videogames and their attendant play processes. The above example is merely a starting-point, however: we may characterise the virtual history as dependent on popular understandings, but we must also ask why it has changed, and what effect the contexts surrounding it have had on both the creation and playing of the game. Tracking chains of reception, from historical source, to media sources, to videogame and gameplay, is difficult. Antiquity is itself fragmented, meaning this continuum of possible meanings is itself composed of bits-and-pieces.[131] Nevertheless, the processes I have illustrated are summarised in a diagram of the gameplay process below (Image 1.1). Abstract "knowledges" existing in a conceptual space (in step 1) are drawn upon by developers to create an ancient game (steps 2 and 3). Step 3 feeds into step 4 as the player enters, bringing her own knowledges to assist with the play process. In amongst these

[128] For example, that the throne was actively rejected, Richards 2015: 22, 24.
[129] Stow 2015: 96.
[130] Gadamer 1989: 398.
[131] E.g. quotes of primary evidence in secondary scholarship as snippets of information to be lifted at a later date, Bolgar 1974: 9.

knowledges, including real-world referents, and understandings of genre conventions, is her own vague appreciation of what antiquity is, means, and stands for. The antiquity within the game collaborates with the antiquity brought by the player to assist in forming an interpretative back-and-forth that constitutes gameplay. The steps relating to the transmedial realm (step 5) in which antiquity operates will receive greater treatment at the end of this chapter. For now, note that the gameplay process is as much about the tacit and immediate extraction of vague knowledges and phantom impression of antiquity, and automatically-implemented information from outside the gameworld, as it is about interpreting what is in the gameworld. In this way, an ancient game can speak contemporarily to the twenty-first century player *through* virtual antiquity, depending on both her appropriately general knowledge of the ancient world and her acknowledgment of other relevant referents.




**1.1**. The gameplay process.

### 1.4 Genre frameworks

When confronted with a less familiar, and by definition complex, virtual antiquity, how is the player guided into the process of interpreting it? Not all antiquity is recognisable to everyone, and that which is purposefully characterised as a collective of vague assumptive notions that permeate the gameworld and facilitate recognition-based gameplay. As reception studies founder Jauss suggests of literature, every reader must bring a 'preconstituted horizon of expectations' that must remain at

hand as the reading experience takes place.[132] The genre framework, only hinted at so far, plays host to this horizon and provides the foundations of the game and the playstyle needed to engage with it: the ancient material is fitted into it, appropriated by it, and subsequently helps the player undergo her virtual journey. Alongside the play process illustrated above wherein 'expectations' are paramount, genre frameworks also assist in making sense of in-game events: 'not only does genre organize the structure of the work, it organizes the structure of cognition, and this organizing allows genre to do its work'.[133] Genre structures are essentially stabilising instruments, the 'middle-man in a complex ecosystem of both functional considerations and aesthetic ideas'.[134] They are also, as Apperley states, subject to media-specific characteristics.[135] This simply means that videogame genres may overlap with others, such as literature or film, but are necessarily different due to the unique interactivity of the videogame. When fitted into a genre framework, the antiquity becomes interpretable even as it is altered: the new relationship between Ancient Rome and the strategy game framework, like in the *Age of Empires* episode above, allows for unique play which nevertheless relies on already-held assumptions and generalities about the fall of Rome. While Gregersen does not apply this to antiquity specifically, he does suggest that genre facilitates the collection of 'fragmented' information;[136] in this way we can see "ancientness" as a phenomenon that weaves in and out of the fundamentals of the game itself, and this is key to understanding the "ancient videogame" as a successful reception event. The player uses the familiarity of the genre framework to stabilise the game experience, drawing on fragmented "knowledges" and "ideas" of antiquity both within the game and within her own cognitive apparatus, to facilitate the communicative process of playing. Genres are thus important for videogames simply because games would be shapeless without those structures that support them. Furthermore, genre frameworks work in such a way that the antiquity within a game is fundamentally altered depending on the game type it is fitted into. Genre therefore constitutes an especially important component of the overall ancient-world videogame.

It is through genre conventions that players also become 'literate' in gameplay.[137] Just like instantly-perceivable Greek marble columns and Roman legionaries acting as visual motifs, components of the genre can be 'take[n] for granted'.[138] Not that the antiquity becomes unnecessary or easily passed over: but the use of familiar elements within an equally recognisable

[132] Jauss 2000: 131.
[133] Gregersen 2014: 163-4.
[134] Arsenault 2009: 150. Equally, they are systems acting as 'a ready code', Colie 2000: 151.
[135] Apperley 2006: 21. Though he also argues that representational features of games are 'superficial'.
[136] Gregersen 2014: 166-7.
[137] Arsenault 2009: 171.
[138] Colie 2000: 163.

genre framework 'allows us to lower our cognitive load.'[139] Appropriation (of antiquity, or anything else) is not arbitrary but necessary for the development of genres,[140] and indeed their overall operation. Despite their primary role as orderer, they are themselves alterable and ever-changing, constituted by non-fixed features.[141] We can agree with Arsenault, therefore, in his intentional broadening of the definition of genre,[142] and with Duff that due to the rise of a complex popular culture in the twenty-first century we need not consider genre as authoritative but simply as a means by which to understand the media products we are looking at.[143] All interpretation begins with classification,[144] whether tacitly or explicitly, so that we can understand what we are interpreting and begin to navigate a response to it. Collingwood identifies the convenience of structural conventions from the perspective of the protagonist of a detective novel, who "knows" that there are certain rules within his world that will assist him in his crime-solving; he contrasts this with the position of the historian, who he says has no such framework.[145] We will see how both familiar genre conventions and new forms of reception can take place within the same text in Chapter 2, where action-oriented epic-style games engage with epic film genre conventions and other generalities of antiquity to assist in the interpretative play process, using genre frameworks and the conventions they bring to allow gameplay to happen. Therefore, staples of the genre framework, represented antiquity, and the general knowledge, subjectivity and personal identity of the player all co-operate to produce new play experiences, and thus new receptions. This, once again, requires us to 'take popular culture materials', de- and reconstruct them, and apply relevant and 'outside knowledge' to the process of consumption.[146] Those play experiences, and the values, messages and meanings underpinning them, are made sense of by the player through recognition of genre framework, narrative convention and the redefined, recharacterized antiquity within.

## 1.5 "Popular Antiquity" and transmediality

This nebulous vision of antiquity, a conceptualization that draws together ancient materials, modern conventions, the many nodes of various genre structures, the preconceived notions brought by the player, and the meanings and subtexts generated by and within this confluence, constitutes a very broad new phenomenon. This is a perspective of popular classics as a 'constantly moving "fusion of

[139] Kelly 2015: 293.
[140] Jauss 2000: 139.
[141] Opacki 2000: 123.
[142] Arsenault 2009: 158.
[143] Duff 2000: 1-2.
[144] White 1978: 22.
[145] Collingwood 1994: 243.
[146] Jenkins 1992 in Consalvo 2003: 326.

horizons"',[147] 'multiple and unstable forms of recontextualization,'[148] endlessly and fluidly hybridizing, functionally familiar yet anything but simple. Thankfully, this definition of antiquity fits within the new media theoretical framework of transmedia. Initially, transmedia storytelling was defined by Henry Jenkins as a means by which media products tell one story or evince a series of stories within the same fictional world, requiring the reader, viewer or player to 'hunt' for materials relevant to the story across multiple media platforms.[149] The same activity is also applicable to the scholar attempting to investigate it. Later, transmediality was widely characterised 'a set of cultural practices',[150] giving us a way of seeing narrative experiences as parts within a broader network of other stories. 'New media technologies enabled the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception.'[151] Transmedial approaches are ideal for both framing this multifaceted "bigger picture", and for picking out pieces of fragmented ancient materials for analysis. The more stories are told through different mediums, the more familiar they and their contents become.[152] So, transmediality characterises the cultural continuum in which media texts live, and as a method of analysis makes it easier for us to isolate and extract materials within those media texts. It is no coincidence that, like Jenkins above, one foremost classical reception scholar Lorna Hardwick speaks of reception studies as 'broader cultural processes' set in the modern world,[153] foreshadowing Jenkins' theory and laying the groundwork for transmedial logic as a means for formulating a vision of popular classics. It is therefore worth conceptualizing the antiquity found in videogames and other popular media as different to, independent of, "real" ancient-world studies, and as something subject to a different, and possibly looser, set of rules.

This proposed "popular antiquity" is an intrinsically transmedial definition of classics. Like those methods above, which require us to see media texts and fictional universes as fluid collections of ever-moving parts, the notion of a conceptual realm of antiquity indirectly and unconsciously appealed to by ancient games to their players, and vice versa, is necessarily abstract. The playing of an ancient game is dependent on the brain's ability to act quickly and on a number of levels unbeknownst to the player. The mind races with abstract "ancientness" when playing a game, an "ancientness" separate from a solid, "accurate" conceptualisation of antiquity.[154] As White notes, if a

[147] Martindale 1993: 16.
[148] Jenkins 2006b: 140.
[149] Jenkins 2006a: 20-1.
[150] Jenkins 2011.
[151] Jenkins 2006a: 11; reworded in 2011 as 'one logic for thinking about the flow of content across media'.
[152] Thon 2017: 287.
[153] Hardwick 2003: 4-5.
[154] Bruner 1956: 47 similarly describes the act of recognising '"birdness"' when reading about birds, i.e. the general bird-like qualities that make up what birds "are".

'trope' is a 'deviation *from* one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation *towards* another meaning',[155] we can conceivably draw a theoretical line between the meaning(s) of the "real antiquity" against the meaning of the "popular" that exists as 'tropes' and conventions in videogames, film, television, and comic-books. This new mode of knowledge has, furthermore, been addressed by some scholars who coalesce that knowledge into 'unconscious mental maps', 'patterns of knowledge' harvested from experiences with fictional works.[156] Like those scholars above, videogame scholars wish for a conceptual space in which to envision these knowledges. Chapman, for example, identifies the need to understand the transmedial environment as a background upon which historical videogames operate.[157] I propose only to map ancient games and gameplay onto this transmedial continuum, to better get to grips with the larger movements of story materials and narrative nodes. The play process in particular may be characterised as a weaving in-and-out of those multiform networks, wherein the player subcognitively makes sense of events onscreen by applying general knowledges engendered by the transmedial nexus in which "Popular Antiquity" resides.

One way to conceive of a transmedial world of "popular antiquity" is to consider it as a narratological 'storyworld'. Sarah Iles Johnston proposes that Greek mythology could be considered a 'tightly woven story world that was cumulatively being created on a continuous basis by the myths that were narrated'; it is, potentially, a world that requires 'no *conscious* decision at all on the part of audience members who participate in it… It immerses readers or viewers so completely, yet so subtly, that they pass into it without even noticing that they are doing so.'[158] It is not just about a connection to singular fragments within a text, but the 'world' those fragments make up within and outside the text. Classicist Lowe, introduced previously, refers to 'narrative universes' accessed through 'common cognitive apparatus'. Regarding the *Odyssey*, he refers to a 'story universe' that contains the narrative world of the *Odyssey* text.[159] Lowe strongly suggests here that each text is its own storyworld, but that each storyworld then relates to a larger storyworld or conceptual universe. The Odyssean world would, for example, invariably interlink with the Iliadic, both of which might belong to a "world" of Homer, and all of which is contained within what we might term "the Greek world". This resonates with Johnston's definition of the storyworld as something 'beyond the narratively constructed space in which a *single* story is told', and, crucially, highlights the

[155] White 1978: 2.
[156] Fencott et al 2012: 76. Upton 2015: 220 notes a 'mental warehouse of applicable themes, characters and tropes'.
[157] Chapman 2016: 277.
[158] Johnston 2015: 284, 286.
[159] Lowe 2000: 60; 130.

storyworld's capacity to grow via its relationship with 'the known world'.[160] Johnston is sketching a Greek myth-world that exists across a variety of sources and across centuries of distinct creators and recreators. This particular perspective is especially useful in Chapter 5, where layers of reception and commentary surrounding ancient materials are used by developers and engaged with by players. While Johnston does not see the creation of a storyworld *by* the Greeks, she does speak of it as something we, twenty-first century spectators, 'feel in our bones.'[161] This speaks directly to both the gameplay process as I characterise it, and the transmedial realm upon which the strategies necessary to both represent and play ancient games are now being mapped.

The storyworld is not a physical or digital catalogue, but a conceptual space, a 'symbolic' world.[162] It is ultimately a shared mental warehouse of impressions of antiquity, fed by past experiences with it, half-remembered "knowledges" about it. Storyworlds are exciting because they are not self-enclosed, but 'sprout branches to their core plots that further immerse people, thereby providing new pleasures'.[163] Furthermore, they cannot be understood without looking across a 'wider web of relations'.[164] To interpret a storyworld, receivers must move outside the storyworld in question and across, transmedially, through others.[165] This speaks directly to the gameplay process sketched above, where knowledges are utilised: the warehouse of impressions, in this case, would be the transmedial world of "Popular Antiquity". All texts contributing to that world, except for ancient sources themselves, are post-antique: tacit impressions of antiquity received from film, television, and other media collaborate to create a conceptual space to which minds appeal as they encounter future popular ancient worlds. This therefore allows space to consider a distinct version of "antiquity". In postcolonial critique, Chakrabarty identifies his 'Europe' as 'an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *cliched and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought'. Throughout, he then refers to the created constructs of '"Europe"', and '"India"'.[166] We see this in Chapter 4, where players engage with a make-believe "Rome" by utilising a "Roman language", a kind of template for strategy games. The ancient worlds of videogames correspond to an ahistorical world of white marble and short tunics,[167] where Zeus is a power-mad antagonist, where the military might of Rome reaches impossible fantastical levels. A game set in ancient Greece or Rome, then, is

[160] Johnston 2015: 287, 291-2.
[161] Johnston 2015: 292. As noted in the introduction, Nevins 2005 and 2011b retrospectively identifies transmedial operations in Greek myth, though does not suggest this was necessarily a conscious decision by the Greeks.
[162] Crites 1997: 30.
[163] Ryan and Thon 2015: 19.
[164] Harvey 2015: 23; cf. Palmer 2004: 41.
[165] Harvey 2015: 2-3; 201.
[166] Chakrabarty 2000: 3-4, 27-8, 39, his emphasis.
[167] Signifiers that are 'always recognisable as Greece', Blanshard 2005: 166.

accessible precisely because it belongs to a wider "world" of popular antiquity. It is also made playable, or made into a 'configurative practice', through a general memory of these signifiers.[168] The player, when playing, is (semi-)consciously collaborating with this fictional universe, an abstract realm where these signifiers "live", as they interpret, remember, and engage with the game.

Understanding popular antiquity within worldmaking and storyworld theory parameters also allows us to shift from 'the order of truth' and 'the nature of facts', and towards 'the cognitive machinery' that assists in interpreting 'coherent representations,'[169] shifting focus to the imaginative involvement of 'reader, spectator, or player'.[170] This in turn allows us to distance ancient games from current trends that see games about the past as intrinsically historical without losing their connection to the "original" sources, while simultaneously building on contemporary new media ideas that accurately situate antiquity in the ever-shifting transmedial realm. As Batstone suggests more generally: 'play is an act of world construction',[171] and for this study this refers to the construction of a "world" aside from that found in formal histories. According to storyworld theory, the elements of the world being contacted are always of a form altered from their real-world counterparts.[172] At all times throughout this project, antiquity is in the game-as-text, is characterised as a referent outside the text, and is imagined to be located in the wider culture universe. The "Popular Antiquity" storyworld is that which contains those branches and patterns relating to, and coming from, the ancient world: gameworlds, film motifs, prevalent interpretations of historical figures. Understanding both game and play process in this way illustrates a fuller and dynamic picture of the movements and operations of antiquity as part of broader creative processes and elucidates both where ideas about antiquity are coming from and where they are going. It also allows us to locate pieces and signifiers in ancient games and compare them to other media: not only that this ancient game operates like that ancient film, but how, why, and with what possible consequences. The "how" and "why", as we find throughout the thesis, is often in relation to a specific social message encoded by developers and expounded by the game.

While it is difficult, and often assumptive, to estimate what might exist in the collective imagination of consumers, scholars are beginning to refer to 'the common knowledge' as a specific concept.[173] Transmedial logic gives a space for this collective world to live and operate. As has been established, 'the meanings we find in games relate not just to games but to what we know about the

[168] Harvey 2015: 3.
[169] Tygstrup 2010: 92.
[170] Ryan 2015: 43.
[171] Batstone 2006: 15.
[172] Zipfel 2014: 105.
[173] Westin and Hedlund 2016: 11 suggest 'the common knowledge' is directly opposed to 'expert' knowledge.

real world or fictitious worlds we know from other media'.[174] To draw on previous iterations of antiquity in the popular realm entails a connection with a "storyworld", a near-intangible imaginative arena which can be contacted in relation to the entertainment being acted upon, and also with other storyworlds. This complex subcognitive endeavour guarantees the coherence of the gameworld and the process of playing with it. A storyworld is defined precisely by its representative nature, by an audience's ability to connect through 'reception process[es]', and by our ability to '"fill in the gaps"'.[175] In encountering any single world (such as a gameworld), the audience 'recognize[s] the intentions of the producers that the audience should adopt a fiction-specific attitude…'.[176] Since 'worlds are always made from other worlds' also, and are 'never fixed once and for all, but are something that has to be made, processed, and circulated time and again in different media via concomitant processes of inter- and transmedial translation',[177] this further suggests the possibility for a co-constructive role on behalf of the receiver. The many nebulous ideas about, and the values imposed upon or found within, popular classics both come from and correspondingly go on to constitute the storyworld. This reciprocating dynamic is what allows step 5 of the diagram (Image 1.1, above) to feed back into step 1, creating a loop through which all creative works operate.

Transmedial perspectives and the storyworld model are especially important because they follow the agenda of this project in proving a separate, though connected, realm of "antiquity" apart from, but overlapping with, its formal historical counterpart. Transmedia fundamentally accepts that a 'convergence' between consumer and texts calls into question 'older regimes of knowledge',[178] furthering the cause here to redefine "knowledge" in ancient games. This type of knowledge has furthermore been identified by non-academic professionals. The fantasy writer Terry Pratchett once reflected on the nature of the diverse materials he implemented in his books: 'I don't recall ever *learning* about… [yet] in a sense, I've never not known them.'[179] He speaks of creation here as a thing that can hardly be controlled or even fully defined. Gameworlds operate within similar parameters, as they can be made to feel 'strange and other-wordly, yet familiar and real' through their use of real-world pasts and mythologies.[180] So, too, do storyworlds. Adopting perspectives from storyworld and transmedial theory also facilitates a certain distance between this and the practices and processes of "proper" history. 'Historians, regardless of their ideological moorings, display a

[174] Fencott et al 2012: 139.
[175] Thon 2017: 289-290, 292.
[176] Zipfel 2014: 108.
[177] Nünning and Nünning 2010: 5-6.
[178] Menon 2015: 108.
[179] Pratchett 2000: 160-2.
[180] Krzywsinka 2008: 124; quote from Gibbs et al 2012 on online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005).

remarkable consensus which it comes to defending history's methodological ties to a certain understanding of rationality.'[181] The pop-cultural transmedia nexus, the antiquity swirling around within in it, and the player of an ancient game, are not rational in this sense, but imaginative, playful, often illogical, and so reflect the fun engendered by the actual act of playing a videogame. It should also be noted that, while this mode is endemic to antiquity because, as a realm of creative reception, it is quite unique, there is agreement in other forms of reception studies that malleable signifiers and associated themes might prompt a new vision of other historical cultures. Nash, for example, agrees that 'to judge *Vikings* [television series] as a cultural artifact against its adherence to source material is misguided'. We must see instead it as 'accurate to a certain tone or atmosphere'. 'What is revealed is a literature that evades capture whilst rejecting boundaries.'[182] There is therefore space even for a "Viking storyworld". In short, if a contemporary student of classics must 'turn his attention to… the intellectual climate of the age',[183] popular antiquity must be considered as corresponding to a different form of intellectual climate, one concomitant with our pop-cultural, digital 'age', and one reflective of the diverse, barely-tangible knowledges moving in and out of interpretative processes like gameplay. We may therefore use this model to define popular antiquity as something like a living, breathing entity that is always dynamic in nature, co-created and managed by all who engage with it.

As a final note, the use of 'signifier' throughout refers to the Barthesian model wherein objects (signifiers) carry connotations which convey a message.[184] Semiotics, a field with which the term is associated, derives from de Saussure's designation of language as 'a system of signs expressing ideas'.[185] Semiotics is useful to some videogame scholars who implements its ideas and precedents as a means of making sense of the game text.[186] Foremost semiotician and videogame scholar Myers uses semiotic theory to highlight the importance of subjectivity in the play process.[187] Moreover, some use semiotics and the signifier to make sense of wider cultural matrices and networks of association.[188] Usage of semiotics is used here only to allow access to complex game- and storyworlds and their many possible meanings.[189] The term 'signifier' is, mostly, a convenient

[181] Chakrabarty 2000: 99.
[182] Nash 2018: 85-6, on *Vikings* (Shaw Media/Corus Entertainment, 2013 – present).
[183] Bolgar 1974: 389.
[184] Barthes 1972: 112-113.
[185] de Saussure 1998: 15.
[186] 'semiotic input' by players, Neiva and Romano 2007: 31; the use of semiotic theory by developers as 'short hand' is proposed by Snyder 2013. Compagno 2015: 1004, 1022 sees semiotics in relation to player interpretation and navigation of expectations; seeing semiotically, he believes, makes games 'readable'.
[187] Myers 2010: 12.
[188] Gee 2003: 91; Ferri 2007: 472.
[189] Herman 2013: 117; 141.

word to use, and should not be conflated with structuralist thinking: as Csapo says of mythology, we in the postmodern era are able, for better or worse, to engage in 'the eclectic use and adaptation of earlier theories of interpretation, especially psychoanalysis and structuralism', wherein we can avoid 'procedural instructions' by 'pick[ing] and choos[ing] from the tools of past theories while reserving a healthy skepticism for their grand, all-encompassing worldviews'.[190] This thesis is therefore not a structuralist search for 'rational thinking',[191] and instead adopts the classical reception studies' trademark hermeneutical approach: 'Hermeneutic consciousness means remembering that cultural narratives… exist only through continuous historical reinterpretations and can thus be changed by new interpretations.'[192] Such subtle alteration through reinterpretation can be seen by comparing the *God of War* and *Apotheon* case studies in the next chapter: no matter when, how, or where antiquity is appropriated, it will always maintain its unique flavour and thus its ability to communicate, while always remaining subject to change. Identifying fragments of game and gameworld as signifiers, and thus as carriers of multiple meanings, only makes it easier to locate moments of play and extract them for analysis.

### 1.6 New perspectives

This thesis focuses on the relationship between ancient materials in games and the many cultural processes the player must undertake when engaging with them. Antiquity, here understood as a body of fragmented "knowledges", as a suite of preconceived conventions, and as a driver of the fiction and the gameplay process, is received and to varying extents reconfigured to co-create the game experience. This is reflected in Chapter 2 where the relationship between action-oriented games and ancient film is explored as a transmedial sharing of assumptions, expectations, even ideas and messages. Chapter 3 finds similar use of a standardised antiquity, this time as a stepping-stone towards explorative, open-world play that allows access to potentially postcolonial perspectives on 'other' spaces and peoples. The games in Chapter 4 explicitly utilise assumptions about empire, ancient and modern, to generate the player experience. By proposing a "storyworld" within which popular representations of antiquity can operate, we make sense of the complex ways antiquity moves in and out of other creative products, political agendas, ideological concerns, and contemporary social attitudes. This vision assists especially in Chapter 5, where immersive first-person games and their embodied play processes draw the player even closer to the ideological and creatively experimental dimensions antiquity operates within. If the storyworld of "popular

[190] Csapo 2005: 291, 296-7.
[191] As Decreus 2007: 246 typifies it.
[192] Meretoja 2014: 103. It is also central to Martindale's foundational work on reception theory, 1993.

antiquity" is fed by and impacted upon by a variety of cultural, creative, political, ideological and other phenomena, it is necessary to see exactly what these other components are and how they contribute to ancient gameworlds and the processes by which players interact with them. In nearly all chapters and case studies, popularly-understood impressions of the ancient storyworld are identified as points of access into political and ethical conundrums. As a result, although the storyworld is not always referred to explicitly, it is implied by this thesis' consistent attempt to demonstrate a "bigger picture", one in which antiquity and modernity are inextricably linked, to better make sense of ancient world videogames.

## 2. Finding a New Epic in Action Videogames

The action-based adventure game tests player reflexes and interpretative abilities as they overcome hostile, larger-than-life enemies and navigate huge virtual spaces. Players complete these challenges to move on to the next "level" or stage, which coalesce to form a complete gameworld and overarching narrative. This often-complex narrative is primarily told through non-interactive cutscenes, drawing immediate comparisons between this genre and cinema since the content of those sequences often borrows from filmic precedents. This chapter is primarily concerned with comparing these games to cinematic antiquity, though, as Diak has recently stated, the norms and tropes of ancient film can and are located in televisual ancient worlds as well. Taking and implementing Diak's further claim that epic antiquity is intrinsically transmedial,[1] the following analyses move freely between cinematic and televisual examples. As this chapter shows, action-based ancient games draw on Hollywoodian thematic and narrative conventions to structure their rules, stories, and even their playstyles, offering familiar action-based conventions to assist with the gameplay process. The approach here hinges on the transmedial notion that a text 'remembers the narratives that preceded it';[2] this chapter therefore sees ancient action-based games and their play processes as rooted in both ancient and modern relationships. This transmedial connection grants comparison between the ancient epic onscreen tradition and the games analysed here: throughout this chapter, the genre of action-based ancient games and the gameplay processes that activate those games are continually shown to depend on precedents set by the epic filmic mode. To illustrate how this works, I analyse the *God of War* trilogy (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2005-2009), locating within its representations of extreme violence and visual spectacle the sorts of behaviours and features characteristic of ancient film. By borrowing branches of the film tradition and making it interactive, the player of the action-based genre engages with a co-operative, co-operating version of that tradition. This is followed by an assessment of independent action-based games with far less cinematic richness and technological capabilities, investigated as potentially "epic" in nature to test the strength of the "epic game tradition" model emerging throughout this chapter. The analysis ends with a look at Roman action games which share these common epic components, but where core notions of spectatorship – ancient and modern – form the architecture of the game experience. Through such diverse case studies this chapter demonstrates the complexity of the epic tradition as it manifests in action-oriented ancient-world videogames. Since these digital "versions" of epic

[1] Diak 2018: 5-6 on, for example, new ways of understanding what constitutes 'epic', and the 'fluidity and adaptability' of it. Diak 2018: 6, 9 on transmedia.
[2] Harvey 2015: 73.

antiquity require a player to participate in co-constructing elements of the tradition, the very notions of 'epic' and 'spectacle' are potentially transformed.

## 2.1 Epic games and epic films

The ancient (or classical) epic tradition, or epic film tradition, refers to the body of ancient-world films that offer action-packed sequences amidst impressive, often large, set-pieces. "Epicness" in films is broadly defined by 'anachronistic' history, elaborate visuals and spectacular sets, symphonic music, and blood-soaked battles: ultimately, the 'extravagance of action and place'.[3] For example, this mode of representation usually defines the Roman city as opulent, elaborate, visually impressive, and the Romans themselves as decadent, hypersexual, and often corrupt.[4] Greece, on the other hand, is usually characterised by its mythological heroes and monsters, resulting in memorable fantasies like the swashbuckling *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963) film.[5] These features that typify the ancient epic film, whether Greek or Roman, may be known as 'components' that are 'infused' into the filmic text.[6] Those components, from extravagant visuals and a largesse of sex, blood and violence, collectively constitute "spectacle", a general term denoting exciting moments or sequences for the viewer to see and indulge in.[7] For example, *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) was, at the time, the most expensive film ever made, primarily due to its elaborate action sequences and absurdly large sets.[8] More recent ancient epics rely on new and sophisticated technologies to convey visually impressive sequences and spaces:[9] when *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) revitalized the epic with modern digital techniques, the possibilities for even larger sets and action sequences were soon realized.[10] The continual popularity of, and recent renewed interest in, antiquity on television also allows us to see the epic film tradition as a transmedial phenomenon wherein the concepts of spectacle and epic may be located across television, videogames, comic-books and music.[11] In particular violence, a key tenet of the tradition, continues to evolve as digital media becomes more sophisticated and big- and small-screen

[3] Sobchack 2012: 332-3.
[4] Pierce 2018: 156-7. For decadence and luxury as both Roman and, to a lesser extent, Greek, see Pierce 2017: 234-238.
[5] Solomon 2001: 101, 113-4, 131 speaks of the 'magical land' of the film, and its 'huge' and terrifying array of mythical monsters.
[6] As referred to by Johnson 2018: 21; 40, who believes the amalgamation of those components are 'necessary for their operation'.
[7] Burgoyne 2008: 74, 77, 85.
[8] Cyrino 2005: 71-3.
[9] Elliott 2015b: 129-30.
[10] Cyrino 2005: 226; Burgoyne 2008: 76; also Richards 2015: 20 on spectacle forming relationships between newer and older films.
[11] Diak 2018: 9-11; Pierce 2017: 244, 247.

renditions of antiquity become more aesthetically and narratively ambitious. Recent ancient film and television tend to mimic the slow-motion 'bullet-time' aesthetic of the *Matrix* film (The Wachowskis, 1999), exaggerating combat sequences and drawing focus on spilled blood, balletic combat and the male bodies committing the acts.[12] This has found its way on to the small screen, such as the Starz *Spartacus* (DeKnight Productions, 2010-2013) television series, and many 'oftentimes cinematic' videogames.[13] Antiquity on television, as in cinema and in videogames, utilises familiar signifying materials and narrative conventions, either to recycle or reconfigure standardised tropes of, for example, Roman decadence and bloodlust.[14] The evolution of technologies and the development of new storytelling techniques has allowed the representation of decadence, destruction and violence to similarly progress and grow across media.

Along with its consistent focus on sex, violence, and impressive set-pieces, Paul has continually demonstrated the epic film tradition to be inextricably linked with its ancient literary predecessors.[15] Furthermore, that the ancient and modern epic traditions are interconnected means that, crucially, the cinematic strand is itself far from uncomplex.[16] It has been demonstrated by film scholars and classicists that ancient epics operate upon layers of reception, relying on ancient and modern sources and drawing on both the historical past and the post-antique patterns of reception that follow it. Paul argues that when audiences participate in viewing ancient epic films, a bank of memories relative to the tradition influences present and future encounters with the genre: viewers consciously or dimly remember them, those memories then maintaining or altering the ways they view.[17] This is echoed throughout studies of ancient epics. For example, *Gladiator*'s new epic-scale antiquity is said by Joshel et al to 're-process other popculture Romes',[18] since its creators relied on past representations to influence its construction. These layers furthermore instil in audiences memories relating to the genre in question, which are drawn on by audiences when they go on to consume other texts in the tradition. In this way, epic films have informed, and continue to inform, each other.[19] As stated above, the recognisability of tenets of the tradition also grant free movement

[12] Used in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) Cyrino 2011: 21, and *Hercules* (Brett Ratner, 2014) Baker 2018: 53. See Turner 2009: 135 for 'battle as ballet' and the 'aestheticisation of body-in-motion'.
[13] Diak 2018: 11.
[14] For Starz *Spartacus* television series, see Hobden forthcoming 2018, Mueller 2018 and Pierce 2018.
[15] A principle aim of Paul 2013, e.g. 2013: 25 on film's capacity to 'reach back and reshape ancient epic'.
[16] This is central to Paul's work, and this vision of a multifaceted corpus of cinema with loose boundaries is similarly becoming central to scholarship on ancient film, e.g. Elliott 2015a: 2, 5.
[17] Paul 2013: 168-9 speaks on the 'vestigial influence' and 'gravitational pull' of genre-memory and its influence on viewer perception. Expectations of the viewer are 'set' by such visual materials, Stow 2015: 88.
[18] Joshel et al 2015: 1; cf Burgoyne 2008: 76-7.
[19] Burgoyne 2008: 74 demonstrates how the film *Gladiator* works with both the epic tradition and with specific titles such as *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960). Also, at 2008: 76-7. Richards 2015: 22 does the same with *Gladiator*'s use of nineteenth-century paintings and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* film. See also Jancovich 2015: 57. Furthermore, layers and chains of reception in *300* in Cyrino 2011: 20-1.

of epic characteristics onto the small screen. It is also important to note, as Sobchack states, that viewers' consciousness transcends "actual" history into a realm of generality.[20] While onscreen traditions have roots in the ancient past, and often work intimately with historical sources, they nevertheless use them in such a way as to create something new, something both ancient and modern simultaneously. This is perhaps why the ancient epic today takes many forms: classical reception scholars locate its presence in science-fictional 'epics' that are not set in antiquity, but are nevertheless connected to the tradition.[21] Regardless of the medium, the epic tradition, whether presenting the viewer with giant buildings, scenes of blood-soaked combat, or weird and wonderful sights, relies on itself and its relationship to its viewers for it to function. These visions of cinematic antiquity, wherein ancient materials and modern conventions across ancient-world media representations interconnect, correlate with the transmedial perspective on antiquity in videogames laid out in the previous chapter. If, furthermore, the cinematic tradition moves away from "actual" history and into new creative territory, and since such behaviours are often permitted by the improvement of modern technologies, a fresh and considered approach to representative strategies in interactive digital contexts is now entirely necessary.

When representing antiquity, the broadly-termed action-based game genre depends on many of the same themes and precedents evinced by the epic tradition, although deals with them in ways specific to the interactive medium. The aesthetic influence of action-oriented cinema on videogames is well established,[22] allowing us to locate visual and thematic similarities between film and game. The action game usually requires players to generate near-automatic responses to onscreen events often revolving around violence, though occasionally it prompts players to solve puzzles and negotiate obstacles crossing their protagonists' path. The adventure game usually situates player activities within a visually and narratively rich gameworld and story-driven play experience.[23] These distinct playstyles hybridize to form the 'action-adventure', a lengthy journey through a (nowadays 3D) gameworld typified by consistently impressive virtual architectures and a play experience replete with narrative hooks and activities based primarily on making violence. Since this picture of action-based games correlates with some of the central traits of the epic tradition set out above, it is the aim of this chapter to assert and demonstrate that action-based adventure games, like *God of War* below, receive cues from the tradition as they present these combative challenges and complex gameworlds to the player. Furthermore, King and Krzywsinka draw an explicit relationship between cinematic and videogame iconography as one which aids

[20] Sobchack 2012: 338.
[21] Best demonstrated by the recent edited volume by Diak (2018).
[22] Lowe 2009: 74 notes this relationship explicitly.
[23] Natkin 2006: 5.

interpretability.[24] This further creates space for us to connect the recognition/interpretation process used by players of this videogame genre to the epic onscreen tradition. The following section analyses the *God of War* series for connections and interrelationships with ancient "spectacle" and epic films and occasionally other media, many of which are themselves often dependent on precedents set by their "original" classical sources. In sketching out a multifaceted, transmedial network in which all these texts operate, this chapter seeks to understand the player process as potentially active within that tradition.

Action-adventures, like all videogames, are grounded in a principle of familiarity needed to facilitate the play process. These games' dependence on recognisable precedents set by previous onscreen texts may, as a result, allow for transmission of potentially troubling tropes and motifs. For example, antiquity onscreen often allows male agents to fix rapacious stares upon female bodies, which then allows that male audience to "enjoy" such sights.[25] However, games, like films, do not 'always defer to the preferences that they engender in audiences',[26] and sometimes the '"givens"' of a text are 'called into question', disrupting usual audio-visual strategies to engender interest.[27] This subversion of expectations can be witnessed in ancient film. In *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), Roman women dominate the titular character (played by a reasonably musclebound Kirk Douglas) with their predatory gaze, at once utilizing the common filmic distinction between overtly sexual Romans and their human property, and simultaneously subverting it. Extending epic representational strategies into ancient television, the later Starz *Spartacus* series uses the very same method, and so 'consciously violates viewing expectations' for those unfamiliar with the film.[28] For those with knowledge of it, it recalls the sequences for the viewer.[29] While both instances reaffirm standard characterisations of the Romans as fascinated by the sexual body, these two examples are at once evidence of a transmedial motif whose existence and recognisability rests almost solely on its use throughout popular antiquity, and the capacity of that motif to turn upside-down usual filmic and televisual behaviours. Games, while operating within specific genres (and here, within an onscreen tradition), need not be necessarily dull or mechanical.[30] A game, too, may at once utilise representational standards while turning them on their heads. 'Cognitive frustration,

[24] King and Krzwyinska 2006: 199.
[25] The 'male gaze', Mulvey 1989.
[26] Carroll 1999: 32 on film.
[27] Herman 2013: 122-3.
[28] For 1960 film, see Cyrino 2005: 106-7; on use of this convention in the Starz TV series, see Mueller 2018: 139, 149.
[29] Pierce 2018: 158 explicitly connects sequences like this in the TV series with the scene from the film.
[30] On film, Symonds 2008: 155 also contends genre conventions do not necessarily make the text boring or predictable.

within tolerable limits, helps keep search-behavior going.'[31] We might then expect to see similar conventions at work in games to allow for fluid, cognitively-available play, though due to the complexity of the epic film tradition we may also locate moments in which those recognisable moments are subverted.

## 2.2 *God of War*

Set in a twisted version of the Greek mythological world,[32] the *God of War* trilogy (SCE/SCI Santa Monica Studio, 2005-2010) is a fast-paced action-adventure and perhaps the most (in)famous of all videogame receptions of antiquity. Its popularity is reflected in its high sales numbers,[33] which are likely the result of its clever level design, strong storyline, and its notorious demand for player-led instances of blood-soaked violence.[34] For the games all require the player to engage willingly in brutal and ever-gorier combat. The sequences within the games are, representatively, similar to the visual languages of such contemporary filmmakers as Quentin Tarantino.[35] As with such hyperviolent cinema, the release of *God of War* (hereafter *GoW*) has coincided with the rise of new technologies and high-definition visuals, leading to its role in the 'normalisation of beauty' via pleasurably violent scenes.[36] Like the epic film or disaster movie sketched out above, *GoW* is chiefly concerned with, as one blogger puts it, the 'prevailing emotion [of] the adrenaline rush of survival and destruction'.[37] It is therefore through ultraviolence and the often acrobatic brutality of the game's combat that players become immersed.[38] The combat scenarios the player finds herself in consequently 'creates threat for the player', as she engages in a gameplay process that 'requires adrenaline-inducing rapid responses'.[39] When not fighting, players are navigating environments at slower paces, deciphering puzzles by moving objects, pulling levers, and finding the correct way forward through the gameworld. At times, then, focus must therefore be placed on the architecture of the world (the environment and the simulated constructions within). As a result, there is space for the games to replicate scenes of combat and large-scale gameworlds typical of ancient cinema and television. After expanding on the more general characteristics of the *GoW* series and their overlap with the ancient epic film mode, this case study locates three characteristics of the epic film tradition

[31] Bruner 1956: 16.
[32] Scholars are content to cross 'history' with 'myth' when discussion ancient or historical onscreen texts. E.g. Jancovich 2015: 69, who openly conflates the two.
[33] Christesen and Machado 2010: 108.
[34] Cassar 2013: 91.
[35] Tocci 2007a.
[36] Prof.mcstevie 2015.
[37] Tocci 2007a.
[38] Ciccoricco 2010: 232.
[39] Symonds 2008: 190.

operating in the games: the spectacle of violence, the use of large, grand architectures, and the conveyance of modern values and messages. These three branches of the play experience, analysed in three distinct subsections, will help to focus the discussion on the games', and their players', interaction with the film tradition and the potential construction of an "epic game tradition". Many of the conventions and representative strategies used in the *GoW* games, as in their cinematic cousins, are derived from a wide range of sources, from ancient literature to contemporary film and television. By assessing the uses of these conventions by both game and player, we begin to see the ways in which facets of the tradition cross into the videogame realm to be co-operated with, and even evolved, by the player.

The *GoW* games explicitly communicate with the epic tradition by offering huge and aesthetically pleasing environments. In a sequence atop Mount Olympus in *GoW 3*, the use of perspective juxtaposes Kratos, the player's character, against the vast surrounding architectures (Image 2.1). The scene simultaneously demonstrates the beauty of the designed landscape while implying a significant difference in size between the protagonist Kratos in the foreground and both the gameworld and the monstrous Titan in the background. The complexity of the gameworld is consistent throughout the series, though often appears in different circumstances (Image 2.2). To the fore here stands Kratos, and in this instance the player must direct him across the platforms on the left of the screen to gain access to the building in the distance. By representing the mythological world as one replete with huge architectures and environments, the game mimics film conventions. In this way, *GoW* engages in the 'intertextuality of spectacle' believed by Surman to be integral to the deployment of "epicness" in videogames.[40] Furthermore, *GoW* extends the player's relationship with this central tenet of the epic film tradition by positioning it as a fundamental part of the interactive challenge: it is now something beautiful to see, and a playground upon which to operate. Throughout the games, and this discussion, there exists a transmedial relationship between the impressive architectures of ancient film, and the similarly grand, though crucially interactive, gameworlds of the *GoW* games.

[40] Surman 2007: 206.

**2.1**: The epic gameworld in *GoW 3*.

**2.2**: An epic environment in *GoW 3*.

These games are, furthermore, connected to the epic film tradition in their appropriation of visual and narrative themes used in films to tell their stories, as *GoW* plays host to a rich cast of characters and a strong motivating storyline. A compellingly told narrative therefore supports player behaviour, often positioning non-interactive cutscenes around moments of action to provide further background and meaning to player action. While cutscenes to some extent remove player agency by operating without their input, they are also 'central to the videogame experience rather than merely peripheral or counter-productive'.[41] Similarly, although "seen" spectacle maintains a bad reputation,[42] others assert that visual spectacle and narrative storytelling feed into one another.[43] This is certainly the case in a medium wherein the receiver co-operates with and assists in actually building the overarching story. Film-like episodes throughout *GoW* deliver complex story-capsules which are wrapped around and collaborate with moments of interaction to enrich those moments of player activity with a narrative thrust. Thus, the player cannot be forced into a position of 'submission and deference' because she acts directly upon the game and its events.[44] This complex relationship between play and cutscene is demonstrated immediately: the first game of the trilogy opens not with an instance of interactive play, but a cinematic sequence in which Kratos leaps over a cliff in an apparent attempt to commit suicide. This image of a tall, muscular and armed figure ending his life may recall Euripides' Heracles, an equally heroic figure who contemplates suicide.[45] While this may also recall Sophocles' *Ajax*, in which the titular hero also engages in an act of suicide,[46] the method here is distinctly Euripidean/Heraclean. Chmielewska appears to concur, noting that Hercules actually appears in *GoW 3* as a 'very brutal, negative character', allowing space for us to conceive of Kratos as the "true" Hercules figure.[47] At this point in the first game, however, no further information is provided, although this method of characterisation does speak out towards the series' wider aim to draw the player first into Kratos' story before leading the player into his (and their) actions. Text appears on the screen immediately after, informing the player that she is being transported to an earlier time, where the game "proper" begins. As a result, the player begins the

[41] Newman 2004: 72.
[42] As De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2009: 189 claim, it is a corporate tool used to 'dull' audiences. Jancovich 2015: 62-3 believes spectacle obscures the themes of the film.
[43] Theodorakopoulos 2005: 45-6, and 2005: 50 on *Ben-Hur* film. Beacham 2012: 112-3 sees similar operations in the historical games.
[44] As Jancovich 2015: 61 discusses regarding film and television.
[45] Eur. *HF*. 1238-42; 1270-1309; although, Heracles here does not actually commit, or attempt to commit, suicide. The more of Kratos' character we see, the more Herculean he becomes (see below).
[46] Soph. *Aj*. 40-70 for blind rage, 815-865 Ajax falls on his sword.
[47] Chmielewska 2016: 184; the 'meta' nature of Kratos (see Chmielewska 2016: 186, below) is further exaggerated since *GoW 3*'s Hercules is voiced by Kevin Sorbo, of the *Hercules* television series.

game not simply to play, but to understand through that play why their protagonist has made this attempt on his own life.

To better illustrate how moments in the games correspond to, and potentially alter, branches of the epic onscreen tradition, a summary of the trilogy's narrative will be necessary. In the first game, after these opening sequences, Kratos is told by Athena that he must kill Ares to escape a life of servitude. Athena acts as a de facto guide to Kratos,[48] and the player, as they both pursue their mission to fight, and ultimately kill, the other Olympian. The player, as Kratos, then goes to an Athens under siege by Ares himself, and encounters an oracle who tells Kratos that he must obtain Pandora's Box, chained to the back of the Titan Cronos, if he wishes to defeat the god of war. Cronos is found walking endlessly through the 'Desert of Lost Souls' as punishment for his part in the Titanomachy. Scaling his gigantic form, the player locates Pandora's Box, opens it, and eventually uses its power to kill Ares. As this series of events demonstrates, players control Kratos throughout his journey, while cutscenes (often featuring the Olympian gods) provide motivation and reasoning for such activities. In *GoW 2*, after killing Ares and becoming the new 'god of war', Kratos attempts to violently depose Zeus. Kratos is killed and then resurrected with help from the Titans after he locates (and murders) the Fates.[49] *GoW 3* picks up immediately after these events as the player enacts a joint assault upon Mount Olympus with assistance from the Titans. In this final game of the trilogy, the player directs Kratos around Mount Olympus, overcoming its monstrous protectors and killing the Olympians and the Titans one by one. The following discussion will use examples from all three games.

The interweaving of narrative and play is typical of the trilogy. Though many of the events above are played out automatically *to* the player, she must also respond to those events through play: for example, when Athena appears before Kratos to assist him in cutscenes, the player must then actively fulfil her requests through Kratos to continue telling the story. Specific moments in the games also demonstrate the interplay between shown and played narrative moments. When Cronos is first encountered, he is first revealed through a cinematic-style cutscene and subsequently becomes an instance of play. The player approaches Cronos as he looms into view. Following this, a cutscene shows Kratos swinging upon a chain, grabbing hold of him, and climbing his giant form. The player then regains control and must direct Kratos atop Cronos' massive head and into the temple he carries on his shoulders. When Kratos scales Cronos, the game camera automatically pans out to provide a sense of scale: the size of the titan, the miniscule figure of Kratos, reflecting the

[48] Seemingly, another resonance with Euripides' *HF.* 1001-3.
[49] Furtwangler 2012 analyses the Fates in the game at length.

gargantuan task at hand. This has been described as a particularly epic and spectacular sequence.[50] The play experience after this, however, seeks to link what the player sees and what the player does, introducing Cronos as a narratively-important character while furthering his role in the sequence as living, breathing playground. This skipping between visually-shown and actively-played sequences is replicated in *GoW 2*, where the Titan Atlas operates as both a character and a game level. As in myth, Atlas here upholds a landmass upon which the player has previously been operating. The player discovers this as she moves underground, where Atlas is then introduced through a cutscene. When she regains control the player must move Kratos across Atlas himself, using the craggy outcroppings of his giant face as ledges and shelves, navigating them as she would any environment in the game. The Atlas character is therefore transplanted from the mythological corpus into a non-playable character with a speaking role, and then translated into a surface upon which to operate. Such playful use of the mythological characters resonates with the 'meta-hero' nature of Kratos himself; Kratos is part generic Spartan, part Greek hero,[51] and part player, just as this meta-characterisation of Atlas situates him as part mythic Titan, part narrative mechanic, and part level design.

A theme therefore begins to emerge in which these videogames borrow epic film techniques, sometimes seemingly to the detriment of the play process. For example, the game camera in all three games often moves automatically as the player plays, and sometimes it intentionally makes Kratos harder to see and control to provide a breath-taking view of the surrounding scenery. In seeking to show the visually impressive gameworld, the game is programmed to operate against usual relations between game and player wherein the camera provides the best possible view of in-game events. When the player finally encounters and battles Cronos in *GoW 3* (Image 2.3), Kratos can barely be seen between the titan's thumb and finger, but the player is nevertheless required in the subsequent sequences to operate her protagonist. The more the player moves and fights, the harder it becomes to even see Kratos. Present here is a sense of scope akin to the epic film, as the game is temporarily programmed to work against the usual dynamic in which the camera provides the player with the optimal perspective. However, although the player is sometimes potentially at a disadvantage, the uniqueness of interactive "epicness" is revealed by the above instances. In all three examples, "epicness" is tonally present in both watched and played sequences: Atlas is both active and passive, watched and played with, whereas Cronos in both acts as a foundation for a moment of epic visualisation and as an instance of challenging play.

[50] Tocci 2007b; Prof.mcstevie 2015.
[51] Chmielewska 2016: 186, describing Kratos as a 'meta-hero' composite of Hercules 'and other mythical heroes'.

Such instances are medium-specific reactions to the demands of the epic tradition, splitting spectacle into “seen” and “played” and interweaving the two to generate the play experience. Consequently, this means that while the games do derive behaviours from their cinematic predecessors, they nevertheless adapt them to suit the needs of the videogame medium.

**2.3:** The barely perceptible Kratos against the form of Cronos.

The personal narrative of Kratos, particularly when told through cutscenes, denotes a shift towards more generic cinematic themes of vengeance. Alongside and within the plot of the first game (detailed above), automatic flashbacks reveal that Kratos once led the Spartan army, and during an especially difficult campaign, Kratos, close to death, called on Ares to save his life. Ares agreed, but insisted that Kratos would forever be required to do his bidding. This is revealed not in the beginning, but halfway through the player’s journey in the first game. The flashbacks, often cryptic and revealing little, eventually disclose that Kratos, at Ares’ behest, unknowingly murdered his own wife and daughter in a blind rage. This becomes the impetus for Kratos’ blood-soaked quest for revenge against the god of war in the first instalment, and eventually all the Olympians throughout the trilogy. Such characterisation resonates with Euripides’ Heracles, a family man

whose momentary, divine-inspired madness similarly results in the death of his family.[52] Furthermore, Kratos' physical form absorbs the ashes of his murdered family, causing his skin to become ashen. This echoes Heracles' keeping of his bow, the principal symbol of his violent past: in refusing to part with it, it becomes a part of him, just as the death of Kratos' family is now represented upon the protagonist's body. However, the 'revenge tragedy', while formalised in antiquity, is also central to European literature and film more broadly.[53] Echoes of Euripides may also indicate standard revenge-narrative devices found in wider fiction strategies and, often, ancient films: in *Gladiator*, for example, the protagonist Maximus is motivated by the need to avenge his family and, like Kratos, free himself from the powers that control him. Seeing across time and media in this way allows us to discern a kind of "Herculean Kratos", one who partially engages with the Herculean tradition while simultaneously operating independently from it and towards more generic narrative strategies, much like Hercules does in other media,[54] but also in keeping with recent trends in onscreen antiquity wherein mythical figures are increasingly being treated as 'flexible'.[55] This combination of conventions creates a powerful impetus for the player to continue engaging in play.[56] As the player gradually learns of Kratos' situation, and so generates an understanding as to why the character acts as he does, the player may even become subject to a kind of heroic affect. Heroic affect in film relates to the arousal of emotions on behalf of the audience when witnessing 'heroism'.[57] Affect may arise from unheroic behaviours, or any other instances in which receivers are 'sharing in the emotion' of onscreen actors.[58] In *GoW*, affect is generated in part by information relayed through cutscenes and partly as a result of the player acting on the requirements presented by them. The need for vengeance is therefore adopted by the player as a primary motivation for play and ultimately the completion of the game and series.[59] There are likely a number of sources for this revenge convention, but wherever it might derive from it is necessary for the player to engage with it, intimately and directly, as a central theme.

[52] Griffiths 2006: 29, 41, 72; on 'madness', 2006: 84. It is also implied that, like Heracles in Eur. *HF*. 12-20, Kratos leaves as a warrior, and returns a murderer.
[53] Kerrigan 1996: 3.
[54] Baker 2018: 50, writing on a "transmedial Hercules", states that 'many outings [of Hercules] were overtly transmedia', implying that some were not, and so were tacitly formulated from general "Herculeanness".
[55] Blanshard 2018: 29, 32-4 characterises Hercules in this way, as a character increasingly susceptible to 'pastiche, irony, and intertextuality'.
[56] One interview with a *GoW* player by Shaw 2014: 83 demonstrates that focus on characterisation is a major draw for players of the game(s).
[57] Cyrino 2011: 30-1.
[58] See Hobden, forthcoming on Starz *Spartacus*.
[59] Much like the viewer of a film, whose attention is held and emotions are altered by dramatic situations, Carroll 1999: 23, 28.

*Co-creating spectacle: violence and complicity*

Player activity within the games therefore interweaves with non-interactive sequences to create a complete play and narrative experience. This section focusses on one particular aspect of the onscreen tradition, investigating how incorporation of spectacular violence typical of ancient-world cinema is rehearsed and potentially changed by its implication in the interactive realm of *GoW*. The application of violent or excessive spectacle in a medium where the receiver must directly act exaggerates some key tenets of the film tradition: complicity, for example, in excessive and violent acts on behalf of the viewer has long been an issue in film studies. Ancient epics usually focus on a male hero, often musclebound, positioned so the audience meditates on his muscular form. As a result, male superstar bodies have become 'standardized visual images',[60] which exist in such a way as to allow for the 'pleasures of looking'.[61] Maleness of this potentially exploitative sort can be seen in *Spartacus* (1960), chiefly concerning the body of the titular character, and continues to be used in more recent ancient film.[62] Usually, however, in both ancient and non-ancient film, the male spectator is traditionally allowed to gaze upon in-fiction female characters, thereby excluding straight women of the audience from enjoying such visual pleasures.[63] Masculinity in ancient epics is, furthermore, intricately tied with themes of violence and patriarchal domination.[64] Spilling blood and objectifying women seemingly go hand-in-hand, which in turn demands audience complicity in the messages and meanings this might transmit. Acceptance of this on behalf of an active engager, a player, goes beyond just seeing. The 'muscular body or swordsmanship',[65] violence enacted by the heroes, and the active gaze of the viewer upon an on-show actor onscreen, may potentially be carried into action-based games and made all the more explicit by player participation within those parameters.

This quandary exists because player agency through interaction is the most central characteristic of all games. Sobchack notes of film that we are 'left to reflect on our own *lack* of agency and our own restricted immanence in the movie theater'.[66] In *GoW*, the player assumes direct control of a musclebound and highly-skilled fighter in Kratos and actively takes part in his violent journey. She therefore lacks no agency, being instead the primary agent. Since successful player-led fighting is fundamentally required to "win" the game, her inevitable victories in combat

[60] Proch and Kleu 2013: 178-9.
[61] Wyke 1997: 31. See also Blanshard and Shahabudin 2011: 47, 174, 229 on continuation of this in *Gladiator*.
[62] Wyke 1997: 70; Cyrino 2005: 120. Cyrino 2011: 21-22 also notes this in the *300* film. Jancovich 2015: 60, 62 speaks of discomfort of male audience in the fetishization of male actors in *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004).
[63] Mayne 1994: 155.
[64] Elia 2011: 84.
[65] Elia 2011: 75.
[66] Sobchack 2012: 355, her emphasis.

are, in themselves, rewards. They are, furthermore, represented onscreen as visually impressive: Kratos' primary method of attack involves swinging giant chains at enemies and creating 'combos' or linked attacks ('5 Hits', see Image 2.4). The player is prompted to fight continually, creating custom combinations of movements and attacks, each following on from another. This results in swirls of orange-coloured flame not unlike a hyperviolent rhythmic gymnastics display, lending a visually-pleasing, even balletic quality to the fight sequences. This representative strategy, in which brutality begets enjoyable visuals, is common in cinematic antiquity.[67] The near-constant presence of enemies in *GoW*, the swiftness of combat, and the blood-and-light show resulting from it, create a continuous succession of things to both do and watch. If, as Paul suggests, spectacle and action feed from ancient literature into cinema to engender a relationship between viewer and film,[68] these characteristics are then given new life in *GoW* where spectacle is actively created to generate cyclical and continuous reproductions of violent sequences. 'Beautifully controlled violence is central to the sword and sandal film';[69] when central to the videogame, as it is in *GoW*, said beautifully (and literally) controlled, visually-appealing violence finds a potentially troubling new role. It is potentially troubling, because the games can only work when players willingly agree to be the very reason violence ensues and submit to entering into an unspoken contract with the game wherein the enacting of violence is, by definition, a signifier of success.

[67] Turner 2009: 135, expanded upon in Gardner and Potter 2017: 220.
[68] Paul 2013: 237, 239.
[69] Elia 2011: 81.

**2.4:** Kratos fights.

This balletic form of combat is highly stylized, almost like a dance, appearing as if a form of self-celebration, and only after the player efficiently inputs the correct actions. This method of presenting violence is typical of action films generally, as Symonds notes: 'the body in motion in martial arts can be as beautiful as it is violent', going on to describe the body in fight sequences as '*dance-like* rather than *life-like*'.[70] Sometimes moments of violence in *GoW* end with an 'O' appearing above an enemy's head: pressing the corresponding 'O' button initiates a sequence of over-the-top actions the player is not directly in control of. These sequences provide the player with especially extraordinary instances of violence designed to be looked at and enjoyed. Lewis describes the alternation between 'extreme slow motion and normal speed' in *The Matrix* film,[71] moments in which the viewer can see everything happening in a visually complex spectacle sequence and so better appreciate it. In action films generally, 'the moments in which fights start and stop in film narratives, for the action genre audience, are the moments of acceptance of the pause in the story in order to appreciate the virtuosity of the fight text and its choreographed body'.[72] Surman crucially

[70] Symonds 2008: 150 and 152 respectively, her emphasis.
[71] Lewis 2014: 216.
[72] Symonds 2008: 160. She uses *The Matrix* as an example throughout the chapter in question.

extends this observation to the action-based videogame, in which sometimes slow-motion, sometimes fast-motion, but always visually spectacular 'special moves' create what he terms the 'reward-spectacle'.[73] After the player has controlled Kratos' combative actions effectively, she is then required to press the corresponding button on their controller as rapidly as possible (the 'O' button, Image 2.5). Doing so in this instance, Kratos now pulls on a Cyclops' eye, eventually resulting in a grotesque scene wherein Kratos forcibly removes the eyeball and kills the monster. Success in a fight engenders a visual treat for the player, a reward-spectacle, transforming the usually semi-passive enjoyment of filmic bloodshed into a collaborative effort between player and game which subsequently ends in a self-congratulatory moment of violent death. The claim of a film viewer that the protagonist is 'not like us' cannot feasibly extend to the gameplayer in this instance:[74] to a significant degree Kratos is 'us', the real-world agent. Such mechanisms close the gap between onscreen actor and real-world player and potentially reignite debates around the harmful qualities of violent videogames. Though it can be argued that Kratos is himself a fully-formed character in a complex gameworld and narrative, and the above conceptualization of violence as 'dance' potentially downplays possible underpinning meaning of brutal acts, player collaboration with and co-construction of the more brutal tenets of the epic tradition nevertheless brings the receiver much closer to the violence represented onscreen.

[73] Surman 2007: 210. These stop-start sequences which showcase the 'fight text and its choreographed body' is identified in film by Symonds 2002: 160 (see n71, above page).
[74] Paul 2013: 183-4 on viewers and their relationship with cinematic protagonists.

**2.5:** Ocular violence.

The instance with the Cyclops highlights two prevalent features of the *GoW* franchise: the partnership between player and game to co-create violent spectacle, and the reliance on player understanding of standard visual conventions to enact those spectacular moments. Upon approaching the Cyclops, the player will by this point understand the essentials of gameplay, and so will automatically make two assessments: that the Cyclops is another enemy, and that his weak point will almost certainly be his eye. Assumptions begin to formulate, and a player strategy begins to materialize. This is relative to what Herman defines as 'general world-knowledge', that knowledge which creates gaps that text-creators assume the receiver can fill.[75] While it relates specifically to a figure from Greek myth (the Cyclops), it is ubiquitous as a figure and "obvious" as an instance of game design, enough so that the developer does not need to formally introduce the Cyclops to a player armed with expectations engendered from past experiences with popular culture. The characterization of enemies throughout the games is notably like visualising methods of fantasy film and videogames: the Cyclops, and many other monster inhabitants, are aesthetically similar to creatures found in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003).[76] By using recognisable

[75] Herman 2013: 237-8.
[76] Most evident in the concept art created during pre-production of the games.

Greek myth "enemies" and characterising them in such standard visual fashions, the developer broadens the potential for accessibility and so allows the continuation of rapid and immediate gameplay. As Upton puts it, we do not play *GoW* 'to learn how to smash skeletons. If you play *God of war*[sic], you certainly learn a lot about smashing skeletons… Your skeleton-smashing knowledge is merely an incidental by-product of your primary experience.'[77] The game experience will always be tacitly tied up with other things to provide a communicable experience, which in turn feeds out of and into non-primary experiences, from skeleton-smashing to Cyclops-dismembering. We can therefore add some cognitive background to these instances of swiftly-enacted and gruesome violence: expectations of the player collaborate with the combat system to streamline the co-creation of violent spectacle and, ultimately, engender its 'reward-spectacle'.

"Boss fights" are an especially familiar component of the action genre framework, and in *GoW 3*, against the Olympians themselves, they are by far the most violent of all sequences. They are also deliberately lengthy and challenging play experiences, and essential for narrative progression. Like the Cyclops, the characterisation and combat strategies attached to these fights are in line with standard depictions of the gods themselves: Poseidon fights as a giant water-monster, Helios blinds Kratos (and the player) with light, and Hermes employs speed and agility. Zeus, the "final boss", utilises his characteristic lightning-bolts as weapons. After deploying combat strategies that correspond to these familiar conventions, the player is treated to reward-spectacles in the form of violent deicide and active dismemberment of the Olympians. Poseidon is the first "boss" in *GoW 3* and is fought as Kratos is still scaling Olympus itself: the titan Gaia, assisting the protagonist, is so large that she acts as a playing field, much like Atlas above. The visual spectacle of impossibly giant physical forms and the creation of that scene through player control is maintained throughout the player's fight with Poseidon, while occasionally the game takes over and "tells the story" of the fight with brief cutscenes. When at certain points the player performs button sequences, very short cutscenes and moments of player agency collaborate in rapid succession to provide a half-cinematic, half-playable scene. These constitute, for the player, adrenalin-fuelled experiences, both showing and allowing operation within a characteristic "hugeness". Once Poseidon is finally, entirely, defeated, he becomes of mortal size and is subjected to one final button sequence, resulting in a kinetic and half-controlled scene reminiscent of contemporary filmic handheld-camera styles. Unusually for any game, the camera switches to Poseidon's own perspective so that the player can now see Kratos (Image 2.6). When the player is prompted to press L3 + R3 together on their controller, Kratos jams his thumbs into Poseidon's eyes, blinding him and

[77] Upton 2015: 283.

temporarily disrupting player view. The L3 + R3 buttons are located on the lower half of the PlayStation controller, and are almost always pushed with the player's thumbs. In this way, the movements of Kratos' virtual hands and the physical hands of the player are harmonised, exaggerating the linkage between player and avatar. Everything about the long and complex combat sequence and this final moment of play seems designed to draw the player directly into the guilty pleasure of co-creating violence. Where the merging of watching and playing, seeing and 'doing' is consistently entangled, the deliberate merging of player and protagonist at Poseidon's death forces the player to become fully conscious of her own role in the ensuing brutality.

**2.6**: Poseidon's perspective.

Within these many fights circulate a variety of motifs from across popular culture and the epic onscreen (primarily cinematic) continuum, creating an experience that is both exciting and unpredictable yet often simultaneously familiar. For example, Poseidon and Zeus both expound their lofty words of judgment in received English accents, continuing the 'linguistic paradigm' tradition established by 1950s Roman epics wherein British actors were employed to provide authoritative, and supposedly intrinsically villainous, voices to authority figures.[78] Similarly, boss fights make heavy

[78] Cyrino 2005: 28.

use of orchestral music and operatic singing, as in ancient films.[79] Strategies necessary to defeat enemies either require implementation of obvious strategies (as with the Cyclops), or, failing that, the player will rely on familiar genre mechanics learned from both the game and others like it. The narrative itself is purposefully ahistorical, likely to keep it automatically interpretable: there are no ancient precedents for deicide or a "Second Titanomachy", these being primarily modern conventions used in fantasy films and comic books.[80] Thus these can be considered necessary alterations to fit the form of the action-adventure, a genre which typically requires monolithic enemies and a recognisably "good vs bad" story structure. Components within the narrative may nevertheless seem intrinsically classical, as in the case of Kratos' possible characterisation as vaguely Herculean. Mostly, however, the games engage in the epic tradition wherein, as Cyrino says of twenty-first century Roman epic viewership, people thirst for 'a familiar cinematic entertainment, yet one that is still exciting and new'.[81] Action-based ancient videogames operating in the epic mode therefore adapt components from onscreen antiquity and reconfigure them to construct new, interactive reception experiences. While it was implied earlier that this new connection between player and violent actor may be "troubling", the above exposition demonstrates the unique and complex ways in which narrative and moments of player-led brutality interplay. The sophisticated and reciprocating relationship between spectacle and story has been demonstrated by scholars of onscreen antiquity,[82] and appears to be replicated, albeit in different and often direct ways, in the *GoW* videogames. This multifaceted relationship between violence and narrative correlates with the recent debunking of the myth that violent videogames are bad for people, a theory continually proven to be fallacious.[83] Recognisable elements of ancient material and non-ancient entertainment create fixed access points in keeping with the cognitive necessities of gameplay, but the very processes of change and the alteration of those conventions creates a new experience in which players become 'image-users' and manipulators of onscreen events,[84] co-creators of meaningful violent spectacle couched in a grand, overarching narrative in which the player faces off against the cruel Olympian gods.

[79] E.g., in the *Ben-Hur* film as noted by Cyrino 2005: 71.
[80] See Tomasso 2015 on death of the gods as modern fiction device; also, Gordon 2017: 212-4; and Frankel 2018: 129 and Tomasso 2015: 152-3 on deicide on television.
[81] Cyrino 2005: 3.
[82] E.g., Theodorakopoulos 2005: 44-6, 50, 168-170.
[83] See Markey and Ferguson 2017.
[84] Stork 2013: 41-2.

*Co-creating spectacle: architecture and destruction*

Ordinarily viewers of epic films see, interpret, and enjoy images of excessively grand architectures and extravagant material objects. Like the demonstrations of violence in the above subsection, this branch of the epic tradition evolves when implicated in the videogame medium, as it demands further interaction with and even destructive alteration of those structures and materials. The architectures of *GoW* are often generically classical, though sometimes more fantastical and outlandish, thus distancing the player from their real world.[85] Nevertheless, player interaction with and direction of Kratos, as with the violence enacted throughout the games, often closes this gap. When engaging with what Lowe describes as the 'destruction' mode in ancient games, the player must be complicit in the moving or ruining of virtual ancient worlds.[86] Much of the surrounding spaces throughout the series are breakable, from the smallest item to the largest building. There are vases and statues, generically Greek in appearance, that when destroyed offer "power-ups" that add to Kratos' health and magical abilities. A player, then, enters a room or space and sees a variety of "Greek things", knowing that she is being encouraged to destroy them. To demolish them 'on sight' therefore becomes an automatic reaction.[87] This is important because it is foremost a reaction to the demands of the modern epic tradition: while there are ancient examples of intentional vandalism (e.g. the mutilation of the herms by Alcibiades[88]), the destruction of antique objects is a demonstrably contemporary onscreen theme. In watching disaster films, Sontag states that the viewer enjoys the 'peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc'.[89] The wreaker of havoc in *GoW*, the player, is more than just 'passive[ly] spectating',[90] and is instead actively destroying vases, statues and monuments to create reward-spectacles. These virtual objects are often presented within 'ruined landscapes', rendered in high-definition to provide an extremely detailed ancient world in pieces.[91] Most of Kratos' environments are already in ruins, then, but to progress through the game the player must participate in the further ruination of this world.

Sometimes such destructive acts are necessary to solve puzzles or uncover the way forward within a gamespace. In the Athens of the first game, Kratos encounters a large doorway blocked by rubble: the camera moves automatically around the space to show a large statue standing beside the doorway, and a high ledge leading towards it. After navigating the gamespace, the player must

[85] Garcia Morcillo and Hanesworth 2015: 6.
[86] Lowe 2012: 55.
[87] Lowe 2012: 70 and 67: 'buildings or objects are turned into ruins "on demand"'.
[88] Plut. *Alc*. 19; Thuc. 27.
[89] Sontag 1965: 43-44.
[90] Fraser 2016: 180.
[91] Tocci 2007b.

stand on the ledge above this doorway and push the statue over by hammering the R2 button. A brief cutscene shows the statue falling and shattering, its head rolling away to provide an alternative way forward.[92] In this sequence, players move between "seen" spectacle familiar to viewers of epic film, and the "played" spectacle endemic to games of this type. First, the statue is looked at as a piece of spectacular scenery. Then, peculiar to the interactive tradition, it is acted upon and destroyed through player action, thereby opening up the next stage of the gameworld. In *GoW 2*, players enter a space wherein green bands of light emanate horizontally from a giant stone face, which coalesce to form a magical barrier again blocking Kratos' way forward. As before, the player negotiates the complex landscape until she locates two reflective statues which are pushed around the labyrinthine gamespace until they are positioned in front of the stone face. This throws the bands of light back into the giant statuary, causing it to shatter and allowing Kratos to continue. The series possesses many of these instances: *3*, being the most epic in scale, has several moments in which the way forward can only be achieved by actively destroying monuments, statues, marble columns, and other architectural and vaguely classical features. A fragmented virtual world resonates with the fragmented, bits-and-pieces nature of ancient-world appropriation,[93] though in these examples the player is required to further deconstruct the gameworld as a means of progression.

It is possible that such treatment of ancient monuments implies a certain contempt for antiquity through the gleeful destruction of "high" culture. The game continually relies on player expectations whenever she sees paraphernalia synonymous with the ancient world, such as marble statues and pottery. These material objects, in the real world, are typically revered as signifiers of their concomitant ancient societies, the so-called bearers of civilization. The conscious destruction of such antiquities in said real world is always met with universal outrage and condemnation, as demonstrated by reactions to the destruction of Palmyra by Isis.[94] Scholarship suggests that methods of destructive spectacle might have a political dimension,[95] that demolition of physical structures signifies the dismantling of social structures, thereby generating a symbolic freedom.[96] Destructive player performance upon structures therefore implies a certain guilty pleasure, and fits within a wider narrative where, in killing gods, the player is "sticking it to the man", a narrative convention concomitant with many ancient epic films.[97] While *GoW* is more about individual

[92] Kerrigan 1996: 6 identifies that toppling statues have some place in the tradition of revenge literature.
[93] And seemingly recognised by Ciccoricco 2010: 235. On an antiquity as fragmented, see Ginsberg 2004: 2-3.
[94] E.g. Jeffries 2015.
[95] Drawing on Guy Debord 1967 on spectacle as a way of pacifying audiences, Best and Kellner 1999: 133.
[96] Watts 2011: 237.
[97] See Roman epic films/games below, Section 2.4.

vengeance than the dismantling of a power structure, the subtext of progress and freedom nevertheless runs through the trilogy as the player acts violently towards architecture and, of course, the Olympians. In this way, seemingly mindless destruction has a more complex dimension: direct ruination of ancient worlds and the constituents within may carry multiple and/or contemporary meanings designed to be co-operated with by the player herself.

This particular element of the epic mode may be extended much further, and even beyond ancient world examples. Gordon identifies the film *Troy* (2004), a retelling of the Trojan War story, as an example of how recent visual media avoids displaying the gods themselves. The viewer may be shown immortal powers in an abstract sense,[98] but the departure from actual representation reflects a present-day disconnect with divinity and religion. This forced disassociation between the story and the gods who control them in Homeric poetry is common across films about Troy.[99] But there is one notable exception to this divine absence in the 2004 film: Achilles, sacking the Temple of Apollo, decapitates a nearby statue of Apollo as an act of defiance. Where *Troy* does depict the divine, then, it does so in a way that is postmodern 'in its theoretical concepts and aesthetics':[100] rebellion against the gods is characterised here by the conscious destruction of a divine symbol. If *Troy* is a remodelling of the Homeric epic for the twenty-first century,[101] the absence of gods punctuated by the destruction of their images reflects a modern rationalistic climate in which gods and their symbolic iconographies are no longer relevant. Baker also identifies a "rationalizing" of myth in the film *Hercules* (Brett Ratner, 2014),[102] again to fit with the demands of modern (western) audiences. Any such subtext or tone of rationalization, then, must be an intrinsically modern cultural one, [103] even when set in antiquity. This strategy can also be found in science-fiction: the television series *Battlestar Galactica* (Universal, 2003-2009) presents a scene in the episode "Kobol's Last Gleaming, Part II" (S01 E13, 2005) in which co-protagonist Starbuck fights a villainous Cylon enemy. The show positions Greek mythology as a central, state-sponsored belief system for the humans of the series, where the Cylons, who believe in a monotheistic God, desire the extinction of humanity and, by extension, that polytheistic system.[104] This fight, already weighted by this spiritual conflict, takes place in an already partially destroyed museum once belonging to the humans. It is populated by vases, pottery, and statues visually indistinguishable from real-world ancient objects found in most museum displays. Throughout the conflict, they are smashed, knocked over and fallen into. The

[98] Gordon 2017: 223, 225.
[99] Salvador Ventura 2015: 59-60.
[100] Salvador Ventura 2015: 50.
[101] Latacz 2007: 39-41.
[102] By 'removing the overt presence of the gods', Baker 2018: 45.
[103] Paul 2013: 14.
[104] For further reading on how the Greek oracle is used in the series, see Wenskus 2017: 455-456.

greater theme of the series, that of religious conflict, complements this scene and its destruction of what is effectively a range of Greek materials. *GoW*, with its destruction of aesthetically classical iconography and material culture compounded by a narrative replete with deicide, may be added to this catalogue. The imagery of a ruined antiquity continues to create a wider transmedial motif,[105] extending this onscreen convention into the interactive realm and so engendering a "bigger picture" in which the player implicates herself in the epic tradition, playing out those values and unlocking those messages through direct action.

*Conventions, values and messages*

If acts of violence and ruination convey such themes and messages, it is likely that other components in *GoW*, interactive and narrative, transmit specific or pointed values and ideas. Burgoyne identifies in epic film three types of historical representation: monumental, antiquarian, and critical/ethical. Monumental refers to architectures, where antiquarian denotes material cultures. Critical or ethical history 'bring[s] these two types together' to help '"measure and organize"' them.[106] By watching and interpreting the first two, the viewer may extrapolate values transmitted by the ethical/critical mode. In short, through watching they may "unlock" the values within the signifying material. This may be an already-loaded symbol, such as an imposing, tyrannical, English-accented Zeus. On the other hand, it may be an ancient signifier 'emptied' of prior connotations and refilled to relay a 'different message'.[107] Either way, the viewer engages with the events and objects onscreen, and infers subtexts and values from them. Often, as noted of film, such readings of onscreen events happen sub-cognitively, and result in emotional and physical reactions, 'sensations of bodily changes, like muscle contractions'. This phenomenon implies that 'cognition' is part of the 'emotional complex'.[108] All this means that films prompt cognitive interpretation, a process that channels the viewer into semi-conscious mental exercises to prompt emotionally-weighted meaning-making. Through this, they co-create themes and values, and respond accordingly. The difference, as always, with videogames is that the process requires cognitive interpretation, followed by explicitly direct action. This action leads to the formulation of values and messages via similar procedures to those of film-watching, though also constitutes a medium-specific method of constructing meaning. As the following section shows, player-co-operation with representations of two female mythical

[105] Fuchs 2016: 8; Darley 2000: 139 on 'fragments' and interrelationships.
[106] Burgoyne 2008: 77-8.
[107] Burgoyne 2008: 92-3.
[108] Carroll 1999: 22; 24-5.

figures, Pandora and Aphrodite, constitute the co-construction of gender-related values and messages by the immersed player.

In having Pandora play a protracted role in *GoW 3*, it is possible that, much like viewers of many ancient films, the player will have to become complicit in standardised, misogynistic characterisations of this figure. In *GoW 3*, Kratos discovers that in opening the Pandora's Box of the first game he has inadvertently endangered the world, its newly-released power supposedly the becoming the reason for the gods' increasingly cruel actions. While this appears to echo standard versions of the Pandora myth described immediately below, it is further understood that 'Hope' was also released and instilled within Kratos. The Greek myth does indeed indicate that once the evils of the world were unleashed from the Box, Hope (*elpis*) was all that remained within.[109] The game takes this further, first by unleashing this *elpis* and then by creating a fully-characterised Pandora with whom the player, through Kratos, co-operates to finally overcome the gods. The interpretative tradition attached to Pandora is often troubling: she is usually rendered as an archetypal troublemaker for man and his household.[110] *Elpis* is furthermore characterised by Zeitlin as a literary technique used by Hesiod to relegate the position of women in society to that of child-bearer and mother.[111] Such approaches to Pandora effectively limit her role to one of domesticity and parenthood, or the bringer of chaos, thereby transmitting a gendered message that tacitly calculates the supposed worth of this figure for the reader. Twentieth and twenty-first century cultural texts have made Pandora synonymous with the 'femme-fatale' film archetype,[112] simultaneously adding depth to her characterisation while designating 'Pandora' as a byword for the perceived wild, uncontrollable woman, who, in the fashion of the Biblical Eve,[113] is the reason for man's problems. Wholesale translation of Pandora into a videogame may well, consciously or otherwise, bring along such baggage, thereby forcing the player to accept and co-operate with this assumption as per the standard dynamics of play.

In *GoW 3*, however, players have the opportunity to contribute towards a new, less disconcerting version of Pandora. Here, she is represented visually as a contemporary teenager, with a thick American accent and a white "emo" fringe obscuring her forehead (Image 2.7). She becomes something of a daughter-by-proxy, maintaining Kratos' connection with his troubled familial past, and despite the standard action motif in which the male protagonist "learns about himself" through

[109] Hes. *Op.* 96-9.
[110] Zeitlin 1995: 50-2.
[111] Outside these parameters, she becomes only an 'economic liability', Zeitlin 1995: 53.
[112] Grafton et al 2010: 684.
[113] Zeitlin 1995: 50.

his association with a daughter figure,[114] such conscious reconfiguration does sidestep usual values that often accompany, and limit, the Pandora figure. Kratos' increasingly positive, even affectionate, attitude towards Pandora contrasts sharply with his typically violent and aggressive nature. This new dimension arguably resonates with Euripides' Heracles, who in the play declares his love for children.[115] Thus the interconnecting classical and filmic tropes engender greater characterisation of both Pandora and Kratos, bolstering them with multiple conventions that act simultaneously and together. Pandora's dialogue is decidedly contemporary: Kratos insists 'Hope is for the weak', while she counters that 'Hope is what makes us strong!', implying a generational gap wherein Kratos believes Pandora to be young and naïve, while Pandora considers Kratos to be narrow-minded and stubborn. She also plays an integral part in the final sequences, sacrificing herself to give Kratos the opportunity to finish Zeus off. By juvenilizing and desexualising Pandora, she is no longer a threat (sexually or otherwise) but is instead a vehicle through which Kratos attains a (comparatively) more morally centred attitude. Rather than 'conceal[ing] the truth in order to deceive' or impoverishing the male and seducing or robbing him as Hesiod presents Pandora,[116] this Pandora forces Kratos to see the truth of his situation (that he must hope, rather than despair) and enables him to act upon it. In this way the developers have undone the myth, eschewing her position as the so-called original sinner and modernizing her to fit with a narrative of forgiveness, self-sacrifice and redemption. Her position as giver, as opposed to taker, further denotes a shift from deceitful enemy of man towards becoming the very reason this man (Kratos) succeeds. While Pandora is less well-represented onscreen, there is a televisual instance in *Xena: Warrior Princess* wherein Pandora operates as 'protector' and 'guardian',[117] implying a relatively recent shift in her representational tradition. *GoW 3* follows suit, reconfiguring Pandora to reflect contemporary attitudes of equality rather than to rehearse culturally-ingrained misogyny. Most importantly, this means that the player, interpreting her as narrative agent and working with her as in-game actor, is never forced to be complicit in the construction of a "negative Pandora" and can instead feel partially responsible for rejuvenating the mythical figure.

[114] This is typical of cinema, action-packed and otherwise, though the dynamic in *GoW* is perhaps closest to the narrative of superhero film *Logan* (James Mangold, 2017), in which the protagonist Wolverine reluctantly takes 11-year-old Laura under his wing, subsequently develops as a character, and uncharacteristically sacrifices himself at the end of the film.
[115] Eur. *HF*. 633-6.
[116] Zeitlin 1995: 50, 54.
[117] Frankel 2018: 125.

**2.7**: A youthful Pandora.

The *GoW* games do sometimes fall into awkward gender stereotypes, particularly when appropriating figures from Greek myth in too literal a sense. There has always been a litany of issues with filmic representations of ancient women, from portraying them as generic scantily clad heroines or 'vamp-like females',[118] to specific instances such as the 'flattened' Medea character in the *Jason and the Argonauts* film.[119] For the most part, ancient women in film are either devoid of personality or without narrative importance and so exist to be looked at or are limited to a select number of stereotypical and often offensive roles. The cinematic Medea above is furthermore replicated in the action-based videogame *Rise of the Argonauts* (Liquid Entertainment, 2008), which in reconfiguring the Argonauts myth forces Medea to become static and effectively characterless.[120] Depending on the representative strategies used to characterise the female in ancient videogames, and especially action-based games plugged into the onscreen tradition, players therefore risk complying with misogynistic portrayals of women, and co-generating inherently offensive sequences as they engage. For example, in *GoW 3*, Aphrodite is represented only as the goddess of love, and is

[118] Johnson 2018: 23.
[119] Ormand 2013: 78.
[120] In the game, Medea binds herself in her own bedroom and contributes to the narrative only at the very end.

consequently obsessed with sex. She flirts with Kratos, initiating a "minigame" in which the two engage in intercourse. The player is intimately involved, twisting controller sticks and pressing buttons as they appear on screen, leading to the final act in which the player must continually hammer 'O' until finished. It is perhaps no coincidence that the 'O' button corresponds to both a violent ending in fight sequences (such as the Cyclops above) and the culmination of a sexual encounter. While it could be considered a bizarrely comedic moment in an otherwise grim play experience, it nevertheless replicates a teenage male masturbatory fantasy at the expense of the goddess. The episode seems designed almost to make us laugh: though it is degrading in its representation, and active complicity in this will likely make the player blush, (s)he is also drawn into seeing it as a blatantly ludicrous sequence mired in irony and self-parody. It must be noted that throughout *GoW 3* there is a growing sense of self-awareness on behalf of the game and its developers. The series' over-the-top violence perpetrated against the gods and their attendant murder sequences are so gruesome that they go beyond even the acceptable remit of the notoriously brutal series. David Jaffe, lead director of the first game, describes *GoW* as '"a creation which is both a work of adolescent wonder and adult seriousness"'.[121] The issue, however, is in detecting these notes of irony: the self-parodic nature of *GoW 3* in its over-indulgence of violence, might be lost on younger players (though the games are an 18 certificate in the UK). Ultimately, the developers of *GoW 3* have relied solely on Aphrodite's most famous characteristic, thereby imposing a restriction on her virtual personality and so limiting the player's capacity to assign her any nuance. This contrasts with the redefining of Pandora in the same game and her multifaceted role in both game and narrative. This is perhaps because Pandora is far less familiar to modern audiences: Fraser points out that in Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* a Greek audience would have been able to contextualise the character and her story.[122] In a twenty-first century videogame, far from ancient Greece both chronologically and geographically, Pandora requires even greater levels of reconfiguration, the result of which here allows alignment with contemporarily recognisable themes of agency and self-sacrifice. Aphrodite, on the other hand, is given to the player as a highly sexualised plaything within an already overwhelmingly male world, with no contextualization and very little bearing on the story.

A lightning-wielding Zeus as "final boss", a beautiful, hypersexual Aphrodite, and an autonomous Pandora as saviour reflect two fundaments of ancient videogames: that the gameplay process is defined by 'anticipation' based on 'expectations',[123] and that the values the characters

[121] From Cassar 2013: 83.
[122] Fraser 2011: 15.
[123] Upton 2015: 133-4.

within represent depend on how these familiar signifiers are deployed, and in what contexts they are inserted into the game. Where characters are rendered in unexpected ways, as Pandora, they are nevertheless dependent on expectations derived from other realms of convention: she assists, she is a foil to the protagonist, and is eventually a symbol of redemption. When a gap needs filling, players may locate themes reflective of contemporaneity rather than conventions from antiquity. For example, while Gordon believes there to be a 'noticeable lack of Christian themes' in *GoW*, exaggerated by the series' preoccupation with extreme violence and occasional nudity,[124] the ending of *GoW 3* uses themes and terminologies reminiscent of the Christ story and the wider Biblical tradition. Pandora's self-sacrifice implies as such, her willingness to die for Kratos' cause indicative of both her autonomy and agency and reminiscent of the death of Christ for the sins of humanity. But it is Kratos' own suicide that cements this motif of post-revenge, potentially Christian, redemption. At the very end of the game, Kratos turns his weapons against himself, his death acting as a vehicle for the delivery of 'Hope' across the world. Visually, Kratos' dying pose is Christlike, forcing comparisons to be drawn between him and the Christ of the Bible (and, of course, modern cinema).[125] There are many possible reasons for this narrative turn. It may be reflective of the Greek poetic, and recent filmic, convention of 'return and making whole again':[126] Kratos, facing Zeus for a final time, 'makes whole' the world by perpetrating a final act of violence against himself and thus saving the world. It might also relate to a strong tradition within ancient epics in the 1950s, which continually told and retold the story of Christ and so relied on the theme of self-sacrifice for the benefit of humanity. It may also reflect the precedent set by *Gladiator*, itself a continuation of Hollywoodian narrative strategies, where the spectacle of the arena results, in the end, with the 'expression of a message', in that case a specifically political one.[127] This fits with Cassar's reading of this moment in the game as a small but effective moment of 'morality'.[128] It is also typical of a post-millennium shifts towards a more nuanced ancient anti-heroic protagonist who undergoes significant personal changes in his character.[129] We can be sure that there is no overt religious message, however, and that, like viewers of *Troy* (above), Christianity is less likely to appeal to a contemporary rationalistic non-Christian playership. It is most likely a refraction of twenty-first century 'pop-culture spirituality' wherein Christian themes fuse with a more contemporary and ambiguous spirituality to create a

[124] Gordon 2017: 218-9.
[125] Including the death of *300*'s protagonist Leonidas. Toscano 2018: 121 sees Theseus in the *Immortals* (Tarsem Singh, 2011) film as 'perfect Christ figure' that complements the 'underlying religious themes' of the film.
[126] Elia 2011: 76.
[127] Burgoyne 2008: 94-5.
[128] Cassar 2013: 91-2.
[129] As Blanshard 2018: 40-1 recognises in twenty-first century renditions of the Hercules character. Similarly, *Immortals*' Theseus undergoes significant 'personal growth', Toscano 2018: 113.

new and abstract form of divinity onscreen.[130] Maybe, like Euripides, who 'wrote for men who had lost that faith, and exhorted them to rely on themselves',[131] the game is written for players who do not necessarily follow either pagan or Christian belief, but nevertheless are happy to engage with more abstract, recognisable themes of revenge, eventual redemption, and sacrifice. Elia suggests that videogames 'do not clearly invest in [players] a sense of the tragedy of violence',[132] perhaps in relation to the perceived lack of in-game critique of player-led acts of aggression in games generally. Here, though, Kratos and Pandora have been transformed from bloodthirsty Spartan and deceitful female into figures of sacrifice and hope in contrast to the violence that permeates the trilogy. In this complex web of conventions, the player successfully collaborates with classical material, with generic modern themes, and with spectacular moments of play, all of which ultimately culminates in the co-creation of a dramatic narrative conclusion by player and game.

*The epic game tradition*

This interplay between ancient and modern has become a recurrent theme in this analysis of *GoW*. Whether controlling the at-once Euripidean and generically cinematic Kratos or participating in the alteration of a traditionally "evil" Pandora into a modern figure of youthful innocence and righteousness, the player moves between classical characteristics and modern ideals as part of a complex play and narrative experience. The *GoW* series weaponizes familiarity, sorting and framing its materials within an easy-to-interpret genre framework and anchoring the game experience in access-points recognisable from broader fiction. Nevertheless, these generic representative strategies and conventions often borrowed from film continually evolve through the interactive processes led by the player. As a result, the intrinsic familiarity of *GoW*'s visual and narrative components constitute radical new approaches to popular antiquity: that the newest instalment, *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2018), brings the still-Greek Kratos into a Norse mythological world speaks to the inherent ability of classical materials to adapt and readapt to non-classical contexts. Such flexibility, nuance and porosity, as Paul states of the ancient film mode,[133] is typical of what I term loosely an epic game tradition, wherein central tenets of the epic film tradition are borrowed and evolved to fit the interactive process. This has been demonstrated through analyses of combative episodes and architectural navigation and interaction, and the details of the narrative and characterisation of in-game agents, all of which intersect with broader cultural patterns and

[130] McAvan 2012: 1-2, 8-9.
[131] Vellacott 1963: 15; see also Griffiths 2006: 96, 'divine protection is no protection and no comfort'.
[132] Elia 2011: 83.
[133] Paraphrased from Paul 2013: 7, 11, 21-2.

behaviours. Just as the ancient epic film collaborates with modernity and antiquity simultaneously, the ancient epic action game does so to construct a similar experience which the player then takes part in. As the viewer of an epic film watches violence, sees spectacular architecture, and consumes inbuilt values and messages, the co-author of an epic action-based game like *GoW* co-creates the violence and dismantles structures, facilitates spectacle, and participates in the development of modern messages and values. The player therefore becomes part of that tradition, co-operating with the remodelling of antiquity and the perpetuation of contemporary principles to help create play and narrative experiences that are at once like and unlike their cinematic counterparts.

## 2.3 Miniature epics

Films of the epic tradition are not necessarily characterised only by their 'bigness': as Paul says above, we need to view ancient cinema as porous, flexible, and nuanced. The film *Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979), for example, plays with many of the central tenets of the cinematic tradition with a far less hefty budget than the films it parodies, and on a much smaller scale.[134] There is also an increasing number of independent (or at least non-Hollywoodian) films that represent antiquity, such as *Centurion* (Neil Marshall, 2010) and *The Eagle* (Kevin Macdonald, 2011). *Centurion*, for example, engages in behaviours set by its predecessor and even 'eclipse[s] *Gladiator* in both realism and gore'.[135] It follows, then, that branches of the epic tradition may be present in much less grand, big-budget and overtly cinematic releases than *GoW*. Independent games ("indies"), like independent cinema, are made primarily by much smaller groups of amateurs, hobbyists and start-up teams operating outside major development studios. Often, action-based indies adhere closely to the format of classic platformers and side-scrollers like *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D 4, 1985), wherein players negotiate gameworlds from left-to-right, jumping across gaps and up-and-down platforms, and encountering enemies. But the recent indie boom has also resulted in more ambitious projects, often generating huge financial returns.[136] As big-name adventure games (like *GoW*) become significantly more expensive to create,[137] indie developers manipulate small budgets in creative ways to replicate, renew or disrupt the usual action-oriented format. *Braid* (Number None, 2008) is one such non-ancient example: while the player moves from left to right, navigating pitfalls and avoiding enemies, she can also rewind time, destabilising the usual straightforwardly chronological style of platforming play. Similarly, the "save the princess" dynamic is overturned at

[134] For more on this, see Paul 2013: 297-306.
[135] Stow 2015: 82-3.
[136] Cobbett 2017.
[137] Fernandez-Vara 2016: 236.

the end of the game, when it is revealed that all along the "Princess" has been running from the protagonist. Best and Kellner appear to have predicted in 1999 the modification of 'form and content' by people on the fringes of industry,[138] while currently game scholars increasingly recognise the capacity for indie games to provide unique and interesting content.[139] Perhaps these independent action-oriented ancient games, like indie films, are perpetuating 'illusions' of the mainstream industry 'rather than challenging them'.[140] Or maybe this is an opportunity to see how components of the epic style are translated and adopted without the luxury of sophisticated gameworlds and large budgets, and how this lack of corporate connection may allow for even more original reworkings of the classical past. The following two case studies analyse independent action-based ancient games, starting with an investigation of *Apotheon* (Alientrap, 2016) to judge how its unique and unconventionally "authentic" use of classical culture and continued collaboration with cinematic convention adds to an emerging picture of the epic game tradition, and leading into *Okhlos* (Coffee Powered Machine, 2016) which presents a rendition of ancient Greece that requires players to construct a pointedly political message through destructive play procedures. This section therefore tests the ways in which indie titles of the action-based genre co-opt and evolve the epic game tradition in much smaller, less affluent but creatively freer circumstances.

In *Apotheon*, players control an ancient Greek villager named Nikandreos, moving him left, right, up and down across a 2D plane. It is a much simpler gameworld than the one Kratos operates in, with a humbler, less fast-paced form of interaction. However, this shrinking of perspective brings the background game environments into the fore, encouraging players to take time to engage with them. This is important because the player of *Apotheon* is presented with a visually impressive gameworld that borrows significantly from Greek cultural visual codes (Image 2.8). The paintings on the walls of the in-game building here are reminiscent of figures from Greek pottery, while the architecture of the building itself resonates with the decorative edges and borders of such objects. *Apotheon*'s world of Greek vase-painting aesthetics gives the player a seemingly authentic representation of pottery come to life. That each constituent, from Nikandreos to the enemies he faces, are rendered in black-figure implies at first a focus on a specific period (primarily, roughly, seventh to fifth century BC) of pre-classical vase-painting.[141] The overall layout is also typical of 'band cups' or Tyrrhenian amphora, both of which present scenes within bands reaching around the pot.

[138] Best and Kellner 1999: 149.
[139] 'The ocean of independent amateur activity is where the interesting and powerful stuff is to be found.' Gauntlett 2015: 21-3.
[140] As Mayne 1994: 156 says of independent cinema.
[141] Archaic pottery was "characterized by simple, stereotype silhouettes", where black-figure better defined the forms, Kozbelt 2006: 141.

Tyrrhenian pottery especially layers its visual sequences on top of one another,[142] mirrored in the game's platforms upon which the player moves Nikandreos up-and-down through the gameworld. The game is nevertheless unconcerned with showcasing an actual typology, instead picking-and-choosing from across Greek material culture. In Image 2.8, a reproduction of the famous Diskoboulos statue is represented as a painting on the wall. The famous Myron sculpture of the fifth-century BC comes chronologically after black-figure pottery,[143] suggesting the creators' principal desire was to offer a gameworld composed of instantly recognisable Greek visual culture. If memories of material objects can inform memories of other objects, as Harvey states,[144] then the use of characteristically Greek material culture here connects players with a broad range of ancient Greek paraphernalia typically found in museum displays and images in textbooks. This is the "indie" way of providing architectural spectacle: while *Apotheon* could never replicate the cinematic splendour of *GoW*, it continues engaging with the epic game tradition through its free use of eclectic and "authentic" Greek artistic styling to provide an at-once instantly familiar and aesthetically pleasing gameworld.

[142] Images 56, 114, 116 & 117 in Boardman 1991.
[143] Boardman 1995: 80. The 'prime period' of classical sculpture as it is 'commonly accepted' took place later in the fifth-century BC, Boardman 1995: 7.
[144] Harvey 2015: 147.

**2.8**: The *Apotheon* gameworld.

Throughout her journey, the player participates in consistently violent behaviours as she controls Nikandreos, and these activities are again complemented by intermittent moments of non-interactive storytelling. As soon as the game begins in Nikandreos' village of Dion, the player is required to kill his opponents. Non-playable characters are coded clearly in primary colours: black figures are civilians, those clothed in red (though still represented in characteristic black-figure silhouettes) are enemies, while Nikandreos is identified by ribbons of blue. Nikandreos fights his way through Dion and assists his fellow villagers against an invasion of raiders. All figures are presented in profile, facing either left or right, so that when a figure attacks, it strikes poses styled upon those present in vase-painting. The belly amphora by the Camtar Painter, for example, shows two people facing each other in combat: one leans over the other, straight-backed and arm up, while the other is posed with angular legs in a kneeling position.[145] These are the same poses both Nikandreos and his enemies assume as combat is enacted. The spectacle of violence is once again upheld, albeit with limited visuals, furthermore doing so in a way that seems significantly "classical". It therefore meets

[145] Image 52 in Boardman 1991.

the criteria necessary to locate it in the broader epic tradition, as it demands player involvement in violence while couching that activity within visually appealing environments, all of which is underpinned by an "accurate" classical aesthetic scheme.

### Apotheon *and "authenticity"*

The narrative of *Apotheon* also endeavours towards a degree of authenticity. While the game is plugged into tenets of the epic tradition typical of film, and *GoW*, the characterisation of the gods appears based specifically on classical renderings. After defeating the "boss" at Dion, Hera appears before Nikandreos to tell him that Zeus and the other Olympians have abandoned humanity, which stands to explain why the people of Greece (and the inhabitants of Dion) are suddenly under such threat. The player then moves from Dion to the much larger Olympus, the central gameworld for most of the play experience. Hera tasks Nikandreos with taking the unique powers of the Olympians in whatever way he can, so he can gather them together and kill Zeus. She therefore becomes a de facto guide, thereby fulfilling a role not unlike Athena's in *GoW*. She is characterised not by queenliness or nobility as she is in ancient sources,[146] most likely due to the game's inability to render the necessary detail, but in her defiance of her husband she is pointedly like her mythical portrayal. Throughout the game, Zeus will refer to Hera as 'my cow-eyed wife' in the Homeric manner,[147] not necessarily in a positive fashion. When the player overcomes Zeus at the end of the game, Hera is overjoyed: she jokes about his imprisonment in Tartarus, encouraging Kronos to cut off his 'shrivelled manhood'. There is at once a sense of Olympic-level bickering as found across the mythological corpus.[148] She furthermore displays the same pettiness that leads to her hatred of the Trojans after the Judgement of Paris, or her scorn for Hercules,[149] as she fights against and mocks her husband. Hera could therefore be considered a more "direct" reception, a strategy which, when placed amongst the unmistakeable aesthetic that acts as the foundation of the game, further suggests the game relies more on ancient precedents than modern conventions. This is further emphasized by in-game objects and narrative turns, from the 'xiphos' shortsword Nikandreos carries, to the theme of divine impact on mortal wellbeing. There are also texts dotted across the landscape presenting the player with excerpts from Greek literature: for example, lines from the

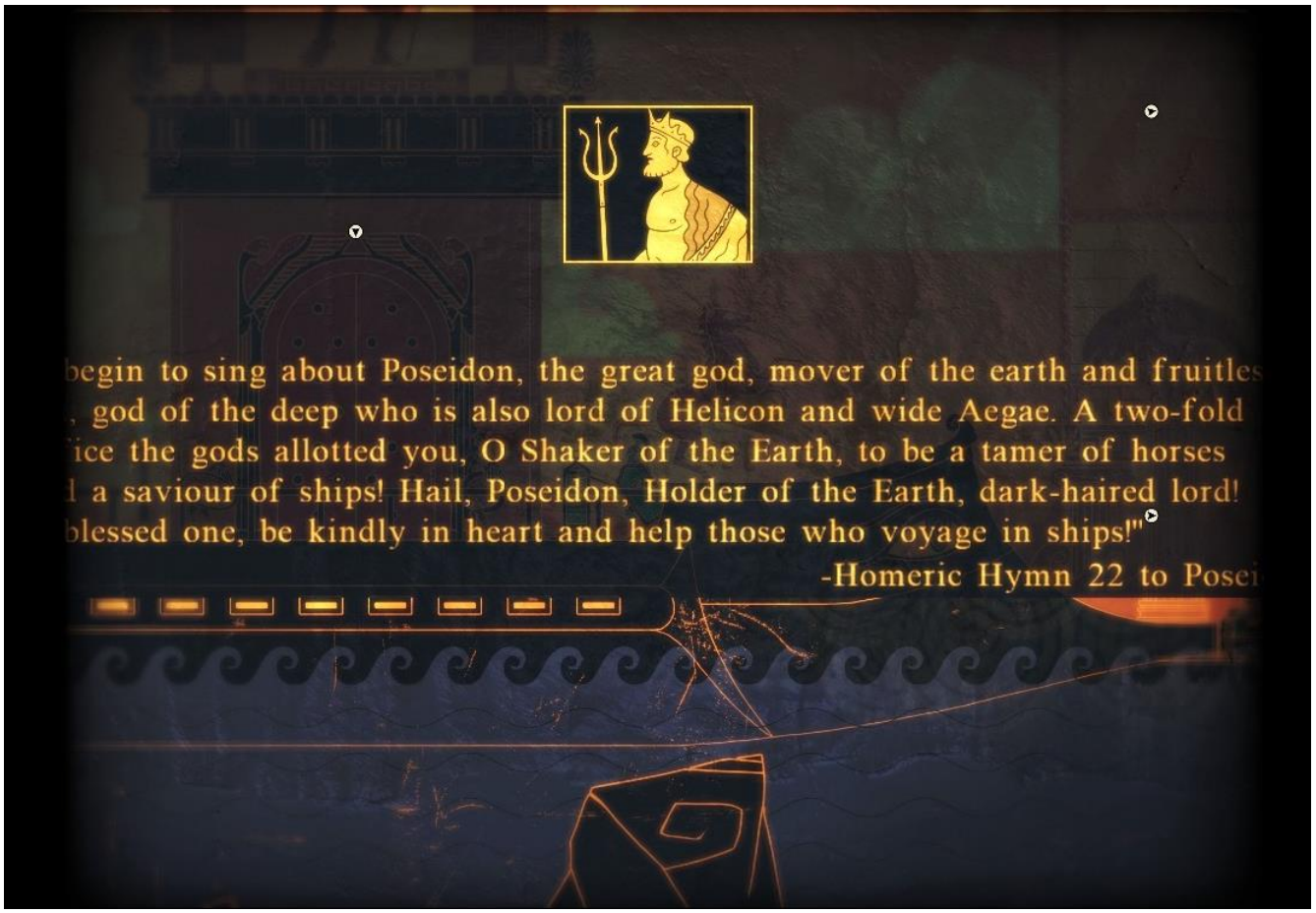
[146] E.g. Hom. *Hymn Apol.* 305.
[147] Hom. *Il*. 4.50, sometimes translated as 'ox-eyed' Hera.
[148] This behaviour is ubiquitous in classical literature, though is perhaps best evidenced by the in-fighting witnessed throughout the *Iliad*. See, for example, the divide between the Olympians at the council of the gods, Hom. *Il*. 24.33.
[149] As she is the entity who incites Heracles' madness in Euripides' *Heracles* play. For Judgement of Paris, see Hom. *Il*. 24-28-30, Eur. *Andr*. 274-92, and Isoc. 10 41-44.

*Homeric Hymn to Poseidon* can be found outside the entrance to Poseidon's domain (Image 2.9).[150] Such "accuracy" is likely the result of input from 'Mythology Consultant' Maciej Paprocki.[151] This adherence to the source material, visual and literary, asks questions as to how far a broad, pop-cultural processes approach sketched in Chapter 1 can assist us in analysing *Apotheon*. When receptions of antiquity conform to "correct" visions and interpretations of the ancient world, it is implied that they are better thought-through or constitute a more sophisticated adaptation. As Shahabudin asks: 'Is it authentic when it matches the vision of the ancient world we've acquired through our studies of ancient literature and material culture?'[152] Does consistent use of visually "accurate" Greek aesthetics, compounded with literature in translation dotted throughout the gameworld, make *Apotheon* a more successful reception? Is the 'claim of historical authenticity' dependent on a certain level of research,[153] one that elevates this game above its more hyperviolent, cinematic videogame counterparts? The more classical the game appears, the more the game implies that the "accuracy" of the text is essential to our understanding of *Apotheon*.

While *Apotheon* has a greater focus on such details, it also occasionally moves between classical source and a more general "antiquity" to form a coherent play experience. After gaining access to Olympus, the player fights through areas tailored to represent the personalities of the gods: for example, Artemis, goddess of hunting, is encountered after the player traverses her Forest.[154] The player must immerse herself, then, into a level that reflects this most famous of Artemis' trait, "hunting" through the Forest before eventually encountering the goddess. Elsewhere, when Nikandreos applies to Demeter for her magical sheaf, the goddess agrees to part with it only if he agrees to rescue the kidnapped Persephone from the Underworld. The rescue of Persephone in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is therefore translated into *Apotheon* as a challenge. It seems most likely that, due to its relative freedom as an indie title, the developers felt able to significantly involve mythology in the very fabric of the gameworld and its narrative. Nevertheless, the game simultaneously co-operates with the epic game tradition, sometimes in keeping with this "accuracy" agenda, sometimes not. Alongside the usual blood-fuelled combat, levels are populated with monsters from the mythical canon, such as satyrs, whose traditional connotations as hard-partying fighters and deviants automatically designates them as enemies.[155] Yet in other regions, statues somehow come alive and attack, as they have in previous ancient games identified by Lowe.[156]

[150] The translation is taken word-for-word from Evelyn-White's Loeb edition.
[151] A classicist at Ludwig-Maximilians University in München, credited in this way at the game's ending.
[152] Shahabudin 2017, though she asks this critically.
[153] Quote from Richards 2015: 20.
[154] See below for more detail.
[155] Heinze and Babler 2006: 'Satyr'. Also, Grafton et al 2010: 264.
[156] Lowe 2012: 71.

Nikandreos is again able to smash boxes, pots and furniture to reveal health potions, power-ups and weapons, an ironic destruction of material culture within a representation of material culture, and a central activity of this emerging epic game tradition. But the overwhelming "historicity" of the game, its visuals and its usages of classical literary precedents raises fundamental questions concerning the play process. Chapter 1 of this thesis asserts players engage not in a new form of historical rehearsal, but with broad cultural processes; this chapter, furthermore, is based on the premise that players of action-based games are reconfiguring behaviours and strategies typical of ancient epic cinema and television, albeit in different ways. So, when interacting with objects and fighting with gods, does the player here still appeal to her generalised 'stored knowledge', 'recogniz[ing] and process[ing] the dialogic exchanges' as part of the play process?[157]




**2.9**: *Homeric Hymn to Poseidon*.

The following example demonstrates that, no matter how "authentic", the classical material in *Apotheon* is nevertheless manipulated, and so fundamentally altered, to fit the action genre framework, the necessities of the tradition, and the profoundly pop-cultural dynamics of the

[157] As Ciccoricco notes in *GoW*, 2010: 247.

gameplay process. After navigating the Forest of Artemis, the player is faced with the goddess herself who acts as a "boss fight" typical of the action-oriented genre. Playful and slightly psychotic in her dialogue, Artemis transforms Nikandreos into a deer which prompts the now-defenceless player to run away, avoiding her arrows, to an object at a certain point on the game map. This object, once reached, returns Nikandreos to his mortal form and subsequently transforms Artemis into a deer. The player must then reverse the hunt, attacking her while she remains in such a vulnerable form. The mythical Artemis is famously connected with the hunt and is at times associated specifically with deer.[158] The representation of Artemis, player actions towards her, and ultimately the strategy to beat her rest on some form of general knowledge pertaining to this, which the player must utilise to succeed:[159] to tackle Artemis in *Apotheon*, the player must understand and accept that Artemis is the goddess of the hunt and participate within those parameters. That understanding is easily gleaned from the in-game event itself. The surrounding forest noted above and the cat-and-mouse nature of the 'boss fight' ignite within the player's cognitive frame a generic but reasonably strong sense of who Artemis "is". It is in a sense a caricature of antiquity, drawn from one of many amalgams of the Olympic gods.[160] Most of all, this reading is like the Actaeon myth with which Artemis was and is most often associated by ancient Greeks and modern classicists alike. In the myth, Actaeon is turned into a deer by Artemis and killed by his own dogs.[161] Two sources in particular suggest this happened because Actaeon boasted he was a better hunter than the goddess.[162] There is implicit in the play process a similar sense of boastful challenge on behalf of the player: the agonistic nature of the action game immediately confirms an unspoken challenge, that Nikandreos (and the player) can indeed best the goddess. The Forest level in which this takes place also reflects details of the story: virtual dogs (here 'Direwolves', a generic term for large wolves ubiquitous in fantasy fiction) feature throughout as automatically antagonistic enemies. Details of the myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are further reflected in this stage of the game: both episodes take place within nature, and both Nikandreos and Actaeon, when transformed into a deer, are unable to operate normally.[163] Nevertheless, to succeed the player must operate within different paradigms to those of the myth by actually killing Artemis, which naturally does not happen in any Greek story. If the Greek myth is a moment of 'grim reversal, wherein the great hunter dies like a

[158] Designated the 'deer-shooter' in the Anacreontic fragment 348 in Campbell 1985. Visual examples of Artemis with bow and deer in Boardman 1991: 219.
[159] A similar notion has been put forth in relation to the strategy/simulation game, in which former knowledge is recalled when specific strategies need to be formulated, Hatlen 2012: 188.
[160] Lowe 2009: 70 suggests 'caricatures'; for 'amalgam' of representations see Gordon 2017: 229-30.
[161] Apollod. *Bibl*. 3.4.4; Diod. Sic. 4.81.4; Eur. *Bacch*. 337-40. It is, furthermore, extensively represented in Greek art, Gantz 1993: 479-80.
[162] Diod. Sic. 4.81.4; Eur. *Bacch*. 337-40. Gantz 1993: 478 highlights lack of consensus.
[163] Ov. *Met*. 3.157-9 and 3.198-231.

hunted beast',[164] the player re-reverses this, acting against the story being reconfigured, because to follow the precedents set by Actaeon is to die and so lose the game.[165] In this instance, *Apotheon* can only be "accurate" until it is necessary to meet the requirements of the epic tradition: to fight, to kill the divine authority figure, to win single-handedly. The player must eventually reject the literary tradition in favour of the pop-cultural, onscreen tradition where gods must die when facing the hero.

As in the *GoW* games, the final "boss" of *Apotheon* is invariably Zeus, who, as in both ancient and modern sources, possesses weaponized thunderbolts.[166] The player must deflect his bolts back at Zeus as he throws them at Nikandreos, using his powers against him until she succeeds. As usual, audiences need to instantly recognise and interpret the distinctions between each god to appreciate them as individual characters.[167] In this instance, players recognise Zeus by his tall, muscular form, bearded face, thunderbolts, and, typically of games within this genre, his threatening behaviour towards the protagonist. Such a standardised characterisation is to be appreciated as a facilitator of immediate reactive gameplay, the player moving fluidly between recognition of a classical figure and a more generic stock-character in wider ancient (and otherwise) fiction. Hera too is more than just classical in her characterisation and is deliberately aligned with modern domestic (even comedic) paradigms in which the wife can no longer stand her husband's cruelty and infidelity. More than anything, this is the reason Hera acts against Zeus and as a guide to Nikandreos and the player. When the player meets Hera in *GoW 3*, she is also typified in this way as the quintessential "woman scorned", drinking heavily and slurring her words, barely concealing her disdain for Zeus. While it is argued that, in *GoW*, the mythological elements do not need to be engaged with by the player,[168] others contend that considered use of and interaction with mythology engenders greater possibilities for meaning-making.[169] That both depictions of Hera characterise her as a reactive, long-suffering wife implies that, alongside her "classicalness", something further, more nuanced, and potentially resonant with broader, more modern characterising strategies is happening in conjunction. The player is therefore co-operating with an amalgamation of both "ancient" and "new" Hera as she interprets her.[170] The player must also connect with Zeus simultaneously as Olympian leader, "final boss", unfaithful husband, and standard wicked tyrant. The final sequences further recall *GoW*'s ending themes, as it is implied that Nikandreos, killer of gods, himself becomes

[164] Lacy 1990: 36.
[165] To play games is to play against the concept of defeat, notes Symonds 2008: 191.
[166] Pottery represents Zeus with thunderbolt as 'principle attribute and weapon', Boardman 1991: 216; he also uses thunderbolts and lightning in *GoW* (above).
[167] See Llewelyn-Jones 2007: 429 on representations of gods and their necessary visual uniqueness.
[168] Furtwangler 2012: 30.
[169] Chmielewska 2016: 186.
[170] Defiance against men or male partners may be found throughout film, most famously in *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991).

the new hope for a new world. Growing to a huge size and navigating the ruined Olympus, the now-victorious Nikandreos locates and resuscitates the last living human, implying the beginning of an era in which the cruel gods are absent. Despite there being no makeable comparison between Greek heroes and Judeo-Christian 'saints',[171] both Nikandreos and Kratos become Christ-like figures, changing their physical forms and symbolically "moving on" to some unseen location seemingly for the benefit of humankind. Armed and bloody conflict, an epic narrative of "god vs man" and a beautiful gameworld are compounded in the end by a now-familiar motif wherein the protagonist, through the player, becomes the ultimate hero by way of generic Christian resonances. Interplay between the player, her character, Zeus and Hera, particularly in these final sequences, demonstrate the complexity of each personality, their interactions with one another, and so ultimately indicates the multifaceted interpretative process the player must undergo to construe, consider, and act upon *Apotheon*.

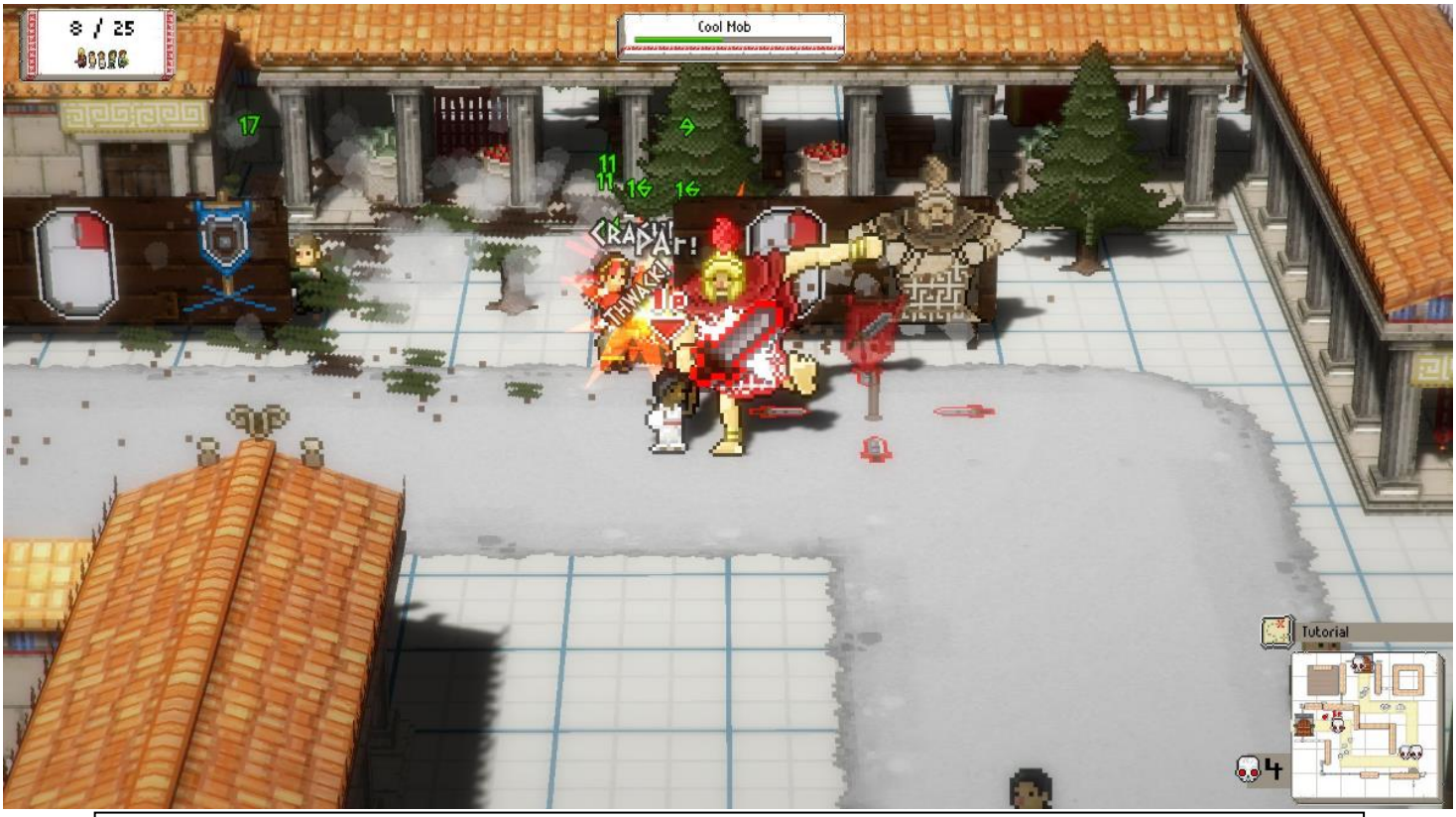
*Apotheon* is of course not trying to "be" the past, or the mythical canon, but it is successful in fusing specific classical details with other genre demands. Even within a game so seemingly "accurate" and "authentic", a complete analysis of *Apotheon* cannot be formulated without looking at all the processes that make it possible. Even the online store page admits that 'learn[ing] a little about Greek Mythology' is but a by-product of play centred primarily around the reproduction of spectacle and the facilitation of epic conventions: 'Apotheon tries to stay true to its source material. Read an excerpt from the Iliad about Diomedes before you stick a Xiphos through his Aspis.'[172] To play the game, the player must function with both the mythology and the strictures set in place by the action-game framework and the epic tradition. To complete the Forest of Artemis and to kill the goddess, the player must at once co-operate with Artemis as a "classical" character and as a challenge to be overcome. "Epicness" in the game is as much a functional operation as it is a representational method: it is what the player does, as well as the virtual environment it is situated it, that locates the game in the epic mode. Ultimately, a "bigger picture" of *Apotheon* places it comfortably within the emerging epic game tradition: while it is not defined by a largesse of scenery, and the reward-spectacle upon defeating an opponent is appropriately lesser, it nevertheless presents its gameworld as something to be visually enjoyed, with gameplay centred around blood-soaked violence and destructible environments. *Apotheon* may be classified as a new and exciting addition to the epic game tradition, replicating filmic and *GoW*-esque gameplay and narrative conventions, and fusing them with classical literary and visual precedents and referents.

[171] Paul 2013: 176, a characterisation she extends to both gods and heroes, both of which 'could be immoral and malevolent as often as they were kindly and virtuous'.
[172] Steam, "Apotheon".

Okhlos *and the modern political message*

The subtexts within ancient epics (games or films) are not always vaguely spiritual, but sometimes pointedly political. The bringing-down of an authority figure is a standard of the epic tradition, both in film and in videogames, and sometimes the epic game tradition transmits explicitly political messages via this convention even within tight budgetary and technological constraints and tiny gameworlds. Onscreen the Roman Empire often stands as an oppressive governing presence,[173] usually to be hampered or even toppled by the (frequently Christian) protagonists. We could arguably see the Olympians of *GoW* and *Apotheon* in a similar light, implying yet another transmedial migration of a branch of the epic tradition. These games represent the gods as an almost (but never completely) untouchable elite, exercising their power without accountability until a hero arises to take them down. In the examples above, these rulers are deposed by a hero who achieves a kind of "godhood" of their own, a vaguely spiritual theme roughly concomitant with the Christian tradition. By contrast, *Okhlos* operates with that strand of the tradition, requiring the player to dismantle the Olympian power structure, but it does so to deliver a specific political message. *Okhlos* continues to require player enactment of violent combat and architectural destruction, although it does so through use of cartoon graphics and comedic dialogue to add a tongue-in-cheek dimension to its explicitly revolutionary agenda. The name of the game refers to the Greek ὀχλοκρατία or 'ochlocracy', the rule of a state or government by the masses, or crowd. The player begins by controlling a small group of philosophers, who run around the gameworld collecting assorted Greek townsfolk to bolster the size of the group, and accumulating fighters to strengthen the mob and afford it offensive capabilities. This "mass" of unruly philosophers and assorted townspeople is moved around the gamespace by the player, who uses it to attack mythological enemies, raze buildings to the ground, ever-growing in number until they battle with an oversized and super-powerful "boss" in the form of an Olympian deity at the end of each stage. The stress on the "masses" in both name and play experience conversely highlights the gods' position in this game as overlords, a small but powerful elite, thereby requiring players to associate with the gods as bosses who rule and providing them with a uniquely powerful (political) reason to engage with the game via a near-untameable populace.

[173] Cyrino 2005: 2, and see below for use of this cinematic trope in Roman action games.




**2.10:** A mob fights a soldier in *Okhlos*.

Everything happens very quickly in *Okhlos*: the mob moves swiftly, and recruitments are made simply by encountering individuals in the gameworld. Fights are in swift real-time, resulting in visual chaos, miniature explosions and dust clouds (Images 2.10 & 2.12). The soldier (Image 2.10), a typical enemy throughout the game, is surrounded and obscured by a mob of angry chiton-clad Greeks but can still be seen due to his exaggerated size. This is done not only for comedic effect, but also to make the game easier to read amidst fast-paced play. The small size of the player's individual agents, the largesse of scenery and the oversized soldiers nevertheless highlight the centrality of soldier-killing and building demolition to the play process. As in the games above, player destruction of the environment results in rewards: the more ruination, the more the metre at the top of the screen fills. Every time it is filled, the player-mob attains a new status: rising from "Cool" to "Reckless", to "Frenetic", the mass eventually becomes the "Mega Chaotic Mob!!!", at which point the mob attains its highest potential for carnage. The more charge the higher the damage capability, and the higher the damage the bigger the buildings and structures the mob can destroy, and the easier it becomes to overcome adversaries. Despite this blasé attitude to all things ancient in its gleeful obliteration of generically classical architectures, *Okhlos* like *Apotheon* couples its uses of tenets of the epic tradition with a uniquely classical component. The game incorporates a huge range of ancient heroes which can be added to the mob at certain intervals. Achilles, for example,

will boost the mobs' attack power by 50%, whereas Terpsichore's jovial presence brings bonuses to attack, defence, and mob morale. Some of these figures and their assigned characteristics are entirely recognisable due to their conduciveness to classical sources and contemporary renditions: the ubiquity of Achilles' strength and martial prowess extends from the *Iliad* through to ancient material culture and subsequent pop-cultural reconfigurations. The Andromeda of the game apparently takes a break from being 'chained to a rock then rescued by Perseus' to aid the player (Image 2.11).[174] The shackling of Andromeda has an especially long tradition within post-antique visual culture, for example, the *Andromeda* painting by Etty (1830s),[175] and perhaps most famously in the *Clash of the Titans* film (Desmond Davis, 1981). The player is furthermore narrated to by Homer (also Image 2.11), telling jokes and quips relating to these classical figures and thereby making these figures more accessible to the player. Some characters, like Terpsichore, are less well-represented onscreen, and only a select few sources highlight her ability to bring 'delight'.[176] This comparative attention to detail suggests a relatively deep knowledge of antiquity, though the contexts do not suggest a typical reverence of it. Replete with classical knowledge yet inserting it into a play experience typified by the obliteration of classical architecture, people, and gods, and then reconfiguring them so playfully, *Okhlos* subverts epic paradigms even while operating within them.

[174] Apollod. *Bibl*. 2.4.3-4 and Ov. *Met*. 4.670-7, 5.12-29 refer to her being bound to a rock, where Ovid emphasises her being 'chained'.
[175] *Andromeda*, Wirral, Lady Lever Art Gallery, LL 3594.
[176] Apollonius 4.895-906 refers to her as 'Lovely Terpsichore' who birthed the enchanting Sirens; Pindar gives her the moniker 'honey-voiced', Pind. *Isthm.* 2.8.

**2.11:** Andromeda in *Okhlos*.

The game evokes resonances of class tensions by drawing on the Olympians' commonplace position as the "bosses", and by simplifying ancient Greek society as a community which must work together to succeed. The short opening sequence to the game gives a brief story of oppressive gods pushing the Greeks to breaking point. In a sequence reminiscent of Monty Python's animation sequences, the Greeks are gathered together when a giant (god's) foot descends from the sky and crushes all but a single philosopher. 'Enough!', cries the philosopher, as the screen fades to the player's first level wherein Homer tells of this individual's 'epic quest against the gods' and teaches the player how to rally the Greek townspeople. The Marxist call for worker unification in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), though not directly quoted in the game, is interpreted in tongue-in-cheek manner and becomes the primary means of interacting with the world, requiring the player to "collect" fighters to fight, defenders to defend, villagers to bolster the size of the mob and even slaves to carry items. Marx and subsequent communist literature in that tradition calls, furthermore, for revolution after unification of the working-classes: in this way, the player directs the "class" of mortals, collected into an indeterminate mass of bodies, to operate against the "bosses", the Olympians. The later addition of the 'Union Rep' unit after the game's release, which can transform

all bystanders into active fighters,[177] further emphasizes the socialistic dimensions of the game and its narrative resonances with themes of class conflict. *Okhlos* therefore appropriates a standard of the action-oriented epic tradition, that of killing the divine overlords, and imbues that action with a modern message and contemporary meaning, adding richness to the usual operations of epic gameplay and installing, subversively and comedically, contemporary political values. It follows ancient films like *Spartacus*, with its supposedly communistic ideologies and its left-wing protagonist,[178] and then requires the player of *Okhlos* to collaborate with the message in an even closer and more intimate way than the viewer of the film, constructing its "left-wingness" as she succeeds. In games such as these, we cannot ignore the 'ideological complicities' of the 'reader' when engaging with a text,[179] for the further the player becomes immersed in the characteristically fast-paced combat,[180] the more she becomes complicit in the dismantling of power structures upon which the gameworld and its story are built. Hera – 'Jealous and vengeful, we hate her too much to do a proper encyclopaedia entry' – follows her post-antique representational traditions, but her association with an overarching political theme draws her ever closer to the ideologies of the present, playing on the double-meaning of boss as both end-of-level challenge and hated exploiter of the people.

[177] RoketronZ 2017.
[178] Hardwick 2003: 37; Paul 2013: 209-10, 212. On popular memory of Spartacus, see McAuley 2017: 175 on the 'communist-tinged' film.
[179] Mayne 1994: 160-1.
[180] Which, according to Grodal 1999: 127, is a form of interaction that produces adrenaline and 'elicit[s] visceral reactions'. Speaking on film, the same can be said of *Okhlos*, though due to the interactive nature of videogames may even be heightened further.

**2.12:** Destroying buildings in *Okhlos*.

Like *GoW* and *Apotheon*, *Okhlos* adopts the three primary characteristics of the epic film/game tradition: violence, destruction of architectures, and the evincing of a message or value. This message, however, is less reflective of spiritual ambiguity and instead reflects a modern ideology as it characterises the Olympians as oppressive rulers. In short, it operates in very similar ways as the above games, but with an ideological twist, installing a subtext which is reflected on all levels of the play experience. When the player has collected and navigated the mob successfully enough to achieve "Reckless" status, the Greek-esque structure become susceptible to damage (Image 2.12). Just as ruination of buildings can sometimes indicate 'freedom' from socio-political structures through representations of ruined urban areas,[181] the player of *Okhlos* is required to participate in the destruction of Greece and its architecture within a similar frame of mind. Historically, classical architecture is highly connotative of the western upper classes and a more general sense of sophistication and civilisation.[182] As a result, the operations of the player uphold the anti-establishment message at work throughout the whole play and narrative experience. Accurately characterised figures from Greco-Roman literary, mythological and historical traditions, are

[181] See Watts 2011: 247. This is because all social institutions are indicative of and 'reproduce social inequities', Guillory 1995: 54.
[182] Hall 2009: 386.

appropriated ironically: Sophocles, Empedocles, Philip II of Macedon, Paris and others do not validate the status quo by upholding the sanctity of antiquity and its revered material culture, but instead bolster the attempts by the masses to dethrone their Olympian masters, to destroy classical buildings, and to strengthen the ideological campaign of the player. The principal play process of *Okhlos*, typified by violence, ruination and the destruction mode,[183] is deliberately couched within a revolution-flavoured message. The player is therefore required to co-create interactive spectacle typical of the epic (game) tradition explicitly to align with modern political values.

## 2.4 Interactive Roman spectacle

Despite emphasis throughout the chapter on action-based games set in the Greek world, there is a body of Roman action-based games significantly dependent upon cinematic Roman epics. Where Greek epic games like those above often position the OIympians as rulers and governors of humanity, Roman epics substitute gods for emperors and other authority figures and so position man against master in a different fashion. To take a few well-known examples, *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), *Spartacus* and *Gladiator* all villainise their emperors or imperial officials, and in all instances either directly or indirectly locate the actions, ideals and beliefs of their Roman antagonists against that of the heroic protagonist. Rome, the oppressor corrupted by excessive power, exercises and maintains that power through a military 'machine of war',[184] and through crooked political machinations. This is opposed by an individual, usually male. As in *Spartacus*, this man is, as Cyrino says, positioned against the Roman elite as the 'justified defiance to repressive authority'.[185] Whether set in the Republic or Imperial era, governmental figures and emperors in Roman cinema are routinely greedy, repressive, dictatorial and selfish.[186] Furthermore, the messages and values of Roman films are often encoded within the spectacle itself,[187] perhaps more so for the Roman epics since their "epicness" is usually generated by specific spectacular sequences such as chariot-races and gladiatorial fights. There is therefore a reasonably solid triangulation between the production and presentation of spectacular sights and scenes of violence, the constructions of narrative which themselves contain messages and values relating to the wider story and its in-fiction constituents, and the viewing experience. In short, this means that in viewing even the most generic Roman films, audiences engage in a complex interpretative process wherein simple visually-pleasing sequences

[183] As Lowe says above.
[184] Theodorakopoulos 2005: 55 and 103 on *Gladiator* specifically.
[185] Cyrino 2005: 101.
[186] Pierce 2018: 156 gives examples from *Spartacus*, *Quo Vadis,* and *Cleopatra* (Joseph L Mankiewicz, 1963).
[187] See Theodorakopoulos above; also, McAuley 2017: 175 on *Spartacus*, and Flanagan 2018: 75 on epic/peplum films generally.

and underpinning narratives interweave to form the final experience.[188] This final section seeks to locate like behaviours in action-based Roman games which similarly utilise action-heavy sequences to at once provide visually spectacular moments and to further the overall story, while continuing to investigate the way in which such filmic strategies and conventions are transformed by the interactive process. Once again with focus on the enacting of violence, the visual pleasure (and occasional dismantling) of architecture and material culture, and the transmission and co-structuring of messages, we look to see how "Romanness", an index for a specific type of "epicness", alters representation and play within the epic game tradition.

Many action-oriented Roman games recycle popular visions of Rome and so repurpose them as carriers of meaning.[189] The gladiatorial arena, for example, has repeatedly been transferred into the interactive realm as either virtual "playground" or narrative setting. These games often take place within a specified time during the early Judeo-Claudian Empire, roughly in keeping with known Roman historiography and chronology,[190] and sometimes even with a specific date. Crucially, games centred around such spectatorial and spectacular events as the arena seek to replicate and exaggerate the role of the audience, emphasizing their connection to the Roman filmic tradition and so creating another visual convention un- or subconsciously anticipated by the viewer (and here, the player).[191] In film the crowds of the ancient world are often conflated with the viewers themselves.[192] These crowds, furthermore, are positioned as such to reflect the viewers' own complicity in the events: 'Gladiators bring for us a strange double frisson: on the one hand, a horror based firmly in our cultural superiority; on the other, a voyeuristic fascination with the laceration of the flesh and with the baying crowd.'[193] If, through bloodlust and viewer complicity, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* brought the 'experience of spectatorship alive',[194] it follows that the 'sadism' of the film and the consequent 'pornography of the violence' will carry over into the videogame.[195] This paradigm once again presents us with issues of complicity and the "nearness" of participating players. One avenue for understanding "Rome" represented and interacted with by the player is to analyse this most "Roman" of activities, the gladiatorial arena event, for signs of reliance upon the

[188] See Theodorakopoulos' 2005 publication for this, and a useful conclusion at 2005: 168-170.
[189] See Kaczmarek 2016: 77, on repurposing of gladiator-themed material in science-fictional cinematic contexts.
[190] Kyle 1998: 51.
[191] Flanagan 2018: 63, on film.
[192] Pierce 2018: 156.
[193] Goldhill 2004: 233.
[194] Potter 2004: 86.
[195] Quotes from Winkler 2004: 101.

onscreen tradition and for the possible evolution of these especially "Roman" cinematic conventions through interactive engagement.

*Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance* (Acclaim Entertainment, 2003) (*GSOV*) is one of many games unofficially connected to the *Gladiator* film,[196] and so is a suitable place to begin locating player co-operation with cinematic tenets in interactive Roman experiences. A commercial release of 2003 prior to *God of War*'s first outing, *GSOV* incorporates the concept of spectatorship into the very fabric of the gameplay. The game opens in a Colosseum-like arena which extends outwards via a network of platforms connected by passageways, planks, tunnels and pulleys stretching far away from the arena proper and into the surrounding space. This extra space indicates a necessary break from both Roman history and filmic standards to generate an expansive playing field replete with conflicts and platform-based jumps extending far beyond the arena's ordinary confines. Rome is made 'plausible' by its identification with the arena:[197] as a result, the game opens within an instantly recognisable space to immediately set the scene for the player. It does, however, simultaneously overexaggerate the scale of the arena compared to its historical and cinematic predecessors to become a protracted playground, thereby signalling its new function as gamespace. In this first section the crowd is always visible, a consistent animated backdrop, thus drawing the player immediately into a virtual world of spectacle, one in which both real-world player and in-game audience participate to some degree. As usual, the role of the player performing in front of this audience centres primarily around combat. The player of *GSOV* takes control of Invictus Thrax, immediately recognisable as a musclebound gladiator partially covered with armour, and so concurrent with other onscreen depictions of Roman gladiatorial fighters.[198] The name too carries a certain weight: Thrax means "from Thrace", the home of both historical and cinematic Spartacus. A more recent player may recognise Thrace as the region from which the later televisual Spartacus hails from.[199] Upon start-up, the game therefore follows many of the visual and conventional tropes set by the wider Roman filmic, and televisual, tradition, with some necessary alterations to suit the needs of the medium.

*GSOV* further reveals the uniqueness of the videogame format through its combat mechanics. Thrax's enemies appear with eagle-shaped health bars above their heads: the eagle itself is common Roman iconography, and it is used here to set the enemies apart from Thrax. This distance is further achieved as Thrax's body and face are often visible, positioning him not strictly as

[196] It is part of a list presented by Lowe 2009: 72-3.
[197] Prieto Arciniega 2015: 175.
[198] Burgoyne 2008: 80, 83-4, where 'bronzed, sweating muscularity' is seen 'riding, fighting or moving'.
[199] The historical Spartacus is 'a Thracian of Nomadic stock', Plut. *Crass*. 8.2. For televisual Spartacus and his similar origins, see Mueller 2018: 145.

"Roman" but an individual man against hordes of near-identical enemies. Once the opponent is defeated the eagle icon flashes red, prompting the player to press the action button and perform an 'execution'. A short, 5-second non-interactive scene occurs subsequently in which Thrax, out of player control, dispatches the enemy in particularly brutal fashion. The camera closes in and the surrounding environment is blacked out, pulling focus onto Thrax's fatal swordplay. This is a 'reward-spectacle' not unlike the sequences in *GoW*: however, in a gladiatorial and broadly Roman context, the meanings underpinning such player actions and the subsequent visual treats change. In these opening sequences especially, this is because the game purposefully sets the game within an arena context wherein player actions are viewed by a crowd. When an execution sequence initiates, the camera swoops into these sequences and simultaneously removes the crowd visually. The player at this point is suddenly the sole member of the audience, partaking in a brief but exciting moment of spectatorship. Spectatorship in non-videogame contexts are themselves interactive, though in different ways.[200] In fact, the reward-spectacle here in the virtual arena is close to what Best and Kellner term the 'megaspectacle', wherein moments of athleticism in contemporary sporting events are edited into 'high-tech spectacles' to be enjoyed by the viewer.[201] Such is the case in *GSOV*, where frantic, combative gameplay is intermittently halted to let players enjoy the scene as audience-member, rather than actor. This is a disruption of the flow of play, a flow which naturally generates affective emotional responses in the player.[202] This short break in the violence is, therefore, both a moment in which the player gathers herself and releases that affective tension, but it is also narratively important, demanding the player watch the sequence they themselves have helped create and so immerse themselves into the world of the gladiator. If cinema utilises 'different cinematographic techniques' to highlight and prompt different responses to the violence onscreen,[203] the execution sequence in *GSOV* is perhaps indicative of a different-but-similar technique connotative of both Roman epic films and onscreen media more broadly. This procedure is ultimately a player technique, since this moment of violence is created as a result of her in-game actions, though the automatic disruption of play repositions the player as the viewer of pointedly *cinematic* spectacle. The execution sequence in the game, a medium-specific mode of representing violent spectacle and rewarding the player's successful enacting of it, persists throughout the adventure even when the game moves outside the arena. While it is most striking within the

[200] It is always, on some level, produced by the viewer, Bignell 2002: 184.
[201] Best and Kellner 1999: 138-9.
[202] McAuley 2017: 180 recognises the production of visible and felt emotional responses in the Roman spectator of Starz *Spartacus*.
[203] Gardner and Potter 2017: 211, 220.

opening context, its sustained use in non-arena circumstances always reminds the player that they are working within Roman-cinematic parameters.

Player awareness of their position as (co-)gladiator, sequence-watcher and gameplayer, fits within a wider narrative that employs the "man vs emperor" dynamic typical of the epic film mode.[204] In this story, a fictional emperor named Arruntius has assassinated the (historical) emperor Trajan and is attempting to reconcile his lack of popularity by hosting grand arena events. Cutscenes demonstrate the relationship between Thrax and Arruntius to be tense and antagonistic, the emperor at once aware of the gladiator's popularity yet consumed by a personal hatred towards him. Once the player has completed the initial arena level, Arruntius has Thrax killed (although this is, of course, not the end of his adventure). Throughout this opening sequence, the player has relied on her own culturally-fed expectations by participating in extravagant, and gory, gladiatorial games only to be double-crossed by the imperial tyrant. Like *Apotheon*'s use of Greek myth, *GSOV*'s characterisation of the emperor is a complex mix of historical and cinematic conventions. Classical scholarship suggests arena games signified the vulnerability of state leaders, in that spectacular events were hosted to satiate the desire of the untameable masses.[205] As in the ancient arena, where spectacular shows were 'sites where contesting ideologies, identities and power structures met',[206] the *Gladiator* film (released two years prior to the game) further exaggerates this dynamic by focussing the film on the relationship between protagonist Maximus and emperor Commodus. This antagonism in the 2000 film is clearly the basis for the characterisation of Thrax and Arruntius in *GSOV*: Commodus despises Maximus and is jealous of his popularity, while Maximus wishes to depose the emperor primarily for personal reasons (the murder of his family), and secondarily for political purposes (to re-replace the empire with a republic). This convention, established prior to *Gladiator* and popularised by it, is mirrored in *GSOV* and becomes the primary motivation for play, the player working to depose the emperor, both for killing him (rather than his family) and to replace his values with those possessed by the heroic gladiator (revealed later in the game as a desire for freedom).[207] As usual the primary theme borrowed from cinema, wherein the hero seeks to alter the status quo,[208] is first presented to the player and then co-constructed by her. In this way,

[204] For example, Nero is the chief villain of the film *Quo Vadis*. In *Ben-Hur*, the titular character's primary nemesis is Roman authority figure Messala.
[205] Kyle 1998: 8; Flanagan 2018: 67.
[206] Bakogianni 2015: 5.
[207] While it is clearly indebted to the *Gladiator* film, it is necessarily reflective of a much older tradition of defiance within the arena, e.g. *Quo Vadis*.
[208] Burgoyne 2008: 78. Also, Blanshard 2018: 30 on how 'peplum films were often based on a story of a fight against oppression', and the 'overthrow of tyranny'. Sometimes it is framed more simply as 'the eternal fight against evil', as Toscano 2018: 115 reports of Zeus in the *Immortals* film, where *GSOV* appears to indulge in all three characterisations.

players depend on the principle of familiarity that so often governs action-based games to inform both their play, and the reasons for their play. Many of the mechanisms at work in *GSOV* are similar to those of the Greek epic action games above: successful players are rewarded with graphic execution sequences, and those actions then feed into the wider narrative. When set in virtual Rome, however, a certain kind of spectacle is produced, one focussed on a single gladiator as individual against a corrupt, human emperor concomitant with a plethora of other arena-based fictions.

Thrax's death after these opening sequences is a far less "realistic", though still somewhat cinematic, episode that kickstarts a journey through fantastical dream-lands. Realism in this sense does not necessarily refer to the historicity of the represented events: it is more about the kinds of portrayals of brutal violence audiences come to expect of onscreen antiquity.[209] While the above examples demonstrate significant interplay between such "realistic" cinematic conventions and the operations of *GSOV*, the game post-arena moves swiftly into the realms of make-believe. Thrax, awakening in Elysium, first finds himself amidst a field of wheat. This now-familiar visual signifier is an open reference to the *Gladiator* film, where the wheat field symbolises Maximus' connection to his real life, in nature and with his family.[210] It has since been used in other films, such as *300*.[211] Two ghostlike children appear and become guides for Thrax, informing him that Arruntius intends to overrun the Roman world with the help of the children of Mars, monstrous entities who appear at the end of the game as a kind of "final boss". The man vs emperor dynamic is maintained, thus keeping the narrative within roughly Roman paradigms, though situates this antagonism in much broader pop-cultural tropes. The game after this becomes a series of episodic journeys through mythical and often nondescript landscapes: Thrax's enemies, no longer mortal gladiators, are now such fantastical beings as the 'Spartoi',[212] living skeletons who populate the first stage of the new gameworld (Image 2.13). Such animated skeletal figures echo the infamous sequence in the *Jason and the Argonauts* film and seem to anticipate the 'skeleton-smashing' activities that form part of the *GoW* experience above. These representative techniques therefore contain the game not just within the epic tradition, but within a broader, transmedial "generic" antiquity. The game subsequently fulfils the requirement to provide immediately recognisable events and agents, and in turn generates a sort of non-specific ancient world. This genericity is bolstered by continued adherence to specific strands of the epic film/game tradition. Throughout *GSOV*'s notably nondescript fantasy worlds, columned doorways and breakable pots which again contain power-ups

[209] Gardner and Potter 2017: 218-9, on 'realism' in ancient cinema.
[210] Burgoyne 2008: 81.
[211] Blank 2015: 80; Cyrino 2011: 23.
[212] Spartoi/Sparti are mythical 'armed men' spawned from the teeth of Cadmus the dragon, Apollod. *Bibl*. 3.4.

continue to typify the gameworld, therefore adding to this maintenance of a broadly "ancient-ish" gameworld while remaining within the wider remit of the action-based genre framework sketched throughout this chapter.[213] Fraser notes that in ancient games generally, there is often focus on 'banal ephemera' of an 'everyday' nature that signify the world the player is in.[214] This means that, so long as it remains within the general parameters of the genre by providing enemies to be slain by swords and Graeco-Roman-ish objects and constructions to be smashed, even an especially "generic antiquity" can remain within the emerging epic game tradition. Most importantly, the game still manages to maintain its connection to the arena, therefore maintaining a "Romanness" that assists in connecting it with that specific body of ancient film and television. The reward-spectacle, for example, continues to be presented whenever the player executes an enemy. Though this is happening now outside the arena, the terrain has been set within the player's mind that the game is intricately bound-up with conventions characteristic of Rome, of spectacle, and viewed violence. These execution sequences remind her that she is still an audience member, and so gently but consistently prompt her to dimly remember the broader themes at work as she plays. Despite the genericity of the game experience post-arena, the execution sequences nevertheless continuously situate the player as audience-member, spectator, and spectacle-generator simultaneously. In this way, it operates in the epic game tradition as other games above, but with a distinctly Roman twist.

[213] *GoW* and *Apotheon* both require the smashing of material objects to gain power-ups (see above).
[214] Fraser 2016: 187.

**2.13**: Thrax fights skeletons.

The game comes full circle in the end, returning to the arena once Thrax emerges from the afterlife and re-joins the land of the living.[215] More fantastical narrative components continues to be employed as the player is required to defeat Arruntius' mythical monster allies, although this is still located firmly within the "man vs emperor" paradigm as Arruntius watches from the side. After clearing the arena of his otherworldly enemies, Thrax eventually confronts a now-defenceless emperor. The final sequences show Thrax throwing his sword into the imperial viewing-box, an explicit visual reference to the act of defiance in the 1960 film *Spartacus* in which the gladiator Draba launches a trident at his Roman audience.[216] Killing the emperor, Thrax pronounces "Roma victor!" and proclaims his own freedom. These closing sequences, while connotative of Roman epic

[215] Incidentally, an instance of *katabasis*, a popular narrative mechanic in which a protagonist or hero descends underground (and returns above ground). See Book 11 of *Odyssey*, wherein Odysseus goes to the land of the dead. *Katabasis* appears as a theme in the *Immortals* film in which Theseus descends prior to ascending as 'hero', Toscano 2018: 120.

[216] See Burgoyne 2008: 89 for more on this scene.

film, are less contemplative and subtle than its cinematic counterparts. Maximus in *Gladiator* fights for his cause, killing Commodus but dying himself: the final scene of the film only hints that Maximus' dreams may one day be realised. The *Spartacus* television series too asks viewers to contemplate 'whether the end justifies the violent means'.[217] In *GSOV* the player has her cake and eats it, liberating Rome from the evil emperor and having Thrax magically walk away from his role as gladiator to enjoy his newly-restored freedom. While these mythical lands, fantastical narrative events and other such "unrealistic" components may be conscious responses to criticisms levelled at the *Gladiator* film, which was accused of taking itself too seriously,[218] it is more likely that in creating a roughly 8-hour long experience more activity needs to be packed into the game to hold player interest and, practically speaking, to provide her with enough material to warrant the purchase. The cognitive demands of play mean that instantly recognisable enemies, like animated skeletons, make for a reasonable enough game challenge and allow developers to populate whole gamespaces with nondescript opponents nevertheless connected with a broader, general popular antiquity. Furthermore, to moralise and to question the violent actions of the gladiator outright would be to perversely question the actions of the player: an interesting proposal, but not the agenda of *GSOV*. This necessarily distances the game's subtexts from that of *Gladiator*, in which Maximus famously asks of the audience, and so the viewer, 'Are you not entertained?' Nevertheless, the theme of spectatorship is never lost and so anchors both game and player within a specific mindset. As the game ends, a narrating voice accompanied with text reads an excerpt from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, characterising the arena as a place 'where the Roman million's blame or praise / Was life or death the playthings of a crowd…'[219] While this is perhaps a little empty considering such a happy ending, the quote draws attention to a significant feature of historical, cinematic and now gamic representations of the arena, and of player-enacted combat generally: that to play any action-based ancient game is to participate in constructing branches of the epic tradition, and that to experience virtual Rome especially is to be both spectator and actor.

*Enhancing the 'spectacle/spectator' relationship in* I, Gladiator

This notion of spectatorship is at the core of most games representing the Roman gladiatorial arena. In this final, 'indie', example, the hallmarks of the Roman epic action game remain, but one in particular is enhanced and exaggerated as a mechanism directly employed by the player. *I, Gladiator*

[217] Gardner and Potter 2017: 225-6. See also Pierce 2018: 161 on deliberately 'negative representation' of Romans and their arena to prove a moralistic point.
[218] Jancovich 2015: 59.
[219] Byron 1812-1818: CXLII.

(Steel Monkeys, 2016)[220] (*IG*) situates virtually all its action within the confines of the arena, providing the player with a concentrated gladiatorial experience and drawing focus right into its visceral combat. The player directs protagonist Rufus in killing his gladiatorial enemies, and so ignores the historical rarity of gladiatorial deaths.[221] Not that gladiatorial combat was not often fatal;[222] but *IG* implies at least one-death-per-fight, and usually more, therefore following more merciless precedents set by *Ben-Hur, Gladiator*, and the *Spartacus* television series,[223] and previous gladiatorial games. Presumably to offset the carnage perpetrated by the player, or even to distance her from it, *IG* is rendered in cartoonish graphics (Image 2.14), a visualising technique known as cel-shading. The enemies, too, are 'Othered' by their dehumanising masks and helmets,[224] creating yet more distance. As examples of gladiatorial play, however, *IG* and *GSOV* are significantly similar. The cutscene in *IG* after the first episode shows Rufus' refusal to kill his opponent, as in *Spartacus* and *Gladiator*, to which the emperor responds by killing Rufus, echoing the fate of Thrax. After establishing this common "man vs state" dynamic, cutscenes show the gods Mercury and Dis betting on Rufus' eventual fate.[225] These sequences are entirely in Latin, spoken by voice actors and supplemented with modern-language subtitles: like *Okhlos*' extensive use of characters from classical literature and *Apotheon*'s deployment of Greek aesthetics, spoken Latin brings a sense of "authenticity", investing in the traditional notion that Latin is 'the preserve of the elite',[226] and so weighting the game with "Romanness". Outside this, *IG* seeks to capitalise on the ubiquitous popularity of gladiatorial films. Marketing for the game promises that its play processes are 'based on the epic Gladiator movies and games of the past'.[227] Specific elements of the game appear to adapt conventions from across the transmedial spectrum: as in *GSOV* and the *Gladiator* film respectively Rufus is resurrected and brought, powerless and without resources, to a backwater stadium far from Rome. This design technique is also used at the start of each *GoW* sequel, where an overly-powerful Kratos is forcibly reduced in strength to accommodate the need for the player to build and "grow" Kratos once again. Such developmental decisions strongly imply a transmedial set of conventions increasingly typical of the epic film/game tradition, representative behaviours and game-specific strategies which move across title, franchise, and medium.

[220] Likely a reference to the influential TV series *I, Claudius* (BBC/London Films, 1976).
[221] Potter 2004: 76.
[222] Beard and Hopkins 2011: 89 estimate 'one gladiator in six in each show' might have been killed in the arena.
[223] E.g. Theodorakopoulos 2005: 55 on *Ben-Hur*.
[224] Burgoyne 2008: 91 on *Gladiator*.
[225] A reference, it appears, to the gods of *Jason and the Argonauts*, whose chess games interfere with the lives of mortals, Llewelyn-Jones 2007: 435.
[226] Paul 2014: 143-4.
[227] Steam, "I, Gladiator".

**2.14**: Fighting in the *I, Gladiator* arena: "ARGH!!"

The game is set apart from *GSOV* in its exaggeration of the role of its virtual spectators, who here act directly upon the gamespace. As in other games of the tradition*, IG* provides the player with visual reward-spectacles when Rufus' enemies are killed, highlighting the centrality of spectatorship while "treating" the player to a shower of blood. *IG* then extends some level of agency to the crowd themselves, who possess a semi-participatory role: when the player presses the CTRL key, Rufus cheers towards the crowd, momentarily increasing his popularity and subsequently adding experience points which are used to "level up" Rufus and make him stronger. Audiences also throw money into the grounds which the player can pick up and use to buy better weaponry. The skills a historical gladiator learns over his career,[228] and the popularity he enjoys,[229] are translated into the game as an extra reward mechanism where the virtual Roman people directly influence the progress of the player and contribute to his future success. The spectator is therefore centralised within the very mechanics of play. In allowing player interaction with the audience, the gap between spectator and actor is even more narrowed, seemingly enriching the central execution mechanic reminiscent of both *GoW* and *GSOV* and tacitly drawing focus onto the "man vs authority" dynamic as it plays with the notion of the gladiator as "man of the people". In short, the player, Rufus, and the virtual

[228] Kyle 1998: 79.
[229] Bakogianni 2015: 9.

audiences encircling the gamespace become connected, drawing on a tension central to onscreen presentations of gladiatorial violence and disturbing the line between 'spectacle and reality', 'entertainer and entertained'.[230] Flanagan claims that the ubiquitous use of digital crowds in twenty-first century ancient films and television series 'induce new anxieties about stability and otherness'.[231] The digital crowds in videogames like *IG* appear to indicate the opposite, as both they and the player-character merge in their operations and motivations. In the game, the crowd is both a participant and passive viewer as are Rufus and the player: the game entertains the player with its spectacle, but the player, through Rufus, must also entertain the audience of the game to garner their favour. Consequently, entertaining the spectator is a never-ending, circular phenomenon, in which the player sees the game, and the game sees the player. Not only does *IG* adopt an established convention, it stretches and exaggerates it, drawing further focus onto the notion of spectatorship, implicating it within a core play mechanic and further underpinning the antagonism at the centre of the narrative.

The journey of both protagonists in *IG* and *GSOV* involves death and resurrection, and this sudden departure from consistently "realistic" Roman-cinematic tropes into fantastical, mythical narratives and spaces is initially jarring. On reflection, however, this developmental strategy speaks of the transmedial nature of ancient games as they construct stories and challenges to entice and immerse players. At all times in both games, furthermore, the tenuous relationship between imperial governance and general populace stands at the centre of the game experience. *IG* takes this further, seemingly virtualising observations in scholarship that the audience of the historical events were participating in a cultural tension that was reflective of the 'social order of Roman society'.[232] It does so to achieve a theme typical of many videogames, that of undermining a social order,[233] arguably to fit within the larger epic onscreen (and game) tradition. The continual focus throughout *GSOV* on a single individual, whose combat prowess is demonstrated by both player skill and the reward-spectacles of the execution sequences, coupled with his eventual dethronement of the emperor, also keep the game and so the player in a rehearsal of the epic tradition. Such ground continues to be (re)run by Roman action-based games like *Ryse: Son of Rome* (Crytek, 2013) which wraps instances of bloody, player-led combat around the deposition of the emperor as part of its narrative. We see already the creation of a Rome-specific continuum, one significantly connected to the other games in this chapter but nevertheless set apart through its depiction of a power struggle between individual (and his society) and the ruling (mortal) body, and then, crucially, realising that

[230] As in Ovid, McAuley 2017: 181.
[231] Flanagan 2018: 75.
[232] Winkler 2004: 97.
[233] Potter 2004: 78.

as a set of gameplay functions. Though both games do not necessarily expound the same profound political and ideological points as their cinematic cousins, they do nevertheless allow players to assist in constructing themes of power, freedom, and loss as they operate. Consequently, like their onscreen counterparts, the games engage simultaneously with the classical, filmic and televisual epic tradition and modern videogame precedents, evolving the film tradition through interactivity and engendering a new and characteristically "Roman" avenue of the epic game tradition.

## 2.5 Conclusions

Despite their differences, all the games here share a common set of values. They take place within similar basic frameworks and possess similar operations, whether in the wide-ranging adventures of *GoW* and *GSoV* or in smaller-scale gameworlds of *Apotheon, I, Gladiator* and *Okhlos*. They are all related to their filmic predecessors and to their classical origins at the same time, even as they are moulded to accommodate for the genre framework: the representation of Artemis in *Apotheon*, for example, her characterisation and her role in the game experience, can be connected to all manner of ancient and modern influences and motifs, most (if not all) of which are recognised and acted upon by the player. This multi-layered, intertextual and transmedial network of relationships is not always straightforward: each component, from orchestral music to lofty authority figures, from application of spectacular violence to meditation on (or ruination of) aesthetically pleasing environments,[234] and from gods against humans to the desire for freedom from state authority, is subject to significant change to fit both the genre framework and the specific purposes of each game. Furthermore, many precedents are rooted in antiquity, reflecting for example the centrality of the arena in Roman life (or at least the centrality of the arena in modern perceptions of Roman life), where others, like the violent murder of Olympian gods, are solely pop-cultural inventions. Nevertheless, at all times the player must co-construct elements of a "game tradition" by engaging with strands of the wider epic tradition, building upon and evolving the strategies and behaviours of their filmic predecessors. The game tradition can be set apart from its onscreen cousins somewhat, due to its demand for player participation in the action. As witnessed in *Okhlos* especially, this fundamental principle pulls the player further into the values imbued within the game. To use another example, *GSOV* maintains emphasis on spectatorship and draws the players' attention to it as they progress, while *IG* deliberately draws the audience directly into the game experience, triangulating player, protagonist, and virtual audience by making manipulatable the theme of

[234] While there is no room here, Lowe 2009: 79-80 sees the Greek-themed game *NyxQuest* (Over The Top Games, 2009) using, moving and so meditating on an already-broken architecture, rather than destroying it.

spectatorship through play. Consequently, the player is always making the messages that underpin the game as they engage in these spectacular moments of play. As a result, these games reflect the sophisticated interplay between narrative and spectacle previously identified in ancient film. It is necessary to consider these games as plugged into their cinematic counterparts, but just as necessary to demonstrate their distinctiveness by formulating what I have termed an epic game tradition.

That the games here consistently evolve the epic mode forces focus not just on the history and myth represented but also towards a transmedial "bigger picture". The logic of transmedia discussed in Chapter 1 requires us to see popular culture as a multidimensional network, where works exist independently but are interrelated through their mutual appropriation of existing conventions, some ancient, some not. Where the games here are indebted to their "original" sources, they have simultaneously been recreated and retranslated to collaborate with other nodes in the transmedia continuum. Classical material is altered and reconfigured to fit the needs of the action-based game genre, and the epic film tradition, a consistent trend that has two primary ramifications. First, it means that impressions of antiquity generated and consumed by developers and players are diversified in dramatic and meaningful ways. The transformation of Pandora from one-dimensional demoness to a figure of hope and change, or conversely the transplanting of goddesses from culturally complex contexts into one-dimensional characterisations (Hera and Aphrodite appear especially prone to this), indicate the capacity for popular antiquity to adapt, or remain static, in new media circumstances. Second, it requires a new outlook on the operations of the ancient past, one which considers both the historical or mythological content as inherently meaningful and as valuable driving forces of game experiences, yet also reflects on their consistent rejuvenation by outside, non-ancient agents, existing within, depending on, and contributing to them. Examining from a transmedial perspective, and so generating a nexus of interrelated conventions and representative phenomena, allows us to appreciate this complex, interweaving combination of mediated ancient material, modified contemporary convention, and flexible genre framework. This in turn allows better understanding of how player interaction with the mechanisms, narratives and underpinning subtexts within the games and across transmedial space facilitates the generation of a new form of the epic tradition.

## 3. Postcolonial Roleplay in Ancient World CRPGs

The computer role-playing game (CRPG) typically offers the player an exploratory, open gameworld designed to be freely navigated. The player explores these lands and converses with often fully-characterised peoples living within them, and takes part in adventures tied to deep, epic narratives. Player characters are co-constructed through decision-making processes and statistical management, allowing the player to build the character in whichever way they choose. Players are also prompted to act, or 'roleplay', as if they were the avatar represented onscreen. This chapter analyses the ways in which this apparatus allows players to enter complex, story-driven ancient worlds, and investigates the sorts of values and meanings underpinning player activities. The open-world *Nethergate: Resurrection* (Spiderweb Software, 2007), set in newly-invaded Roman Britain, is examined first to see those mechanisms in practice. Because of the nature of the gameworld and the distinct, genre-specific ways in which players operate within it, the analysis goes on to determine if, because the player's primary location is an explicitly colonial ancient place, players might encounter and even act upon themes of intercultural conflict. This provides an impetus to identify operations within open-world, choice-driven virtual colonial spaces as potentially postcolonial in nature.

Postcolonialism is referred to throughout this chapter to describe critiques of colonial themes and ideologies: in Rao's words, the term is 'an ideological concept' wherein an agent engages in 'polemics against colonialism'.[1] Here, that agent is the player who, through engagement with these virtual spaces, works within or against colonialist and imperialist values and principles. Since *Nethergate* offers a complex world with nuanced characters from both "invader" and "invaded" communities, players reflect on the consequences and ramifications of imperialist and colonial enterprises and may even, through playing the "invaded" community, voice the 'subaltern', the 'non-Western' (non-Greco-Roman) 'men and women from the subordinate social groups'.[2] We therefore look to *NG* to see if imperialism can be represented while simultaneously becoming a 'counter-text',[3] a 'polemic against colonialism' as Rao says above. This is contrasted with *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006), wherein player-led movement of a Greek hero through foreign lands constitutes the potential rehearsal of colonial ideologies. Here, different methods of adapting generically "ancient" materials into the genre framework present an alternative means of encountering colonial ideals and values within ancient CRPGs. To discern the dissimilar ways in which Greece and non-Greek eastern lands are represented and encountered by the player, this

[1] Rao 2015: 271.
[2] Chakrabarty 2000: 8.
[3] Hardwick 2005: 107.

second case study employs perspectives initially proposed by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* publication, which defined and investigated the construction of an eastern Other by the west, and other subsequent postcolonial scholarship that expanded on and challenged it. A final comparison complements these analyses and asks whether the ancient CRPG can allow the player to enter into something like postcolonial practice, addressing her preconceptions of imperial pasts and so 'transform[ing] conceptions' of antiquity in the process.[4]

### 3.1 Introducing role-playing games

RPGs come in a variety of formats,[5] though the CRPG has its roots in the non-digital tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) where players come together in the real world to create characters by assigning them names, statistics and attributes, while a 'Dungeon Master' (DM) describes the players' journey through a gameworld based entirely in their collective imagination. Players roll dice to accomplish a successful action (e.g. hit a monster with your sword, charm a non-playable character through speech), and the results of the dice-roll are then compared with pre-determined statistics provided by the game manual, which the DM presides over. Quick arithmetic is done to calculate the result of the action. The CRPG channels the complex rules of *D&D* into an accessible digital structure that supports single-player experiences. Concepts such as 'character level, hit points, and armor ratings'[6], values that define characters, are virtualised so that, while in the tabletop version players must calculate manually, the CRPG instantly produces those results.[7] The DM is thus replaced by the computer, which simulates that role as best it can and so removes the 'daunting' challenge of learning all the rules and mathematical skills required to play.[8] *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare and Black Isle Studios, 1998) was the first major and popular CRPG to allow players to engage with a digitization of the *D&D* ruleset through their computers.[9] Players of the game must manage their character(s) successfully to confront future in-game encounters, gathering "experience points" and "spending" them to improve character statistics. While shared social experiences and teamwork are no longer a priority as they were in *D&D*,[10] the mechanics of the CRPG engender

[4] Hardwick 2007b: 4, 11. See also Hardwick 2007a: 326 on how postcolonialism can either further 'colonize' or 'subvert'.
[5] Live-action roleplaying and MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games) are not included in this chapter, for reasons of time, space, and resources.
[6] Laycock 2015: 258. Also known as the 'lingua franca' of RPGs, Mona 2010: 25, 30.
[7] Laycock 2015: 260.
[8] Tresca 2010: 74-5. Bowman 2010: 110 also notes 'hyper-intelligence' and 'capacity for remembering large amounts of information' as necessary requirements for any tabletop player.
[9] In the wider context of RPG evolution, see Hitchens and Drachen 2009: 11.
[10] Bowman 2010: 34, 46.

teamwork between player and virtual world directly, allowing her to gain "experience" and develop the storyline by interacting with peoples, fighting enemies and exploring virtual spaces.

Since RPGs generally depend on the 'integration of diverse cultural elements' so that players can make sense of the gameworld,[11] many ancient materials are present in CRPGs, combining with other materials to facilitate the flow of play and to generate meanings and messages. *D&D* is primarily fantasy-based: the game manuals describe adventures, peoples, cultures and monsters based on a huge range of influences and is indebted most to the works of JRR Tolkien in its near-limitless use of high-fantasy motifs and character-types.[12] 'Every role-playing game takes place in a fictional world',[13] often a complex open-planned one that allows freedom of choice and movement to the player, meaning a large number of potential encounters with a wide variety of possible signifiers. Standard fantasy content interweaves freely with elements from ancient literature, historical narratives, and material culture, not just in ancient CRPGs but digital role-playing games generally. This diverse array of material is packaged into easy-to-read scenarios and sequences,[14] allowing historical and mythological phenomena to interplay with other pop-culture realms from fantasy and science-fiction to television and film and other videogames,[15] thereby resulting in an intrinsically transmedial genre form. Most often, antiquity continues to operate within that familiar storyworld of standardised assumptions and expectations. Lankoski and Jarvela indicate this with their example of the "barbarian" character-type in *Advanced D&D.*[16] Here the stereotype of the barbarian is bracketed into a set of statistics and characteristics, so through a single name – "barbarian" – the player is provided quick access to this character and what it is supposed to represent. When some of its most familiar elements are appropriated, and reconfigured, popular antiquity may assist in making sense of moments of play. This is alluded to in the *Stranger Things* (21 Laps Entertainment, 2016-present) television series, where *D&D*-playing children relate to a fantastical being they meet in the real world by associating it with the Demogorgon of Greek mythology encountered in their tabletop games. To understand the way the CRPG framework functions with ancient materials, we must focus on what Ilieva broadly terms 'cultural conventions': this can be achieved by a hermeneutic approach where RPGs are read as texts, so that we can access

[11] Ilieva 2013: 35.
[12] For Tolkien's influence on RPGs, see Barton 2008: 18.
[13] Borgstrom 2010: 57. 'Strong' narrative in Hitchens and Drachen 2009: 15.
[14] Rolston 2009: 119, an RPG writer, describes his ideal gameworld as one composed of 'digestible snips and fragments' of ancient historical civilizations. See Cragoe 2016: 591-3 for 'packaged' mythologies.
[15] Bowman 2010: 69-70. Also see Tynes 2010: 221.
[16] Lankoski and Jarvela 2013: 26.

the 'underlying matrix' upon which the player depends.[17] What is often dismissed as a "hodgepodge" of myth and genre convention is in fact the repurposing of resonant fragments which make sense of rich narratives, complex worlds and the actions of the player within them both:

> 'These days, we do things in fragments… We devour these fragments, flicking through hundreds each day, and we return to many… We return to things again and again… Look more closely, though, and you'll find that a game is a network of fragments, most of which are not necessary to experience the game fully, and yet which cumulate into a rich experience of a storied world.'[18]

Familiarity is a necessary principle to help the player engage with the 'higher levels of narrative complexity' typical of the CRPG,[19] wherein players choose between solutions to problems, pathways to take, and conversation options with non-playable characters (NPCs). Easy-to-interpret signifiers also allow swift player engagement with the significant demands of the genre, which include 'long-term planning', 'resource management', 'strategic combat and exploration'.[20] Conventional material also allows them to easily co-construct the CRPG's often complex narratives.[21] These narratives are further structured into quests, digestible "chunks" of story provided to and acted out by the player. Quests are picked up from NPCs, who direct the player to go to a certain area, or kill a certain in-game agent, which in turn produces experience points used to "level up" their characters' statistics, and often rewards the player with items, weapons and usable objects. Quests also serve to further the game story, allowing the player to participate directly in these narrative "chunks" to contribute towards constructing an epic narrative through their activities in the gameworld. Quests are 'classified in part by the challenges that they provide and the initiations that result from overcoming these obstacles'.[22] That is, completing quests entails performing an in-game function, and co-constructing the story simultaneously. In this way, quests 'unify both meaning and action':[23] the player assists in co-creating the game experience, first by recognising familiar components of the world, then completing quests, thereby developing both character and overall narrative. This system is further enriched by the typical open-endedness of CRPG quests, which

[17] Ilieva 2013: 35-6; Harviainen 2009: 75 on hermeneutics and RPG analysis. This, furthermore, echoes the 'cultural processes' Hardwick uses to characterises the multitudinous ways in which antiquity functions in appropriative texts (see Chapter 1).
[18] Quote from Walker 2010: 309-10. Tresca 2010: 64 and Tynes 2010: 221-2 claim, apparently independently, a 'hodgepodge' of materials. Hite 2009: 67 and Laycock 2015: 235 respectively on 'familiar' conventions to make games 'accessible'.
[19] Moser and Fang 2015: 146-7.
[20] Barton 2008: 2-4.
[21] Dormans 2006.
[22] Howard 2008: 101.
[23] Howard 2008: xii-xiii.

often allow the player to make decisions concerning direction, action and response and in doing so permit creation of personal responses to in-game situations.

One final quality peculiar to the C/RPG is that of immersion and intimacy with the game character being roleplayed. To roleplay, the player suspends her 'primary identity' and submits to 'immersion into an alternate mental framework'.[24] In this way players 'become a character', even engaging with that character's 'emotional urgency' within in-game situations.[25] This synergy between involved player, multi-branching game experience and quest-structured narrative provides a 'more coherent' experience than other genres.[26] Such urgent levels of engagement mean players often prioritise immersion even at the expense of winning the game.[27] If successful, the player of an ancient-world CRPG like those presented below is simultaneously drawn into world, narrative, and character, and so closer to that virtual antiquity. If the game allows, the player may also choose her own way, tailor her own experience, even employ her own personal interests and values through the movements and actions of her characters.[28] As a result, players have some capacity to input themselves, their thoughts and motivations into the represented ancient world. However, this also means that any values, messages or subtexts already contained within the world and story are also exaggerated by this unique and intimate connection. For example, early editions of *D&D* exoticized and made powerless the female figure.[29] Theoretically, players of early *D&D* roleplaying their character within this fictional space were assimilating and co-operating with misogynistic values built into that game structure, not unlike the players of the previous chapter who had to tacitly agree with co-producing *GoW*'s oversimplified, sex-obsessed Aphrodite. But due to the singularly involving nature of the CRPG, the values built into them become especially important. Players must not only choose between, for example, killing or not killing, stealing or not stealing, but must also consciously engage with the thematic and narrative contexts surrounding possible actions. In games that explicitly reconfigure colonial, imperial or provincial spaces, like *Nethergate* below, the player must therefore confront, navigate and agree or disagree with the implicit themes and values therein. Success in creating an ancient CRPG that affords subversive or unique play experiences therefore depends on the ancient materials used and, crucially, the ways they are reconfigured to accommodate for the unique, immersive and choice-driven genre framework.

[24] Bowman 2010: 180. Also, Hitchens and Drachen 2009: 5.
[25] Adams 2013: 70. Howard 2008: 25 on 'emotional urgency'.
[26] Moser and Fang 2015: 146.
[27] Laycock 2015: 232.
[28] Radosinska 2016: 159-60.
[29] Garcia 2017: 237-8.

## 3.2 Confronting colonialism in *Nethergate*

A game in which players roleplay from both invader and invaded perspective in a newly-occupied Roman province is an ideal position to begin exploring potential player encounters with colonial subtexts and messages. *Nethergate: Resurrection* (2007)[30] (*NG*) is an open-world CRPG set in a mythical Roman Britain, conforming largely to the standard framework outlined above by requiring players to build characters, complete quest-structured stories and explore, negotiate and act upon a fictionalised, fantastical gameworld. This section begins by outlining the fundamentals of CRPG play as encountered in the game before analysing the ways in which players operate as both Roman and Celts (as they are called here), "becoming" these cultures and functioning within fully-realised, living-and-breathing virtual societies. That the online store page invites players to 'fight for freedom, or further the glory of the Empire',[31] immediately suggests players will operate within an invader/invaded paradigm. This analysis therefore goes on to investigate the ways in which players covertly or explicitly engage with themes of colonialism or imperialism implicit within the Roman-imperial narrative, as they collaborate with standard "Roman" and "Celtic" tropes to complete the challenges of the game and co-create the story. Depending on developmental choices and player capability to immerse, roleplay and enact meaningful decisions, the game may or may not uphold, and demand complicity with, attitudes pertaining to colonial invasion and aggression.

The game is presented in a roughly three-dimensional, or "2.5D" perspective (Image 3.1).[32] The largest box depicts the in-game events, including the four player-characters standing in the centre, the surrounding enterable buildings, and other characters the player may either fight or speak to, such as the Centurion seen standing to the south of the party. The text beneath details combat moves and general events, e.g. "You open the door.", while icons under that text are used by the player to engage with the environment. To the bottom left is the current highlighted character and party leader, Spurius, and the wearable items and inventory currently equipped and possessed by him. Automap changes the image to a low-tech version of the current area to ease player navigation around the gameworld. The top left box contains portraits of party members, including the character's health which, if depleted, means the character is dead. Info shows that character's statistics, which affect all performances and actions from combat to bartering with merchants. This is the interface through which the player governs, directs and constructs her character(s). As the amount of interface possibilities suggests, *NG* is designed to be a deeper

[30] *Nethergate: Resurrection* is a remake of *Nethergate* (1998), created with a few new episodes and areas but made primarily to grant players with newer computer systems access to outdated game software.
[31] Steam, "Nethergate: Resurrection".
[32] Neither fully 3D nor entirely two-dimensional, the 2.5D perspective simulated three-dimensional without actually being so.

experience than other, faster-paced games, requiring management of many different attributes and equipment to successfully navigate the gameworld and overcome its challenges.

**3.1:** The standard perspective in *Nethergate*.

There are three game states within which the player can operate. The first, above, is the main way the gameworld and its events are presented. The second, combat, is depicted in much the same way (Image 3.2). Upon entering Combat Mode, the player may now attack hostile opponents. Each party member has 'AP', or 'Action Points', used to move and attack opponents, resulting in a slower, more contemplative approach to combat compared with those of the previous chapter. As with most games of this type, combat ends when either set of characters run out of health points. Beneath the blue health bars are red bands which represent magic points. Magic can be used in both combative and non-combative situations, to unlock sealed doors or as attacks. It is structured in Circles, such as Health (to heal party members) or Craft (to create items) which can be upgraded separately every time a magical character levels-up. Non-magical characters can choose between Strength (making the character hit harder), Dexterity (allowing the character more Action Points)

and other sub-skills, including proficiency in Spears or Javelins. All characters have varying levels of access to talents such as First Aid, which allows characters to heal party members, and Barter, which grants better possible opportunities to charm merchants through speech. The type of character generated, whether speech-heavy healer or sword-playing fighter, depends on the choices the player makes in character construction. The third game state is the World Map, which when accessed shows the player possible destinations for exploration. This creates the illusion of an open world, *NG* being a rare example of the ancient Roman world as explorable and open to meaningful and direct interpretation. Moving across the World Map in the third game state, entering areas, exploring them, and speaking to people in the first game state and fighting enemies in the second typifies this complex, multi-layered game experience.

**3.2:** *NG*'s combat mode.

The player engages with quest-structured narratives which prompt the player to move around and explore this open world, encounter its peoples, and to build their characters through a combination of combat and speech-based interaction with other gameworld constituents. As opposed to pen-and-paper RPGs like *D&D*, the single-player of *NG* must co-operate directly with the computer, rather than real-life co-players.[33] Arguably, this engenders an even greater level of connection between player and virtual antiquity, not only with the environment but also the characters within. The quest-giver, for example, is almost always an NPC who occupies some role in the gameworld, perhaps with an agenda or motive of their own: if the game is programmed to allow for it, the player can choose to complete their task, do something else, or even act against the quest-giver's wishes. CRPGs must possess fully-characterised agents since 'players will attribute the capacity to act to those characters', and the 'life' they are given must stimulate the players imagination and 'belief that fictional characters have desires and intentions of their own.'[34] Due to the need to make readable this complex game experience, in-game constituents tend to conform to recognisable signifying strategies. As a result, this Roman Britain is replete with generic elements of Irish and Welsh mythologies alongside its recycling and reproduction of Roman and Celtic tropes, demonstrating the flexibility and fluidity of antiquity as it interplays with other features of non-Greco-Roman belief systems to grant further ease of interpretability. These diverse agents of the gameworld function in suitably generic ways to allow players to 'know what to do intuitively'.[35] For this reason, Romans and natives reinforce standard assumptions through their behaviours, narrative motivations and statistical make-up. Their personalities, as well as their coded functions as player-controlled operatives, further demonstrate a reliance on motifs pertaining to both Roman and Celtic people as seen in other audio-visual media. The television series *Britannia* (Neal Street Productions & Amazon Prime Video, 2018), for example, is one of many onscreen representational examples to show regimented, heavily-armed and ultimately capable Roman soldiers against disparate factions of superstitious, nature-loving Britons, all of which (and more) characterise the two cultures in *NG*. Such is the precedent for western/Roman colonialist as taker of space and resources, opposed by the not-yet-westernised Celtic subaltern. A role-player is required to become fully involved in her characters and their surroundings and, within that frame of mind, to consider her actions and responses. Depending on decision-making and choice-driven possibilities afforded by the game, players may or may not choose to act like this standard "Roman" or typical native. Therefore, we look to the tried-and-tested, ever-familiar Roman Empire (albeit in a new virtual environment) to

[33] Stenstrom and Bjork 2013: 3.
[34] Parsler 2010: 136-7.
[35] Dormans 2006.

find 'new things to say about existing topics but also to make new topics emerge',[36] to see how the player may uphold or subvert norms associated with colonial encounter and so engage in something like postcolonial practice.

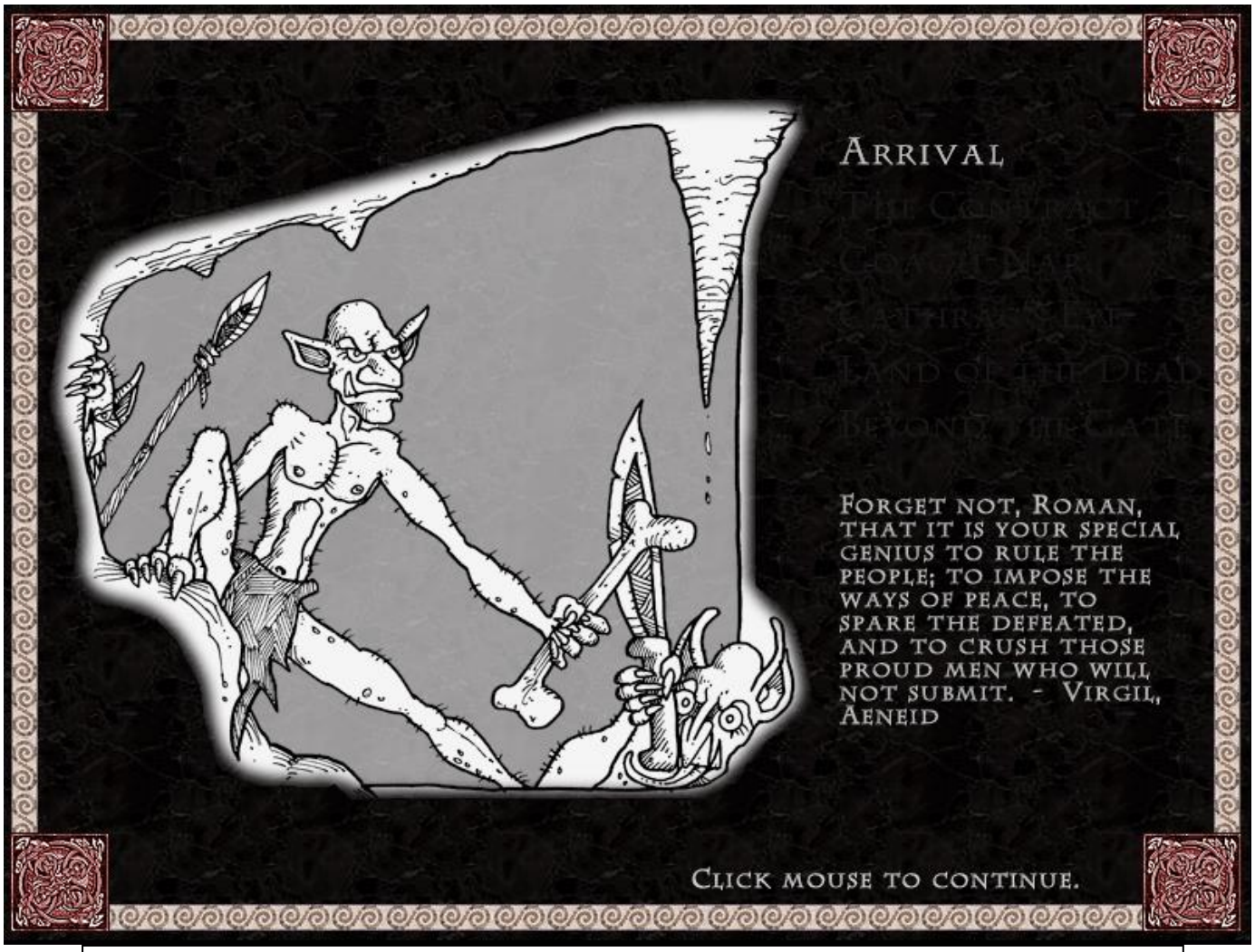
*Roleplaying the Roman invader*

The player of the Roman campaign collaborates with cognitively accessible versions of the Romans as a foundation for roleplaying as these colonial agents. Upon start-up, the player immediately learns that the Romans are excellent fighters. On the other hand, the Celts are less adept at hand-to-hand combat though are naturally more attuned to their natural, magical environs. From the beginning, "Romanness" is therefore built into the very characteristics that determine success in behind-the-scenes "rolls": the 'Roman Training' statistic, for example, further improves chances to hit in combat and the strength behind that action, a trait the Celts lack. Romans also have 'Tool Use', allowing them to pick locks on doors, and Celts do not, implying the Celts' lack of interest or skill with material items. This upholding of assumptions about Romans sets them functionally and narratively against their provincial counterparts. It is implied in the very fabric of the Romans' statistics that they are colonisers, specifically western ones, with "advanced" technologies and superior military training. This goes some way towards directing the player towards the kind of personality their character is perhaps supposed to have. It is then up to the player to either act as that character, fitting within this predefined role, or to operate outside those guidelines where possible. Roman role-playing is rare in videogames, perhaps because the "Roman" of the collective imagination is highly typical. As a result, when roleplaying the Romans there might be fewer opportunities for players to engage in free, imaginative character construction. This fixed notion of "Romanness" was encountered by classicist Amy Richlin in her classroom: setting her students the task of role-playing as Romans, she found it necessary to demonstrate to them that the Roman world was not homogenous, and that '"The Romans"' is in fact a catch-all set of terms designed to communicate, quickly, generic and generalized characteristics about all ancient Roman people.[37] Ultimately, the students' idea of "The Romans" proved to be too rigid. Through automatic assignment of characteristics and frequent in-game "reminders" *NG* relies on, rather than eschews, those assumed principles of Roman behaviour to stimulate (role)play. It is by being "the Romans", "invaders" with a superiority complex, that players can explore this tension. Nevertheless, since even the most immersed of role-players always maintains some sense of themselves and their own

[36] Goff 2005: 1.
[37] Richlin 2013: 347-8, 356-7.

thoughts and feelings,[38] it remains to be seen whether this fundamentally stereotypical representational strategy may still allow room for the player to operate as an individual, making decisions for or against the Roman imperialist mission.

Initially, the usual "Roman mission" is set up through a textual introduction to the campaign. When the Roman player begins the first main quest, 'Arrival', she is met with the following slide:




**3.3:** 'Arrival' opening slide in the Roman campaign.

The passage from the *Aeneid* sends the player into the game believing they will be the typical civilizing force in an otherwise uncivilized land, signalling to the player the kind of mindset they should be adopting.[39] However, the actual events in-game suggest from the very beginning that the standard takeover-and-assimilation of place and people does not necessarily apply here: conversations initiated by the player and textual notes automatically produced by the game draw a

[38] Bowman 2010: 157.
[39] Virg. *Aen.* 6.851-4.

contrast between player preconceptions of the "usual" representation of organised, efficient Roman military life and the strangeness of this new setting. The expectations of the player "as Roman" are routinely subverted: text-boxes appear to tell her that while the Roman party expects a rickety old outpost, they instead find a 'serious fortress, well built and maintained'. The Romans and the role-player both expect discipline and are met with apathy, even disdain, from non-playable soldiers in the camp. The passage above is also set within generically non-Roman iconography bordering the screen, instead bracketing a cartoonish image of a goblin-type creature from the European mythological tradition within quasi-Celtic swirling patterns. Such visualising strategies thereby fantasise the game, further disrupting what the player perceives to be ordinary Roman imperial practice and implying a vague sense of myth-based mystery and threat. The main game is divided into 6 major episodes, each accompanied by extracts from Roman literature to reinforce a sense of "Romanness" against a foreign entity, a sense which is intermittently undermined by the setting and narrative. This uniquely "Roman" characterisation acts as an anchor for the player as she interprets this new, original virtual environment full of diverse mythological creatures and other magical entities. Those creatures themselves often appear as characters, who constitute a kind of third population alongside the two playable societies and can be spoken to, bartered with, helped or harmed by the player, while other mythical beings exist as hostile enemies who automatically attack the player's party.

While the game is therefore typically and rigidly structured, the experience of the Roman role-player is nevertheless tempered by the strangeness of the land and its populations. In the first episode, players must enter and navigate an abandoned mine, fight goblins and obtain information vital to the main storyline. All six episodes follow largely the same format: the player is sent by their Commander to new places to collect special items. Even when operating within this basic "get quest, complete quest" format, the player is engaging in necessarily colonial hostilities, the kinds of actions that signpost, for the player, the movements and functions of an invader: moving into unwelcoming spaces, killing its inhabitants, and claiming items necessary for their own personal mission. Throughout the player is introduced to other, lesser-known monsters from Celtic, Norse and Irish mythology, such as the Fomorian, a monstrous race from the Irish mythological canon. The Fomorian contributes to this theme of a Roman-led "civilizing mission": MacKillop's Celtic dictionary describes them as fitting within 'the invasion sequence' so often found throughout Irish and British mythology,[40] while here providing alongside the Celt a natural Other to resist the oncoming Roman invaders. In later episodes, the party traverses the Land of the Dead, an area sometimes visited in

[40] MacKillop 2004 'Fomorians'.

Celtic myth tales, to usually disastrous ends.[41] What might be considered tropes of the British and Celtic mythic tradition, like battles with Fomorians, conversations with transmigrated souls in the underworld,[42] and exploring villages of intelligent supernatural fairy communities, are all used to provide the Roman party with a unique adventure, one that subscribes to the conventions of the CRPG while so often pointing the role-player towards, or away from, "Romanness" and standard colonialist practices. Depending on how she chooses to respond to certain situations in the game, quests with multiple possible endings, and conversations with Other peoples, the player may either violently colonise and so uphold her new identity as aggressor or see what she can do explore and trouble that mission.

Most often the standard Roman identity, that of the imperial aggressor, guides the player into certain responses appropriate to the colonial role-player on a mission to conquer and civilize:

**3.4:** Romans encounter a dragon.

Here, the player's Romans encounter Mozannos, a dragon, in the depths of a cave (Image 3.4). The computer-generated description emphasizes typical Roman behaviour, reporting to the player that the dragon 'strike[s] fear into even your battle-hardened Roman soul'. It further uses comparable

[41] MacKillop 2004 'The Dead'.
[42] Squire 2003: 36, 252.

examples recognisable to "you", the Roman: the dragon is described as being 'as big as one of Hannibal's war elephants'. It even preconceives a standard response: 'You ready yourselves' to fight, since your Romans are such courageous men. The player, eventually lowering her weapons, speaks to the dragon, who has words for her: 'You Romans. You are ravaging over the world, like ants. The world you are making, the world you will lead to, has no place for my kind.' The dragon is given, briefly but effectively, a personality that corresponds to the wise, foreseeing dragon of fantasy fiction,[43] but also through this speech provides a native's perspective on the Roman players' imposition of 'the way of peace' expressed by the above *Aeneid* passage. The dragon requests one final fight, desiring either to kill the humans or be killed in battle. The scenario is thus designed to make the player reflect on her identity as a Roman, and to then consider the most ethical and acceptable solution. An RPG-savvy player will understand there to be material rewards for killing a dragon, adding self-interest to the internal discussion the player undertakes within her own mind as she develops a response to this event. Overhanging this decision-making is the notion made explicit by the dragon that Roman activities are destroying the natural order of the land. This forces the Roman role-player to consider the morality of such colonising actions and, crucially, to then respond in conjunction with their own reflections on that theme.

*Familiar Celts*

Like in the Roman adventure, the Celtic campaign prompts the player to create identities that often reflect perceived beliefs about the Celts yet is necessarily configured to allow an alternative perspective on the themes of imperialism underpinning the game. Since the Celts are perhaps less recognisable than the Romans, and since new game systems with new content 'can sometimes confuse and disgruntle new players',[44] the game typifies them by universal expectations such as the assumed connection between Celts and nature.[45] Squire here encapsulates "vague ideas" about the Celts:

> 'Ancient Britons, recollected, doubtless, from our school-books. There we saw their pictures as, painted with woad, they paddled coracles, or drove scythes chariots through legions of astonished Romans. Their Druids, white-bearded and wearing long, white robes, cut the

[43] Consistent with much high-fantasy fiction, most famously *The Hobbit* (1937).
[44] Bowman 2010: 109.
[45] Henig 1984: 18 on natural religion of the Celts.

mistletoe with a golden sickle at the time of the full moon, or, less innocently employed, made bonfires of human beings shut up in gigantic figures of wicker-work.'[46]

These are effectively all reproduced in the game in both represented and playable Celts. The gameplay functions of the Celts prioritise less-tangible dynamics, such as magic, while the non-playable community consists of agents like druids. They play a central role in the Celtic campaign, and so the historically-attested intolerance towards them on behalf of the Romans provides a clear distinction between in-game invader and invaded.[47] The village druid in the Celtic campaign furthermore acts as political and spiritual agent, like the historical druid is assumed to have done.[48] He can also sell the player usable magic spells, many of which are analogous functionally and visually to descriptions of Celtic activity in ancient sources: 'their hands raised to heaven, pouring out terrible curses', 'bodies motionless to enemy weapons, as if their limbs were paralysed'.[49] General weirdness and connections with nature are already within the Celtic statistical structure and are reflected in the stereotypical virtual environments in which this population exists, automatically denoting them to be a certain "type" of character against that of the tool-using, spear-wielding Romans.

The Roman campaign requires players to explore strange goings-on from the invader's perspective: conversely, the Celtic storyline operates from the perspective of the native. The Romans wish to locate the source of the pervading mystery and stabilize the region, whereas the Celts wish to rescue their homeland from imperial forces. To demonstrate this, the game frequently prompts the player to think about their present situation and asks her to make choices (as with the dragon above). To make these choices easier to interpret and make, and to further allow themes of "invader/native" to proliferate, the player exploring the gameworld is often presented with choice-defined episodes that use visuals and terminologies reminiscent of past, often non-historical sources. At their starting village, the Celtic player can discuss human sacrifice with a local official and even argue on behalf of those to be sacrificed, though admittedly to no lasting effect in this particular instance. This instance nevertheless illustrates a difference between the two cultures, using the uniquely non-Roman practice of human sacrifice to demonstrate "Celtness".[50] This sequence uncovers the setting-up of a native non-Roman Other through either appropriation of the infamous scene in *The Wicker Man* film (Robin Hardy, 1973) or a broader acknowledgment of the "vague" images sketched by Squire above, themselves based on historical narratives and post-

[46] Squire 2003: 18.
[47] de la Bedoyere 2013: 232; Henig 1984: 206; Balsdon 1979: 65.
[48] Squire 2003: 34.
[49] Tac. *Ann.* 14.30.
[50] Maier 2003: 50; Squire 2003: 36-8; Henig 1984: 23.

antique visual representations of the Celts and their customs. This is necessary because 'players do not create fantasy worlds entirely from their imagination; rather, they shape and add an additional level of meaning to cultural materials derived from their background knowledge'.[51] As a result, the Celts, as narrative constituent and playable cohort, are made sense of by their exaggerated position as non-Roman native constructed through a wide spectrum of sources. The player, now cognisant of the type of character the Celt is supposed to be, is free to immerse herself into both the characters and the themes arising from the narrative and game experience.

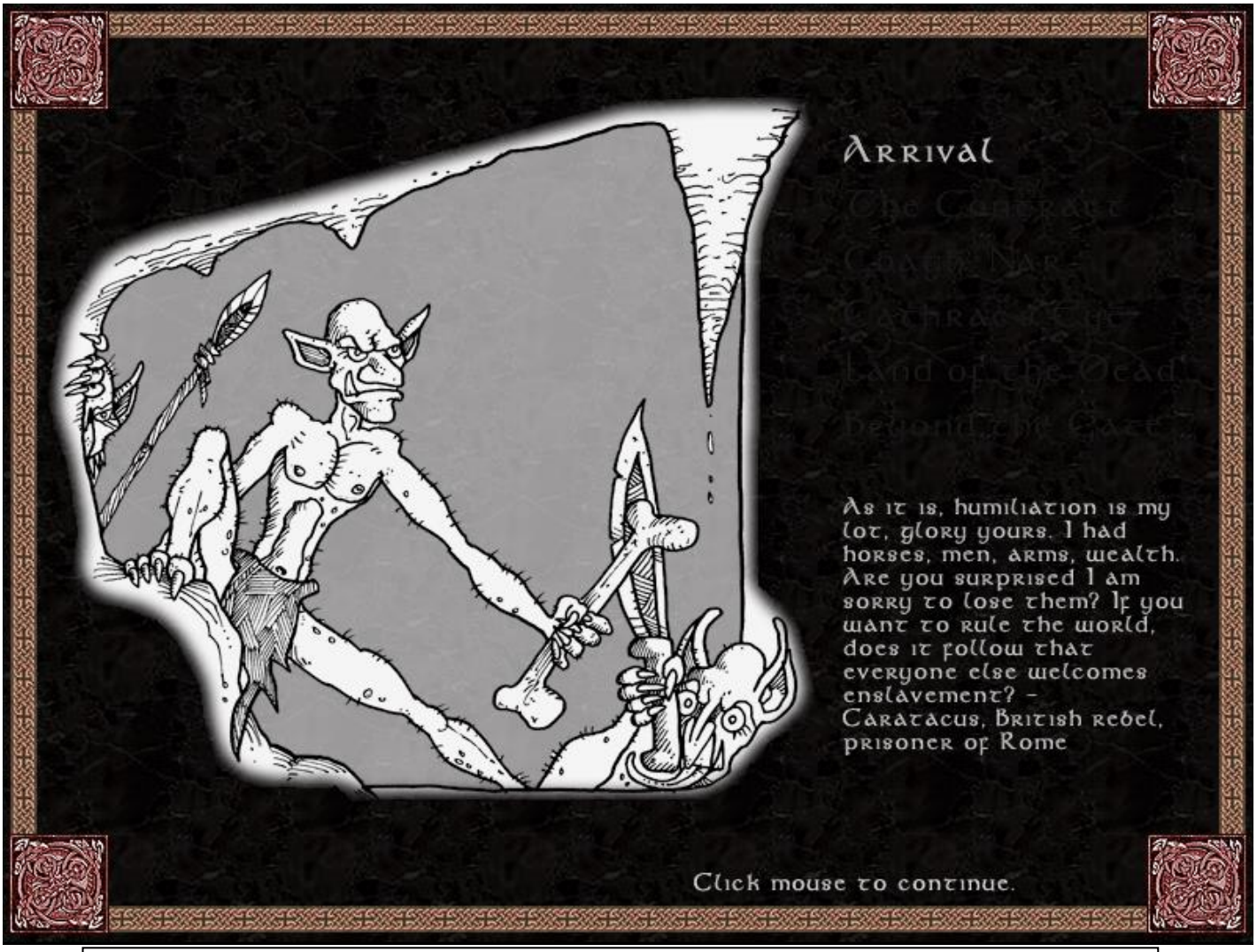
*Cross-cultural interaction between colonialists and subalterns*

The intrinsic familiarity of both cultures establishes an "us" and "them" or "self" and "other" dynamic that is central to the game. The opening description of the Celtic campaign immediately places players into the context of invasion, just as the Roman slide denotes an imperial mission: the Celtic party 'grew up together, learned the ways of war together, and chafed under the Empire's constant grip'. When pressed by the player's characters, many Celtic residents of the opening village will offer opinions that explicitly reflect these tensions: 'When the Romans rise victorious, as they always do, they will rampage over our lands, looking to slay anyone who aided the rebels' says one, while others simply acknowledge the advantages the Roman military has over them: 'Beware the Romans. Their weapons are good. Their armor is powerful. Their training is unmatched. Do not shirk from battling them, but do not be surprised when they take your head off for your troubles.' This last quotation is both a veiled reference to the statistical differences between Celtic and Roman characters built into the game rules as much as it is an elaboration of the fiction. Not just Celts, but mythical creatures too have opinions on the Romans. In non-Roman territory such as the Faerie Bazaar, called so because it is populated by faeries, or "sidhe",[52] inhabitants offer little or no help to the Romans, sometimes refusing to sell them items necessary for adventuring. Romans exploring the World Map may find themselves attacked automatically by creatures that, when encountered by Celts, appear friendly and co-operative. By presenting their personalities as such, and by barring certain game experiences from the Romans, the native population is designated functionally and narratively as under threat, and colonised. This characterisation of the non-Romans, deliberately set apart from the Romans, also allows Celtic players to listen to, and co-operate with, the voices of the mythical natives.

[51] Ilieva 2013: 28.
[52] Their Celtic name, which is used repeatedly throughout the game.

The tension between invaded and invader effectively positions the Celtic and mythological natives as virtual 'subalterns', who here are capable of expressing individual responses to actions taken upon them. The subaltern, as described above, is a non-hegemonic group of people typically un- or underrepresented in the historical record. The issue with providing them with a voice is contentious, as the imposing of such a voice may be considered an act of control from top-down 'hegemonic' groups: should the top-down group grant the subaltern a voice, even in the spirit of co-operation, this is still an outward demonstration of power over them. In *NG*, the subaltern is necessarily the Celtic and mythological natives, those who are present in historical narratives only as relayed through Roman sources. In those materials, the Roman writer provides top-down characterisation and voicing of the subaltern: in the game, this is done by both the developer and the Celtic player. Most associated with the Marxist intellectual tradition, the representing and voicing of the subaltern has long been a difficult issue. For example, postcolonial scholar Spivak finds in Marx a certain elitist perspective on subaltern peoples as unable to represent themselves.[53] In this virtual context, the developer of *NG* is the initial representer, putting words into the mouths of Celts from his, rather than their, perspective. This tension is implicitly underscored in the opening slide to the Celts' own 'Arrival' episode:

[53] Gramsci 1971: 52-5 in Rao 2015: 277 describes the 'subaltern': concerns over controlling the subaltern found in Rao 2015: 277-8 and Spivak 1988: 276-7.




**3.5:** Celtic 'Arrival' slide.

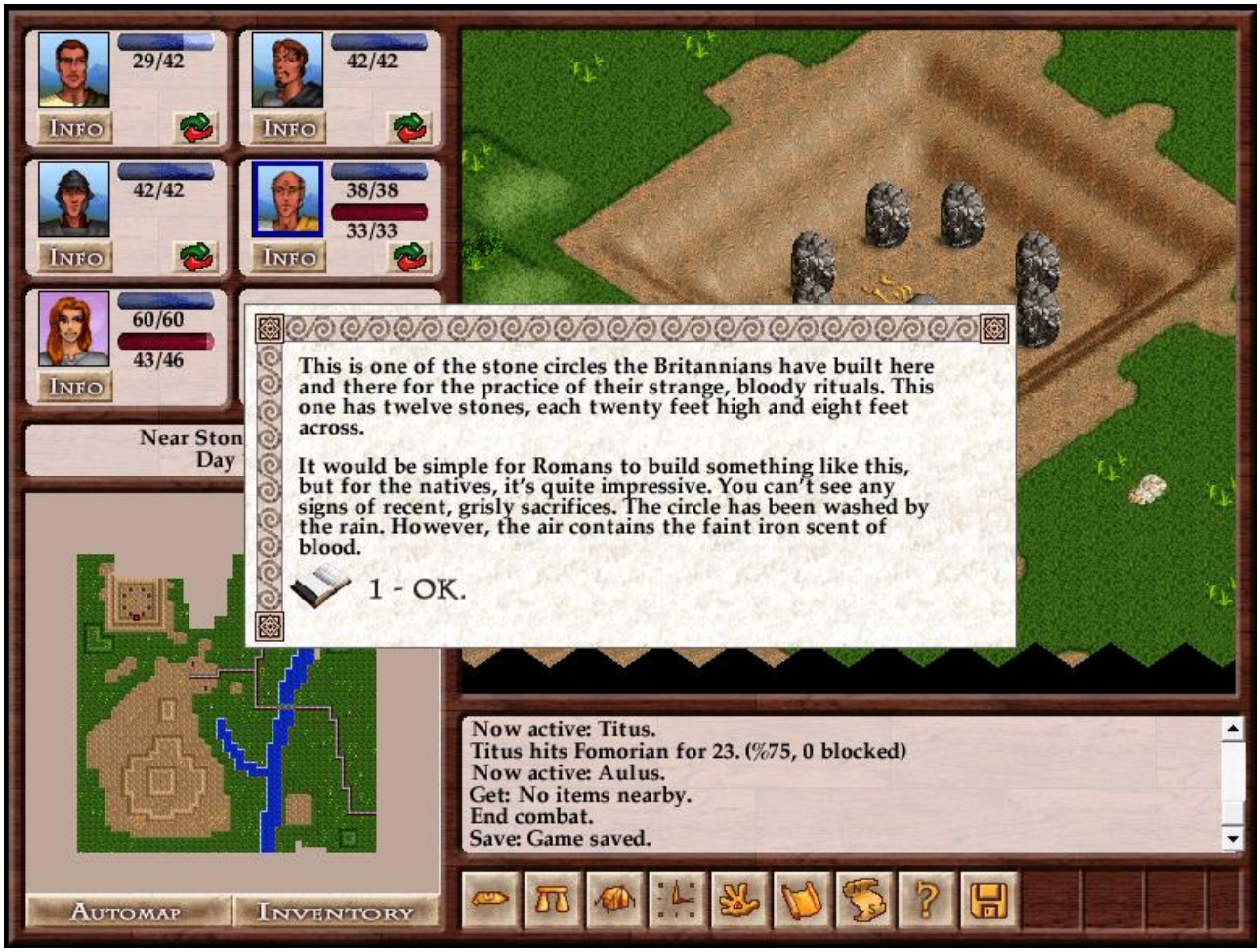
In this extract, the Briton Caratacus is made to speak here, in a humble fashion, by Tacitus.[54] In doing so, Tacitus, a Roman and so a member of the top-down Roman colonising force, voices the subaltern native within a Roman text in a way concomitant with wider themes of Roman imperial dominance. To imagine the Celts in this way is to engage in the colonial observation and top-down representation of their Other. The use of this source, however, must nevertheless be seen within the wider context of the game. First, the open CRPG world requires nonplayable agents for the player to speak to, to gain access to the world and develop an understanding of her surroundings: essentially, this would not be Roman Britain without Britons. Second, the slide and text above exist specifically to locate the player within a Celtic mindset to inform future roleplaying behaviours. While the quests remain roughly the same – enter dangerous territory, kill monsters, and retrieve items – the context in which the experience is cast is set deep within a narrative of imperial infringement. Furthermore,

[54] Tac. *Ann.* 12.37.

the cultures themselves are not designed to be clear-cut. For example, in the opening Celtic village the player can interact with a Romano-Celt named Bituitus, whose identity immediately connotes loose boundaries between the two cultures. He gives his opinion on the Roman emperor Caligula, 'the foulest Emperor to ever curse the Roman people', and reveals himself to be a former triarius, a type of Roman soldier, with 'knowledge' and 'training' to offer. Upon payment, Bituitus can increase the characters' ability to fight hand-to-hand, thereby allowing the player to overcome the discrepancies between Roman and Celtic capabilities. Cross-cultural interaction in this example therefore remedies the coded inability of Celts to fight hand-to-hand with Romans, and narratively sets up the possibility for (brief) intercultural co-operation. In both play and representational contexts, the characterisation of the subaltern, the agents and communities oppressed by the invading Romans, is necessarily complex. The player can therefore be, speak with, and give agency to the colonised population, thus charting not just 'the imposition of external force' but 'the responses to that force'.[55]

Many sequences in the game are coded to present reasonably diverse Romans and Celts who have the potential to possess "positive" and "negative" behavioural traits depending on decisions and observations made by the player. In most instances, the gameworld reacts to the player depending on who they are (role)playing. For example, there is on the World Map a small stone circle which both teams have access to. The Roman player may direct her characters to move into this space and interact with this stone circle. The Romans betray a characteristic aloofness: 'it would be simple for the Romans to build something like this, but for the natives, it's quite important':

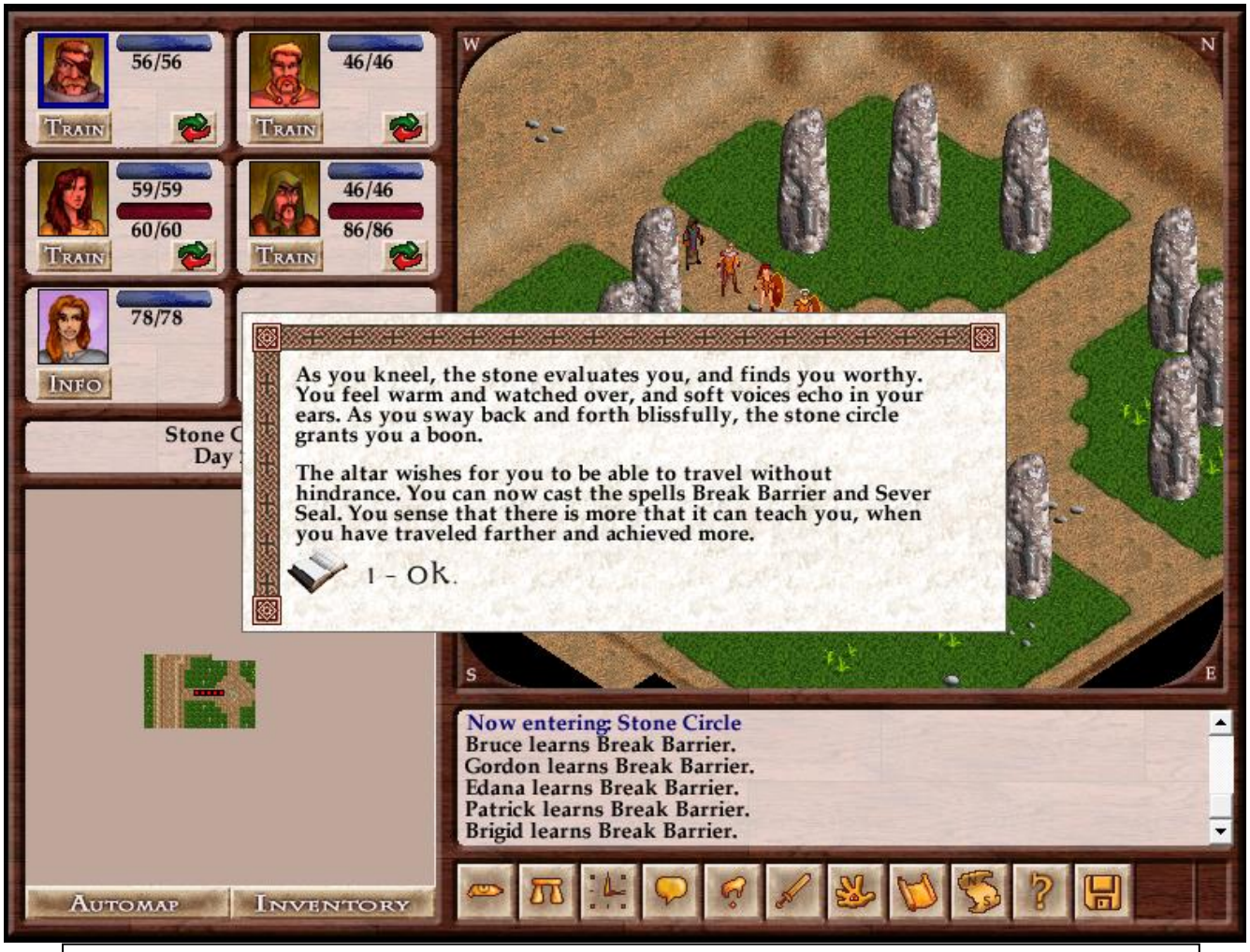
[55] Goff 2005: 2.




**3.6:** Romans encounter a stone circle.

Such attitudes reflect a literary tradition that exaggerates the perceived simplicity of the Celts as compared to their Roman "superiors",[56] and furthermore upholds a more general attitude of past imperialists as civilizers.[57] In this moment, the player is prompted to behave and think as standard colonialists, belittling and misunderstanding native monumental culture. The same stone circle when visited by the Celts will operate differently. She can direct the team to kneel and pray at this sacred site, an act which automatically grants useable spells:

[56] 'They have lots of milk but can't make cheese', Strab. 4.5.2. See also Takacz 2008: 148-9 for Tacitean 'pretense' regarding Britons.
[57] Said 2003: xvi. See also the *Aeneid* passage replicated in the game itself, above.




**3.7:** The Celts encounter the same stone circle.

A player "correctly" roleplaying will be motivated to act as a Celt "would", according to the logic established by the game: in this instance, observing religious rituals. This action then provides a text box unique to the Celts and bestows materials the player needs to succeed in adventuring and combative situations. The Celts, however, are not necessarily always more culturally understanding than the Romans. Encountering a shrine to Augustus elsewhere in the gameworld, they find the idea of venerating dead men as gods to be laughable, saying to the player: 'The Romans have an odd tendency to worship their emperors as Gods. It would be humorous if those same emperors weren't the ones who subjugated your people.' This combination of player action and game-generated consequence tacitly guides the player into a rough estimate of assumed cultural identity. Since player activity upon the gameworld also often results in text-boxes that elaborate on the thoughts and feelings of characters, this confluence also draws players into a complexity of cultural representation, one which never designates one culture as "superior" to another but instead hints at the types of behaviours each culture might or "should" be characterised by.

Parts of the gameworld are sometimes consciously constructed to offer some space for reflection on themes of intercultural co-operation and integration. Vanarium is a town founded by a Roman citizen to the west of the World Map, a place where predominantly Roman inhabitants dress as 'savages', seeking to fit into the Celtic way of life without entirely abandoning their cultural identity. In Vanarium the player can pick up side-quests, buy and sell items, and can even pick up a fifth party member of the opposite culture. This is a space built specifically to show cultures working together, and so seeks to expound the benefits of cultural co-operation. It is an eschewal of the outdated concept of 'Romanisation', a theory that claimed natives 'became Romans',[58] instead representing a more "multicultural" outlook reflected in recent scholarship which appreciates the diverse ways in which British tribes reacted to the Romans, ranging from resistance to hesitation to integration.[59] It is interesting that a place like Vanarium should exist in a videogame that explicitly uses generic assumptions and expectations about Romans and Britons, and can be taken as a specific attempt to provoke meditation on the theme of cultural cohabitation (and conflict) which is continually drawn upon throughout both campaigns. For the Romans especially, half the gameworld is pacified and the other half is hostile: a place like Vanarium is a middle-ground, a grey area that demonstrates the benefits of cultural co-operation and warning against thoughtless Roman (and perhaps Celtic) intolerance.

*Acting colonial*

While player behaviour is often prompted by the game as demonstrated above, the player is also frequently a significant determinant of in-game events and director of actions and attitudes. As noted previously, the player never completely loses her sense of herself even as she engages in deep immersive play within virtual cultures. This means that an immediate, present-day contingent in the form of the player, her imagination, and feelings, is always present during roleplay. As the player considers and then implements their responses to in-games events, those motivations feed into the 'inner lives' of the in-game characters themselves,[60] leading to a hybridity between roleplayed agent and real-world player. Furthermore, RPG quest-structures are often encoded with 'allegorical meanings'.[61] These allegories and subtexts are revealed, or not revealed, depending on the types of actions the player makes in response to quests and challenges. The following two examples

[58] Henig 1984: 41-3.
[59] Mattingly 2007: 527; Hingley 2007: 342.
[60] Williams 2009: 30.
[61] Howard 2008: 31.

demonstrate how player and character may become bound up when working through message-laden quests and narrative moments in *NG*.

On the World Map, players may encounter a lodge where, upon entering, they are met with an old blind man. Text appears: 'You could sit and talk. On the other hand, you could loot the place.' The player is given three options: '1 – Just Leave'; '2 – Sit and Talk'; and '3 – Steal Everything'. Stealing might initiate a new quest or provide a powerful item, whereas sitting and talking might have a similar outcome. The blind man could be playing a trick. These are all thoughts the player must contend with before acting upon this encounter, weighing up the possible advantages and reacting in ways they believe their character would respond. Furthermore, a sequence such as this, couched within an overall imperialist/invasion narrative theme, means player decisions will also be tempered by what the twenty-first century player of the game understands imperialism to be and to mean, while also tacitly equating imperialist action with basic (modern) morality that states stealing to be intrinsically bad. Most of the time, the game is programmed to react to player choices in such a way as to confirm the "right" way or the "correct" attitude: in this way, the blasé attitudes typical of Roman imperialists prompt the player to steal, where the real-world agent may hesitate. Here, as with the dragon example above, the player manoeuvres between the need to accumulate items for adventuring, the personal desire to do right by the old man, and the requirement to act as a coloniser/Roman through the act of forcefully and deceitfully taking without consent. Elsewhere during the Roman campaign, the team comes across a goblin shrine, another identifiably non-Roman in-game constituent and encounter that demands the player decide the most appropriate course of action for their Roman party. 'This place offends your civilized Roman eyes', the text says, leading to a player-initiated decision to either destroy the shrine or ignore it. To an extent the player is given here the opportunity to shape the party's opinion of native culture as they direct their Romans towards either course of action. Choosing to destroy the altar makes the party feel refreshed, meaning the player has made the "right" choice and has role-played the Romans "correctly". Nevertheless, she can also choose not to "be colonial" in this rudest sense, respecting this space and leaving it alone.

Playing in-character requires 'deliberate dissociation', so the player becomes 'so completely wrapped-up in a narrative that the outside world begins to 'receive only secondary mental processing'.[62] This general rule does not, however, force the player to act "like a Roman", and instead guides towards the type of character she might wish to create, always within the range of options presented by the game. In a recent report by Adams, *D&D* players were found to be carrying

[62] First quotation from Neuenschwander 2008: 195; second from Mahood and Hanus 2017: 63.

out actions within the game that reflected their belief in 'democracy, friendship, extraordinary experiences, and ethics… it can be extrapolated that meeting these needs serves as motivation for the game-play itself'.[63] At certain narrative moments, the player of *NG* can choose to subvert standard assumptions about Roman imperialists in favour of modern-day values, thereby allowing their own ideals to lead their activities and character construction in the game. At all times the CRPG is coded and programmed so that the player is always committed to the story presented,[64] but each possible choice the player makes is a direct reflection of their personal selves, their feelings towards the in-game constituents, the values that influence those feelings, and her desire to stay true to or subvert the prompts provided by the game. The Roman player immersed in what she perceives as the role of cruel occupier will destroy the altar and rob the blind man. A Roman player aware of herself or desiring to create a distinctly un-imperial Roman character, may help the blind man and attempt to operate in ways least likely to offend the natives. Operating as the latter type of Roman therefore unlocks a considerably "non-colonial" way of behaving.

Both campaigns terminate at roughly the same predestined endpoint, although these endings are also designed to reflect the differing perspectives of Roman and Celt. The Romans storm a castle in the final quest to find a wizard named Sylak, who is attempting to open a portal through which all the creatures of mythology living in Britain can escape from their homeland. He explains to the player that the antagonism between the Romans and Celts has made the land unliveable. The primary narrative thus expounds the belief that Roman aggression has created such instability as to disrupt the country, an opinion given by the dragon in the example above and by many of the Celtic natives within the gameworld. He also taunts the Romans: 'yours are not the ways of magic, and we leave your world poorer for it'. This draws attention to a Roman campaign characterised by limited magic use. Cultural difference, then, typifies the personality and speech responses of the main villain. The Romans necessarily fail in their mission to contain the population, losing the mythical dimension of its newly-acquired British citizenry through the wizard's portal. Sylak then curses the Roman Empire before fleeing himself: 'Try what they will, never again will they conquer another people.' The final slides of the campaign inform the player that her party begins 'hearing tales of severe Roman losses', specifically the abandonment of Gaul by future Romans, and the eventual fall of the Empire. Even as Romans, the role-player must now reflect on the transience of the colonial enterprise she herself is part of, partially depending of course on the degree to which she has agreed to participate in it. Through this ending, the game wraps up the major themes of cultural conflict and fits it into the known historiographical account of the Roman empire. By contrast, the Celtic ending

[63] Adams 2013: 82-3.
[64] Although Costikyan 2010: 12 warns developers against allowing the story to constrain player possibility.

has the player attempting to assist Sylak, allowing the oppressed native to have a role in the eventual downfall of Empire. It also ties into the known historiography of the Roman Empire: 'Centuries later, historians are never really sure why, at the height of its power, the Empire never expanded again.' To some extent, the "sympathetic colonizer" or "insensitive Roman" characterisation the player may have constructed throughout the game is marred by a predefined ending that partially disregards the nuances of character construction. However, merely by offering two perspectives, throughout the game and at these ending sequences, the player is not 'complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow',[65] but instead inserts the native into the known trajectory of Roman history. It is, furthermore, a subversion of the assumption that classical history is 'a grand narrative that regulates a universal truth',[66] as half of the overall game experience entails roleplay and direction of the Celtic party while their ending prioritises the actions of both human and mythological subaltern in the eventual collapse of Empire. The Celt is not the faceless enemy of the Roman, but an operable and distinct playable entity with a life of its own, one which through player action demonstrates strength and agency as it assists in removing the colonial presence.

Despite playing around with dominant historical narratives in this way, this is not so much historical practice as a response to the needs of present-day players in a world that consistently re-evaluates imperialist narratives and attempts to locate alternative voices in colonial pasts. Here players can witness and co-create a narrative of resistance,[67] one partially governed by player decision and concomitant with a contemporary thirst for multiple perspectives on colonial pasts. To understand the 'cultural values' of a narrative in a media text, we need to assess in what ways the meanings evolve through that narrative.[68] *NG* refracts contemporary approaches to imperialist eras of history, bringing the 'cultural values' of the present into the functions of the game and allowing players to co-operate with them. Players are then to some extent able to work upon and change those values, either inserting their own modern beliefs, or following what they perceive to be appropriate cultural responses of those societies, or even creating a Roman or Celt who acts peculiarly modern, respectful, and culturally aware. Such multifaceted play possibilities allow player acknowledgement of 'the hybrid cultural formations resulting from the colonial encounter'.[69] Merely by requiring players to consider not just their own perspectives but the opinions and motivations of both sides of the invasion narrative, within a gameworld that often directly prompts such

[65] Spivak 1988: 280.
[66] Decreus 2007: 263.
[67] See Hardwick 2007b: 2 for appropriated classics as 'resistance and liberation'.
[68] Reynolds 2009: 399.
[69] Rao 2015: 276.

considerations, the player is led to define colonial spaces as profoundly and fundamentally complex. Furthermore, the CRPG has the capacity to act as a 'moral educator' wherein players must 'negotiate between their game identity and their real self',[70] the needs of the player and the needs of the character, a characteristic of the genre which is at work in the provocative and morally challenging colonial world presented here. This adds further complexity to the already deliberately multifaceted presentation of Roman Britain and its many human and mythological constituents. Close player involvement denies an understanding of colonial circumstances and events as black-and-white, allowing instead for collaboration between player and their characters' 'needs, feelings, and problems',[71] to engender greater interrogation of the plight of the colonised in the gameworld. Such 'loftier' interrogations of such themes may have an impact on the real world that creates such texts.[72] For example, interviews with RPG players indicate that, after playing, they are 'more aware of prejudice and oppression in the "real world" and that playing as a character with prejudicial views forces the player to think within those challenging parameters.[73] Not only does *NG* offer the player the chance to interrogate themes pertaining to the "real" world of today, it also lets players inhabit uncomfortable roles in its fictional ancient world to allow greater degrees of reflection on those themes.

### 3.3 Is *Titan Quest* colonialist?

The possibility for players to construct personal responses is necessarily limited, though, when dual perspectives are traded in for CRPG experiences that present single heroic characters in action-heavy gameworlds. In *Titan Quest* (*TQ*), the player travels through ancient Greece and into the East to stop the mythical Telkines' plan to unleash the Titans from their prehistoric prison. The Telkines also release hordes of mythological creatures, thereby providing a gameworld replete with enemies. Hesiod famously describes only the war with and eventual imprisonment of the Titans,[74] but while their breaking free is absent from ancient sources it has nevertheless become an appealing plot device across contemporary media, as in Disney's *Hercules* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1997), the later *Immortals* film (Tarsem Singh, 2011), and now here in ancient-world videogames (as evidenced by *God of War* above). To achieve her quest the player enters a comparatively stripped-down CRPG framework and engages with a single Greek hero, whose mission it is to travel from the west (Greece) into the eastern ancient world, here comprised of Egypt and a vaguely-named

[70] Khoo 2012: 419-421.
[71] Hallford et al 2002: 76-77.
[72] As Cross 2015: 22 imagines and hopes.
[73] Bowman 2010: 59, 62-3.
[74] Hes. *Theog*. 715-721.

'Orient'. While these gamespaces are not strictly conceived of as colonial spaces like *NG*'s Roman Britain, the movement of the player's hero from west to east into non-Greek lands and a literally-named 'Orient' constitutes the crossing of boundaries into other, potentially Other, spaces. While the player is not embedded within an actual "invader" character like the Romans above, her actions through the character in *TQ* nevertheless connote movement across space and activity within that space upon and around foreign, non-Greek peoples. As a play experience, it is therefore like *NG*, without being couched in an overtly colonial narrative, though its modes of play may allow imperialist or colonialist ideas and themes to surface in clandestine ways. The intrinsic heroism of the Greek protagonist, who singlehandedly overcomes hordes of supernatural, mythological entities, positions the player character as the ultimate, and only, capable actor amongst a wider world of non-Greek, non-western peoples. This section explores the possibility that, in a twenty-first century (western) political, postcolonial landscape wherein people are increasingly conscious of representations of empires and "foreign" agents, *TQ* covertly expounds ideas of inherent western power and ability through its more linearized presentation of an individual hero's journey. Greek antiquity in particular has historically been conceived, by nineteenth and twentieth century observers and writers, as culturally superior and politically accomplished. Ancient Greek and Roman sources informed the way in which British and French colonial writers and imperial occupiers conceived of and developed their overseas territories.[75] A view of Greek antiquity as "superior" was explicitly equated with a self-assessed view of equally "superior" Europeans who used this connection to designate themselves as "better" than non-European cultures.[76] As Hanink points out, this myth about Greek exceptionalism not only led to the creation of the myth of '"Western civilization"', but proliferated after the colonial era and into the twentieth century.[77] Since the game frames the inevitably successful movement of a player-controlled Greek through eastern lands, this ideological perspective might therefore exist as an implicit subtext underpinning the game experience and narrative of *TQ*. The assumptions employed by *NG* were mostly explicit, with the play experience centred around questioning imperial behaviour in the British province. But assumptions can also be unconsciously embedded within a game system.[78] The purpose of this section, then, is not just to identify Orientalising images, the strategies by which western entities have traditionally conceived of and constructed the eastern Other,[79] but to understand the

[75] Aicherou 2008: 3-4.
[76] Chakrabarty 2000: 5 on the false 'unbroken tradition' between Europeans and Greeks, constructed by Europeans to justify their actions, and Aicherou 2008: 17 on 'string[ing] together the ancient Greeks and modern British'. See Stray 1996: 77-8 for classics as 'legitimating practice'. Also, see Hanink 2017: 276 on the myth of the "Greek miracle" used to construct the similarly mythical notion of "Western civilization".
[77] Hanink 2017: 276.
[78] Garcia 2017: 233-4.
[79] Most famously defined by Said in *Orientalism* (1978), referred to throughout this chapter.

'*processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse',[80] the meanings behind the images and the ways in which stereotypes and expectations are presented to and rehearsed by the player. In searching for these potential meanings, this section therefore also relies on the 'conviction that the new is never a break with the past':[81] we look to *TQ* for 'expressive, semantic, and thematic meaning: ideas symbolically encoded within the landscape, objects, and challenges of the quest and enacted through it.'[82]

*TQ* begins in the village of Helos, a Peloponnese settlement south of Sparta.[83] Directing the character in the centre of the screen around the village (Image 3.8), the player speaks to the inhabitants to establish some initial context for the world around her, a world already and suddenly populated by hostile mythical creatures. Eventually she meets Diomedes, an elder,[84] who tells the player that to stop the monsters harassing her people she must kill the satyr shaman, a magic-wielding enemy visually represented akin to the goat-like, horned satyrs of Greek myth. Doing so results in 1000 gold and 150 experience points as a reward. Defeated monsters occasionally drop an item upon death, such as weapons or useable items: the stronger the enemy, the better the items dropped. These items and equipment are used and worn by the character to enhance certain characteristics, such as strength or physical resilience, or even magical spells and abilities. As in *NG*, players engage with an interface at the bottom of the screen to navigate these many possible play actions. As evidenced by *NG* above, such game mechanics are typical of the CRPG genre, giving the player a significant level of control over character development, which in *TQ* is often used to improve combative capabilities. As the hero invariably gets drawn into the fight, she travels from Helos and further into Greece, battling swathes of mythological monsters as she goes.

[80] Bhabha 1999: 370, his emphasis.
[81] Villarejo 2017: 104-5.
[82] Howard 2008: 25.
[83] Paus. 3.20.6. Despite being primarily concerned with mythology, occasionally *TQ* uses 'real-world' names and places.
[84] And not the character from the *Iliad*.

**3.8** *Titan Quest*'s opening area, Helos.

As demonstrated above, *TQ* operates within fixed staples of the CRPG framework, utilising familiar signifiers and containing them within a rigid quest-based structure. Those signifiers, furthermore, are characteristically and generically "Greek" in nature: travelling through a mythologized Greece the player encounters oracles, navigates Greek regions like Boeotia and the city of Athens, and fights mainstays of onscreen antiquity like Medusa and her Gorgons. Less familiar entities like the Telkines are presented as ethereal wizards capable of destructive magics. True to their mythological characters,[85] the Telkines are also akin to generic fantastical characterisations. Visually, hero and villain are juxtaposed: the Telkine is much larger than the protagonist, reflecting his strength (Image 3.9). When not overtly and generically fantastical, the Greek portion of the game is characterised by a standardised "Greekness". Developer Brian Sullivan saw mythology as 'an inspiration for the monsters, magic and story', hoping to create something 'new and refreshing for

[85] Grimal et. al. 1991: 'Telchines'.

the role-playing genre' by conflating the creatures of myth with standard fantasy tropes.[86] Another developer, who studied classics and ancient history, cites JRR Tolkien as his inspiration for building the gameworld.[87] Here, antiquity acts as a 'repertoire of traditional tales',[88] just as it does elsewhere in popular fiction and much as it did in the *D&D* tabletop system. These representations are, as before, channelled into a quest-based narrative that, when compared with the multiple-choice options granted by *NG*, remains largely inflexible. Generally, players consult quest-givers in the gameworld who provide 'a short narrative, some fixed objectives, and a resolution'. Objectives continue to include movement into certain areas, killing entities and collecting items, and here never allow for player-led choice-making. Each quest acts as a 'capsule narrative' that contributes to the overall story.[89] Like *NG*, players accrue experience points to develop their characters. However, the game is not open-planned, and neither can the player make lasting impacts upon her character's personality. Gameplay here is almost exclusively combat-centric. Players consume familiar signifiers and engage with cycles of quests as they move from "A-to-B" across the gameworld. For this reason, GameSpot described its gameplay as 'very single minded', while others described the experience as 'repetitious' and 'derivative'.[90] As a potential exercise in virtual colonial spaces, *TQ* therefore offers fewer opportunities than *NG* to construct a character and personality reflective of the themes potentially contained within.

[86] Aihoshi 2005.
[87] Walker 2011.
[88] As von Hendy 2002: 265 characterises myth more generally.
[89] Taken from Walker 2010: 307-8, describing the near-identical quest system in *World of Warcraft* (2005).
[90] Davis 2006; Rossignol 2006.

**3.9**: A Telkine.

*From "our" West to "Other" East*

Both the representations of in-game agents and the game narrative are ultimately fantastical, thereby positioning all agents and constituents within the gameworld as something Other to the player and her own reality. After defeating the first Telkine in Greece the player meets a member of the Order of Prometheus, a group dedicated to stopping the Telkines and keeping the Titans imprisoned. Kyros, one such member, tells the player that she must travel to Egypt and speak to Imhotep, another 'sage of the Order of Prometheus'.[91] The journey there is automatic, one of the only instances in which player control is completely relinquished. The Order continues to play a central role, as do the Telkines, and the Greek character of the player. This stretching-out of "Greekness" into Egypt, implanting the player and her epic quest into non-Greek lands, assists in maintaining a kind of Greek interest tacitly dragged into the east. While the narrative remains strictly

[91] Perhaps not coincidentally, Imhotep is the name of the villainous priest in *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999).

"Greek" in this way, the representations of east and west are markedly different from one another. Visually, Greece is either a bright and colourful rural environment or a wide-open urban space constructed from white marble, with lavish, visually impressive interiors. Before traveling to Egypt, the player encounters an oracle in Greece:

**3.10:** *TQ*'s oracle.

The oracle sits within a dark and mysterious setting, enveloped visually by red drapes and gold ornaments, and encircled by magical essence as she speaks in cryptic verse (Image 3.10). Such representations are concomitant with the popular conception of the oracle at Delphi as a mysterious figure standing amongst vapours and symbolic items as she interprets the words of her god.[92] The meeting within this impressive scene is narratively important, and while other such essential encounters happen throughout such visual grandeur is witnessed mostly in the Greek section of the game before the player moves east. While here Greece is Othered to a degree, particularly in sequences such as this wherein the riddle-speaking oracle is an enigmatic and visually weird

[92] Burkert 1985: 116.

character, player identification with "Greekness" always designates the non-Greek as *more* Other. It is from this perspective, of belonging to Greece, that the player encounters a far more alien Egypt.

In *TQ*, Egypt is very much in the tradition of an "Egypt" of the popular imagination.[93] Just as *TQ*'s Greece is typified by shining white marble architectures and the woods and caves of the countryside, Egypt is characterised by similarly familiar, but often less grand, sights: desert sands, uniformly beige pyramids, and villages replete with mud-huts. This standardisation of Egypt is indicative of what Huckvale sees as an 'Egyptian *mood'* in popular receptions, an "Egyptianness" that adds 'resonance' to the product being consumed.[94] Egypt to the player here is primarily a series of tombs to be robbed, a procession of inhuman creatures to be killed. The 'mindless automata' that is the stereotypical mummy,[95] for example, becomes an enemy to be hacked and slashed. Because the narrative is effectively a Greek story of heroism, gods, monsters and Titans, this representational strategy implicitly creates a sharp delineation between "Greek us" and "eastern other". Orientalism, foregrounded above as a mode of representing Others, functions in *TQ* through the use of stereotypical audio-visual, narrative and thematic conventions to characterise its Egypt. Bernstein connects Orientalism, 'a strand of colonial discourse in the ideological arsenal of Western nations… a way of perceiving these [eastern] areas that has been supported, justified, and reinforced by the West's colonialist and imperialist ventures', with rigid and often offensive representations of the eastern Orient in film.[96] Within the potentially Orientalizing parameters the game appears to uphold, made possible through its methods of presenting Egypt and by reinforcing the player's identification with Greece, an uncomfortable symbolic meaning underpins the actions of the player as game and narrative unfold.

The "A-to-B" movement through the gamespace, as opposed to *NG*'s open-plan gameworld, along with the cyclical nature of the quest system, further fits the play experience within the dynamics of Said's analysis of eastern experience from western perspectives. The Orient, as Said characterizes it, is 'a semi-mythical construct which… has been made and re-made countless times by power acting through an expedient form of knowledge'. He furthermore designates the knowledge used to construct the Orient as not 'real', but 'a kind of second-order knowledge'. With that comes 'a kind of free-floating mythology of the Orient'.[97] While a certain kind of generic antiquity is used to construct both Greece and Egypt, the latter is presented to the player not as a homeland under threat, but as a different, alien place that needs the player's help. As all

[93] Schadla-Hall and Morris 2009: 195.
[94] Huckvale 2012: 143, his emphasis, and 148.
[95] Huckvale 2012: 185.
[96] Bernstein 1997: 2-3.
[97] Said 2003: xxiii, xvi.

videogames, *TQ* requires the player to recognise onscreen events and implement secondary 'knowledges' to then participate in the hero's quest. As a result, the cognitive operations of gameplay may tacitly require utilisation of Said's 'second-order knowledge' as the player sees and makes sense of the virtual Egypt. This sharp delineation between Greece and Egypt is amplified since the further from Greece the player moves, the more she depends on portals, gateways which are used to move forward, or back-and-forth between previously visited areas. The use of portals in wider fantasy fiction has an additional impact on the player/reader's interpretation of the in-fiction east. 'In both portal and quest fantasies,' Mendlesohn says, 'a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place… The portal fantasy is about entry, transition, and exploration.'[98] As the player moves from left to right, west to east, and those spaces are further intersected with portals, the game inadvertently sets up a 'boundary notion', 'testify[ing] to a willed imaginative and geographic division made between East and West'.[99] This instantaneous access across space is complemented by the player's consistent movement through Egypt for the purposes of "saving the world", setting up non-Greek gamespaces as 'weaker' and inviting player 'interest, penetration, insemination – in short, colonization'.[100] This is different from the explicit invasion/colonisation narrative central to the story and player activity of *NG*, but nevertheless strongly connotes a sense of "superior" west (through the heroic player-led Greek) against a strange, but necessarily conquerable, east. So, as the representations become simpler and less impressive, the player becomes increasingly more able to "solve" the regions she travels through, ridding them of the hostile monsters overrunning the lands through the innate power of her protagonist and her singular ability to flit around the various gamespaces.

[98] Mendlesohn 2008: 23.
[99] Said 2003: 201. This is despite popular understanding that the Greeks were 'culturally elastic', Hall 2015.
[100] Said 2003: 210.

**3.11:** Meeting Egyptian peasants.

Such potentially Orientalising undertones implicit in the *TQ* experience alter the meaning of in-game encounters, particularly those outside Greece. For example, outside Memphis the player can turn off the path into the Beggars Quarter. Here is the downtrodden of Egypt, the self-described 'poor whom all disdain' (Image 3.11). Their 'mud huts' (their own words) are overrun by monsters, and none of the Egyptian guards appear to care. This quest is optional, and has no bearing on the main storyline, and doing so grants, as always, experience points and an item. The characterisation of the Egyptian here relies on the presumptive conception of the underclass of Egypt as a near-starving 'labouring workforce',[101] manipulating player expectations of a sharply divided socio-political system typical of onscreen representations of Egypt (and particularly those of Biblical Egypt). Memphis itself, while not as beautifully outfitted as Greece, is greater in size and visual impressiveness than its neighbouring Beggars Quarter. The singular Greek must now decide whether

[101] The 'historical' Egyptian peasant, David 2007: 75.

to act as heroic saviour by solving the crises of the peasants. Just as Nippel demonstrates how colonial Europeans sought to justify their imposition upon other lands as an act of benevolence, the juxtaposition between the beggar and the Greek hero, rewarded as always by her actions, places the virtual Egyptian peasant, the 'peaceful savage… under the protection of a master', the player-controlled Greek, who exercises 'dominion' and 'paternalistic assistance'.[102] The Egyptian therefore exists to have things done to, or for, them, by a hegemonic entity. This furthermore designates the Egyptian NPCs as subalterns in the traditional sense, agents of this land who are temporarily subject to a colonial power only ever possessed by the colonizer.[103] Quite literally, in this case, as the static peasants and their uncaring guards are represented as unable or unwilling to defend themselves. That the guards do not act to help their citizens also implies their own status as 'degenerate types', in the same way colonial discourse described its subjects 'to justify conquest'.[104] While *TQ* does not, as *NG* did, deliberately face players with the theme of outright 'conquest', the player is nevertheless obliged to move through and overcome monster-infested foreign lands for the benefit of their intrinsically weaker populations, thereby constituting a more tacit, subtle, and potentially more menacing 'imposition of peace', as Virgil had it. This "saviour" reading is compounded by the beggars' words when the quest is complete: he refers to himself as 'the lowest of the low whom the priests will not even acknowledge', showering the Greek with praise. This pattern is replicated in similar ways throughout, allowing the player to justify her movement through the east as she exercises her power through assistance, gains material rewards and so continues to function as Greek/western "saviour".

*TQ* therefore evokes notions of western superiority through moments of play like the example above, instances which are themselves located within a visually typical virtual ancient world. First, the ancient world outside Greece is removed of all its complexities, a common technique used in historical western imperialist narratives.[105] The Orientalising procedures outside Greece are subsequently complemented by 'a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes'.[106] The rendering of the virtual east especially, made so to be interpretable to and digestible by the player, contains added meaning within the wider contexts of the game. Said defines colonial encounter as an enterprise of violence and exploitation: not just the explicit violence of invasion, societal subjugation and resource-stealing, but the 'epistemic violence enacted by

[102] Nippel 2002: 300-1.
[103] Implicit in Said's work, this suggestion is criticized by Bhabha 1999: 274 and Rao 2015: 274.
[104] Bhabha 1999: 371.
[105] Said 2003: 196-7, wherein the complex European homeland is juxtaposed against the simple foreign space.
[106] Bhabha 1999: 376.

particular forms of knowledge tethered to imperial power'.[107] The player of *TQ* operating in Egypt not only achieves, subtly, the status of 'invader' by solving lands and taking materials as a reward, she does so by way of the standard process of gameplay wherein previous semi-conscious or embedded knowledges assist in player activity. When the player engages with the challenges and quests that populate this gameworld, these usual gameplay procedures become a different, 'particular form of knowledge', to paraphrase Said above, that ties in with the tacit resonances of imperialist movement and consumption, not always with invitation, that characterises much of the game experience. Without facing up directly to the issues of representation when it comes to imperial eras and places, as *NG* arguably does, the game unthinkingly presents signifiers, embedded in play processes, that are 'connotative' of the 'dominant cultural order'.[108] This resonates with traditional approaches to antiquity by nineteenth and twentieth century colonialist ideologues who used classical sources to form 'a stratified site of knowledge and power'.[109] Here, it is the player who interprets classical materials and utilises pseudo-knowledges to assert their dominance. The usually-useful semi-familiarity of antiquity essential to gameplay, when supplanted into a less exploratory and less socially-driven play process, exaggerates a colonial subtext co-operated with by the player, potentially without her knowing. At once plundering and assisting, and so simultaneously engaging in 'imperialistic colonialism and well-meaning development aid', the player operates within outdated European ideologies by using, as past colonialists did, ancient materials. She therefore acts out, as she plays, 'the objectively and culture-dependent justified supremacy of its values, its historical evolution and its cultural features'.[110] As a result, the implication that "west is best" is subtly reinforced through play.

*How the West won*

As the player is drawn further east, the game continues to reinforce the embedded values uncovered so far. After "completing" Egypt, the player moves into the third and final zone of the gameworld, called simply 'The Orient'. A fast flurry of sequences through ancient Babylon, into Central Asia and then China, the Orient gamespace becomes stranger, more Orientalized and less tangible as it is all packed into one-third of the game experience. In Greece, players had significantly more face time with Cyclopes, satyrs and maenads. These specific entities from Greek mythology were then traded-in for generic Egyptian scorpions, beetles and mummies. The newest cohort of

[107] Rao 2015: 272.
[108] Hall 1972: 12-13 describes ideologies of the 'dominant cultural order' becoming attached to signs and is then relayed through those signs.
[109] Aicherou 2008: 5.
[110] Both quotes from Heit 2006: 728.

enemies in the Orient is even vaguer and not necessarily applicable to any specific culture. The 'Tropical Spider', for example, is not Babylonian despite its position in the 'Gardens of Babylon', but just exotic enough to connote a dangerous and unknown adversary (Image 3.12). Heading down the Silk Road, a pan-Asian influence permeates the gameworld as players encounter aggressive, anthropomorphised tiger-men called 'Saberlions'. One nondescript enemy is simply called 'Neanderthal', which if nothing else implies that the player is truly in an undiscovered country, one far away from 'the privileged center',[111] a place where inhabitants become less and less human.[112] It is therefore represented in colonialist fashion as, to use Bhabha's words, a 'unified racial, geographical, political and cultural zone of the world'.[113] This is achieved not just by naming these lands 'The Orient', but also by lumping several regions into one zone and populating them with several indistinct enemy units.

**3.12** Tropical spiders.

[111] Said 2003: 117.
[112] This is furthermore typical of classical ethnographic writing, such as in Herodotus, where the further from Greece the author takes us, the stranger and less recognisably human the people become. For example, see the Hyperboreans at Hdt. 4.32-36. Also, Johnston 2015: 291-2 on Hyperborea as 'fantasy land'.
[113] Bhabha 1999: 371.

The representation of Chinese mythology towards the end of the 'Orient' stages may indicate a more considered approach to visualising distinct cultures, although it is unclear how recognisable these signifiers would be to a primarily western playership. The player encounters the 'Spirit of the Great Emperor', possibly implemented here to resonate with ancient Chinese beliefs in ancestral spirits with 'specific existence[s]… [and] distinct personalities'.[114] Furthermore, the spirits of the mountains and forests typical of Chinese folklore make contextual sense when they appear in the virtual Chinese hinterlands. The disparate and untidy nature of most of the Chinese enemy entities might well reflect Chinese mythology itself, which is defined as 'extremely disparate and contradictory' by Chinese scholar Zhou Zuoren.[115] Contemporary western scholarship similarly considers Chinese mythology to be 'superficial' due to its uncategorised nature.[116] Within the wider game experience, *TQ*'s China feels even less codified than Egypt and certainly Greece, being contained within a dizzying muddle of other, non-Chinese, signifying materials. Overall, then, virtual China further assists in systematizing 'The Orient' into a largely indistinct unity. The ever-able Greek hero continues to "solve" the East through her A-to-B movement and continues to '"clean"' the land through consumption of the gameworld.[117] Sometimes there are moments of cultural specificity: in Greece, the 'Artemis' Bowstring' item is a relic that boosts the damage capabilities of bows and arrows, while in Egypt the Udjat of Horus endows greater protection from attacks. These items are, functionally speaking, Hellenized when applied to a virtual Greek body, their only purpose being to assist the player in her journey. Nevertheless, the majority of the play experience designates an Orient of 'half-imagined, half-known: monsters, devils, heroes; terrors', 'previously conceived expectations' brought to life, a 'space or stage' on which these representations are presented.[118] When combined with cyclical combative procedures and linear movements, player activities within the Orient gamespace further uphold a sense of pseudo-colonialism.

The final stage of the game concretizes the theme of western rectification and solution of the east that has so far emerged. Mount Olympus, the last region in the game, is accessed (inexplicably) beneath China. Prior to descending underground to gain access to this final zone, the player meets the Yellow Emperor, a kind of oracular entity,[119] who knows of the Telkines and their plot and directs the player to where Typhon has been imprisoned. This effectively blankets the east with western concerns by suggesting this epic tale is inherently Greek in nature, a fight between the

[114] von Glahn 2004: 30.
[115] Zhang 2015: 107.
[116] von Glahn 2004: 265.
[117] The Orient is 'incapable of defining itself', Said 2003: 300-1, and so must be characterised by the all-knowing west; Rudyard Kipling quote in Said 2003: 226.
[118] Said 2003: 102, 63, 65.
[119] And legendary figure in Chinese religion.

Greek and his Titan nemesis, and further implies that only the Greek can save the world since the Emperor all but admits that only the player can overcome the villain. For, unlike the Roman failure in *NG*, the hero does invariably liberate the world from the Telkines and the Titan. Consequently, as one of the last characters encountered by the player, this final exchange also drives home the implication that the eastern peoples of this world are, to borrow Chakrabarty's words, '*not yet* civilized enough to rule themselves',[120] or to look after themselves independently. The player then abruptly moves from indistinct China into the most Greek of all places, a marble-columned and richly decorated Olympian landscape (Image 3.13). The Telkines' plan has reached fruition, and the Titan Typhon wreaks havoc upon the world. Battling her way through a partially demolished and overrun Olympus, the player must defeat this "final boss" and finish the game. The hero thus comes full-circle, beginning her journey in Greece and dragging her "Greek cause" through the eastern lands and then back into (mythical) Greece. The player must therefore, from start to finish, engage in the 'misleading' concept of 'a unidirectional flow of "influences"', a postcolonial criticism of traditional colonial narratives proposed by Hardwick.[121] The movement from ill-defined China to shimmering, albeit partially ruined, Olympus is jarring, and suggests that the player's goal has always corresponded with Greek priorities, an implicit acceptance of a kind of manifest destiny made reality by the player through her hero.

[120] Chakrabarty 2000: 8, his emphasis.
[121] Hardwick 2007a: 324-5.

**3.13:** Bright and shiny Olympus.

Upon defeating Typhon, the rumbling voice of Zeus greets the player and reveals her reward: 'You have proven that men are ready to become the masters of their own fates. Your mortal world is not yet safe, but the responsibility now is yours.' Zeus thus leaves the governance of the world in the hands of humankind. In completing the game, the player effectively frees the world from superstition, removing both mythical monsters and the gods themselves from the world of humanity. 'A central aspect of Western identity, as distinct from other cultures, is the claim that the West has a rational worldview, understood as a Greek invention.'[122] The ending thus accentuates Eurocentric attitudes that have so far sustained both the game experience and its narrative. There is a significant difference between the rationalizing here, and the removal of the gods in ancient film described in the previous chapter. There, a creative decision was made to make the *Iliad* story "mortal" for a contemporary viewership (in the 2004 film *Troy*). It is also a different story mechanic to that seen in the ending sequences of *NG*, where the mythical monsters exercised their autonomy

[122] Heit 2006: 732-3.

by actively leaving the war-torn British province. Here, on the other hand, the player must co-operate with the forced extinction of a paganistic belief system, fixing the problem of the gods just as she fixed the problem(s) of the east. In this way, the westerner has overseen a journey 'from myth to reason':[123] the West not only wins, but through its actions rationalises the world. Such a final revelation sits comfortably within the broader themes of the game.

### 3.4 Comparing colonial experiences

Classical reception scholar Lorna Hardwick sees in classical reception texts 'the role of classical referents in challenging and reshaping assumptions about genealogy, suffering, and victim status; the mapping of cultural exchange and the construction of identities; and the deappropriation of colonial classicizing'.[124] *NG* arguably meets all of these criteria, although with some caveats. Initially, *NG* is seen to incorporate standardised images and behaviours of the Roman imperialist and Celtic victim into a rigid CRPG framework. While this allows for a swift and easy play process, it also requires those referents to be fundamentally uncomplex in both their representation and often even their in-game functions. There is, furthermore, the issue of control, as players must always act upon the world from their top-down perspective. Like all videogames, *NG* is not a text that can speak 'in its own terms':[125] the player must always direct both the coloniser and the subaltern. However, in playing and role-playing the player co-creates new meanings that arise from the game experience. *NG*, an independent game, achieves through the confluence of familiarity and originality a multifaceted play experience. 'Even as digital games have become more and more stereotyped, "indie" RPG designers and hobbyists have been exploring ways of creating games and scenarios that are designed specifically to produce well-defined story experiences.'[126] Its ability to operate as it does is not the result of the types of images used, but in the way they are inputted by the developer to afford greater reflection on player actions.[127] There are, as witnessed, many examples in which the player must consider the potential consequences of her actions. The genre structure to which *NG* largely conforms can guide her into empathizing, arguably more so than any other videogame type.[128] By operating in the CRPG framework, and through roleplaying her character(s), the player of *NG* may now engage in postcolonial practice and 'ask some questions' of herself and her real world 'concerning aspects of the Other and of Otherness, about blind spots, hidden agendas, and the

[123] Heit 2006: 735. He also notes that this is reemployed in 'reconstructions of Antiquity', 2006: 736.
[124] Hardwick 2007a: 313.
[125] Hardwick 2007a: 326 on 'texts' generally.
[126] Costikyan 2010: 11.
[127] Lankoski and Jarvela 2013: 24. Walker 2010: 308 argues originality is far less important for RPGs.
[128] Harviainen 2009: 75.

stranger in ourselves'.[129] This in turn engenders 'a stronger sense of self-awareness',[130] and the possible alteration of perceptions and judgements about the ancient world.[131] The use of mythology, for example, in ways that engender 'idiosyncratic and personal' exploration have been noted.[132] Roleplaying games that are then 'geared toward a specific "purpose"',[133] like *NG* in its use of historical and mythological materials interchangeably, can therefore allow greater reflection on the consequences of colonisation and colonialism, wherein the player works with both invader and invaded, at times disrupting "normal" modes of behaviour, and interacting with a Roman Britain that acts as a mediator for wider themes concerning the roles of both dominant and dominated cultures in colonial, imperial and/or provincial settings.

The CRPG structure usually allows for a free, social exploration of a world and its peoples. *TQ* eschews the CRPG's usual exploratory and socially-oriented mechanisms, described immediately above, and in doing so downplays representation of cross-cultural interaction in favour of combat-heavy game mechanics. The analysis demonstrates that as this play experience goes on, Eurocentric and Orientalizing messages and values underpinning the game may consequently surface through play. This opposes *NG*, where the player reflects upon acts of colonisation. The player there may not only encounter and interact with meaningful in-game constituents but can, through this, challenge deeply embedded assumptions about, for example, the superiority of the invading Romans. This in turn allows greater reflection on the procedures of empire, the human and societal cost of invasion, and the resulting ecological and cultural damage, all of which are compounded in the final sequences of *NG* where Britain is finally demystified. The very same "rationalizing" at the end of *NG* supports a reading that imperialism and consequent aggression is always a harmful act, placing varying degrees of blame on both parties. The rationalizing of the world at the end of *TQ* lacks context, allowing that final sequence to slide into wider colonial resonances witnessed elsewhere throughout the game. *NG* also, crucially, achieves a reflective look at the themes of empire by requiring the player to play as the Celts, and for both Celtic and Roman parties to engage with fully-characterised mythical societies to different ends. *TQ*, on the other hand, removes this roleplaying element to focus on testing player reflex and ability to contend aggressively with mythological monsters. Even as they use similar storytelling techniques, representational strategies and colonial-

[129] Decreus 2007: 263.
[130] Bowman 2010: 180.
[131] Hardwick 2003: 10.
[132] Howard 2008: 150. He even hints at a conceptual universe of games 'that exist[s] alongside the work of fiction', evoking the 'storyworld' construct referred to in Chapter 1.
[133] Bowman 2010: 81.

tinged plot devices, both games deliver different perspectives on colonial spaces, and operations and movements within and through those spaces.

While the subaltern is represented in *TQ*, as demonstrated in the example of the Egyptian peasant, there exists no capacity for the player to explore what their position in the gameworld might be. Nonplayable agents throughout *TQ* take one of two distinct roles: automatically combative enemy, or static entity. Effectively all humans represented are the latter, with agency extended only to designated quest-givers. All speak "your" language, making it easier for them to sue for help from the player. Compare this with *NG*, where other cultures are consciously constructed with personalities, needs, tendencies, behaviours and motivations. *TQ* constrains the role of the subaltern in favour of a single, all-powerful player-hero, the focal point around which the cultures of the gameworld circulate. As Spivak says, 'to ignore the subaltern today is… to continue the imperialist project'.[134] Consequently, *TQ* represents the subaltern, but does not characterise it. It is impossible for the player to understand the character or 'constitution of the Other',[135] since the represented cultures exist primarily as a mediator between the player and her quest-rewards. Rather than deconstructing 'traditional cultural ideas that have been taken as natural or normal' by characterising ancient peoples fully, as *NG* does, the player of *TQ* is instead made to accept and consume a 'marginal' Other as (her) European subject.[136] It is furthermore impossible for the player to resituate Europe (Greekness) from a central position and into a nexus of intercultural connections, thereby combatting the outdated notion of European (Greek) 'exceptionalism'.[137] *TQ* would be a very different game otherwise: instead, it inadvertently designates virtual eastern peoples as largely unresponsive passive agents which in turn bolsters the singular agency and heroism of the central Greek figure.

The ability to reflect and critique through these virtual ancient worlds is especially important when the lived experience of roleplaying is central to the gameplay process. Radosinska suggests RPGs are appealing because players can operate imaginatively within different cultures, facing fictional people unlike themselves to eliminate 'cultural prejudices'.[138] In *NG* the player can explore and interact with other cultures from two differing perspectives, deciding when to ignore or engage,

[134] Spivak 1988: 298.
[135] Also, Spivak 1988: 294, her emphasis. She warns also that we must 'watch out for' *how* we construct the subaltern.
[136] Decreus 2007: 249 notes how classics in postcolonial contexts can do just this; Spivak 1988: 298 notes how the Other is marginalised, and that this is the central problem of colonialist modes of thought. See also Seth 2009: 336 on how postcolonial approaches are supposed not just to identify, but to see how and why, a claim or representation is made.
[137] More postcolonial priorities identified in Seth 2009: 334-5.
[138] Radosinska 2016: 163.

complete the mission or subvert the will of her quest-giver, even "act colonial" or not, depending on game constraints. Players can operate loosely with the Romans, reflect on their position in this world, construct their character and come to understand their, and so the players' own, actions, beliefs and motivations. Players will then do so with the Celts, perhaps hiring a Roman party member from Vanarium, co-operating with magical entities, or ruthlessly stealing from her own people to achieve her desired ends. Playing as Romans, characterised as they are by a superiority complex, lets players assume this character, this behaviour and mindset, only to have it tested. Playing as Celts, and so the "uncivilized" Other, allows the non-Roman (symbolically the non-Western, despite being "British") to become a 'genuinely felt and experienced force'.[139] This in turn upends standard assumptions about the Roman empire as totalising military force, so that even a historical period and place so often defined as straightforwardly imperial can 'remake' and 'transform conceptions'.[140] Such play practices can furthermore have significant personal benefits, challenging Eurocentric assumptions and assisting in the pursuit of a present-day vision of multicultural complexity.[141] *TQ*, on the other hand, presents less opportunities for the player to reflect on their position in the gameworld, having her instead expound 'Western exceptionalism' and 'denigrat[ing] the relevance of context'.[142] This is simply because *TQ* places a premium on combat and heroism, not because of an innate agenda on behalf of developers to construct a Eurocentric experience. Its straightforward style, converse to *NG*, nonetheless tacitly acknowledges 'less attractive aspects of the classical tradition',[143] and inadvertently ties them into the very act of roleplay.

*TQ* is not itself attempting to reflect the ancient Greek belief in their own cultural superiority, nor is it an explicit claim on behalf of the creators that the west, or simply Greece, is "best". The issue here is with antiquity, and especially Greek antiquity, and its inextricability from modern processes of orientalising and the ideologies of imperialism. Classics and classical studies traditionally belonged to the European and broadly western ruling-class, who used classical knowledge to maintain their position at the top of socio-political hierarchies.[144] This appropriation of

[139] Said 2003: 208.
[140] Hardwick 2007b: 11. See also Barnard 2017: 10 on turning the classical tradition upside down and so changing the way antiquity and its uses may be viewed.
[141] Postcolonial approaches challenge Eurocentrism, Seth 2009: 335; Bernstein 1997: 14 sees challenging Orientalism onscreen as a way towards 'multiculturalist pedagogy'; Laycock 2015: 248, 258 sees personal benefits when representation is done correctly in roleplaying games. See also Villarejo 2017: 103 on media and 'intellectual practice' generally.
[142] Said 2003: xx.
[143] Harrison 2002: 2.
[144] This began during the colonial Victorian era, Stray 1996: 79, and continued into the nineteenth century, Schein 2008: 80. On maintaining the class system, see Hall and Stead 2013: 1-2.

classics by the elite carried into colonialist-era ideology: as Hall and Stead state, 'the centrality of the ancient Greeks and Romans to the European curriculum precisely coincides with the era of European imperialism'.[145] This 'ideological construct' was directly fed by elitist intellectual connections with antiquity, and especially philhellenism.[146] An assumed "betterness" of the Greeks, and therefore the contemporary coloniser, led to a Eurocentric mission to spread that "betterness" from inside-out into non-European spaces.[147] This was, no doubt, a made-up, 'reconstructed Greece';[148] this particular version of Greek superiority, developed in the colonial era, is absent from previous Greece-based videogames of this thesis, yet appears to inform *TQ*. Unlike strategy games (of the following chapter) which focus explicitly on themes of imperialism, *TQ* seemingly accidentally carries colonialism-through-antiquity to the fore, forcing players to accept and reinforce such notions through their success as the hero. The only way to win here is to accept that 'the West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor'.[149] This "betterness" is often denied a presence in *NG*, where Celtic players may learn Roman-style training from Bituitus, the Romans of Vanarium live comfortably within a multicultural society, and the Roman player in Vanarium may benefit from picking up a Celtic party member (and vice versa). The issue is neither with virtual colonialist settings, narratives that present multiple cultures, the CRPG structure, or the ancient materials contained within it. 'The "classical" is ideological', Schein states, and so we should avoid when we can the 'construction of a self-serving literary canon' and seek instead to disentangle the classical world from such artifices.[150] This paradigm occurs in *TQ* because the genericity of a broader antiquity (Greek and otherwise) is left to operate without much surrounding context. 'It is when signifiers are left to look after themselves that verbal slippages happen.'[151] Careless appropriation of antiquity into a rigid, unexplorable CRPG world leaves blanks, which allows these values to slip through the cracks of ancient-world representation and into the very process of play. That the developers are themselves western is telling, the team being American-led, though again this by no means implies a sinister agenda. Scholars note that creators of texts may unconsciously reproduce hegemonic values which stubbornly embed themselves in the text itself.[152] If the teacher of classics, as Bolgar states, 'has

[145] Hall and Stead 2013: 10; cf Goff 2005: 6, 11.
[146] Quote from Schein 2008: 81; Philhellenism, Greek philosophies and cultural achievements in Heit 2006: 725, 732. See also Held 1997: 255.
[147] On Rome and America, see Barnard 2017: 2-3, 11; for White Man's Burden concept, see Heit 2006: 734. For contemporary analysis of the connection between Eurocentrism and classics, see Karnam 2016.
[148] As Aicherou 2008: 17 designates the make-believe Greece of nineteenth century Hellenists.
[149] Said 2003: 109.
[150] Schein 2008: 75, also noted in Barnard 2017: 2. For de-historicizing and so transforming classics, see Schein 2008: 84.
[151] Spivak 1988: 275.
[152] Hall 1972: 19 on reproducing 'hegemony' through media. Garcia 2017: 235 highlights the importance of understanding 'who authors these games and with what blind spots' they operate.

some concern which occupies his mind, his memory will feed that preoccupation and neglect what is irrelevant to it', and this 'concern' can then infiltrate the classical materials he conveys.[153] This is not to say that classics is intrinsically elitist: it is rather that classical materials need to be appropriated wisely and appropriately,[154] that space needs to be made to revaluate what antiquity is 'and what determines its value',[155] so that accumulative receptions attached to antiquity in videogames that designate it to be something "western", "ordering", rational, and "better" do not facilitate pseudo-colonialist play.

### 3.5 Conclusions

In the CRPG mode, antiquity can serve as a vehicle for the exploration of both fantasy worlds and themes of society and culture relative to the "real world". Both games illustrate in different ways how colonialism as a theme can be located in the gameworld, its narrative and play processes, via reconfigured ancient materials. Postcolonial critique is possible in the roleplaying mode, as evidenced by *NG* where voices and agency are given even to the nonplayable characters of the gameworld: they can and will react to the player depending on who the player is and how they direct them to act. Furthermore, playing as the "invaded" allows confrontation of issues of colonial occupation and disruption of the environment, since operating as Celts involves making decisions, choosing directions, and inputting considered evaluative responses. Its unique play practice also embraces the notion that European perspectives are only part of the bigger picture.[156] The linearity of *TQ* and its scant use of genre affordances emphasises its less complex representation of cultures and available play options, requiring instead a more cyclical, rigidized play process. The "ancientness" fitted into the CRPG framework brings its associative connotations – which are always to some extent activated during play, as discussed in Chapter 1 – which then merges with the A-to-B nature of play and so permits exaggeration of outdated values, many of which are traditionally connected to antiquity. This allows colonialist values to surface untouched. There are still issues that make *NG* an imperfect example of postcolonial critique: it is not made by 'subjected groups' like other successful postcolonial classical texts.[157] Nevertheless, *NG* explicitly allows negotiation of modern concerns and postcolonial sensibilities through ancient cultures by way of the intrinsically exploratory framework of the CRPG.

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[153] Bolgar 1974: 5. Although it must be reiterated, *TQ* is not interested in 'teaching', see also Guillory 1995: 38-40 on schools and the 'ambiguity' of cultural knowledge.
[154] Hall and Stead, especially at 2013: 13, provide an interesting perspective on this.
[155] Hanink 2017: 277.
[156] Seth 2009: 336.
[157] Goff 2005: 11-12.

These games demonstrate the usefulness of antiquity in confronting and sometimes destabilising stubborn colonial values. If reconfigured and relayed imaginatively, classics can be informative in a postcolonial society such as ours, one that seeks to readdress colonial narratives and the ideologies underpinning them. When implicated within an open-world colonial space like the gameworld and game system of *NG*, the player gains a better understanding of the mechanics of empire through relatively free, and personal, play. When communicated via the *TQ* framework, it can impede 'flexible and innovative thinking'.[158] The subverted use of classics in texts and media can be 'revolutionary', instrumental in readdressing power structures (ancient and modern).[159] *NG* presents exploratory practice through an open-world mechanism to give life to cultures underrepresented in ancient texts and misrepresented in contemporary fiction. The player can overturn what antiquity "has always been" and associate it with something new, operating as culturally complex Celts or manoeuvring Romans into un-Roman behaviours. Doing so allows challenging and even undermining of the historical colonial mission. CRPGs are uniquely equipped to responsibly and effectively channel postcolonial engagements via rich, open ancient worlds. While postcolonial engagements are often conducive to historical practice,[160] these case studies demonstrate the complex confluence of ancient materials with genre components, popular-cultural conventions, and fantasy motifs, resulting in the potential removal and re-examination of inherited values and ideologies attached to antiquity. These analyses are therefore not exercises in history, but in analysing the text.[161] Antiquity in this framework allows for continued recognition, application and reconfiguration of "things antiquity", drawn from a collective storyworld, which are remodelled to offer a greater level of exploration, of self and other, of modern and ancient, defining and redefining the ancient world and even offering an enduring advantage to the player. If postcolonial criticism of Eurocentrism is becoming mainstream,[162] then eventually, through play like this, the transmedial free movement of such themes and motifs will allow more progressive and arguably more appropriate play with CRPG ancient worlds in future.[163]

[158] Hall and Stead 2013: 2-3.
[159] Barnard 2017: 4.
[160] E.g. Chakrabarty's 2000 publication critiques historicism from a postcolonial perspective throughout.
[161] Goff 2005: 4, when figuring out what postcolonialism can do, makes explicit the difference between using it to do history, and using it to look at texts.
[162] Seth 2009: 334.
[163] As Perez Miranda and Acosta del Rio 2016: 227, 235 imply of the future trajectories of CRPGs.

# 4. Strategy Games and the "Roman language"

Using strategy games based primarily in ancient Rome and its empire, wherein players are principally required to construct empires, harvest resources, manage populations and overcome barbarians, this chapter investigates how assumptions about the Romans and their imperial and military activities correspond with an especially rigid genre apparatus. The popular conception of "the Romans" as organisational and managerial in nature, coupled with a belief in the inevitability, efficiency, and superiority of their empire, here become key components of the gameplay experience of Roman strategy games. This chapter first demonstrates how two Roman strategy games, *Caesar III* (Impressions Games, 1998) and *CivCity: Rome* (Firefly Studios & Firaxis Games, 2006), have contributed to the creation of a generic Roman model or visual "language", a form of play process specific to this type of videogame in which the rules of the genre framework conflate with standardised beliefs about the Roman empire, and further correlate with modern capitalistic paradigms. A later release, *Imperium Romanum* (Haemimont Games, 2008), is then investigated as a more fully-developed and chronologically later version of this model wherein players enact systematic changes upon homogenised landscapes and peoples by engaging directly with this standardised vision of Rome and its provinces. The amorphous idea of "Rome" prompts players to create, manage and maintain in specific ways, often via processes reminiscent of contemporary economic patterns of production and consumption. The resulting "language" is even seen to inform games representing pre-Roman networks of hegemonic influence wherein players continue to be required to "speak" to the game within parameters set by those earlier Roman strategies. Whereas the last two chapters identified genre apparatuses with relatively fluid boundaries, this chapter explores the relationship between fixed genre affordances and potentially fixed modes of ancient-world representation, and their effects on the game experience. A question of inevitability is therefore raised: can fitting antiquity into an especially mechanical and necessarily processual apparatus allow for significant representational differences between games within this genre? To explore this question, a brief analysis of *Age of Gladiators* (Creative Storm Entertainment, 2016) looks at how the spectacle of the arena established in Chapter 2 is co-opted and transformed to provide a potentially radical new take on the strategy framework. Ending the chapter, *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios, 2014) is investigated for its potential to adapt to and even alter the basic framework of the strategy game, engendering exciting new instances of classical reception as it pursues a "multicultural" worldview atypical of the genre. Upon setting the terrain for an especially rigid form of representation and play, this chapter is able to test the boundaries of this apparently inflexible genre structure as it accommodates an array of ancient materials.

## 4.1 The strategy game framework

The player of the strategy game is positioned above the game map to allow constant surveillance and to grant control over the gameworld from what Rollinger terms a 'göttlicher Perspecktive'.[1] Playing from this vantage point necessarily engenders a disembodied experience, removing the player from the gameworld and so disassociating her from that world and its constituents as she exerts total authority and influence over it. Players primarily engage with buildings, people, and armies, which are placed, directed and maintained by the player in order to gather resources like building materials, to create structures and items for in-game actors, and to construct warring armies to battle player enemies. Acquisition and domination of the gamespace in this manner means that many strategy games consciously adopt the theme of 'empire'.[2] This chapter will not re-tread ground from the previous chapter, though postcolonial perspectives do nevertheless appear throughout: it is acknowledged here that Rome, like Greece, has an especial place in European colonial ideology.[3] It is possible then that, like the CRPG, this historical tradition may affect the ways in which antiquity is represented in this particular genre. Most strategy games present their imperial processes as a series of playable episodes or scenarios, not unlike the cyclical quest system of *TQ*, and each scenario is completed when the player achieves a win condition. This win condition usually demands either military dominance or economic success, whether at the expense of a rival society or civilisation (in the former) or simply for the benefit of the society controlled by the player (in the latter instance). Such monumental levels of control over every aspect of the gameworld requires screens of numbers, statistics, and percentages by which to understand, govern, and micromanage in-game constituents. Through these affordances players are most often placed 'in the role of governors tasked with building and defending progressively more complex settlements'. The result of this, Wainwright then suggests, is that cultural representations in the games usually 'boil down to mathematical calculations'.[4] The overall experience, by and large, contrasts a high level of player control with less attention to individual representation of the constituents within the world, leading to low levels of characterisation and in-game personality. A procedural, highly mechanical approach to the ancient world therefore departs from the intrinsically fluid representational tradition of

[1] Rollinger 2015: 19. Symonds 2008: 187 suggests this 'god mode' plays into the proposed saviour complex of the player.
[2] De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2009: xix. See Kokonis 2012: 155 on how historical materials streamline the theme of empire in strategy games.
[3] E.g. Romans were seen by British colonialists as 'valiant imperial conquerors', eventually leading to direct emulation of them, Mantena 2010: 64, 57.
[4] Wainwright 2014: 584-5.

onscreen antiquity, including the games of the previous chapters, thereby formalising the ancient world in a very specific and stratified way and forcing the player to operate within those strictures.

The Roman strategy games analysed here are indebted to a huge corpus of previous strategy titles, itself a genre which incorporates a wide range of different subtypes. Strategy games have their roots in influential releases like *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997), which moves out from classical antiquity into other historical periods, *SimCity* (1989), wherein the player builds a fully functioning simulated society, and even the popular *Football Manager* (Sports Interactive, 2005), which condenses the sport into a series of screens filled with numbers and statistics. The strategy game may therefore operate in different ways, though it is largely bound by an adherence to slow-moving play experiences that prioritise tactical approaches in lieu of action-packed sequences. *Civilization* (MPS Labs, 1991) has perhaps received most scholarly attention and is described by Chapman as a '*ludonarrative*' in which the player 'creates' history through gameplay.[5] Players build a "civilisation" from beginning to end, controlling every aspect of maintenance within the society they create to achieve military, economic and/or scientific success through 6,000 virtual years of development. Some claim this allows players to rewrite history,[6] while others consider it a 'complex' game that gives players insight into the development of past cultures more broadly.[7] But the mathematicising of cultures, this 'boiling down' of represented communities referred to above, and the bracketing of them into specific operations and values, has drawn criticism. *Civilization* and the genre it helped define have been criticised for being western-centric and even racist,[8] masculinised,[9] misrepresentative of non-playable (non-western) cultures and thus colonialist,[10] and are accused of implying that non-playable cultures (also often non-western) are naturally unable to achieve the level of 'civilization' that the player strives for.[11] *Civilization* and games like it tend to promote linear conceptions of 'world history', a general Eurocentric history the average player 'already knows'.[12] Ultimately, in *Civ* and the games it influenced the fluid contexts around historical peoples and events are removed.[13] This invariably produces a historical non-truth, a common knowledge largely unrelated to historical analysis, meaning *Civilization* and its strategy counterparts co-operate with

[5] Chapman 2016: 129, his emphasis.
[6] Fogu 2009: 116.
[7] Nicholas 2005: 3. For general criticism of this see Black et al 2014: 293.
[8] Carr 2007: 222; Fogu 2009: 117-8.
[9] Schut 2007: 214.
[10] Dillon 2008: 132-3, 140-1.
[11] Bembeneck 2015: 81.
[12] Voorhees 2009: 255.
[13] Which, for historians, is not considered 'fuller scrutiny' and so is an inefficient method for conceptualizing the past, Gruen 2011: 293. See also Ford 2016 on distillation of history 'to [generate] strategic decisions'.

'History', '"the opposite of history"'.[14] Like "Romanness", or "popular antiquity", 'History' is the shadow cast by representations over time, the grey areas that surround conceptions of the past, rather than the simulation of historical processes sought after by formal historians. Not only does the game imply that civilization is achievable by a set of actionable in-game commands, but those assumptions are then built into the very mechanics used to play the game.[15] Those assumptions are, in the *Civilization* series and most strategy games, based upon modern concepts and especially contemporary economic notions to allow players easy access into gameplay. Koabel states that the latest *Civilization* determines population growth 'by a constant algorithm of production and consumption of food', defining player success by capitalistic paradigms.[16] In this way, the player must accept the definition of civilization provided by the game, and then actively co-operate with it and thus reinforce it.[17] Many of these imperial and neoliberal-economical mechanisms continue to be replicated in a wide variety of Roman-themed strategy texts. Where roleplaying frameworks allowed for direct confrontation of imperialist projects, or the indirect carrying of colonial values, strategic Rome functions explicitly as a continual set of colonising actions based on accumulated assumptions made about Rome and its empire. Consequently, by constraining a distilled, standardised "Romanness" into the framework and then prioritising economic success by conflating this idea of "Rome" with contemporary neoliberal practices, the player is most often required to construct a capitalistic, orderly and organised "Rome".

*Rome: Total War* (2004) (*R:TW*), the most well-known ancient strategy title, has attracted much attention from classicists and historians studying videogames. The player here is afforded the characteristic 'godlike' perspective over a series of board-game style maps,[18] and similarly authoritarian control over units of soldiers, fortresses, and cities. The *Total War* series operates with concepts like diplomacy only 'at a very basic level' when compared to other strategy games,[19] instead exaggerating the player's capacity to dominate her opponents militarily. The player, beginning the scenario, is already aware of the outcome necessary to succeed,[20] since she is afforded such a wide-ranging view of the gameworld. This dynamic imparts the impression that the historical Roman imperial project was itself preconceived. This 'grand strategy' mode of play

[14] Galloway 2006: 102 in Mukherjee 2017: 47.
[15] King 2007: 6; Mukherjee 2017: 30.
[16] Koabel 2017: 65 on *Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010). Population contentedness depends on 'how much you spend on them, and your success depends on your ability to create commerce… and balance income and expenses', Hatlen 2012: 193-4. See *Imperium Romanum* below.
[17] In European empire-builders, Mukherjee 2017: 31, his emphasis, terms this '*perpetuat[ing]* the logic of colonialism instead of challenging it'.
[18] Nicholas 2005: 8; Ghita and Andrikopoulos 2009: 109.
[19] Rhett 2017: 6.
[20] 'the conditions for victory have already been determined', Nicholas 2005: 4.

mimicked by Roman strategy games and their players is most indicative of the scholarly theory perpetuated by the historian Luttwak (1979), a notion much criticized as an oversimplification by the twenty-first century and proven to be unstable.[21] Nevertheless, players of *R:TW* must know not just what they can do, but each possible outcome of those manoeuvres in order to plan ahead.[22] The player is therefore operating in a 'clinically clean image' of empire, Romans, and their enemies,[23] the player's cities, outposts and "Romes" all being constructed within very particular paradigms and towards a specifically 'grand' and pre-planned outcome. She creates and sends out uniformly organised Romans in boxed formations to achieve dominance and superiority over similarly anonymised barbarians: this behaviour constitutes much of the game's, and so the player's, possible actions. In this way it splits from *Civilization*'s emphasis on cities and its people and focuses primarily on rehearsals of Roman military battles, reflecting popular conceptions of imperial Rome as a war-machine. Kokonis describes this style of play succinctly: 'The game's code sets up the rules and introduces the general historical framework as a kind of grid within which the game will be played', although he then suggests the player can alter meanings through play.[24] Consequently, *R:TW* shares many of the same criticisms as *Civ*: for its preoccupation with empire-building, forceful acquirement of space,[25] and its masculinisation of history.[26] Whereas Mukherjee argues that in strategy games set in imperial Europe postcolonial narratives offer 'fragmented identities and silences' of simulated colonised people,[27] there is no such voice in Roman strategies, where "Romanness" engenders a system and narrative to be engaged with by players at the expense of the represented non-Roman. The 'world of context',[28] therefore, is lost within a continual story of superior Romans enacting a 'grand strategy' and so fulfilling their 'open, beckoning, and inevitable' 'manifest destiny'.[29] This is a well-studied example, which is why this chapter focuses on less, or not at all, looked-at case studies. *R:TW* does, however, introduce the Roman strategy "model" by which these games are made and played. The similar trends in this game and in those analysed below allow the illustration here of a "Roman language", a way of seeing these Roman strategy games as indebted to a particular

[21] Wells 2001: 99; Whittaker 2004: 28, 30, 37. This was perhaps because Luttwak 1979: 1 wished to position 'ourselves' (Europeans/westerners) as the 'Romans'. The desire to subvert and emulate antiquity was typical of early modern English readers of antiquity, Jensen 2012: 6, 8. Also, Munkler 2007: 8.
[22] The 'Big Picture' mode of *Civilization* lets players see future ramifications of actions, Voorhees 2009: 266.
[23] Bembeneck 2015: 85 in reference specifically to 'barbarians'.
[24] Kokonis 2012: 153.
[25] Mukherjee 2015: 300.
[26] One with 'a lack of human factors and coincidence', Hatlen 2012: 198.
[27] Mukherjee 2017: 15-16.
[28] McCall 2016: 524.
[29] A term made famous by American colonisers arguing their 'right' to expand across the North American continent, Mukherjee 2017: 10-11. Quote from Solomon 2012: 25 in context of Roman films.

confluence of assumptions about Rome and the application of those notions into capitalistic paradigms.

Strategy games are by far the most popular game type used by scholars to express historical games' capacity to simulate historical practice, a recent trend that provides us with a useful frame by which to test a Roman strategic "model" or audio-visual "language". The Rome we encounter in the following games is a 'Rome' identified in popular culture,[30] not of the city or empire 'but rather the knowledge of Rome filtered… the idea of Rome'.[31] The Rome presented to us in games such as these is therefore a construction,[32] partly derived from antiquity itself,[33] partly from beliefs surrounding it which idealise the Roman enterprise as an unstoppable military and economic force.[34] Where the games of the two previous chapters primarily relied on interplay with audio-visual, pop-cultural precedents, the Roman strategy game appears to follow a different trajectory to facilitate a particular type of "antiquity". This rendition of the ancient world is, as usual, in some ways borrowed from other audio-visual media, and the "knowledge" needed to play these games continues to be drawn from the well of a collective, imaginative antiquity. However, to interpret the "Rome" presented to her by strategy games the player must connect with a city and empire of exaggerated 'structural conformity', [35] a conscious construct,[36] one of intrinsic rationality.[37] As shown throughout the following two sections, this is more indicative of a traditional set of intellectual beliefs concerning imperial Rome as it is a straightforward demonstration of a transmedial "popular antiquity": that is, the signifying materials used to construct these games and prompt play are based primarily on "ideas" and abstract notions concerning the ancient past. As the brief descriptions of *Civilization* and, most importantly, the later *R:TW* demonstrated, players operate within 'grids' to achieve an optimal organisation of cities and armies and put significant effort into managing land, buildings, populations, and the commodities necessary to create and maintain them, all of which is experienced from a literal top-down perspective. This potentially limits the type of "Rome" being represented and produced and, in turn, engenders a very particular set of play procedures. Such specific modes of representation and player processes constitute a kind of in-game "language", a

[30] Wyke 1997: 3 identifies 'Rome', rather than Rome, in cinematic reconstruction where, not coincidentally, Romans are bad people. Hall 1972: 6 has something similar on the audio-visual appropriation of 'real historical West' into 'the symbolic or mythical "West"'.
[31] Westin and Hedlund 2016: 7, 9.
[32] Tutrone 2015: 1.
[33] Aeilus Aristides propagandized Rome as 'world state', Lintott 1993: 186, 191.
[34] E.g. The belief of early twentieth century classicist Edith Hamilton who considered the Romans 'inferior, bloodthirsty, repressive' expansionists committed to the overthrow of 'freedom'. These ideas captured a wide audience, Hallett 2016: 223-4, 234.
[35] Allison 2013: 50.
[36] Takacs 2008: 150-1.
[37] 'the Roman past is anchored by very rational directives', Alcazar 2010: 305.

certain way of communicating between player and game. To better understand how these Roman strategy games are made and played, this generic model or "language" will be further explored.

## 4.2 Constructing a "Roman language"

This proposed, genre-specific "Roman language" is already in full effect before the twenty-first century, as illustrated here with the 1998 title *Caesar III* (*C3*). Players of *C3* take charge of Roman provinces to fit together houses, farms and production sites upon a map decorated with trees, bodies of water, and quarriable stone and iron deposits. Every map has a main road running through the gameworld by which migrants arrive to live and work as the town develops and grows. This already implies a certain linearity, a conception of the Roman empire connected by a single road which always leads to (or rather, from) Rome.[38] Every building must be situated alongside a road, which in turn must stem from the central one. Furthermore, each house must be within a predefined radius of the farm or workshop so that the inhabitant can take it up as a profession. The aim is to attract migrants by constructing houses in this fashion, along with places for them to work. Eventually the player is required to satisfy the needs of the population by providing food, shelter, work, and cultural institutions. By positioning units upon a network of square roads all connected to a single channel, the player creates a functional, grid-like town of near-identical units (Image 4.1), just as *R:TW* would ten years later with its box-formation armies. Like *Civilization* seven years prior, *C3* also fixes economic processes into largely modernized paradigms of production and consumption, thereby foreshadowing a set of processes characteristic of later Roman strategy games. To succeed, the player must accept this version of "Rome" before procedurally creating and maintaining it.

[38] There must be a "Roman" road 'before any content can be transmitted', Willis 2007: 341.

**4.1:** *Caesar III*.

*CivCity: Rome* (*CCR*), a spin-off from the hugely successful *Civilization* franchise, follows very similar functions to both the other instalments in the series, and to *C3* above. While more aesthetically pleasing than *C3*, *CCR* is nevertheless characterised by an interface crowded with buttons, statistics, and numbers, and visual renderings of settlement units as square, identical, and connected to a road system (Image 4.2). Such representations of Rome and its empire typical of the genre deviate from the historical and into the imaginary. Rome itself was not 'a city of parade routes' or 'straight avenues', but a mix-and-match of winding narrow streets,[39] where even the most central of impressive structures were made from reclaimed materials. Even where Roman structures were designed to create the illusion of rational symmetrical planning, the city was no doubt physically defined by its disorganization.[40] The functions of *C3* and *CCR* run counter to this historical reality. In those games players operate with the version of Rome sold to contemporary tourists, who ascend the Capitoline Hill 'not to *see* Rome so much as to situate their perspective', to 'order' it in

[39] Wallace-Hadrill 2003: 191.
[40] Cornell 2000: 42, 53.

their minds.[41] The popularly-understood "correct" way to perceive Rome feeds into these virtualisations of Rome and its empire and is accepted by a player who procedurally constructs a Rome as well-oiled, impossibly well-planned machine. While more units, such as temples, are added to the catalogue of possible constructions the more a player plays, they too become part of the organised infrastructure of the settlement, put in just the right place between rows of houses and uniform farmlands. Individual units, like those temples, are therefore unindicative of, for example, the complex religious system maintained by the Romans.[42] We therefore play not just with an unhistorical or inaccurate Rome, but a dream of an empire that never was, nor could ever be. In other words, no such picture-perfect, culturally-flattened Rome ever existed, just as no real-world town or city could function within such parameters. *CCR* does have an inbuilt encyclopaedia of facts about Rome, although consulting it is rarely if ever necessary for successful gameplay.[43] Beyond this, the economic systems by which players organise Rome and its colonies are peculiarly contemporary, as the player prioritises the supervision of building placement, land usage and commodity production/consumption over interaction with the characters and personalities of her homogenous population. Rome is further aligned with modern ways of seeing the city and empire by its continued affiliation with a modern "trickle-down" economic apparatus. Denarii are invested by the player into superfluous material goods which are then made available to the people, who automatically begin to consume them as and when necessary. Not only does this de-diversify the multifaceted development of technologies by mischaracterising it as a linear process responding to a supply-and-demand model,[44] it also determines quality of life to be intrinsically linked to material possession. While Lammes claims that in *Age of Empires* and *Civilization* a certain amount of personalization through empire-building is possible,[45] and others see these functions as representative of the '*initial context of information*',[46] the "Roman language" shared across these strategy games limits the scope of possible "Romes" into a series of immaculately constructed urban and suburban dream-worlds wherein money, materials, and well-presented towns connote success. It is not simplified history, but simplicity over history:[47] not a historical process necessarily, so much as the result of assumptions concerning Rome and its empire accumulated over time and channelled into the strategy framework.

[41] Vout 2007: 321. The same is said of Mary Shelley, who sought out 'familiarity' when attempting to view and understand the city from a creative perspective, Webb 2012: 210-11.
[42] Lane Fox 2005: 297-8.
[43] Wainwright 2014: 600.
[44] Ghys 2012 notes this in four other strategy games.
[45] Lammes 2010: 3.
[46] Chapman 2016: 187, my emphasis. Spring 2015: 208 makes a similar claim.
[47] Alcazar 2010: 337.

**4.2:** *CivCity: Rome*.

This idea of ancient city and empire was not created by or for the strategy framework but is necessarily perpetuated by it due to the requirements of the genre apparatus. If representational virtual histories are made up of picked-and-chosen materials,[48] yet those materials are not consciously located within 'contextual specifics',[49] it follows that the prevailing image of Rome as a homogenous and managerial power is collected from a variety of sources to then form the fabric of these games. The 'context' for these materials is provided by the genre framework itself as it translates those representative nodes into fixed roles. The drawing-together of ideas about imperial Rome, fit into the strategy framework, is then continually upheld by the receiver through gameplay. Signifiers, as Stuart Hall says of televisual experiences, constitute a 'form of communication or language' which we engage with during audio-visual interpretation.[50] It is simply that this idea of Rome works best within the constraints of the strategy genre framework. This channel of possible "Romes" constructed via player response is therefore narrow enough to allow the formulation of a

[48] Chapman 2013b: 327.
[49] King 2007: 2.
[50] Hall 1972: 1-2.

particular "language" through which virtual Rome and the player of the strategy game communicate with each other. Both the intrinsic interpretability of Rome as structured, planned, and wealthy, and the recognisable modern paradigms of structuring, planning, resource management and fund allocation function together to guide players towards the production of a particular kind of half-imaginary, semi-capitalistic ancient city and/or province. Such notions of "languages" are already popular amongst digital culture theorists: for example, in 2006 Robert Glass divided software development workplaces into 'Greeks' and 'Romans'. 'Greeks' are, he says, 'individuals', whereas the Roman developer identifies with his group. 'Greeks' are informal in their methodologies, while Romans are 'formal' and functional, managing projects with maximum administration. His assessment ends by stating: 'Greeks do things, Romans plan things.'[51] While scholars warn us that any analysis of the ancient past must always be aware of the stereotypes and prejudices of that past,[52] game designers continue to funnel standardised ideas of "Rome" through familiar modern parameters to make virtual, strategic antiquity instantly communicable.

### 4.3 *Imperium Romanum*

The "Roman language" currently formulating can therefore be summarised thus far as a game system based on accumulative impressions of Roman antiquity that, when installed into the strategy framework, prioritise straight roads, structural planning of buildings, methodological management of communities and the administration of those communities via capitalistic notions of production, consumption and monetary investment. In *Imperium Romanum* (*IR*), the player co-operates with perceived notions of the Roman world to construct a rough chronology of Roman imperial history, using these very same tenets to "build" the empire over time. Focussing on certain moments in the development of empire from 500BC Rome to the metropolitan city of Hadrianopolis, the player develops towns and colonies, battles barbarians and violently conquers non-Roman territory, and so participates in an anachronistic version of Roman historiography. The term *imperium Romanum* itself was almost unheard of in contemporary Rome until the imperial period, where the phrase became almost exclusively related to power,[53] and the exercising of power and pursuit of control is central to the play process in *IR*. The player draws tablets which contain directions as to how she will succeed, along with a titbit of historical information. Most often the final tablet requires the player

[51] Glass 2006. These attitudes were perpetuated by Romans themselves, who considered Greeks to be 'unreliable' and 'flighty' when compared with Roman 'sturdiness', Balsdon 1979: 31. Ironically, this attitude towards the 'other' was characteristically Greek too, Browning 2002: 259.
[52] Hirschi 2012: 11; Tutrone 2015: 2.
[53] Richardson 2003: 138, 147; cf. Lintott 1993: 22, 49. Both references speak of the *imperium* of the magistrate, and *imperium* over/within territories.

to gain control of the map and its resources, and to wipe out the indigenous settlements from the face of the virtual earth. Each episode provides a new map, in a new region, the completion of which leads to others. As with previous strategy games, Roman and otherwise, *IR* explicitly deals with themes of empire: players must liberate a virtual space, control it, and achieve victory when 'the last sign of the enemy' is eradicated,[54] while using the spoils of those victory to establish and maintain a wealthy city or colony.

Each episode begins with an already-positioned Forum, the centre of the player's settlement, which can be upgraded periodically for a perk (better wealth creation, more wells and/or altars and temples for the population to benefit from). Each time the Forum is upgraded, the building and its surrounding area is automatically transformed into a grand structure of white marble, making the Forum visually more "Roman" through its now-gleaming, monumental form. Eventually the player will be required to build guard towers and walls, public structures, temples (often specific to Roman gods), and other architectural units which become larger and more impressive as the player continues to develop the city, thereby engaging with the "language" through processual construction and subsequently spreading the classical aesthetic across an otherwise anonymous space. In pursuit of in-game success, the player is effectively Romanising the landscape. The recently upgraded city ultimately becomes visualized as a glowing silver-white centre, and becomes increasingly surrounded by stone walls, red-roofed villa-style buildings and aqueducts stretching out from the city (Image 4.3). Such buildings and colour schemes are typical of the filmic and televisual traditions. However, unlike for example the *Rome* television series (BBC & HBO, 2005-2007) with its presentation of a structurally uneven, lived-in Rome, or the even 'cruder' and 'grubbier' streets of Starz *Spartacus*,[55] the player of *IR* continues to lay out buildings in grid-like structures, creating uniform streets and blocks. The first episode is completed when the player expands Rome from village to town in this mechanistic way, and then defeats a small group of invading barbarians. After, the player can move to either Caralis, Capua or Genoa, uncolonized spaces often playing host to native peoples. Genoa, for example, is empty but for a Forum and a warehouse on the opposite side of the map. Warehouses in *IR* signify extra drop-off points for resources and materials alongside the already-positioned Forum. In Genoa the player must, again, expand her town, but she must also pay additional attention to populating the settlement and creating jobs for new inhabitants. The reward for doing this is usually more settlers. Thus, the player engages in a cyclical process generated by strict guidelines that ultimately govern the direction of the scenario. Houses, schools and butcher shops sit in neat rows alongside one another; stone

[54] Again, typical of the genre, Nohr 2010: 186.
[55] For *Spartacus* series, see Hobden, forthcoming.

quarries rest by the warehouse; everything produces and is then consumed, the settlement becomes bigger, the Forum is developed to look grander, and so the colony flourishes.

**4.3:** 'Romanising' the landscape in *IR*.

The Capua scenario places even more emphasis on commercial success, commodity production and the accumulation of surplus wealth to fulfil the "Roman" mission. The tablets insist the player creates wheat farms and trade posts, pushing her to grow more food than is necessary so it can be sold through trading posts to (unseen) allied societies. Success in the Capua scenario also depends significantly on player interaction with slaves and barbarian neighbours, both of whom are visually and behaviourally oversimplified. Slaves, who wander around the settlement building structures and carrying materials, can be clicked on to usually reveal a reasonable mood, cheerfully stating: 'There's nothing better than a relaxed work schedule!' The player is certainly never required to consider the consequences of using slave labour, except on the rare occasion that slaves threaten to revolt. This is assuaged as soon as the player builds more quarters for them to live in, at which point the slaves return to their usual state of docile productivity. This portrayal is not only unreflective of the reality of ancient slavery practices, but operates against contemporary trends in

textbooks, schools and classrooms which seek to confront the nature, reality and 'extent of slavery' in antiquity.[56] Placating the Roman population is more challenging: they will, if pushed, protest and refuse to work if they do not receive enough food and luxury items. Mukherjee identifies in the non-ancient strategy game *Empire: Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2009), a franchise relative of *R:TW* above, a mechanism by which the virtual population can rebel. This, he states, is the game's attempt to present a genuine representation of protest.[57] But if, as in the Capua episode of *IR*, the player has accumulated excess wealth and resources, she can redirect some of those to the population, pacifying them with wine and sausages. Mukherjee's spirit of protest located in non-ancient games is therefore not reproduced here: instead, the player of *IR* utilises the "Roman language" to generate and then provide surplus commodities which easily subverts potential rebellion. The importance of resources and material goods to player success is further highlighted when, halfway through this scenario, the player is directed to purchase a nearby village, ejecting the native population. This she achieves without conflict: the barbarians instantaneously lose their houses and walk off the map, allowing the player to take advantage of the now-available marble and gold deposits. The player then mines the marble and sells it for five times its normal amount, resulting in exorbitant amounts of denarii. The scenario is finished by upgrading the Forum to a sufficiently Roman level (using those denarii) and building an Arch of Triumph, a non-functioning structure which increases the profitability and 'prestige' of surrounding houses. In Capua, as in Genoa, solutions are implemented systematically and propagate notions of military dominance and cultural superiority engendered by the process of Romanisation. That very Romanisation of the landscape, highly similar in its gridded presentation to *C3* and *CCR*, is explicitly blended with modern neoliberal and capitalist practice, drawing a correlation between player success and economic harmony. Here the "Roman language" within the fabric of each scenario grants players the capacity to construct this Romanising, gridded community typical of other Roman strategy games, and subsequently to overcome the natives and use their resources create a highly contemporary paradise of riches.

*IR* remains, like *Civilization*, an easy-to-read and ultimately imperialist dream-world,[58] as opposed to an 'open-ended' collective of regions operating dynamically.[59] *IR* does provide small historical details and 'facts' as the player draws tablets, though much of this information – names, dates, summaries of events – is unimportant to the play process. The topography of some virtual lands is occasionally concomitant with historical descriptions: ancient historians write that Caralis is

[56] Hanink 2017: 274 wishes for a less reverent approach to teaching and learning about Greek and Roman antiquity.
[57] Mukherjee 2017: 40.
[58] Mukherjee 2015: 306 on strategies games more broadly.
[59] Lintott 1993: 42 speaking on 'historical' Rome.

situated on a low hill, near an indigenous settlement and close enough to the sea to allow for a quay.[60] Caralis also appears as a playable episode in *IR* and is represented as a gamespace concomitant with the above description, even requiring the player build a quay to facilitate trade. Such instances of authenticity may add richness for a historian scrutinising the game, but such accuracy is likely to go unnoticed as the nonprofessional player operates within very specific play processes towards a particular endpoint. Therefore, when some warn that "educational" moments like these may fool the player into 'a false sense of intellectual accomplishment',[61] it is worth recognising that developer, game, and player are not operating in that psychological environment wherein education and "learning" of any formal kind take precedent. We must instead, as Chapman does, work towards seeing the play processes within such historical games as informed by the 'wider and enriched transmedia' world.[62] From this perspective, *IR* is not necessarily a nexus of historical practices, but can instead be characterised by the co-operation between information from classical sources, representational strategies from other media, vague thoughts applied to the empire by observers of the past, and the modern economic models typical of the genre to allow players to strive for subtly predetermined "correct" visions of Rome and its provinces. While these scenarios and gamespaces are potentially created from a variety of past and present sources, the play process usually remains largely fixed when contained in the strategy framework. Caralis, like Capua and 500BC Rome, must still be built in the same processual manner to allow for production of commodities and, here, the creation of some military regiments. As a result, the player is not required, as the reader of a historical text is, to see the contexts in which that text was made and consumed.[63] Instead, *IR* demands the player follow a stringent set of rules to construct a linear, inorganic empire that reflects the contemporary economic contexts that she, the twenty-first century player, is situated in.

The barbarians of each scenario do not change in appearance or behaviour and exist only as a temporary barrier to the manufacture of the perfect empire, further highlighting the idealising, Roman-specific lens through which players must interpret each gamespace. Every barbarian the ancient world over is identical, each with the appearance of axe-wielding bearded Viking-like men,[64] and Northern European-looking Bow Maidens. Homogenous huts and ant-like natives are seen from the usual top-down perspective (Image 4.4), while the portrait in the top right of the screen shows the distinctly Anglo-Saxon face of the barbarian. Barbarians may possess one of three moods: they

[60] Mastino, "Carales".
[61] Metzger and Paxton 2016: 556.
[62] Chapman 2016: 27.
[63] Tutrone 2015: 13.
[64] "Viking", in that they wear 'famously anachronistic horned helmets', Nash 2018: 81.

are either enamoured with the Romans, marvelling at how 'civilized' they are; sceptical, wondering what the Romans are 'up to'; or openly hostile. Rather than a highly social frontier community,[65] based on a diversity of peoples recognised by the Romans themselves,[66] the game presents a highly systematized and effectively indistinguishable Other to allow space for the further application of the "Roman language" by signifying immediately to the player their non-Roman enemy. This is concomitant with the imaginative Other created by the western world as recognised by Said,[67] and explored in the previous chapter. Such representations of the barbarian occlude 'questions of belonging and diversity' and ignore 'the hybrid cultural formations resulting from the colonial encounter'.[68] Despite always positioning the player within an explicitly colonial space, these representational strategies deny a postcolonial perspective on the non-Roman and instead require the player to accept intrinsically Orientalising ways of presentation in similar ways to the player of *TQ* in the previous chapter. The barbarian in *IR* is not subject to 'the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together', but exist to have things done *to* them.[69] Such functions of the barbarian are necessary to maintain a system in which land and resource acquisition are primary aims of the game, and to further align with the assumptions about Roman superiority that form the bedrock of the play process. Upon destroying a barbarian settlement, a Roman warehouse automatically materialises from the ashes from which the player can develop a new outpost. The barbarian is only ever a temporary, fleeting barrier between the player and her resources. Therefore, while it may arguably be concurrent with Roman ways of seeing empire,[70] it is most likely a reflection of later European 'Othering'.[71] Wherever in the empire the player goes, the barbarian always remains in a fixed, 'earlier mode' of "civilization", one consistently inadequate when compared to the western (Roman).[72] Much like *TQ*, this is not necessarily indicative of a sinister or racist agenda. Subaltern pasts 'are marginalized not because of any conscious intentions',[73] although here their marginalization is further exaggerated as it becomes part of the semi-conscious operations typical of ancient gameplay. Player co-operation with the "Roman

[65] Allison 2013: 19. Gruen 2011: 14 believes the Romans and Greeks themselves had more 'nuanced' opinions of other non-Graeco-Romans than has traditionally been considered. This 'multiplicity and complexity' is reduced to 'a calculable number of behavioural patterns', Holscher 2008: 46.
[66] Ando 2012: 111.
[67] See Chapter 3. Furthermore, this imaginative Other is based on 'perceptions' and impressions, Gruen 2011: 13.
[68] First reference from Chakrabarty 2000: 18; 'hybridized' cultural formations in Rao 2015: 276.
[69] Said 2003: xxii. See also Said 2003: 115 where the east is defined by its 'use to modern Europe'.
[70] Strabo, for example, sees foreign lands as being 'Romanised', according to Ando 2012: 120, 123.
[71] Hingley 2001: 146.
[72] Chakrabarty 2000: 14, 32, speaking on western perspectives generally, and colonial Indian history respectively.
[73] Chakrabarty 2000: 101.

language" of this game therefore upholds and rehearses both stereotypes: the superiority of the Romans, and the inferiority of the generic barbarian.

**4.4**: Barbarians in *IR*.

The Pompeii scenario, on the other hand, requires the player engage with the popular characterisation of the settlement as a '"city of the dead"',[74] as a single, catastrophic event due to the infamous eruption of Vesuvius, thereby engendering a different mode of interaction. Pompeii in fiction provides the reader or viewer with a hidden menace 'waiting to burst free',[75] and appears frequently across media as a disaster waiting to happen. At first, the in-game Pompeii episode is similar to other scenarios in both form and function, displaying none of the Roman/Hellenic cultural tensions present in the "real" Pompeii,[76] and presenting much the same basic functions and win conditions. Where traditionally fiction wishes to 'travel back' to Pompeii to discover the inhabitants,

[74] As Paul 2009: 94 notes when discussing Pompeii in political usages.
[75] Hobden 2009: 152-3 on science-fiction.
[76] Arno 2012: 151.

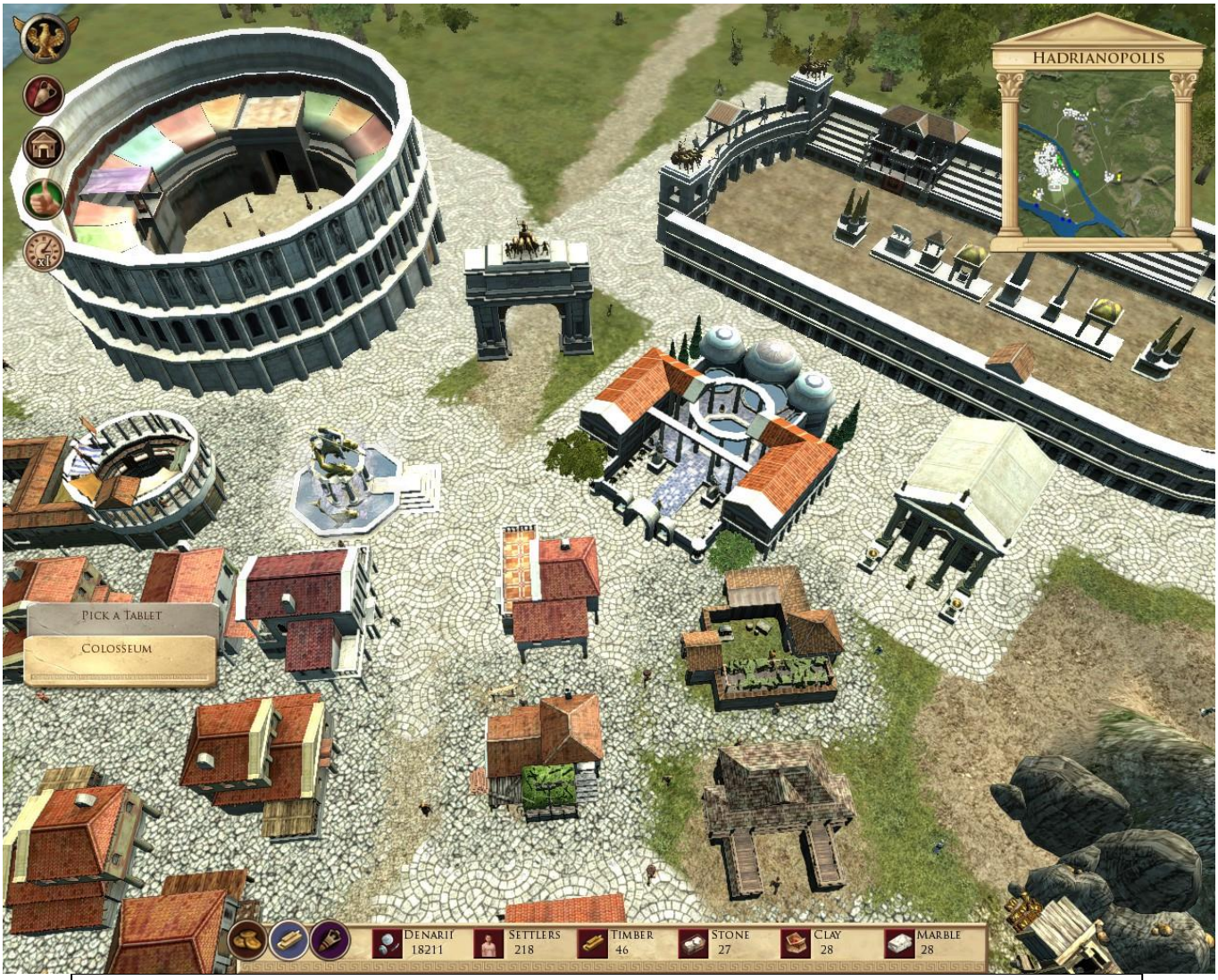
the people, their thoughts and feelings,[77] the game continues to require a player as builder and maintainer of the "language" that perpetuates strategic Rome. Nevertheless, each stage of the scenario is shot through with tension as the player is constantly reminded of the growing volcanic threat. The tablet system is for the first and only instance altered to allow only one tablet at a time, where other episodes let players operate with three at once. The impending dread that overhangs the scenario affects its virtual inhabitants, who periodically leave their homes and jobs and so destabilise the meticulously designed economic paradise. The result is a deliberately slower pace, reflecting the generation of tension afforded by these profoundly altered play processes. The procedures the player undertakes in this scenario indicate the uniqueness of Pompeii as it exists in the popular consciousness, being presented here not as a generic colony but as a specific space and event. The dramatic irony of the situation pervades the whole experience as the player is fully aware of the coming disaster, knowing as she will the promise of volcanic disaster even as she is required to develop an affluent neighbourhood despite being consistently reminded through the very processes of the game that this town will not last. Upon completion the game does not show the eruption, but instead leaves this growing anxiety unresolved. This runs counter to the usual strategy game parameters: in *Civilization*, the player is required to maintain a society that will '"stand the test of time"'.[78] The Pompeii scenario is the only episode in *IR*, perhaps any strategy game seen thus far, that operates against that principle. The willing reduction of Pompeii to one setting at one time, typical in ancient film,[79] allows a fresh alternative to standard utilisations of the "Roman language", stunting the usual flow of in-game challenges and consistently drawing the player's attention to the unstable volcano. The implementation of a "popular Pompeii" frustrates the usual organisational successes typical of the episodes seen so far, as this scenario is explicitly constructed around a single, infamous conception of the ancient settlement.

One of the final scenarios, Hadrianopolis, nevertheless consolidates and compounds player expectations generated throughout the game by requiring her to make the biggest and best city possible by constructing a procession of huge monuments and conquering three barbarian villages. These monuments start small, with an Arch of Triumph and a Golden Statue, temples and bathhouses, eventually reaching the largest possible structures, the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum. Each success engenders another building requirement, which must in turn be grander and more visually impressive than the success that facilitated it in the first place. It is in a sense a step-by-step reiteration of the "language", drawing the player through a linear process of

[77] Moormann 2015: 307, 330.
[78] Voorhees 2009: 261.
[79] Pomeroy 2008: 35.

monumental construction to generate surplus wealth and commodities. The map is therefore Romanised to a level beyond any salvageable realism. Image 4.5 represents a small corner of one possible Hadrianopolis: a Colosseum, Circus Maximus, triumphal arch, baths, a white sanctuary and a Temple to Neptune sit alongside each other, beside a group of red-roofed domus and villa houses. It reflects the intangibly 'monumental' nature of Rome to which generations of people have subscribed, simulating the kind of 'civic pride… dignity and honor' which fifteenth-century architect Alberti realized in his personal vision of Rome.[80] Just as the Roman architect Vitruvius conveyed in his own construction manual, the creator of monuments here achieves 'the status of generator of civilization'.[81] While these very visions of Rome have undoubtedly fed into the kinds of "Romes" built throughout *IR* and other Roman strategies, the ancient Disneyland of Hadrianopolis, an impossibly grand cityscape fed by consistent flows of denarii and settlers, rests firmly within the conception of an idealised, structural, managed Rome, and further forces adherence to contemporary classifications of urban success which demand that both more and bigger are better. The player now sees a Roman Empire that has 'reached its culmination… fully formed and active; it could not go forward from that point'.[82] The Hadrianopolis scenario thereby compounds every facet of the "Roman language" as a final test of the player's ability to create a structured townscape, generate wealth and resources, and overcome the non-Roman.

[80] Hearn 2003: 26.
[81] Hearn 2003: 25.
[82] Schiavone 2002: 13-14.




**4.5:** Hadrianopolis

*IR* demands in almost all instances that the player accept, engage with and rehearse very specific procedures to construct gridded, well-ordered cities and generate wealth across colonised virtual landscapes. The term "Roman language" therefore helps to outline how these Roman strategy games are represented, and then subsequently played. Each scenario, regardless of place or time within the Roman imperial timeline, is presented in much the same way within very similar paradigms: build monumental cities, gather and maintain resources and commodities, and destroy the barbarian. The experience is made entertaining by offering larger constructions the further the player plays, as the Hadrianopolis scenario demonstrates. Nevertheless, this fixed vision of Rome and its empire and the equally fixed trajectory by which players construct their virtual empires has three primary ramifications for the game and the Roman strategy subtype. First, it continues to set in place an idealised vision of monumental, militarily gifted and economically successful Rome, by installing these popular ideas of the empire into a largely immoveable framework. Our imaginary

Romans live in an imaginary city, a "Rome". That "Rome" is make-believe, 'an empire of a thousand cities, distinguished by the admirable vitality of its urban centers, from the most modest to the most wealthy; by the wise and prudent power of its government; by the strength of its professional army, composed of faithful soldiers, and especially by the prosperity of its exemplary economic and civic life'.[83] It is therefore a shared belief in "Rome" like this one that allows the proliferation of a "Roman language" used by players to communicate with the game. Second, this collective of assumptions about Rome, virtualised into a game system, implies something especially ahistorical, and more broadly "cultural", is happening between *IR* and the player. For example, historians cannot 'presume that there was a single enactment regulating each province':[84] *IR* demands the player presume this without question. This is because the game needs standardised "Romes" with which the player can grapple cognitively and immediately. Those standardised signifying materials are, foremost, vaguely cultural rather than historical, since they are drawn from an amorphous nexus of appropriative traditions that designate the processes of the Roman empire to be structural and processual regardless of time or place, while the visualisation of the gamespace and its constituents are both generic, and roughly in keeping with other audio-visual renderings of the Romans (and, apparently, Viking-like barbarians). Third, *IR* consistently proposes a modern-capitalistic interpretation of Rome that denies space for postcolonial historical critique. In the Roman world, luxury was a point of tension between public life and private practice among the elite:[85] *IR* positions it as a goal to be achieved by any virtual inhabitant regardless of their job. Outdated ethno-anthropological perspectives that homogenised ancient peoples are here revived,[86] as are European traditions of thought that saw Romanization as a legitimating, justified and 'distinct process' of colonial operation.[87] In relying on a confluence of assumptions about the unity, efficiency and supremacy of the Roman empire and contemporary economic processes by which to measure player success in these areas, *IR* perpetuates this specific myth of Rome and its imperial project.

[83] Schiavone 2002: 20.
[84] Lintott 1993: 31.
[85] Lane Fox 2005: 602.
[86] Ethno-anthropological studies threatened '*historicity* and *multiplicity',* Tutrone 2015: 12-13, his emphasis; standardization by Fascist Italy, Arthurs 2012: 131.
[87] E.g. in India, Mantena 2010: 58, 72.

### 4.4 Constructing "Rome" with Greeks?

The Roman empire is not the only subject to be represented in the corpus of ancient strategy games. *Hegemony III: Clash of the Ancients* (Longbow Games, 2015) (*H3*) offers players the chance to construct hegemonic networks in the pre-Roman imperial world. By selling itself as hegemonic, rather than imperial, the game implicitly sets up a difference between the way players might create, develop and maintain, as opposed to the fixed way in which players of *IR* create empires. While the online webpage, in its description, switches between 'hegemony' and 'empire' freely,[88] its advertising of playable pre-imperial Italians (Etruscans), various Greek societies, and diverse, comparatively obscure cultures of the ancient world (Illyrians and Rhegions) equates to a promise of alternative strategic play within a less well-represented period of antiquity. The difference between hegemony and empire is in itself difficult to quantify. *Hegemonia* requires detailed action before and after militarised endeavours.[89] Furthermore, a hegemony is often understood to be a mutually beneficial partnership, even if under a central controlling government: when Thucydides writes of the Spartan hegemony, he characterises it as being run for the benefit of the Spartans alone and so it is repeatedly called an 'empire' by translators in popular editions.[90] All this means, for this analysis, that a game named 'Hegemony' tacitly implies something familiar yet different, an empire-builder with processes that do not necessarily over-centralize the supremacy and intrinsic capability of the imperial force. *H3* therefore offers the opportunity to see how other, broadly Graeco-Roman cultures are reconfigured, represented and played in alternative representational and gameplay circumstances.

[88] Steam, "*Hegemony III*".
[89] Wilkinson 2008: 125, 129. The word *imperium* has become synonymous specifically with the Roman empire, Lebow and Kelly 2001: 595.
[90] Thuc. 1.19; 1.76. Hegemony referred to as 'empire', Thuc. 1.76; 1.144. Hegemony and the *hêge* root can also entail themes of governance, dominance, supremacy, and command, Wilkinson 2008: 120, 123-4.

**4.6:** Example of map and interface in *H3*.

The basic play functions are similar to others in this chapter in that the player must enact a smaller-scale colonial approach to a virtualized Italy, sending workers to gather food, wood, and gold, and developing diplomatic contacts with neighbouring cities to create a network of influence.[91] Nevertheless, it is presented visually with a "Greekish" overlay and interface (Image 4.6), an orange colour-coding reminiscent of Greek material culture and furthermore uses vase-painted figures to depict player advisors (in the top left of the image). In this way, the game is telling the player that she is operating within a roughly Greek, or generally Graeco-Roman, time and place and so with a potentially different set of play procedures. In this instance, the game is played out on a large map of the Mediterranean (above), which is manipulated by the player to achieve a better view of her own city-state and those that surround it. In presenting the world in this way, the game recalls a specific filmic technique, mimicking the *Troy* 2004 film whose introductory sequences present and characterise ancient Greece as a map. Conceiving of the ancient world as a map is not uncommon: Shahabudin, speaking on the *Troy* film, compares its starting scenes to 'the opening of a history book'.[92] This is a broadly "Greek" way of visualising antiquity reminiscent of the *Troy* film, one typical

[91] *R:TW*, above, allowed creation of diplomatic networks to an admittedly small degree.
[92] Shahabudin 2007: 111.

of audio-visual media, though it is also typical of the way people imagine imperial enterprises more generally. As Lintott states of the Roman empire: 'We tend to envisage empires in terms of territories of a certain colour on a map and their rulers as landlords… but this was not the root idea of *imperium*.'[93] Such comments further imply the game will take a different approach to the processes of land-accumulation, resource-gathering and the possession of territories, one divorced from the Roman notion of *imperium* and towards an alternative means of generating wealth and influence. It suggests at first a different tact to the homogenised, gridded towns and cities represented in all images above pertaining to *IR*, implying a more nuanced "international" antiquity.

Nonetheless, the further the player engages with the game experience the more akin to the operations of Roman strategies and their "language" *H3* becomes. While the game implies a new approach to influence-building, granting the player opportunities to sway their opponents through diplomacy, tributes, gifts, and promises of protection, the player will most often have to contend with opponents through military action. Visually the movement and action of the military units, no matter which culture they belong to, are persistently uniform, though each culture has slightly different types of available soldiers. When conflict arises, the outcome is almost always a battle of attrition, the winner being whoever has the largest army. The only significant difference between the cultures opposing the player in *H3* and the barbarian of *IR* is that the player is actively homogenising them, rather than encountering an already-simplified society. Instead of marching on pre-existing barbarian communities, the player subsumes other growing societies into their hegemony: they lose their character (their colour coding changes to reflect the players') and their autonomy (as they become instantly controllable by the player). Here the enemy *becomes* the player, who is effectively Romanising her enemy. In this way, the aim of the game is similarly to dominate the map, which, typically, is achieved through military success: this is usual not just of Roman strategies, but strategy games set in other non-ancient periods as well.[94] Both "Greek" and Roman case studies operate generically but in different ways, meaning the player of *H3* adopts a form of play not unlike the "Roman language", though not identical either. Players continue to dominate the landscape, appropriate resources and accumulate wealth, all through military activity and almost exclusively to the disbenefit of other cultures, but there are some differences: the game does not, for example, allow for the careful placement of buildings. This is not to suggest Greece could not possess the same military prestige, tactical sophistication or architectural splendour as the Romans, nor is it a claim that hegemonies are more or less complex than the Roman empire;[95] the

[93] Lintott 1993: 22.
[94] As Nohr 2010: 189 notes to be the case in many RTS games.
[95] Thucydides goes into great detail about the mechanics of statecraft and conflict, Novo 2016: 7.

issue is that, despite its initial proposal of a pre-Roman imperial timeframe and play experience via a range of Italian and Greek societies, the functions of this pre-colonial Italy edge closer towards precedents set by Roman imperial strategies.

*H3* can also be compared to the sequel to *IR*, *Grand Ages: Rome* (Haemimont Games, 2009) (*GAR*) to further demonstrate this relationship between simulated historical periods and places in the Roman strategy game corpus. Images 4.7 & 4.8 demonstrate the graphical similarity between the games. The first is *H3*, wherein the player is given an expansive view over the gameworld. The screen beneath, *GAR*, allows much the same perspective and even a similar interface, albeit without the typically Greek colour scheme as it is set firmly within the Roman imperial timeframe. Both render the rurality of the scene and the buildings within by similar visual technological techniques. *GAR* remains largely similar to its predecessor, *IR*:[96] while the "Roman language" is modified to allow greater freedoms of unit placement – Image 4.8 no longer conforms quite so rigidly to the grid-like rules of building construction – *GAR* still requires a certain type of imperial outpost or town to be constructed, and even offers bonuses to players who position certain units next to certain others. All buildings on the *H3* map, on the other hand, are prerendered and must be taken over by the player as she builds her hegemony-empire. Players here exercise dominance by colonising the gamespace, transforming it into their colour, governing it in a very specific way that, once again, prioritises land ownership, the production of material goods, and the overcoming of opponents through force. In some ways, both Roman *GAR* and pre-Roman imperial *H3* engender a sense that, rather than every ancient strategy game appearing to be "Roman", the ancient strategy game tends towards more broadly generic "ancient-ish" visualisation strategies and in-game procedures, particularly as they continue to highlight the importance of land procurement and resource-gathering as central to the creation and expansion of an ancient society. But this does potentially stifle the range of possible gameplay methods and choices. Nicholas suggests that in this genre 'simple fixed rules… generate an inexhaustible amount of possibilities of game play'.[97] This analysis suggests the opposite, that at least concerning antiquity the strategy genre is being at once Romanized and genericised. Nicholas himself notes elitist, capitalistic models in Egyptian civilization builders,[98] a mode of representing economies that continues to operate in *H3*. The *Alexander* expansion to *Rome: Total War*, as the name suggests, also transplants the conquests of Alexander into the Roman model laid out by the original release.[99] Subtle differences between Greek colonial and Roman imperial enterprises do

[96] For example, Bembeneck 2015: 83 notes in *GAR* the representation of barbarians as 'inconsequential slave labor'.
[97] Nicholas 2005: 2.
[98] Nicholas 2005: 7.
[99] See *Rome: Total War* at beginning of chapter.

appear across the games presented here, though not enough to offer 'other possible ways of looking at history',[100] since a kind of procedural imperialism typical of the strategic game model thrives in both settings. This analysis of *H3* therefore speaks of a general antiquity in the strategy game framework that will often operate in a generically processual way, which then allows us to draw comparisons with both the broad, popular idea of the impossibly efficient Roman empire witnessed from *C3* to *IR* to *GAR*, and with wider assumptions about societal "progress" set in motion by earlier games like *Civilization*. Consequently, players take away a very specific idea of imperial, hegemonic, and broadly "civilizational" projects by measuring the success of these enterprises by their success in occupying virtual spaces and commandeering materials. The player of *H3* therefore in many ways plays in generic and limited ways not at all far from the "Romanness" that characterises the other examples of this chapter.

**4.7:** *Hegemony III*.

[100] Which Mukherjee 2017: 102 notes is essential to critical approaches to studying empires.

**4.8:** *Grand Ages: Rome*.

## 4.5 Indie futures of managerial Rome

In the ever-expanding world of videogames, the independent game market is often considered a space in which developers and players can get more creative with games and the ancient worlds they represent. This has been reflected in previous chapters, as in 2 where *Apotheon* fused rich, "accurate" components of Greek mythology and the literary record with the procedures of the epic game tradition, allowing for a unique take on the action-oriented genre framework. This thesis (and section) continues to define the "indie" as a small-scale enterprise with extremely limited budgets and technologies,[101] that are nevertheless motivated to create new and genre-bending forms of play. It remains to be seen, however, how the rigidity of the strategy framework is translated into humbler, less affluent circumstances. Many indie strategy games that represent antiquity still focus on Rome and its empire. For example, *Alea Jacta Est* (Ageod, 2012)[102] offers the player a strategic experience based on a literal map, removing any visual indication of individual units or soldiers and

[101] The definition of "indie" in, for example, film, has always been contentious and so requires some broad definition.
[102] A phrase attributed to Julius Caesar, through Suetonius, translated as 'the die is cast', Suet. *Iul*. 1.32.

representing them instead as tokens and numbers within the player interface. There is, therefore, no representation of peoples or military actions that the player of *IR* might enjoy in some form. The whole experience of *Alea Jacta Est* is statistics, data and information through which the player plans and executes battles without either actively or passively engaging with the actual processes of warfare. She organises her soldiers, moves them like chess pieces across the game map, and the results of the battle are instantaneously produced for her. The game thus homogenises not just the barbarian, but every actor and constituent in the gameworld. Such examples demonstrate the deep-rootedness of the "Roman language" in the strategy experience, as both representation and play are stripped back to the extreme, to the starkest presentation of military expedition on a two-dimensional map filled with numbers.

This section identifies a very different game to those above and indicates instead a new trajectory for independent ancient strategy games. The indie strategic simulation *Age of Gladiators* (*AoG*) presents a reconfiguration of the Roman arena, thereby immediately offering an alternative to resource-heavy, military-themed experiences presented by *IR* and its predecessors. In *AoG*, the gladiatorial arena is translated into a different kind of strategy framework that requires the player to govern the minutiae of events within the institution. In terms of its setting, it is closer to the action-oriented games of Chapter 2, although here the immediate violence and spectacle of brutality endemic to the arena is here traded in. *AoG* nevertheless remains concerned with combat, honour and ruthlessness, but since it presents a strategic, rather than cinematic, experience, the actual fighting is taken away from the play experience to provide the player with a kind of business management simulator. Being foremost a response to the strategy genre, *AoG*, like *Alea Jacta Est* above, pares back the visual experience into static portraits and screens of raw data, and is therefore immediately representative of a different type, or subtype, of the strategy game, stepping away from empire-building, urban planning and army movement and into a set of gameplay mechanisms based on administration and logistics. It is therefore a stripping back not just of the strategic model, but of the spectacularism of action-based gladiatorial games. The common logic of the Romans as habitual (and successful) organizers remains operative, yet the experience of the virtual arena is also altered profoundly when reconfigured into such a different, smaller form of strategy apparatus. This analysis therefore identifies the use of Roman materials not often utilised by strategy game developers, and so seeks to locate play opportunities unrelated to the usual military and economic procedures that have so far defined the ancient strategy game.

*AoG* is a deceptively complex system composed of several distinct but interconnecting screens through which the player operates, and this unique series of processes produces for the player a surprising and characterful take on the strategy game type. The player takes the role of an

arena boss, hiring gladiators, housing them in their stable, purchasing support staff – trainers, doctors, scouts, and smiths – and sending gladiators into fighting events as and when they come up. The 'sponsors, support-staff and combatants' that constituted the historical arena are all-important in this virtual environment.[103] The game continues to be played procedurally, in turns, where each turn corresponds to a day: the player receives letters to read, speaks and trades with other bosses, and enters arena contests when they are available. The flexibility of the administrative system for which Rome was known, for example,[104] is represented in a simulation which involves such dry material as sponsorship fees, calendars, and incoming mail, living the life not of an emperor or provincial governor but of a businessperson and manager in all its mundanity. The player is primarily concerned with buying and putting to work a collective of gladiators. She must understand her gladiators and build their skillset and statistics so that they can defeat their opponents. These statistics, furthermore, are controlled by the player who applies accumulated skill-points to her characters after each fight. This "levelling" system is akin to the CRPG system in Chapter 3, and although the player is not required to think and operate from the perspective of the gladiators as the Romans, Celts and Greek heroes of the previous chapter, this game mechanism nevertheless assists in creating a significant bond between the player and her stable. Freedom of choice also extends to fighting styles, weapons, and armour, allowing the creation of distinct champions, even heroes, constructed through careful management of resources and an adequate balance between risk-taking and financial thriftiness. Though the fights themselves are represented only as flowing channels of numbers and statistics accompanied by motionless images, the overall experience nevertheless forces the player to make connections with individual fighters. Even though the gladiators are ultimately immobile and lifeless, the play process disallows standard gladiatorial archetypes of the anonymous, helmet-wearing Other.[105] Gladiators instead become characters, generating fame in the gameworld through combative success (and strategic planning by the player), and becoming the go-to favourite for players. The play process is still necessarily dependent on the notion of a bloodthirsty, money-hungry Rome typical of both action-oriented and strategic ancient games, but by providing the player with a more "lived" Roman experience *AOG* allows players to cultivate distinct personalities for her characters.

In fact, despite its stationary presentation of the arena, *AoG* has as much in common with the wider transmedial cinematic and televisual tradition as it does other strategy games. Narrative moments appear occasionally in which the player can participate, thereby allowing her to tailor and

[103] Coleman 2000: 235-7 on the logistics of the "real" arena.
[104] Lintott 1993: 14-15; cf. McAuley 2017: 178-9 in audio-visual reception contexts.
[105] Bembeneck 2015: 78-9.

personalise her experience. For example, a pop-up box will appear telling the player she can bribe public guards to evacuate the treasury, leaving it unguarded from unscrupulous individuals such as herself. If she agrees, the player brings three gladiators to help with the break-in, their skill statistics determining whether the robbery of the treasury is successful. Other times, the player may kidnap the gladiator of a rival hero, setting him free or keeping him in her own stable. Failure in these tasks will result in no reward and gladiators may even be injured in these illicit activities, thereby hampering their future ability to participate in the more legitimate practice of arena-based blood-sports. If the player defeats another boss too many times in the arena, a rivalry will develop, and they may refuse to speak or trade with her. Such reconfiguration of the arena draws comparisons not with other strategies, but with broader onscreen antiquity. As in Starz *Spartacus*, *AoG* presents a social world around the arena, goings-on behind the scenes that constitute a 'tangled interaction between public and private competition'.[106] The vocabulary used to relay this information in the pop-up boxes is also similar to that of both ancient film, television and action game. Nevertheless, even moments like these are represented as text-boxes and static portraits of figures, distancing the game from films like *Gladiator* wherein spectacle was the central draw.[107] This results in a game firmly situated in the strategy framework, but modified by independent developers to offer a new way of interacting with both strategic processes and (ordinarily) action-packed Roman institutions simultaneously.

The game is consequently inspired by both the cinematic-televisual tradition and the requirements of the genre framework simultaneously, embracing the transmediality of antiquity while remaining roughly within the purview of the strategy corpus. Player success is still measured by her ability to manage denarii, property, and people as property: the player is always trying to save, invest, and make money, interpreting the day-by-day events in and out of the arena and applying her wealth when and where will best suit her. Underpinning the player's journey towards success, again, is the general presumption of a natural Roman capacity to succeed economically. Nonetheless, its distancing from the standard Roman model seen in the examples above enable a greater diversity of experience, emphasis on narrative moments, and personal connections with virtualized individuals. In this way it is both like and unlike the "Rome" seen so far, still providing the strategic manipulation of data and statistics but doing so in a way that falls outside the usual, expected format by allowing a boots-on-the-ground experience in which the player constructs and manages individuals in a world of sport. The result is something like genre fusion. *AoG* offers an

[106] McAuley 2017: 182. Hobden, forthcoming, notes the series' 'person-oriented', 'complex and dynamic social world'.
[107] The 'awesome' and 'astounding' Colosseum, Cyrino 2005: 227.

arena-based experience like in language to the games of Chapter 2, the points-based systems similar to those in Chapter 3, all while maintaining the functional and mathematical dimensions that characterise the strategy games above to provide an alternative narrative and play experience.

### 4.6 Reconfiguring classics and genre in *Age of Mythology*

The analysis above reveals the (perhaps unexpected) diversity of the strategy game type, wherein the visual language constituted by grids and lines, systematisation and organisation can be applied or avoided depending on the needs and qualities of each individual game. With this newfound genre malleability in mind, this final case study demonstrates how primarily Greek materials are adapted into a big-name, big-budget strategy game, assessing for a fuller picture of the genre how Greek mythology, rather than the tangible, human experience of Roman militarism, operates within the strategic experience. *Age of Mythology* (2014[108]) (*AoM*) appropriates a vast range of mythical material to present a unique gameworld and a narrative that appears to propose themes of intercultural co-operation with distinctly characterised non-Greco-Roman societies. The game is part of the larger, and very popular, *Age of Empires* series and is preceded by two non-mythological franchise instalments, released prior to *AoM*'s initial 2002 release and dealing primarily with standard colonial, historical narratives. *AoM* is also made with much the same technology and much of the same development staff as *Titan Quest* of the previous chapter. Judging by the analysis of *TQ* that revealed unsympathetic portrayals of barbarians, and by the characterisation of the strategy that emphasizes colonial movement, military force and aggressive economic practice, it remains to be seen here how mythological materials from three separate cultures, Greeks, Egyptians, and Norse, operate within or without standardized (Roman) strategy game tropes. This section locates the ways in which *AoM* as a unique example of strategic Greek mythology constitutes further diversity of the genre, and how imaginative and creative use of such classical materials might indicate an even more malleable strategy framework than implied so far.

The player assumes the role of Arkantos, an Atlantean, who is drawn into the Trojan War after his homeland is attacked by Trojans and their Kraken-like beasts. This initial hostility kickstarts a constantly-moving adventure through Greece, during which the player fights Trojans alongside Agamemnon and Odysseus, and eventually travels into Egypt and the 'Norse lands' in an effort to stop the Cyclops Gargarensis from resurrecting the Titan Kronos. The central narrative is very similar to the epic plot in *Titan Quest* (Chapter 3). Like in that game, the player of *AoM* moves through foreign, non-Greek spaces and so, consequently, Atlanteans and Greeks intersect with Egyptians and

[108] This chapter uses the revamped release of *Age of Mythology*, originally released in 2002.

Norsemen as the story progresses. Although the game proposes the Atlanteans to be separate from the Greeks, they nevertheless act, look and operate in much the same way. Atlantis holds a significant position in the western imagination, it being an invention of Greek culture that became associated most often with Plato's ideal city.[109] The visually-impressive virtual city of Atlantis in *AoM* may initially indicate an idealization of the ancient city space, and so could invite comparison with the above Roman strategy games which rely on player recognition of "superior" classical monumental and material culture. However, although Atlantis is replete with grand structures, peoples, resources and wealth, the player does not act upon it and make it grand*er*. She instead moves immediately out of Atlantis after the introductory episode. As a result, the city is not a substitute "Rome", but acts merely as the protagonist Arkantos' home city wherein the player can quickly and easily learn the game rules. The game is even complimented by extensive cinematic cutscenes, much like action-based games and unlike its strategy game counterparts, which expound on connections between individual characters. The opening narrative sequences, wherein Arkantos is pulled into fighting alongside Odysseus and Ajax at Troy, strongly suggest a predetermined friendship between the characters. Throughout this chapter, we have seen how little focus is afforded to individual agents in favour of homogenous representations of places and peoples. *AoM* bucks this trend by visualising and characterising the player as an individual agent in the game and narrative, one who is furthermore seen and controlled directly. Usually strategies remove a player-protagonist agent from the map, creating distance between player and gameworld.[110] The techniques employed by *AoM* imply a desire to locate the player in this mythological world, disrupting the typical 'godlike perspective' and allowing players to develop a bond with her avatar (Arkantos), as well as her Greek friends, and to invest time and effort into this unique experience.

For the most part, fundamental genre rules remain largely similar: players complete challenges in scenarios to move onto the next, and in each episode of the game resources are again collected to create buildings, workforces, and armies. Atlanteans and Greeks use villagers to hunt wild animals and farm for food, mine gold to pay for new units, and cut down trees to build structures – the three basic requirements of all cultures in the game. The breaking-up of the main campaign is, however, atypical: each episode operates like a story capsule, the events of one moving into another so that as the player progresses, she constructs a wider narrative. On top of this is the 'Favour' system, which allows the player to generate points at their temples which are exchanged for powerful mythological units. Favour acts as a fourth resource, and thus separates it from other

[109] Vidal-Naquet 1986: 264; e.g. in Pl. *Crit*. 110d-11e it is described as a very fertile land, Vidal-Naquet 1986: 269.
[110] Although arguably bringing them closer to the 'machinic apparatus' of the game, Voorhees 2009: 263.

more "historical" *Age of Empires* series counterparts.[111] To reflect her movement through the "other" lands of Egypt and the Norselands, the units used by the player to construct towns will change in accordance with the culture with which the player is engaged. Egyptians function in much the same way as the Greeks since they also operate as hunter-gatherers, but their Favour is gained by constructing consecutively larger monuments, whereas Greeks must worship at their temple to accumulate Favour points. The Norse civilization can only gain Favour by defeating opponents in battle, thus placating the bloodlust of their gods. Greek and Egyptian non-combat villagers build structures, but the Norse soldiers are the only units in that culture who can create buildings. In generating "Norseness" through killing and destroying,[112] the game is also tacitly made harder: where units are usually defined by their ability to fight or build, combining both capabilities in the same unit forces the player to think outside of genre norms and operate with distinct units for diverse in-game functions. Therefore, while mainstays of the genre framework and even hints of the "Roman language" remain as the player must occupy gamespaces and overcome hostile entities, the player must also accommodate for differences between cultures within this story-heavy, character-driven experience.

Even as *AoM* requires the player to recognise the diversity of their three cultures through play, the representational differences that characterise them are nevertheless often stereotypical. The game gives players magic-wielding Egyptian priests, thereby relying on a reading of the Egyptians as vaguely "mystical", while Norsemen are typically heavily-armoured axe-wielders. Often units like Greek, Atlantean and Egyptian foot-soldiers maintain a certain visual similarity. There is a functional reason for this, as in all strategies: it allows the player to immediately perceive who is where as they move and fight in real time. Despite this somewhat uniform way of presenting, the player can generate units singularly, rather than in groups as in *IR*. As a result, every collection of fighting unit is different, with each individual agent being encoded with a very specific and distinct set of values and capabilities. The intrinsic diversity of each represented culture means that player armies range from human to mythical, swordsmen and archers to club-wielding cyclopes and dryads. By forcing the player to operate with more than one culture, and several different subtypes of unit, it engenders a play experience typified by non-homogenous peoples who benefit from unique, individual, statistically-determined coded abilities. Conceivably an army can be composed of Norse strongmen,[113] Greek mythical beasts, and Egyptian magicians, lending the play process a theme of intercultural co-dependence against a common enemy. This is furthermore reflected in the

[111] McMenomy 2015: 114.
[112] "Norseness", like "Vikingness", 'remains a highly reductive categorization of a broad and multifaceted culture', Nash 2018: 80. The Norse, like all cultures in strategies, are subject to certain limiting characteristics.
[113] Defined, like all onscreen Norsemen/Vikings, by their proclivity for combat, Nash 2018: 87-8.

narrative: the villain, Gargarensis, is a Greek Cyclops in pursuit of the resurrection of the Greek Kronos, inevitably inviting comparison to its sister-game of Chapter 2, *Titan Quest*. However, here it is shown through cutscenes that Gargarensis is part of an international plot and is assisted by members of other cultures such as the Norse god Loki. The symbolic meaning underpinning the narrative changes from one of "western Greek saves the world", as in *TQ*, to one in which separate societies with distinct personalities and abilities co-operate to achieve a common cause. Coupled with the game's embedding of cultural difference into the mechanics of play, both play and narrative experiences are no longer about characteristically "superior" Greeks or Graeco-Romans saving the world, but instead indicate a collaborative effort that is recognised and co-constructed by the player.

The game is played in episodes, like *IR*, but frustrates the standard framework to provide diverse scenarios, removing singular moments of, for example, the Trojan War story and refiguring them to fit within a semi-flexible version of the genre framework. The game remains fundamentally strategic, still requiring accumulation of materials and displays of military dominance, though the creativeness with which classical and mythological materials are reconfigured provides a unique experience. That Troy is the focus of the first third of the campaign speaks not only of Troy's enduring contemporary life,[114] but the intrinsic adaptability of the story into new contexts. In one early episode the player must quickly build a sustainable outpost in which the player stores food, wood and gold gathered from the surrounding gamespace. However, the player must depart from the standard gather-build-repeat dynamic and set several villagers aside to build the legendary Trojan Horse. While largely absent from the Homeric texts, the Horse is nevertheless an immediate signifier for the Trojan War story generally.[115] The horse has no in-game effect but is instead necessary purely to further the narrative. Enemy Trojan scouts enter the map and must be killed before they can report back to Troy, forcing the player to locate a balance between building the functionless Horse and protecting the very settlement that is constructing it. Therefore, as the player engages with tenets of the strategy reminiscent of the "Roman language" by building outposts and armies and fending off attackers, she is also working outside its usual remit to construct a version of the Trojan legend. Resources are now directed in such a way as to fulfil narrative requirements, while enemies are killed not to acquire space but to keep the Horse project a secret from the player's Trojan enemies. This creative reconfiguring of the Trojan legend provides a unique and non-

[114] Rose 1998: 405; Thompson 2013: 208; Mac Sweeney 2018: 153.
[115] With only brief Homeric mention in Hom. *Od.* Eg.8.492f and Hom *Od.* 11.523, "knowledge" of the Horse comes primarily from non-Homeric sources, Solomon 2007: 482; visual material culture throughout Greek history suggest the Horse was reasonably well-represented, Rose 1998: 406, 408; West 2013: 41, 194; Sparkes 1971: 55, though number of representations small in comparison to the wide range of themes on offer, Solomon 2007: 499. Mac Sweeney 2018: 145 uses the example of 'trojan horse' as a computing term to demonstrate the malleability of the Horse as both object and name.

generic instance of strategic play. The next episode sends the player into Troy itself, via the Horse, and in a manoeuvre wholly unusual for the genre requires the player to direct only Arkantos, Odysseus and Ajax silently through Troy toward the main gate, to destroy the entryway and grant access to the Greek army. The win conditions of the episode explicitly demand the player does not fight: to fulfil fixed elements of the wider epic cycle,[116] the player must actively play away from genre expectations at the same time as they move towards expected, predefined moments of the myth. There is no indication that the episode is mimicking the *Little Iliad*,[117] fragmentary and lesser-known as it is. What we are seeing here instead is the telling not of a "truth", but the 'telling [of] a "historical" story':[118] it is, roughly, "accurate" to epic precedents, and accurate to popular perceptions of those precedents, but changes enough to accommodate for genre requirements. Furthermore, those requirements are themselves partially moulded to meet the corresponding demands of the Trojan War story. It is perhaps surprising that a genre so well-suited for monumental sieges and displays of military power eschews such practices in *AoM*. The player now refuses to employ 'colonial techniques of domination' present in its 1997 predecessor *Age of Empires*,[119] that "historical" counterpart mentioned above, and other strategies analysed in this chapter. By creatively adapting necessities of the Trojan story and translating them into a workable play experience, the strategic play process is here able to move away from usual operations of large-scale warfare and empire-building to contribute directly to a fresh form of epic storytelling.

*AoM* frequently manipulates the genre framework to tell unique and imaginative stories inspired by Greek myth and literature. In a later episode, a cinematic sequence shows a seafaring journey in which Ajax and Arkantos spot Odysseus' shipwrecked boat. Going ashore, they encounter a herd of pigs who are eventually recognised as Odysseus' human crew in animal form. They are further shocked by the appearance of Circe on a nearby cliff, who transforms the two heroes into boars. Circe is described in Book 10 of the *Odyssey* as a goddess-like enchantress who lures Odysseus' men and transforms them into swine. Her virtual representation is perhaps less enticing than her Homeric rendition wherein which she is welcoming, beautiful, and almost seductive.[120] The game instead characterises her more like a typical villain, though the player only meets her after the transformations have taken place and so misses her initial offences. Arkantos and Ajax, as boars with limited attack power, must herd the pig-men to the other side of the map, fighting off villagers who

[116] The Trojan Horse, as mentioned in n113, was retold primarily through the *Little Iliad*, one of a 'large corpus of myths' that made up the Cyclic Epics, Solomon 2007: 488, 493.
[117] There is no Epeios, 'builder of the Horse', and the virtual horse, unlike the mythical one, was built in a single day, West 2013: 193-5.
[118] Atkins 2003: 90.
[119] Lammes 2010: 1.
[120] Hom. *Od*. 220-236.

are attempting to harvest them for food just as all villagers do in accordance with standard operations of the game. When the player reaches the other side of the map the men are returned to human form, and the player must build a settlement, raise an army and destroy Circe's fortress. The game format is thus turned on its head, wherein villagers are the enemy, and the army is unable to defend itself: yet it is not arbitrary, being a rough translation of Book 10 of the *Odyssey* into a playable strategy experience. McMenomy believes the 'received fiction' of the ancient game 'cannot be understood separately from that game's rules and mechanics'.[121] Here, "Greekness" is not used as a catch-all realm of references to facilitate gameplay based exclusively on military success but instead allows for a fusion of narrative and play that grants imaginative co-construction of a Homeric moment. 'Our relationship with the past is increasingly dominated by imaginative projections.'[122] This, evidently, is no bad thing, as that dynamic allows both myth and game to operate on new levels defined by malleability and adaptive capacity. Here Circe, a figure from Homeric epic and, like the Trojan Horse, a popular image of mythical Greece,[123] is reconfigured to successfully overturn usual strategic play processes. The replacement of ever-successful ancient armies with a near-defenceless band of Greeks is unprecedented for a framework that usually demands well-organised displays of military power.

The game necessarily loses some of its association with classical literature, and indeed other historical literary sources, as it moves into Egypt and the 'Norselands' and instead becomes increasingly reminiscent of modern pop-cultural precedents. Furthermore, player awareness and operation within cultural differences becomes even more profoundly operative. Cultural diversity is increasingly signalled throughout the player's adventure through foreign lands, and so becomes a central theme in the narrative. When the player's Greeks first meet a Norse Jarl, they immediately come to realise they share a common threat. The Jarl speaks of the coming Ragnarok to the player's Greeks and Egyptians – 'Ragnarok!?' Ajax asks – allowing the three cultures to connect over an apocalyptic scenario that, while understood differently from each society's perspective, is eventually realised as constituting a shared, overlapping concern. While, as mentioned before, the Greeks had no concept of the Titans returning, and while we have only minimal implication of apocalyptic events from the ancient Egyptians,[124] this "end of the world" scenario threatening all three civilizations is understood on each culture's level. To the virtual Greeks, the apocalypse is to be brought on by

[121] McMenomy 2015: 107.
[122] Hong 2015: 36.
[123] She is, for example, a recurring antagonist in DC Comics' *Wonder Woman*. Otherwise, see Yarnall 1994 for a history of reconfigurations of Circe. Yarnall 1994: 199 ultimately characterises her as embodying 'sexual hostility and vulnerability and control'; all but the latter are not present in this virtual episode.
[124] Amut implies he will 'destroy all that I have made; the earth shall return to the Abyss… as in its original state', Spell 175.

Kronos' return; to Egyptians, it is the straightforward demise of the world; to the Norsemen, it is Ragnarok.[125] This leads to the three cultures banding together to fight this common enemy, and as the narrative expands outwards from Greece the player is continually required to adopt and adapt, bringing each society's unique characteristics and abilities together to contend with this common menace. In this way, gameplay and narrative intertwine to bolster the theme of intercultural co-operation, since the very functions of the game require an understanding of cultural similarities and differences for player success, while all those operations are couched within a narrative of shared endeavour. The acceptance of cultural variance within a band of heroes is indicative also of wider themes in fantasy fiction like the Fellowship of the *Lord of the Rings* (1954), wherein characters representing different races band together against a ubiquitously threatening force of evil. This new dimension of cultural difference between in-game constituents opposes usual representative techniques like those in *IR*, where non-Romans are depicted as homogenous and are dealt with only by force. The operations, functions and characterisations of the three cultures in *AoM* might even suggest a progressive revision of the genre, continuing basic trends of spatial movement and martial combat while exaggerating the benefits of cultural tolerance and acceptance in line with contemporary liberal beliefs.

Since play is enacted primarily through a single character, Arkantos, and that character is effectively (visually, behaviourally and narratively) Greek, there is necessarily a degree of 'god-like' player control typical of the strategy playstyle even if it is played through an agent (Arkantos) visibly present in the gameworld. Nevertheless, this vaguely contemporary setup of both gameplay and narrative disallows the subsuming of cultures and instead proposes virtual societies as the-same-but-different, co-dependent yet autonomous. In one Nordic episode, for example, the player's three-tiered army comes to a town which requires assistance in defeating the marauding enemy. The native Norsemen here portion off some of the buildings for player use, as they are coded to exercise agency and temporarily share their land and resources. In game terms, this means that the military-training and soldier-producing buildings turn blue, indicating the player's ability to use those structures to create her own military units. Others remain green, and so are off limits. Unlike in *H3*, where players absorb other cultures into their own (which in turn alters their colour-coding), these new allies in *AoM* retain their unique character and depart freely once the scenario is over. The core of the player's travelling army throughout the overall game will necessarily be composed of all three cultures, although the narrative does centralise the Atlanteans, and by proxy the Greeks, towards the very end of the game. Returning to Atlantis in the final episode, it is revealed the greater danger

[125] 'The sun grows black, the earth sinks into the sea. The bright stars vanish from the heavens.' Sib. Prophecy 46-57 in *Prose Edda*.

is based at Arkantos' own home (another Homeric resonance, recalling Odysseus' return to Ithaca). In keeping with the broader themes of the game, though, that final challenge can only be overcome when the player utilises the three cultures simultaneously to defeat the villain Gargarensis. This final sequence, coupled with the general trajectory of the game, is evidence of the spirit of co-operation-without-subjugation coded into the very structures of the game and its wider story. This indicates a significant shift away from normal strategic operations defined throughout as a "Roman language".

*Shifting boundaries*

As a strategy game, *AoM* is no less organisational than others analysed here, but not in such a way as to diminish non-Greek entities or to present the Greeks as naturally superior. The player controls a band of heroes constantly on the move, not constructing an empire but partaking in a ceaseless collaborative quest to slay the evil villain. There remain lingering representational issues typical of the genre, in that it continues to use sorcerous Egyptians and hardy Norsemen as a basis for stereotypical unit characterisation. Even in the most creative episodes, players are still required to gather resources and build armies: Circe must, in the end, fall to the might of the Greeks. It is also entirely possible to miss the references to antiquity, bound up as they are in a variety of fantasy-fiction conventions and malleable genre components. But this does not alter the fact the game is grounded in classical materials to a significant degree, and that the utility of such materials engenders an alternative form of strategic play. *AoM* implies that antiquity can assist in pushing the boundaries of a typically rigid genre framework. The opening Trojan War sequences especially offer play experiences unlike any other Homeric reception in the strategy game corpus: the player must directly act upon the gameworld without the "reward" of bloodshed, implying creative use of genre affordances to meet the needs of the classical story.

The narrative that underpins this unique play experience is furthermore infused with a certain contemporaneity, particularly as the game represents the three cultures as equally capable and naturally co-operative and then requires the player to function consistently within that setup. Such progressive attitudes set it apart from its companion role-player *Titan Quest*, perhaps the one game we may expect it to be similar to due to its shared development staff. *TQ* offered a perception of Other lands from a singular point-of-view, and while *AoM* situates the player through the protagonist Arkantos' perspective, the player must also operate across cultural boundaries with Egyptian and Nordic warriors and villagers alike. Neither is Arkantos' homeland presented as inherently superior. It appears at the very start and very end of the game, both times occupied by either the Trojans or by Gargarensis' forces respectively. Atlantis has a significant hold on the

western imagination and is used in the game primarily for this reason.[126] Outside this, it is not necessarily like the Atlantis of Plato: *AoM*'s Atlantis is not, like Athens, destined for 'political change, commerce, imperialism', and is not fated to become 'an imperial power'.[127] Although an impressive gamespace in the first episode of the game, the player will depart to create temporary outposts and engage in building programmes and heroic campaigns with, rather than to the disbenefit of, its pre-existing inhabitants. Atlantis as place and culture is never characterized as imperialistic here, and even Arkantos' (the player's) actions are not framed as such. As demonstrated by the Nordic example above, players move into spaces primarily to bolster other "native" societies, constituting a banding-together of forces rather than the imposition of an all-powerful agent for the "benefit" of the indigenous population (as in *TQ*). If games like *Civilization* 'foreground assumptions about global politics',[128] past and present, *AoM* presents the player with a model of interculturalism, one dependent on player recognition and implementation of the benefits of working with other cultures. It is a departure from its predecessor, *Age of Empires*, which effectively promoted colonialism,[129] instead reconfiguring classical materials to subvert genre expectations of both strategy game and popular antiquity. The multiculturalist ideology in the twenty-first century political climate may be contested or disagreed with: Guillory, for example, contends such notions as an acceptance of right-wing 'culturalist politics'.[130] But the player of *AoM* is required to partially subvert the usual practices of ancient-world strategy games by acting alongside, rather than against, non-Greco-Roman agents. 'No program of multiculturalism will succeed in producing more than a kind of favorable media-image of minority culture if it is not supported at every point by an understanding of the historical relations between cultures.'[131] In light of this, the developers of *AoM* may have coded multiculturalism "correctly" into the fabric of the gameplay process and the narrative. Through co-operating with this paradigm, players are furthermore 'given insight into the workings of our own complex society',[132] grappling with ancient-world cultural representation on multiple levels to actively construct a modern ideology of tolerance. Games 'reaffirm or call into question players' expectations about the processes and outcomes experienced in everyday life' and give them space to reinforce and 'reproduce' ideology.[133] *AoM* demands we see the strategy corpus as yet another genre site in which antiquity can be used to allow modern audiences to confront, interrogate, and

[126] It has had centuries to accumulate influence in philosophical and popular circles. See Solomon 2007: 485-6.
[127] Vidal-Naquet 1986: 272, 275. Vidal-Naquet also notes here that descriptions of Atlantis are almost identical to those of Athens, only a bit more 'exotic' in places.
[128] De Zamaroczy 2017: 160.
[129] Mukherjee 2017: 104.
[130] Guillory 1995: 44-5, 47. Chakrabarty 2000: 97 refers to multiculturalism as a 'rather tentative concept'.
[131] Guillory 1995: 53.
[132] Nicholas 2005: 1-2.
[133] Voorhees 2009: 257.

reflect on their own behaviours, thoughts, and surroundings, as well as a place in which players may find creative classical reconfigurations and unique play experiences that speak increasingly towards the present.

## 4.7 Conclusions

The collective of expectations brought by players and game makers to the standard ancient strategy game have been codified here into a shared "Roman language", an audio-visual vocabulary used to create and operate the games. Initially, this "Roman language" model was constructed to demonstrate how strategy games demanded player rehearsal of perfectly constructed urban paradises protected by an intrinsically capable and superior military machine. This approach to representing and playing ancient cultures typically leads to the activation of stereotypes, though this in itself is not necessarily the core issue. Stereotypes in videogames, say Alhabash and Wise, 'are simply ways of categorizing people according to a particular attribute' and relate to our ability (and in this case need) to 'cognitively categorize'.[134] Evaluation of strategy games must instead consider the ways in which those stereotypes are refigured to support the genre apparatus and communicate with the player. *IR*, for example, continually characterised the Roman empire by huge marble monuments, martial supremacy, careful organisation and administrative ability, much of which followed production/consumption paradigms recognisable to modern players situated in neoliberal capitalist economies. Such codifications of the empire are themselves dependent on an idealised image of "Rome" based on centuries of accumulative chains of reception, which fit perfectly within a genre framework that demands co-operation with those assumptions. *IR* achieves its aim of allowing players to construct the Roman city and empire by relying on this ahistorical Rome, a "Rome" of post-antique origins. On the other hand, the developers of *IR* presented a different, though no less rigid, version of Pompeii that manipulated the strictures of the genre framework and temporarily denied the player's ability to create perfect, lasting monumental cityscapes. In defining *IR* as a collection of disparate cultural processes, as an indication of the transmedial shift of ideas and concepts pertaining to a "popular antiquity", it is possible to locate how ancient materials may, or may not, correspond to the oft-inflexible genre framework.

The malleability of ancient materials and the adaptability of the usually-rigid strategy apparatus was eventually revealed in the analyses of *AoG* and *AoM*. The former relied on the broader storyworld of popular antiquity to present a strategic take on the usually-spectacular arena, while *AoM* moulded both genre boundaries and classical materials to produce a unique experience

[134] Alhabash and Wise 2014: 1359.

underpinned with contemporary "multicultural" themes. *AoG* maintained, and even exaggerated, the role of statistics and data, yet did so to provide greater narrative potential and more opportunities for player connection with her in-game agents. Even as it remained within roughly familiar parameters of the Roman world, the flexibility with which the materials were treated in an equally unique version of the strategy framework indicates movement away from the uncompromising behaviours that characterise so many other strategic ancient worlds. *AoM* too invigorates the genre by stretching and evolving components of it, bending classical and mythological materials to here fit standardised play processes while there denying many of those behaviours typical of the playstyle. It denotes a new way of strategic play that affords fresh and exciting experiences which thwart player expectations of both game-type and of antiquity. It has been found in strategy game studies that gameplay with real-world issues and cultures does alter more harmful stereotypical ways of thinking.[135] The installation of contemporary attitudes here can help shift antiquity from concerns of power and domination, even in such playstyles that often prioritise them. There is then, in conclusion, an unignorable Romanisation of the genre through a specific visual and playable language, one that perhaps plays too much into the fundamental principle of familiarity to the point of predictability. But there is also significant room for manoeuvre within the framework to allow unique and thought-provoking play experiences within ancient strategy games.

[135] Alhabash and Wise 2014: 1371.

# 5. First-person Antiquity: Contemporaneity & Experimentality

This chapter explores the first-person play experience, which offers an exaggerated connection between player and avatar to enhance immersion within visually detailed and thematically engaging gameworlds. The games presented all possess similar ways of operating, functionally speaking, as the player always embodies the protagonist and enters into the gameworld "as" them, although each subtype of first-person game here provides varying ways of acting upon the world, its events and characters. The perspective of the player is essential to all genres, whether she is acting as the action-man, epic hero, or colonialist Roman. In first-person games, the experience entails "being" the person and taking an exaggeratedly direct place in the world and so the subtexts and themes underpinning it. These games are further bound, it is argued, by their unique treatment of classical materials. The 'experimentality' referred to in the chapter title comes from the games' appropriation not just of an ancient locus, but through incorporation of the numerous readings and interpretations made by post-antique commentators over time. While the games of the previous chapter operate in this way too, to varying extents, they also represent antiquity in relatively normative ways as they draw on an array of often familiar audio-visual signifying materials. These first-person examples constitute highly alternative ways of applying and presenting antiquity within a unique videogame framework, as they mould specific phenomena from, and surrounding, antiquity into varying spaces, aesthetic styles and themes.

Unique play and narrative experiences are therefore made possible in these games because of their implication within wider, multi-layered interpretative networks and the playing-around with these nexuses of meaning by developers and players. *Salammbo: Battle for Carthage* (Cryo Interactive, 2003) is investigated as a layered complex of receptions that spiral out from a single ancient place, set of persons, and story. Whilst using the example to map the fundamentals of first-person play, it is demonstrated that this game provides an otherworldly, *un*familiar play experience through experimental use of a whole network of reception possibilities. Analysis of *Eleusis* (Nocturnal Works, 2013) uncovers an even more complicated map of possible interpretations centring around the ancient Mysteries, and the numerous post-antique responses to it. Because of the many ways in which the Eleusinian Mysteries have been approached and appropriated, the player operates within a heavily reconfigured representation of an ancient religious phenomenon in a modern space, which allows for her collaboration with a huge spectrum of genre conventions themselves all connectible to the Mysteries. The positioning of a practice in antiquity within a twenty-first century space allows overlap with several themes and iconographies, a confluence that engenders player co-production of urgently contemporary issues of environmentalism and urbanism

from an embodied perspective. This capacity for antiquity to be radically revised is expanded upon in the final section where two visual novels, *Melos* (Skarn, 2015) and *Helena's Flowers* (Heiden, 2015), elucidate how first-person videogames of this type allow exploration and interrogation of present-day issues. Through the use of possible versions of "Sappho" and Helen, players navigate and ultimately confront issues of gender politics. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to explore these games as fundamentally unique, immersive experiences that implicate the player within experimental, sometimes bizarre and often intensely contemporary versions of specific ancient places, spaces and people.

## 5.1 Embodiment and perspective

"First-person" constitutes an interrogative category for this thesis as much as it denotes a genre that can take many forms. The first-person videogame here refers foremost to its perspective. The point of the view of the player, always an important consideration in the design process,[1] changes from above the avatar or over-the-shoulder third-person witnessed in previous chapters into a consistent first-person view. The movement of the computer mouse directs the character's point-of-view,[2] while the "WASD" configuration on the keyboard, relating to the individual letter keys, operate as "up, left, down, right" respectively, and are most often used to direct the movement of the protagonist around the gamespace. This setup allows the player to fully control the protagonist, moving the mouse as eyes and keyboard commands as limbs. Keyboard-based inputs also bring up in-game maps and item inventories. There are many variations,[3] the most infamous being the first-person shooter which, for obvious reasons, has virtually no ancient examples: except *Catechumen* (N'Lightning Software, 2000), a Christian videogame set in an ancient Rome where guns appear readily available, and *Legendary* (Spark Unlimited, 2008), a modern-day rendering of the Pandora's Box myth already analysed by Lowe.[4] No matter the subtype, though, the point-of-view (as in cinema) is positioned exactly where the character's eyes are, and so places players 'inside the skull of that character'.[5] Hence the term embodiment, described in videogame studies as 'a way in which cognition can be grounded'.[6] This statement further implies that players must become the "mind" of the character, that her cognition becomes that of the protagonist.

[1] Bates 2004: 39-40.
[2] The games in this chapter are all played on a Windows PC.
[3] Fernandez-Vara 2010.
[4] Lowe 2012: 62.
[5] Galloway 2006: 40-1.
[6] Lankoski and Jarvela 2013: 20.

The view onscreen therefore becomes a window onto the gameworld *via* the protagonist, fundamentally altering player relationships to the gamespace, the characters, and the story playing out within. As in all games, first-person titles rely on 'pre-existing narrative association[s]',[7] which are based on the cultural milieu that surrounds us.[8] But with a player situated 'in' the character, she is the 'participant' in the most direct sense,[9] having total control over most protagonist actions within the game.[10] This connection forces a certain form of immersion in which the player loses herself in the utmost concentration needed to assume her role, much like in the roleplay of Chapter 3. This is important because, while *Nethergate* and *Titan Quest* explicitly and inadvertently expounded varying messages and ideologies relating to colonial pasts, first-person narratives are often deliberately centred around very specific messages and anxieties relating to immediate political and social concerns. For example, the award-winning *Papers, Please* (3909, 2013) has players embody the role of a present-day immigration officer on the border of a fictitious country. Documents of migrants are shown to the player directly, who spends the "day" as a border officer processing individuals requesting access to the country. The game won awards for successfully presenting a rule-heavy bureaucratic desk job amidst a grim atmosphere, in which the player, a 9-to-5 administrator, must face increasingly difficult moral dilemmas. Such themes, furthermore, are likely to be impactful in a twenty-first century world in which immigration is an ever-present, often controversial topic of political conversations around the world. The 'political message' of the first-person adventure is not new,[11] and is especially successful because of the unique connection between the gameworld (and its messages) and the deeply-immersed player. First-person immersion in ancient worlds which are also reconfigured to connect with extra-antique cultural phenomena may also allow the contemplation and interrogation of issues through player embodiment of ancient peoples in ancient spaces. This chapter seeks to unlock how uses of specific ancient-world settings, peoples and places facilitate similarly exploratory, experimental and sometimes socially conscious reflections upon contemporary anxieties.

## 5.2 Ancient Carthage as apocalyptic nightmarescape

A truly radical take on a Roman historical event, *Salammbo: Battle for Carthage* (*Salammbo*) draws on a complex network of receptions to achieve a psychedelic aesthetic, present a bizarre world and confront players with weird, alienised characters and surreal architectures. The game is based on a

[7] Veugun and Querette 2008: 215-6.
[8] Harpold 2007.
[9] Fernandez-Vara 2010.
[10] Perlin 2004: 14.
[11] Kelley 1993: 56.

comic-book of the same name (1980-1986) which is itself grounded in the book *Salammbo* (1862) by Gustav Flaubert. The nineteenth-century novel, and so by proxy the texts to which it is related, is a heavily reconfigured retelling of Polybius' first book in the *Histories*. This is not the first time Polybius has entered the videogame realm: in 1981, an urban myth began to circulate amongst arcade-goers that a game named *Polybius* had been released by the American government. It was said to have induced psychoactive reactions in players, giving rise to the belief that the US government was testing covertly on its population. The name *Polybius* was chosen as a reference to the historian's belief in the importance of eyewitness accounts;[12] as a result, the name 'Polybius' to some in the gamer subculture already has mysterious and dark connotations. This capacity for Roman antiquity to denote strangeness, rather than the sobriety of "historical" Rome in the previous chapter, foreshadows the subversive interpretation of Polybius' *Histories* in the *Salammbo* videogame, wherein players engage with a nexus of meanings derived from the ancient historian, the nineteenth century novelist, and the twentieth century comic-book writer, which in turn provides a unique and estranging experience within an especially weird version of ancient Carthage. This first case study fleshes out the basic mechanics of the first-person videogame, before assessing how the game's dependence on a range of sources related to the locus of ancient Carthage engenders non-normative representations of the ancient world and facilitates a unique play and narrative experience.

The game begins by challenging players to navigate a culturally diverse army of mercenaries who are camped outside ancient Carthage demanding payment for their services after the First Punic War. Like the *Histories*, this story is chiefly centred around the tension between the encamped soldiers on one side of Carthage's walls and the Carthaginians within. Negotiation of the gameworld is done through the Roman Spendius, described by Polybius as a 'runaway slave',[13] and here the virtual protagonist of the adventure. The game opens as the Roman is trapped in a pit-like prison, and the first challenge is to find a way to escape: the player clicks the bones surrounding her using the mouse and positions them in the centre of the pit, building a loose column of human remains which Spendius ascends. Within the wider prison block, the player then combines parts of the environment with objects found in the immediate area to escape the jail, find a way out of Carthage and into the camp. Polybius does not detail how Spendius managed his escape, but here the narrative "fact" that he did is realised as an experience in which the player operates "as" the Roman. Much like in the *Histories*, which relays a narrative of Spendius' negotiation around the Numidian

[12] Matulef 2015.
[13] Polyb. 1.69ff.

and Gallic mercenary camps,[14] the player as virtual Spendius overcomes challenges in the gameworld by speaking with certain characters to further the plot, and by interacting with objects and solving puzzles to enter new gamespaces. The player uses Spendius' ingenuity and diplomatic skills to gain access to the mercenaries' inner circle. *Salammbo*'s Spendius, like his ancient counterpart, uses 'speech and action' to get in with the mercenaries, for he fears that if he remains at the mercy of the Carthaginians he would be 'tortured and put to death'.[15] Although not necessarily its aim, the game and its narrative follow precedents initially set by Polybius' account.

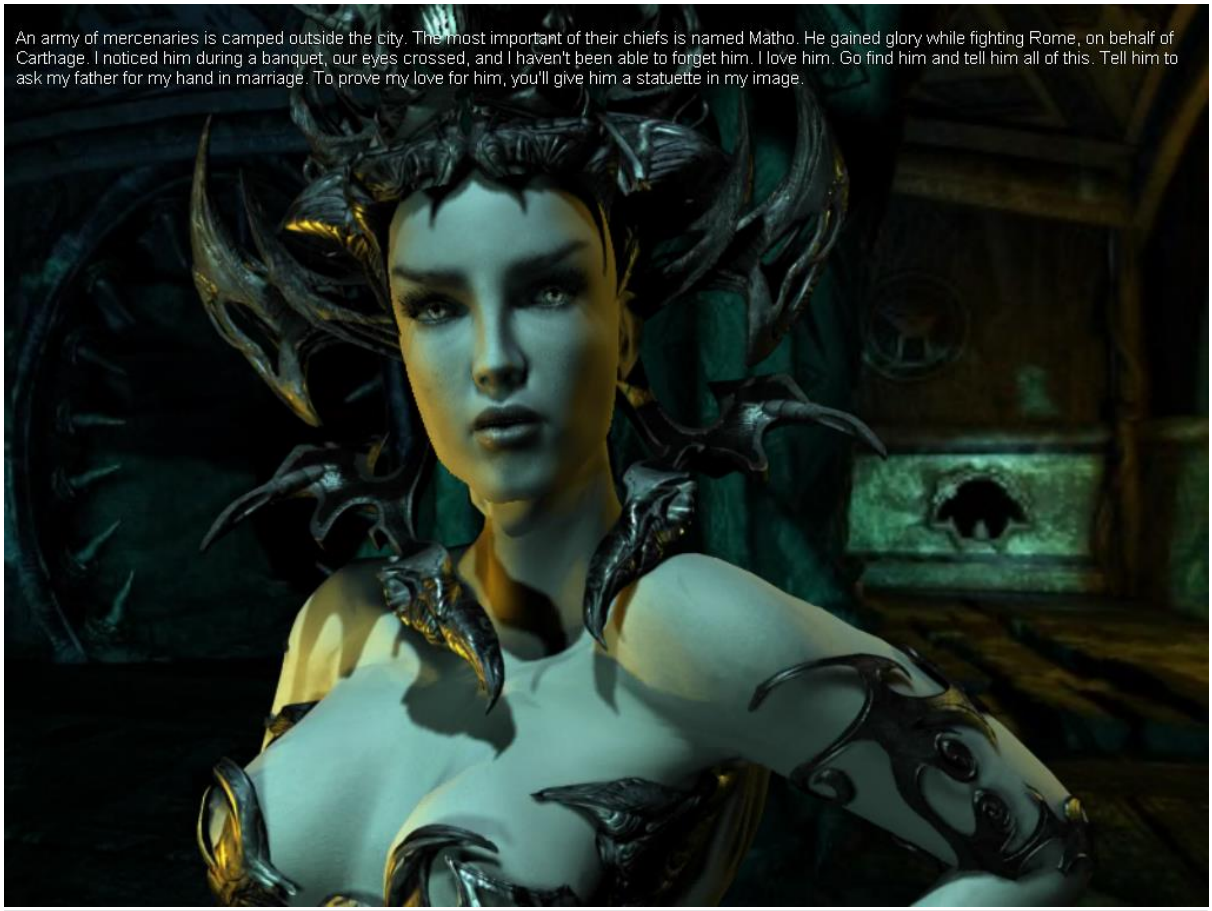
Nevertheless, this apparent historicity is offset by the conscious decision to render this ancient world in psychedelic, science-fictional visuals. Carthage here is a nightmare world, made up of exaggerated, surrealistic topographies, nonsensical jagged-topped buildings and soldiers wearing spiked and over-the-top armours (Images 5.1 & 5.2). If videogames, and particularly those of this type, are about the world more than anything else,[16] *Salammbo*'s Carthage is therefore a considered representation of the region as deliberately non-ancient, characterised as it is by an absence of usual arenas, columns, homogenous military units and other classical symbols witnessed throughout this project. This experimental method of representation stems from two specific, interrelating sources. First, the game borrows its strange aesthetic style from Philippe Druillet's comic-book. Druillet created art and stories for *Heavy Metal* magazine, known for its portrayal of exaggerated female forms, fantasy-inspired violence, and psychedelic imagery; other narratives from antiquity have been appropriated for the publication, such as the story of Odysseus.[17] Second, both game and comic intersect thematically with Flaubert's novel. While his book is not told from the first-person through Spendius, the aesthetics for both succeeding *Salammbo* interpretations stemmed from Flaubert's literary enterprise. Flaubert wished to describe a world of 'cultural inaccessibility', one which communicated 'alienation, unknowability, and inaccessibility'.[18] Throughout his novel Flaubert created a Carthage so unlike our own world that it became part of the reader's attraction to and interpretation of the story. The 'aspects of hallucination and reverie' in the comic-book are claimed by Lagerwall to be part of Flaubert's own creative mental state, suggesting then that the radical approach taken by the novelist was adopted by Druillet.[19] In this way, the representational techniques of the game are reflective of at least two personal, experimental approaches to, and heavy modifications of, a story and place from ancient history.

[14] Polyb. 1.65.
[15] Polyb. 1.69.
[16] Kelley 1993: 53.
[17] Jenkins 2011: 221, 229.
[18] Toumayan 2008: 52.
[19] Lagerwall 2014: 34, 62.

**5.1 & 5.2**: Walls of Carthage and a Gallic mercenary in *Salammbo*.

The more the player plays, the more the player of *Salammbo* becomes bound-up in this contemporising of an ancient space, time and story. Items one would expect in an ancient-world military environment are replaced with weird weaponry and fluorescent potions, engendering a kind of "dream-world" rendition of antiquity in which the player exists and functions. The game further strays from the historical account and moves towards Flaubert's own inventions by introducing Salammbo, fictional priestess of Carthage, and the Zaimph, a shroud sacred to the people of the city and significant plot device. Salammbo is the quintessential science-fictional *Heavy Metal* female (Image 5.3): dark, attractive, with piercing eyes and a large chest. Face-to-face conversations between Spendius and Salammbo, and between Spendius and the mercenary Matho, reveal the two non-playable characters to be intensely in love, and it is this which drives the actions of Spendius and the player, who must help them if he hopes to ally himself with the mercenaries. Despite their strange appearances, the characters are not being 'Othered' in the same way as non-Graeco-Romans of the games of previous chapters. Far from the homogeneity of the barbarian of *IR* in Chapter 4, the uniqueness of each individual visualisation encourages a diverse cast of strange and distinctive characters. Rather than directing a Greek hero like the protagonist of *TQ* against uniformly similar peoples and enemies, Salammbo and Matho in this game both look directly at the player through the screen whenever they enter into conversation. Otherness here is therefore not witnessed from a distance, or a position of superiority, but is lived in by the player. This could conceivably be a response to Polybius' own characterisation of the mercenaries as 'a confused herd of barbarians' who 'no longer can be called human beings', as opposed to the 'educated, law-abiding, and civilized' townsfolk.[20] Yet in *Salammbo*, everything and everyone is weird: even Spendius, the player-character, is long-faced and alien-grey with bright-red lines for eyes. The overall result is a game that embraces this protracted "weird antiquity", presenting the ancient world as so different from our own while, crucially, directly implanting the player into it.

[20] Polyb. 1.65, 1.81.




**5.3:** The priestess Salammbo.

To make sense of *Salammbo*, the skewed way it presents players with the ancient world, and the consequent upending of Othering dynamics typical of other ancient games, we must therefore consider its conversation with other texts rather than as another (or a standalone) reconfiguration of the historical source. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler suggest that for a game to earn the moniker of 'historical', it 'has to begin at a clear point in real world history and that history has to have a manifest effect on the nature of the game experience'.[21] *Salammbo* does this, yet it is also *un*familiar, weighted by an experimental aesthetic agenda that presents ancient Carthage as science-fictional dreamscape. There is a strong sense here that *Salammbo* is an operative cognitive, interpretative experience not as an ancient game like previous titles in this thesis, wherein players communicate with standardised signifiers of antiquity, but as the product of a wide interconnecting network of responses to this collective of Roman/Carthaginian signifiers, some of which are fictional, others historical, all of which are interrelated. Some familiarity with the "idea" of the past is arguably always necessary to engage with a historical game,[22] and when ancient world settings 'lack the

[21] MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007: 204.
[22] Veugun and Querette 2008: 221, 226.

iconographic and cultural identifiers that connect them with a specific cultural milieu… we find use of a cultural eclecticism and exoticism'.[23] The standard see/interpret process of play remains without the same logic and conventions as other ancient games, as *Salammbo* consciously adopts bizarre visual styles and fantastical fiction aesthetics to disturb usual characterisations of "Romans" or "non-Romans", and further characterise everyone under the same alienising, "exotic" rubric. The aim to immerse the player in a surreal, psychedelic antiquity is made possible through decades of appropriation that have experimented with and made weird the ancient world, and particularly this part of antiquity. Experimentality is therefore at the very core of the game, upending the usual of methods of presenting ancient worlds by subscribing to realms outside Polybius' *Histories*, allowing Otherness to permeate every facet of the experience, and presenting an almost profoundly different form of cognitive, interpretative interaction.

When not engaging in face-to-face conversations, the player is interacting with her environment, interpreting objects and spaces to progress through the game and story, taking their time to look at the environment, pondering its contents, devising strategies and solving puzzles. These constitute the standard first-person gameplay practice, eschewing real-time combative sequences of action-based adventures and the levelling-up, create-your-own-hero dynamics of the CRPG in favour of mentally-stimulating, often devious puzzles built into the gameworld. In *Salammbo*, the player engages in the play process as normal to a point but must also engage cognitively with signifiers *un*connected to the usual dim resonances of antiquity to overcome in-game challenges. When becoming "one" with the virtual Spendius, the player is instead simultaneously embodying a product of Polybius' historical agent, Flaubert's exoticized character, and a version of Spendius concomitant with Druillet's cast of psychedelic aliens. In this way, the player "becomes" a product of this chain of reception, inhabiting an alien individual in a bizarre dreamscape that is at once connected with all three sources. The ancient historian continues to be a component of this mix of moving parts, but his initial narrative is routinely challenged by this experimental approach to visualisation, narrativization and interaction. While the game is arguably unconcerned with contemporary issues, sidestepping the "us and them" dynamic by weirding everyone, it reflects an aesthetic agenda set in motion by multiple authors across time, a way of visualising antiquity made possible by its innate capacity to be reconfigured in increasingly non-normative ways. It is experimental in its approach to this story of Carthage partially because of the absence of an 'Othering' theme, where there could easily have been one. As a result, this case study has demonstrated the fundamental mechanics of the first-person videogame whilst locating the

[23] Garcia Morcillo and Hanesworth 2015: 7.

game within a multi-lateral nexus of interconnecting materials, moving in and out of both texts from antiquity and the contemporary texts it has informed and revelling in its lack of connection to a historical "reality". Both the developers conceiving of this ancient world and the players interacting with it are interplaying in-and-out of a wide spectrum of influences stemming not just from Polybius but other playful interpretations of this ancient Roman/Carthaginian space and time.

### 5.3 First-person fear & New Age spirituality in *Eleusis*

The first-person game type can also exploit the limited vision and claustrophobic atmosphere that accompanies the act of becoming a virtual agent. The ancient first-person horror game further pushes the boundaries of what ancient materials can do in virtual worlds, as developers have routinely incorporated antiquity into fearful, uneasy embodied experiences. First-person horror games deliberately immerse the player in a sense of anticipated dread.[24] The player then identifies with the protagonist and so shares in that dread:[25] as characters move, so too do players themselves, "jumping" as monsters leap from dark corners or creeping tentatively forward as eerie noises emanate from unseen spaces. Horror games, then, put 'stability and security… under constant siege'.[26] The use of the perspective is well-established in cinema as a means of conveying powerlessness, alienation, and the generation of fear for the "benefit" of the viewer via the protagonist,[27] and the visual codes and narrative themes of cinema invariably influence the content of horror videogames.[28] Furthermore, antiquity has provided horror cinema with a significant cast of mythological monsters.[29] There is therefore plenty of space for the transmedial movement of conventions into this form of first-person videogame. However, the difference in medium engenders significantly different results. The horror game exploits its uniqueness as interactive and immersive to frustrate 'hermeneutic expectations' and disrupt the regular process of gameplay.[30] In this way, standard cognitive processes of play are fundamentally disturbed, and standard ways of operating are purposefully destabilised to offer profoundly unique game experiences.

First-person antiquity in this mode is always designed to disturb players and throw off their sense of direction. Antiquity here frustrates the player's ability to navigate space and forces her into vulnerable position. First-person games that use the ancient world to achieve these aims also tend

[24] Grant 2010: 3-4.
[25] Habel and Kooyman 2014: 6.
[26] Habel and Kooyman 2014: 2.
[27] Galloway 2006: 48-9.
[28] Grant 2010: 1-2, 3-4.
[29] Lindner 2016: 151, 155.
[30] Krzywinska 2015: 294.

to adopt familiar settings that are nevertheless populated with unfamiliar constituents. The labyrinth is an especially fruitful source of inspiration for those developers wishing to instil in players the fear of being lost and the sense of dread engendered when trapped in a gamespace. One title, *Depths of Fear: Knossos* (Dirigo Games, 2014), promises that the player will 'learn the meaning of fear' when they embark upon their labyrinthine journey.[31] At its core, the Greek myth concerning Theseus and the Minotaur tells the story of the hero Theseus entering the labyrinth and valiantly killing the beast within. As virtual Theseus, the player of *Depths of Fear* must navigate the darkness and contend with minotaurs and snake-headed Gorgons as they appear from pitch-black recesses and hidden areas. It is, furthermore, a 'Depth', underground, a space that connotes fear and anxiety.[32] In navigating this virtual labyrinth, the player anticipates what is around the next corner without knowing what will be there. Here, the architecture of the labyrinth is used to exaggerate a sense of being lost and helpless, while the labyrinth space itself is populated with a variety of hostile creatures from Greek mythology. 'One key way in which survival horror games create their emotional effect is by maintaining a state of player vulnerability, often by suspending the player in a state of incomplete knowledge.'[33] The Knossos labyrinth especially stimulates and excited the popular imagination, making it a suitable site for developers wishing to upend the usual ancient gameplay process. Nineteenth-century century attempts to locate historical realities of the Minotaur myth through the archaeological remains of the Knossos site resulted in hugely influential publications by Arthur Evans.[34] Yet Knossos may also connote something much more frightening. For example, "The God Complex" (S06 E11) episode of *Doctor Who* (2005-present) reconfigures the myth to situate a terrifying Minotaur within a 'maze-like hotel, feeding on people'.[35] The labyrinth in popular culture is therefore often a place where people are either 'destroyed by the Minotaur' or must wander around 'unable to find an exit' before perishing, as Plutarch describes it.[36] The player of *Depths of Fear* is similarly lost in a labyrinth of monsters, and, despite embodying the characteristically heroic and capable Theseus,[37] is often left feeling impotent and threatened, subverting both the heroic Greek dynamic and the usually capable qualities of the player. It also disrupts standard ways of visualising a Greek world so often typified by bright white marble, presenting instead a dark, oppressive

[31] Steam, "Depths of Fear::Knossos".
[32] As a narrative mechanism, the 'fear and horror' of underground spaces is exploited in Starz *Spartacus*, S01 E01 'The Red Serpent', Hobden forthcoming.
[33] El-Nasr et al 2007.
[34] Published across 1921-1935 to significant impact, Vavouranakis 2013: 216-7. See also Vavouranakis 2013: 214 on the Knossos dig site.
[35] Potter 2016.
[36] Plut. *Thes*. 15.2.
[37] Revered as slayer of monsters and mythic sovereign of Athens, Apollod. *Bibl.* E.1-5, 11; Plutarch *The*. 6, 8 has him emulating Hercules, most famous of heroes. Isocrates 10.27-28 focusses on his valiant victory over the Minotaur and eventual returning of captive children to their parents.

gamespace. The labyrinth is already almost a ready-made horror-gameworld, requiring only the exaggeration of certain possibilities (e.g., the labyrinth as "otherworldly", or personally threatening) to turn it into a game experience that unsettles the player.

The *Eleusis* (2013) game continues to use ancient materials to disturb its player, even as it moves away from explicitly dread-inducing, complex gamespaces like the virtual labyrinth of *Knossos*. Where that game seeks to frighten players by troubling her mastery over the gameworld and springing monsters on them from around corners, *Eleusis* is not designed to "make the player jump", but nevertheless uses a mysterious, modern-day rendering of the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries to bring the player into a psychologically unsettling experience. The atmosphere of *Eleusis* is more akin to recent horror films like *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015). Set in the isolated rurality of seventeenth-century New England, that film draws on a range of historical sources and modern conventions to present the story of a Christian family living in perpetual fear of the Devil, witches, and other such then-contemporary spiritual concerns. Instead of focussing on the "shock value" of serial killers and monsters, this cerebral method of producing horror relies on gradual pacing and extended periods of silence to unnerve its audiences. This form of horror fiction has been given the moniker of 'post-horror'.[38] The slow-moving, unsettling progression of a post-horror narrative seeks to unsettle more than outright terrify, and it is this mode of creating the horror effect that is operative in the *Eleusis* game. By embedding ancient materials into a mysterious, isolated setting, *Eleusis* utilises the gothic narrative pattern wherein the exploitation of 'anxieties that primitive pasts have not been successfully superseded' delivers the necessary feeling of fear.[39] It achieves this not by setting the game in the past, as *The Witch* does, but by bringing pieces of the Eleusinian Mysteries into a modern-day setting and intermixing them with a variety of genre conventions and imageries, many of which already pertain to the Mysteries. The aim of this case study is to investigate in-depth the many ways in which Mysteries-related conventions, iconographies and phenomena converse with tenets and imageries of contemporary horror fiction to produce a narratively complex and thematically rich experience. After introducing the Mysteries and summarising the plot, this case study is broken into three distinct-but-overlapping subsections: modernity, eco-feminism, and New Age spirituality. Furthermore, is it illustrated that because of this range of reconfiguration the game both implicitly and explicitly engages with contemporary issues like environmentalism and the effects of urbanisation on the natural world. The game is ultimately dependent on the spectrum of possible interpretations stemming from the Eleusinian Mysteries themselves as constructed over time by numerous individuals, groups and collectives. As a result, analysis of the *Eleusis* game

[38] A term suggested by Rose 2017 to describe the recent trend of 'unsettling' horror films.
[39] Kirkland 2012: 114.

illustrates the malleability of a single locus of ancient Greek culture, and the ability for the many post-antique readings of those Mysteries to constitute an experimental, multifaceted play and narrative experience.

*The Eleusinian Mysteries*

The ancient Eleusinian Mysteries took place both inside Athens and at the Eleusis site on the peripheries of the city. They were open to all Greek-speakers who, upon undertaking the rites, had conferred upon them certain personal and spiritual benefits. The Telesterion, the central structure at Eleusis, housed the most secret and 'dramatic' parts of the ritual,[40] which to this day remain unknown to contemporary observers. For example, scholars know that initiates drank the *kykeon*, a special potion, but it is unclear to them when this was consumed,[41] and therefore for what reasons. Much of what happened within the site remains unknown, constituting an enduringly unknowable mystery. Evans complains that modern scholars 'have consistently made some assumptions' about both the site and the rituals.[42] The terminology of the ritual itself 'plays at secrecy', thus inviting all manner of speculation.[43] This leads some analysts to use emotive and romantic language,[44] which Sourvinou-Inwood, for example, explicitly warns against.[45] This unknowability stems primarily from a fragmentary topology and archaeology, coupled with the unreliability of a broad range of literary sources from across a wide chronology (from Greek to Roman Christian) and the then-contemporary forbidding of any initiate to talk about the Mysteries with outsiders.[46] Recent studies attempt to counter this ambiguity by deploying cognitive and experiential methodologies. Petridou attempts not to uncover what definitely took place, but rather the 'possible ways' the rites could have been perceived.[47] Ustinova characterizes Eleusis as one of antiquity's 'embodied mystery experiences', using experiential approaches to also locate possibilities rather than definitive truths.[48] Consequently, the Mysteries remain ultimately unknowable, while recent academic engagement accepts this and instead widens interpretative possibilities and, in doing so, paradoxically undefines

[40] Bowden 2010: 37.
[41] Burkert 1983: 274-5.
[42] Evans 2002: 227.
[43] Parker 2007: 354.
[44] Ruck 2008b: 96, one of the more "fringe" scholars, speaks of 'swampy ground' where 'reeds grow and flower profusely, or a region where 'we can almost expect still to hear the exultant cries of the initiates'.
[45] Sourvinou-Inwood 1997: 132 attempts to move away from 'preconceived moulds' and ideas about the Mysteries.
[46] Most famously, Alcibiades was accused of mocking, and thus revealing, the secrets of the Mysteries, Plut. *Alc*. 19; Thuc. 28.
[47] Petridou 2013: 310.
[48] Ustinova 2013: 106.

the rituals. This intellectual climate reflects Eleusis' character as a fittingly mysterious and multifaceted place in the imagination, resulting in a more than suitable body of material for videogame developers operating creatively.

Despite its enduring secrets, Eleusis was and remains intimately connected with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.[49] The Hymn tells the story of Persephone's abduction by Hades and separation from her mother Demeter, goddess of agriculture, and is traditionally understood to be reflective of themes of agricultural prosperity and the cyclical disappearance/reappearance of vegetation as seasons come and go.[50] Ritual actions such as the drinking of the *kykeon* are undertaken by Demeter in the story, leading some to conflate what happens in the *Hymn* with what must have happened at the ritual itself. Clay warns, however, that the *Hymn* cannot fully elucidate the real happenings at Eleusis, and that doing so deflates the intricacies of the poem.[51] Nevertheless, the *Hymn* has undoubtedly 'captured the imagination of modern readers',[52] who might assume its passages to be at least roughly analogous to the rituals performed at the Mysteries. Furthermore, motifs in the myth may also be found in modern Eleusinian folklore: stories are still told of 'the charitable woman Demetra and her beautiful daughter who was abducted by a Turk',[53] implying the capacity for this story so central to the Mysteries to evolve as time goes by. The principal narrative of the rites and the *Hymn* as constructed by historians and archaeologists is effectively set in stone: it is known where they happened, we have access to the timeline of events, and there is near-universal consensus that the Mysteries and *Hymn* were concerned with the processes of the natural world. Nevertheless, the many trajectories the Mysteries and its concomitant sources have undertaken and the many meanings that have subsequently become attached to them allow the *Eleusis* game to be wide-ranging, yet specifically and curiously "Eleusinian" (as the folkloric story above), in its use of materials. The Mysteries, the *Hymn* and the wider traditions surrounding both fall under study in the following analysis, which demonstrates in separate sections how the many commentaries, nuances, readings, imageries and themes applied to the Mysteries over time collaborate and co-operate to present the player with a complex interactive experience.

[49] Bowden 2010: 28.
[50] Bowden 2010: 46-7; Burkert 1983: 259-60; Clay 1989: 202, 255.
[51] Clay 1989: 203-4, 344; cf. Bowden 2010: 42.
[52] Clinton 1993: 112-3.
[53] Mylonas 1961: 12.

*Game summary*

*Eleusis* is especially narrative-heavy. As in the investigation of *God of War* in Chapter 2, the complexity of the narrative means that it will be useful here to summarise the story of the *Eleusis* game before embarking on further analysis. The game begins with a non-playable cutscene, in which the male protagonist is driving his car through a deserted rural space. An unseen narrator informs us that he has received a letter from his Greek mother asking him to leave his American home to visit her.[54] The screen is filled by a single lamppost, a downwards-facing light and a barely-visible electrical box, before the camera pans out to show the protagonist's car rolling into view on a country road. The player then enters the first-person perspective, and immediately witnesses a boulder falling from the overhanging cliffs and crashing into the vehicle. The screen goes dark and comes back into focus, showing the still-functioning car dashboard and the front of the wrecked vehicle. The player, gaining control, must retrieve an electric torch from the car-boot and proceed down an unlit path in search of help. Eventually, she reaches the entrance to a small hamlet when a scream tears through the silence. Following it to a nearby shed the player meets the partially visible face of an imprisoned woman, who explains she has been locked inside against her will. The first act of the game requires player exploration of the village to locate the tools necessary to open this makeshift jail. Finding ways through locked doors and powering up old generators to light up cellars, the player eventually finds the key to the shed, before being knocked unconscious by a mysterious robed figure. The "horror" effect here is generated primarily by the unseen, rather than the seen: the locked door, the imprisoned woman, empty eerie villages and robed figures work together to produce a sense of pseudo-cultic mystery.

The protagonist awakens to find himself buried alive, and, upon freeing himself, the player regains control and sets to finding out who lives in this seemingly deserted village, what they are up to, and where this now-missing imprisoned woman is. The player explores the village and its surrounding countryside, picking up items and finding ways to manipulate their ordinary functions to gain access to other buildings; finding hidden passages and uncovering secrets through notes found in houses, she gradually reveals the truth about this unnamed, but nevertheless "Eleusinian", settlement. There are no combative moments in the game, bar one: every time the player exposes a particularly dramatic secret, a lone wolf appears. The player must outrun(!) the animal, for if she is caught the game is over. Otherwise the game maintains a deliberately slow pace, allowing the player 'to go off on [her] own to explore the space'.[55] When the player eventually gains access to the

[54] The narrator's generic American accent implies his nationality, though it is never explicitly stated.
[55] A standard feature of horror games, Grant 2010: 15.

mansion in the centre of the village, she finds and peruses three books. One details the Eleusinian Mysteries, their mythical origins, and the practices undertook by initiates. Another explains the Typhoeus myth, the relevance of which remains unknown until the end of the game, while the third describes the 'science' behind ancient Greek automata. In the game, the phenomenon of Greek automata provides a handy explanation as to how supposedly ancient buildings discovered during play can still operate mechanically, as if by magic. It has been argued that automata occupied a semi-magical place in the ancient imagination,[56] and stands as a suitable, quasi-scientific explanation of mechanical architectures within the logic of the game. The player must pay especial attention to the Mysteries book and read the information it contains carefully: this in-game tome tells the player how to create the *kykeon*, the ceremonial drink. She locates the ingredients for the *kykeon* and imbibes the potion, which causes the protagonist to witness hallucinations. Following a ghostly figure, the player locates and enters an ancient temple and encounters a single chest within. Tracking down fragments of the chest key, an artefact is gained from the chest and the player is prompted to enter the Christian church in the middle of the village. Descending into its catacombs, the player is finally confronted with this elusive, black-robed cult community; the 'imprisoned woman' is revealed to be the cult leader, who tells the protagonist that he must decide whether to disrupt the ritual, or to bond with Typhoeus, thereby wiping out humanity and reclaiming the planet. Whichever decision is made, the player witnesses a final post-credits shot of an urban space, wherein a vortex appears, implying that the ancient forces of "reclamation" remains an inevitable threat to the real world.

*Modernity and environmentalism*

Much of the play experience revolves around navigating the isolated village and the rural space surrounding it. To overcome this gamespace and the challenges within, and thereby to gain some tenuous level of control over this dark and eerie setting, players locate everyday items within the gameworld that are instantly recognisable to the player: keys to unlock doors, screwdrivers to open containers, jerry cans to contain liquids. The player is always made aware of and always thinking about these ordinary objects as a primary means of penetrating the darkness and securing themselves in relative safety. Like previous horror games, the protagonist of the game is merely 'scraping through', not dominating his surroundings but merely surviving,[57] and does so with the use of these items. In hunting for the key to free the imprisoned woman, the player must locate a piece

[56] Bosak-Schroeder 2016: 123.
[57] Krzywinska 2015: 296.

of a hosepipe and a container, and syphon off gas from an abandoned Vespa scooter. This is used to power a generator inside a cellar, wherein the key is found. Aside from these items, the community is distinctly antiquated: houses are filled with old furniture and books, devoid of televisions and telephones. Now, 'horror videogames call on players to perform in regulated and coordinated ways on situations that arise'.[58] In the world of *Eleusis*, modern paraphernalia is the player's only ally. Furthermore, as the summary above illustrates, the opening non-interactive cutscenes focus on electrical boxes, cables, an automobile and its lighted dashboard. When the protagonist becomes stranded, his handheld electric torch is the only useable barrier between himself and all-consuming darkness. The game therefore juxtaposes the surrounding rural area with the contemporary equipment possessed, located and used by the player to assist the protagonist. This dynamic presents a tension between modernity and the traditional, countryside setting, wherein modern paraphernalia must be used with ingenuity and creativity to overcome the unsettling surroundings and so navigate the gamespace.

This focus on the constructed, manufactured objects speaks outwards towards a wider thematic contrast between modernity and the rurality of the old-fashioned, lost-in-time village environment. This not only constitutes a principal theme of the game overall, it is important because it also utilises core features of the Mysteries, including the rites' emphasis on torchlight and darkness. The ancient rites focussed on the contrast between light and dark,[59] much like the wider horror genre. Torchlight in the Greek rituals and the meaning behind its presence are furthermore central to studies of the ancient Mysteries.[60] Torches are also essential for successful play in *Eleusis*, wherein darkness can only be overcome using electronic means (i.e. the torch). The single beam of artificial light uncovers the unseen, creating an emphasized 'visual obscurity' typical of horror games.[61] There is therefore a crossover between game requirement, ancient practice, and the wider horror genre, as both the notion of light and dark from the Mysteries and the representation of light and dark in the game intertwine. This relationship, furthermore, happens within a genre framework which is itself contorted to offer a horror experience replete with obscured visuals and the player's feelings of tension. Sometimes the player enters a building and becomes 'enclosed' and entrapped.[62] The first-person perspective exaggerates the unsettling feeling underpinning play by using both torchlight and the walls of the building to constraint the vision of the player (Image 5.4). Perspective

[58] Krzywinska 2015: 295.
[59] Ustinova 2013: 116-7; Bowden 2010: 215; Patera 2010: 280.
[60] Clay 1989: 217; Kerenyi 1970: 197. Patera 2010: 283 notes how important torchlight was 'even though we cannot precisely settle the moments of its appearance'.
[61] El-Nasr et al 2007.
[62] Grant 2010: 15.

essentially limits and brackets player vision, forcing her to focus on the single beam of artificial light and so come to appreciate it as a simple but focal element of play.

**5.4:** Inside a building in *Eleusis*.

Trees, rivers, and rocky terrains encircle the village and often encroach upon the boundaries of the settlement. The player must therefore contend with the natural world, sometimes using it to hide, while other times anxiously awaiting the emergence of some terrifying (usually non-existent) threat. The dominance of nature, visually and thematically, connects this dimension of the game with the commonly-held association between the *Hymn*, the Mysteries and the natural environment. Both *Hymn* and game place significant emphasis on the renewing capacities of nature, and the destructive-and-regenerative patterns it follows. In the final sequences of the game, the cultists reveal their wish to envelop the world with 'the great power of Typhoeus'. The cult leader insists the player takes on 'the power to shape reality' so that she might 'redeem this world'. The implication is that this redemption of the world will entail a return to times-past. If the player chooses to engage with the ritual, the protagonist ascends to godhood, instilling in him 'a new kind of awareness'. He tells the player directly that he intends to 'shape the world according to my own

will'. Typhoeus is used here as a seemingly generic symbolizer for destruction. Classical authors have described Typhoeus as 'furious' and 'fierce';[63] a 'fire-breathing' creature;[64] Homer likens Typhoeus to the groaning of the earth beneath the Achaean army;[65] and he is used by Plato as an analogy for the unknowable.[66] Nonnus attributes him with the ability to fundamentally alter the very elements of the natural world,[67] which fits well within this emerging theme of rurality, environment and modernity, and the redemptive capacities of nature. While Typhoeus has no obvious connection with the Mysteries, he is no doubt used here as a means to "wipe the slate clean" through the destructive capabilities implied by many of the above ancient authors. Otherwise, the player can disrupt the ceremony, causing the surrounding catacombs to fall apart. Escaping, the protagonist says to the player that he had in that moment 'the power to either change or preserve the world as we know it'. He goes on: 'I know now that there are forces lurking hidden in our reality that we are unaware of, as we are occupied by our daily life. These forces are constantly trying to enter our world. It's up to us whether to let them in or not.' The former choice results in the player's active engagement with the pseudo-Eleusinian cultists' ideology as he assists in reclaiming the world. Considering the gameworld is consistently presented as rural, natural and idyllic (despite the claustrophobic darkness), and considering the necessary manipulation of modern materials against this backdrop, the cultists' motivations appear to be in line with a particular reading of the Eleusinian rites, one pertaining to the importance of environmental renewal. This choice between ideologies posed to the player, between assisting in renewing the world or refusing to disrupt modernity, is made possible by its association with the Mysteries and the environmentally-focussed ideology underpinning it.

This reading of the game correlates with many twentieth-century interpretations of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the *Hymn* that align it explicitly with the theme of nature, as modern sources often even employ terminology that connotes such a reclamation of the planet through the power of the natural world. The *Hymn* places some emphasis on the renewing capacities of nature,[68] while a Herodotean story tells of a divine apparition travelling from Eleusis to defend the Athenians against the Persians 'who were ravaging their fertile fields'.[69] A Lucian scholion elsewhere 'states explicitly, the rites both link and promote the reproduction of humankind and agriculture'.[70]

[63] Aesch. *PV.* 350-57.
[64] Aes. *Sept* 488-94.
[65] Hom. *Il.* 2.780-5.
[66] Pl. *Phdr.* 230a.
[67] Nonnus, *Dion.* 2.258-355 and 2.214-7. Also implied in Hes. *Theog.* 865-80.
[68] *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 2.380-87.
[69] Hdt. 8.65; Parker 2007: 327.
[70] Foley 1994: 73-4.

Furthermore, the events of the Hymn have been interpreted as representing the cyclicality of the natural world specifically: as Demeter grieves, the crops suffer, whereas her return to Olympus engenders 'the restoration of the natural order'.[71] Similarly, Burkert describes the journey to Eleusis by initiates as a movement out of the urban Athenian space towards 'regression', and into the world of nature.[72] The chasm between our modern industrial world, one experienced by player and protagonist, and the natural utopia envisioned and hoped for by the Greeks according to these references (and our cultists), has also led to deeply emotive descriptions of contemporary Eleusis in twentieth-century scholarship. Ruck describes the road to Eleusis now as one of 'ramshackle shops and industrial buildings', 'dismal suburbs', and an 'industrialized' Rarian plain.[73] Hoffmann believes that modern humanity's distance from the nature-loving Greeks and their behaviours 'has made possible a vigorous domination of nature', and exploitation of the natural world.[74] The description of modern-day Eleusis by Lundborg also requires the reader to imagine an Athens and Eleusis 'not yet laid waste by man-made deforestation'.[75] These concerns resonate with the virtual cultists' anxiety about their immediate environment. If the player sides with the cultists, she is thereby enacting the renewal of nature against the modern urban world in a way that echoes the laments of the above writers. The game borrows from and incorporates such interpretations concerning the meaning of the Mysteries and the *Hymn*, drawing the player into a journey that prioritises juxtaposition between modern instrument and natural world and compounds that with a final decision between reclaiming the world or leaving it as it is. In this way, the universally familiar concerns of urbanisation and environmental damage, oft reported in present-day media already, are channelled through post-antique interpretations of the Mysteries that assert this to be the primary ideological concern of initiates, both historical and in-game. This interpretation of the game narrative is made possible by a synching-up of in-game events and dominant readings imposed upon the ancient Mysteries.

*Intersecting environmentalism with twentieth-century feminism*

This "nature reading" of the game is further supported by the primacy of the female in the game. The three figures of import are the protagonist, the mysterious woman encountered at the beginning and end of the game, and the protagonist's unseen mother. It is revealed as the game starts that the protagonist is motivated to travel, and so become stranded in the countryside, at the request of his mother. The mysterious female character, initially feigning imprisonment at the

[71] Clay 1989: 247-9.
[72] Burkert 1983: 296.
[73] Ruck 2008b: 85. Association with 'non-natural' ways of living, Ruck 2008b: 55-6.
[74] Hoffmann 2008: 143-4.
[75] Lundborg 2012: 11.

beginning of the game, is revealed in the end to be the cult leader. Her revelatory words imply that she has been guiding the protagonist through the journey carried out by the player. As a result, two of three characters are women, and both are ultimately instigators of the game and its events from start to finish. There are further possible parallels between details of the narrative and moments in the *Hymn*. For example, Demeter's 'self-imposed isolation'[76] appears to be mimicked by the mysterious woman, although the goddess does so out of grief whereas the woman in the game does so for the purposes of trickery and manipulation. Although this implies usage of the "wily" female stereotype, it could also be read that both unseen mother and mysterious woman initiate the (male) *protagonist's* 'isolation' in the village. Furthermore, while Persephone is forced into sexual maturity and subjugation,[77] the only individual forced into anything in the game is this male protagonist. Despite the protagonist being controlled by the player, the narrative dictates that the real instigators of this journey are female figures of authority, the mother and the cult leader.

Such positioning of women in the narrative, coupled with the desire of the mysterious woman to bring about the renewal of the world, further demonstrates a connection with central themes of the Hymn and the Mysteries.[78] Foley states of the *Hymn*: 'the text seems to stress that the Mysteries emerge from the private and even secret world of female experience; on both the divine and human level the male role is to integrate these Mysteries into the larger social structure.'[79] The mysterious female in the game operates in secret, and she is implied to be the true controller of events. In a way, the player-protagonist is something of an initiate: ignorant of the village's true purpose, he gradually comes to uncover goings-on as the player navigates the gamespace and solves the puzzles and challenges in it. Such a narrative draws significant comparison with the *Wicker Man* film (mentioned in Chapter 3), wherein the protagonist gradually becomes caught up in the strange goings-on of the island cult. Like the initiates of antiquity, the player of *Eleusis* is guided through her protagonist into the Mysteries, the sacred grounds and the secrets within.[80] The game also features virtually no combat, in keeping with its horror genre conventions: rather, the protagonist is always vulnerable, his security destabilised.[81] The overall experience is thus a violence-less journey dominated by implicit and explicit female instruction. The functioning of environmental reclamation as a theme evinced through a predominantly female cast further implies a 'female quest' rather than

[76] Clay 1989: 249. Also characterised as 'self-exile' from the gods, Clay 1989: 222.
[77] Lincoln 1979: 228-9.
[78] For example, importance of the 'mother-daughter relation' between Demeter and Persephone, Foley 1994: 123. For comparison with male-centric texts, see Foley 1994: 122. Myth also connected with initiation into womanhood, Lincoln 1979: 224.
[79] Foley 1994: 138-9. See also the female as defined by 'periphery as opposed to the center', Foley 1994: 139.
[80] Evans 2002: 235-6.
[81] This can be read as 'de-masculinization': see analysis of visual novels below for more on this.

a male one. This interpretation of the *Hymn*, by Foley, characterises the male quest is typified by 'war and kingship', as opposed to 'the female quest' concerned with 'fertility' and 'a cyclical reunion and separation'.[82] The game's ending, posing a choice to the player between renewing or leaving the world undisturbed (which consequently destroys the sacred site), is asking the player to decide between these two gendered forms of quest. This is especially poignant, considering the protagonist is male, providing the player with the opportunity to further align her character with implied "feminine" goals.

The authoritative cult leader not only links the narrative with commentaries made by Eleusinian scholars, but exaggerates the Mysteries' (and so the game's) association with contemporary eco-feminist movements. Female creative writers, poets and academics alike, such as Margaret Atwood and Josephine Donovan, characterise the story of Demeter and Persephone as representative of the female life cycle and of a modern break from 'matricentric preindustrial culture' into the type of global society we live in today.[83] New Age movements of the twentieth century see modernity as the primary instigator of such an 'ecological crisis', an age where 'pagan wisdom about man's relationship to the natural world' is lost and can only be rectified through the 'recovery of this wisdom'.[84] Feminist perspectives have long permeated alternative spiritual movements such as that of the American Wicca,[85] while other smaller revivals of non-Judeo-Christian origin have historically provided marginalised women with voices.[86] These subcultures, furthermore, often utilise Graeco-Roman culture to inform their spiritual, "New Age" beliefs.[87] These non-traditional communities consider there to be 'an antagonistic and alienated relationship' between people and nature,[88] while feminist scholars like Keller exaggerate this attitude by suggesting this tension will eventually result in a 'nuclear omnicide' which can only be averted through collective belief in the 'abundant love and nourishment of the ancient Earth Mother'.[89] The many interpretations of the Eleusinian Mysteries (and some broader Greek religious thought), all corresponding to eco-feminist beliefs, find their way into the game: by embracing the 'primal

[82] Foley 1994: 104.
[83] The latter quote relates specifically to Donovan's studies on the goddesses, as referenced by Foley 1994: 162.
[84] Hanegraff 1996: 77.
[85] Hanegraff 1996: 88. More broadly, Rigoglioso 2010: 105 identifies feminist critique of Eleusinian Mysteries as female centric and proto-matriarchal.
[86] Ellis 2004: 2000. For more on New Age diversification outside of Judeo-Christian faith, Hanegraff 1996: 183; 186; Truzzi 1972: 30.
[87] Hunt 2003: 81 believes this 'abstract mysticism' stems directly from mystery cults and classical philosophers. Lundborg 2012: 27 considers 'the spiritual culture of Eleusis' to have been 'forced underground', until, as the rest of the book implies, its revival in the twentieth century.
[88] Owen 2004: 243.
[89] Keller 1988: 54.

element, the original source of all birth',[90] as psychoanalyst Kerenyi characterises the Eleusinian rites, the player adopts this viewpoint and "saves" the world. Otherwise, the player may eschew this philosophy in favour of modernity, presumably towards an aforementioned 'nuclear omnicide' possibly alluded to in the post-credits sequence of both endings (see the summary above). This is all important, because from player interaction with dark woods and rural landscapes to narrative themes which confront players with a choice between continued man-made diminishment of the environment and the destruction of modernity, are made possible and enriched by this extensive interpretative tradition. The immersed player operates through these channels, collaborating with (assumed) ancient ideology and contemporary agenda to decide between a feminist-tinged reclamation of the world and the maintenance of the current (destructive, environmentally unfriendly) state of things.

*'New Age' Eleusis*

At certain points, the game requires the player to directly interact with other, very specifically "New Age", interpretations of the Mysteries. As described above, the player learns how to make the *kykeon*, tracks down its ingredients and creates it. Upon consuming, the screen's contrast tones take on a purple tinge (Image 5.5), wherein an anonymous spectral figure appears and leads the player to a ritual object used to gain access to the ending gamespaces. The use of hallucinogenic aesthetics in horror games is not unheard of,[91] but the psychoactive visions witnessed by the player and protagonist changes when implicated in the context of the Mysteries. Much has been written on the *kykeon*,[92] but one very specific interpretation of the potion appears to have contributed to its role in the game. The infamous *Road to Eleusis* collaboration argues for the 'sacred', 'therapeutic, philosophical', and religious potential of entheogenic plants.[93] These authors assert that ergot, a substance found to grow on barley, was a natural psychotropic ingredient that facilitated visions and revelations experienced by consumers of the *kykeon*. Several Greek sources appear to prove this assertion.[94] While this has convinced some scholars that consuming the *kykeon* was indeed personally revelatory due to its supposed entheogenic qualities,[95] for the most part this theory is

[90] Kerenyi 1970: 205. Later, Levitz 2012: 56 describes Greek religion as 'primal' in reference specifically to the Eleusinian Mysteries.
[91] Kirkland 2012: 108 describes 'alternative psychological conditions' and 'a disorientating dream-like environment' in the *Silent Hill* horror videogame (Konami Tokyo, 1999).
[92] Clay 1989: 236.
[93] Wasson, G., Hoffman, A., and Ruck, C., 2008: Publisher's Note.
[94] Ruck 2008b: 102-3.
[95] Rigoglioso 2010: 159-60; 174; Lundborg 2012: 11.

considered 'dubious', controversial, and unpopular.[96] The central thesis in *Road to Eleusis* continued to have significant meaning for 'a certain group of readers' nonetheless:[97] the *Journal of Psychoactive Plants and Compounds*, forenamed *Eleusis*, sought to prove through scientific methods that the *kykeon* was indeed a psychoactive substance.[98] At its heart, the theory is countercultural, even counter-academic. This reading of the *kykeon* was informed by the New Age climate of the mid-twentieth century, one which clearly maintains some currency, wherein the psychotropic experiences of drug-users formed part of the celebration of the rebirth cycle of the feminine Earth and the turning-back upon the urbanism of twenty-first century living that denies that cycle. 'If the hypothesis that an LSD-like consciousness-altering drug was present in the *kykeon* is correct… then the Eleusinian Mysteries have a relevance for our time not only in a spiritual-existential sense, but also with respect to the question of the controversial use of consciousness-altering compounds to attain mystical insights into the riddle of life.'[99] By embracing the *kykeon* as such an instrumental part of the game in this way, the developers explicitly co-opt this twentieth century and, as Hoffmann above indicates, 'spiritual' reading of the potion and require players to rehearse it.

[96] Burkert 1983: 287; Ustinova 2013: 114; Bowden 2010: 43 respectively.
[97] Ruck 2008a: 11-12.
[98] Webster 2000: 2.
[99] Hoffmann 2008: 143, 147.

**5.5:** The protagonist on drugs.

For the *kykeon* of the game unlocks the final sequences described above and must be made and consumed to complete the game. Furthermore, the way in which its consumption and hallucinogenic effects are represented in the game are concomitant with descriptions provided by this "New Age" community. Reports of apparitions witnessed by contemporary drug users match the appearance of the ghostlike figure in the game.[100] When the virtual *kykeon* in the game ultimately leads to the final Mysteries, it is as Wasson promises of psychotropic drugs in general: it 'permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life… to enter other planes of existence'.[101] This "hippie" rendering of the *kykeon* fits alongside larger narrative themes of nature expounded throughout the game, suggesting a deliberate siding with a non-academic, fringe interpretation of the Mysteries and the activities performed therein. The New Age theme underpinning this section is further complemented by the wider eco-feminist

[100] Spence 1920: 199-200.
[101] Wasson 2008: 29 on the "benefits" of hallucinogens.

connotations outlined above, as the player becomes immersed in an activity visually and narratively connotative of 'parapsychology and extra-sensory perception', important tenets of twentieth-century esotericism and 'occult interest'.[102]

By the time the player reaches the final act of the game, Greek, Eleusinian, New Age and horror symbolisms intersect with vaguely occultist and occasionally Christian iconographies, all of which have helped to characterise the wider network of interpretations surrounding Eleusis over time. After drinking the *kykeon* and being led around the gameworld by a ghostly apparition, the player eventually locates a mysterious small temple, constructed in generically Greek style, and encounters within a locked chest. She finds here a map of the village and its surrounding countryside, and a single pentagram. The pentagram is placed over the map (Image 5.6), and at each of its points is found a piece of the key needed to open the chest. To classicists, the pentagram is associated primarily with Pythagoras and his intellectual followers.[103] Pythagoras also reportedly believed in the 'deification and transmigration of souls and the destruction of bodies',[104] language not unlike that directed at the player should she choose to participate in the rites. The pentagram itself has its roots much further back than Pythagorean Greece, dating before 3000BC in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Sumerian contexts.[105] For most, however, it is infamous for its association with modern occultist practice,[106] and most famously with twentieth and twenty-first century "Satanists".[107] The developers therefore employ an immediately recognisable signifier connotative of mysterious or even "evil" goings-on, which links with the pseudo-Satanic ritual practice of the black-robed cultists encountered by the player when she uncovers the "truth" of the Mysteries. In this instance the player overcomes the game challenge and establishes narrative meaning by collaborating with generic "horror", occultist and Satanic imagery.

[102] Quotes from Truzzi 1972: 18, who characterises 'New Age' thought as this disparate phenomenon. For antiquity within a milieu of other belief-related phemonena, see Hammer 2004: 28. Bramble 2015: 137-8 sees this as 21st century commercialization, and so exploitation, of belief.
[103] Lucian *Slip.* 5; Allman 1889: 26; 143-44.
[104] Epi. *Panarion* Section 1 1.7, 1,1-2.
[105] van der Schoot 2005: 657-8.
[106] Spence 1920: 261-2; Hunt 2003: 261.
[107] Gunn 2001: 174, 187.

**5.6**: The pentagram, or pentacle, assists the player.

Successful engagement with the pentagram puzzle conversely leads the player into the Christian church in the centre of the village. Paintings on the walls inside show disturbing imageries from across Christian mythology, such as the dog-faced Saint Christopher and the Biblical dream-visions of Jacob's Ladder. Exploring the interior, the player activates a passageway that leads to catacombs beneath, where she eventually discovers the cultists who reveal the meaning of her journey and the inevitable decision she faces. From the recently renovated catacombs at Domitilla, believed by commentators to represent the interrelationship between pagan myth and the Christian faith in the ancient world,[108] to the many others scattered across Greece and Italy as tombs and burial chambers,[109] the underneath of churches remains a point of fascination for many. Situating the final sequences of the game here plays on this notion of secret areas beneath older buildings, but also connotes a crossover between the Mysteries and the post-pagan spread of Christianity that eventually eradicated the practice. Nearly all publications about Eleusis mention its antagonistic relationship with Christianity, and much of our "knowledge" of the rites comes from later Christian

[108] Petroff 2017.
[109] Roberts 2007 "catacombs".

writers who cover them with unconcealed hostility.[110] Furthermore, Christian monasteries came to be built around the area of Eleusis,[111] resulting in a clash of cultures that has had a marked effect on the way Eleusis is remembered, allowing the Mysteries to represent a pagan practice that stands against the centrality of Christianity in post-pagan and modern Greece. There is even suggestion that the activities of initiates crossed over with the practices of later Christians, who congregated in such catacomb-like structures as the one presented in the game.[112] This interrelationship between the two opposing belief systems has had a marked effect on the way the Mysteries have been deployed: for example, Levitz demonstrates how Stravinsky's and Gide's operatic *Persephone* may have worked toward 'reviving the Greek mysteries to replace Christianity'.[113] The interplay between belief systems and the iconographies, themes and imageries associated with them, can be read in the game. This tension between modern Christianity and ancient paganism is embedded in these ending gamespaces and the eventual final narrative moments presented to the player as she nears the game's ending.

It is often difficult to discern distinct Eleusinian moments in the game from other narrative themes, visual aesthetics and symbolisms. That it is a horror game means that the already complicated interpretative possibilities in the game are simultaneously subject to the conventions of that genre. Black robes, flaming torches and elusive behaviours appear to rely more on the player's 'general cultural knowledge' of "Satanism" that exist within the popular imagination.[114] The 'men in black cloaks' described in ancient literature, who co-operated with the destruction of the sanctuary in 395AD,[115] are concomitant with the representation of the generic cultists of the game, yet could even indicate the game's direct referencing of ancient sources. The occultist theme running throughout the game may or may not indicate another specific reading of the rites. Infamous twentieth century self-styled 'magician' Aleister Crowley himself practiced the 'Rites of Eleusis' as part dramatic performance, part religious ritual: in this, he ultimately 'put together bits and pieces from any number of knowledge systems'.[116] That said, occultism itself is a broad term relating to any and all uses of images and signifiers borrowed from across the spiritualist spectrum.[117] If occultism is

[110] Foley 1994: 68; Burkert 1983: 251; Lincoln 1979: 230-1 expands on a specific part of Clement's account where he reinterprets Demeter's actions to be 'scandalous' and thus obscene. Clay 1989: 2013 notes their unreliability as sources. On Emperor Theodosius' edicts, Evans 2002: 230-1; on the Goths, Bowden 2010: 198.
[111] Ruck 2008b: 85.
[112] Mylonas 1961: 274.
[113] Levitz 2010: 56.
[114] Gunn 2001: 193; 201.
[115] Parker 2007: 237.
[116] Brown 1978: 5, 10.
[117] Gunn 2001: 190-1.

traditionally seen as opposed to rationalism and empiricism,[118] it follows that occultist signifiers such as those found in the game are equally open to interpretation. Ultimately, our ability to read multiple interpretations stands as proof of the Mysteries', and wider Greek culture's, capacity to contain multiple, overlapping meanings. For example, the wolf, who appears at pivotal moments of the game, is a clear indication of combinatory ancient and modern resonances. The Greeks considered the wolf to be representative of improper, inhuman activity, as expressed in the Lykaon myth, while the prevalence of the wolf in contemporary Greece and in western media implies the animal maintains a powerful place in the present-day imagination.[119] But then wolves are also affiliated with various horror fictions and may well be used here to designate a general threat. Furthermore, the entire game takes place in barely-contained wildness, an isolated village surrounded by mountains. Ancient Greeks considered mountains to be a very specific signifier of the "outside"; it was, to them, the natural boundary between civilisation and chaos, and to be amidst the mountains was to participate in something outside of 'normal social behaviour'.[120] But this mountainous, wolf-filled setting has as much to do with the generic characteristics of *Eleusis* as a horror game, as much as it does its association with ancient Greece. Many of these past associations with the Mysteries are unknown to most, and the player does not need to come equipped with these knowledges. Nor does she have to understand the intricacies of the ancient Greek mindset concerning wolves and mountains, since such entities and settings are standard horror fiction signifiers. Nevertheless, these in-game agents, spaces and imageries all interrelate with the Mysteries (and wider Greek culture) as they have been interpreted over time, thereby illustrating the capacity for the Mysteries to be remoulded and conflated into a readable, playable, narratively complex and often unsettling experience.

*A dense mix of themes*

In most cases, it is impossible to extricate moments of the game or its narrative as singularly "horror", "Christian", or "Eleusinian" in nature. The importance of light, for example, is indicative of Eleusinian and horror-genre conventions, while focus on environmental renewal could be reflective of Eleusinian, feminist, or environmentalist concerns, or a combination of them all. Ultimately, the game works with a number of possible "Eleusises" construed by diverse individuals and groups. It openly participates with a whole series of overlapping traditions stemming from Eleusis, thereby

[118] Noted by Owen 2004: 238-9, but later refuted by him 2004: 256. Nevertheless, occultism is seen by many to be as stated above.
[119] Buxton 2013: 47, 50-1.
[120] Buxton 2013: 9, 15, 19, 22.

operating on several subtle levels to produce a densely-layered experience. The first-person perspective draws the player ever further into these many themes, consequently implicating her within this network of appropriative traditions and patterns via an embodied point-of-view. Eleusis, the space and event, and the many readings imposed upon it, make the game narratively and thematically complex. To reflect this, it is therefore necessary to characterise the game not as a representation of the Mysteries as religious, historical performative practice, but instead as being about the traditions surrounding Eleusis: from superstitious folkloric stories, to contemporary occultism and Satanism, to concerns about nature analogous to our own. The game operates as any other generically "horror-like" media, and these conventions are always present throughout. Nevertheless, the primary narrative and many of the playable moments are bolstered and enriched by their continuous participation in the transmedial, trans-chronological network surrounding the Mysteries.

As a result, the game is peculiarly contemporary, since the developers have experimented loosely and playfully with the nexus of readings attributed to the rites. The theme of global rebirth, for example, is made possible by its concomitant associations with the Eleusinian Mysteries.[121] The player then engages in this tradition, extending it and becoming a part of it, going on a journey of interpretative possibilities from introspective, psychedelic potions to increasingly environmentalist rhetoric, before deciding in the final sequences to either demolish the 'mass, hyper-individualized' urban societies which have led to the 'humanity-generated destruction of environment and life forms' of our planet,[122] or to refuse this radical (potentially eco-feminist) calling for a return to the preindustrial natural world. This choice is made by the twenty-first century player, through a reconfiguration of Eleusis, against a contemporary backdrop of anxieties concerning the environment, climate change, and increasing destruction of the natural world by human activity. On top of all this, the player is presented with various occultist and Christian iconographies, many of which relate both to traditions of thought applied to the Mysteries and to the broader horror genre simultaneously. The one thing these various imageries and themes have – the psychedelic *kykeon*, black-robed occultists, the authoritative female, and the focus on environmental and urban issues – is Eleusis. The Mysteries as an imaginative phenomenon reaches out through times, spaces, and ideas, and connects with numerous post-antique channels, so that the resulting text, the *Eleusis* videogame, can allow players to play, *through* the Eleusinian nexus, into modern issues of environmentalism, modernity and spirituality.

[121] A claim laid upon the Mysteries by Keller 1988: 52-3.
[122] Hunt 2003: 317.

## 5.4 Visual Novels and Ancient/modern women

The expounding of subtexts and messages within strange and even otherworldly gamespaces typifies the ancient first-person game experience. This final section examines how players perform as versions of women from ancient Greek literature to face modern issues relating to gender. The visual novels *Melos* and *Helena's Flowers* offer players the opportunity to act as ancient women to explicitly address contemporary anxieties concerning modern (real and virtual) women. The player occupies the role of a Sappho-like poet and a science-fictionalised Helen of Troy in these two games respectively, embodying those characters and immersing herself via the first-person perspective. Taking an active role in the construction of these antiquity-inspired figures, the occupation/embodiment dynamic is utilised to confront and critique the behaviours of the videogame world that marginalises non-male virtual characters and disbars female workers from the game industry.

Few women work in videogames, and those that do have little input in the actual making of games.[123] A 2014 survey found only 22% of industry professionals to be female,[124] while earlier 2009 statistics from Skillset stated only 4% of workers in the UK game industry are women.[125] The most recent survey of a broad range of respondents within the industry, conducted by the International Game Developers Associations (*IGDA*), found that 74% of worker were male, with 21% identifying as female and less than 3% transgender.[126] In 2004, a sample of women working in the industry cited a 'culture of masculinity' typical of game companies, which these women felt forced them to adapt their behaviour.[127] Such little involvement within potentially toxic work environments necessarily impacts upon the representation of in-game women. Gender stereotypes are prevalent in videogames, which can discourage women from taking up the medium as a hobby, while those who do play may feel marginalized by portrayals of women as 'sexual objects'.[128] For decades games have characterised virtual women in this way as damsels in distress or as 'rewards'.[129] This complements 'the testosterone profile of games',[130] a feature of videogames which some believe has a role in priming 'negative attitudes toward women'.[131] Attempts to create compelling female characters often result in intelligent, capable, tough virtual women who are nevertheless scantily-clad and

[123] Lynch et al 2016: 564-5 on gender disparity; Prescott and Bogg 2011: 7 on lack of voice in industry.
[124] Cited by Lynch et al 2016: 564.
[125] Prescott and Bogg 2011: 7.
[126] Weststar et al 2018: 5-6, 11.
[127] Prescott and Bogg 2013: 55, 63. Therefore men are more likely to become game makers, Williams et al 2009: 828.
[128] Lynch et al 2016: 566.
[129] Cassell and Jenkins 2000: 7.
[130] De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2009: xvii.
[131] Fox and Bailenson 2009: 147-8.

physically disproportioned. Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* franchise may well be 'a possible entry point' into videogames.[132] However, she may also constitute proof that female characters must undergo 'sexualization to bolster their merit' and to align with perceived male interests.[133] The numerous issues plaguing representation of real-world and digital women are countered by the gradual rise in female members of the game-making community: for example, one recent survey found an increase in women working in the Australian game industry.[134] This is nevertheless still disproportionate to the common claim that women make up roughly half of global playership. A report from the UK in 2014 even suggested that there are now more women and girls playing than men and boys.[135] Closing the gap is a slow business, and women "breaking barriers" continues to be an exceptional, reportable event. It is within this climate that female players and commentators continue to persevere against deeply regressive and sexist attitudes toward both virtual and flesh-and-blood women.

The two visual novels investigated in this section were created within and in response to this misogynistic environment. They were developed as part of the 'Yuri Game Jam 2' which called for amateur developers to make games based on the *yuri* theme, a Japanese media term denoting fiction concerning love between women. The *tumblr* page further invites developers to explore 'the queer female experience' through their creations.[136] This endeavour took place only a year before the *IGDA* survey above, in which 81% of respondents identified as heterosexual.[137] This small online community meets on forums to discuss and encourage further knowledge of the design process, and to engage in projects such as this which speak out towards wider issues within the world of games. The developers of the two games here choose as their vehicle for exploring 'the queer female experience' the visual novel (VN), a type of videogame that uses the signature first-person perspective to allow players to look "through the eyes" of the protagonist and into the gameworld. It is different from other first-person games in that it is primarily defined by its 'lengthy textual passages', 'conversations or interior monologues', 'multibranching and interactive' play, alternative endings, and its 'deliberate pace, [which allows] the player to linger on its dense and highly detailed graphics and… the game's textual dimension' at their own pace.[138] They are intentionally slow to allow the player to take their time, consider the world, her character, their motivations, thoughts and possible actions. Those actions primarily take the form of movement between areas and speech

[132] As Schliener 2001: 224 suggests.
[133] Lynch et al 2016: 578; Shaw 2014: 59.
[134] Maggs 2017.
[135] Stuart 2014.
[136] *Tumblr* 'Yuri Game Jam 2'.
[137] Weststar et al 2018: 12.
[138] Cavallaro 2009: 2, 8-9.

with other characters, emphasising thought and communication as core gameplay mechanics. Compared to *Eleusis* and *Salammbo*, action is even less important in VNs where narrative progression and character development are the principal concerns of developers and players. The player not only enters rich, decorative gameworlds and so feels to be 'in' them,[139] she does so by embodying the protagonist and occupying their role, their actions and responses. In both VNs here, the player embodies and acts as two ancient Greek women. The first in particular is set out in a typical 'dating sim' framework, wherein protagonists face desired agents and potential love objects who are posed against static backgrounds while players attempt to woo them with the correct choice of dialogue.[140] This format usually offers players a 'young, heterosexual male' choosing between a cast of women.[141] However, in siding with non-traditional criteria set out by the Game Jam, the games here seek to buck this trend in which male characters always gets the girl of their choice.

VNs follow the aesthetic and thematic style of Japanese anime and manga, which have themselves drawn criticism for their unashamed sexism and for routinely representing violence against women.[142] VNs tend to represent women in the '"*kawaii*"' mode, wherein female characters are infantilized and 'characterized by small bodies with oversized heads and disproportionately large eyes', and are typified by 'a pervasive feel of softness evocative of innocence, vulnerability and playfulness'.[143] Such conventions do not imply developed, serious adult female characters. Moreover, where anime and manga have intersected with antiquity, scholars tend to downplay their appearances, implying a further reduction in the likelihood of locating considered and deep appropriations of the ancient world in this venue. Classical reception scholars identify the use of, for example, Nausicaa in the anime of the same name as one example of Japanese adoption of Greek mythology.[144] Elsewhere, Castello and Scilabra locate a reconfiguration of Athena in anime contexts.[145] Mythological content like this tends to be described as 'nominal' in its importance.[146] Nevertheless, others see that manga can help to construct personal understandings of the past by incorporating history as 'common' or 'banal memory', thereby allowing formal history and popular media to 'sit together'.[147] In one manga series, Peer sees a conflation of ancient Roman and modern

[139] Cavallaro 2009: 132.
[140] Taylor 2007: 194.
[141] Taylor 2007: 198.
[142] Norris 2009: 237, though he implies this might be 'sensationalist' over-inflation of the issue, 2009: 255.
[143] Cavallaro 2009: 21, her emphasis.
[144] Bryce 2012: 391.
[145] In this analysis they consider Athena to be a 'typical example of "pop-reception"', referenced in Chapter 1, Castello and Scilabra 2016: 188, 194.
[146] Theisen 2011: 63-4.
[147] Otmazgin 2016: 12, 21.

Japanese culture to ask the reader 'for tolerance and acceptance'.[148] Elsewhere, Wieber sees various Japanese and Indian media products in which the Greco-Roman world is represented 'sometimes in a sophisticated manner, sometimes more simply', and always 'with different aims'.[149] There exist now VNs that engage in self-parody and self-conscious criticism, signifying the potential for subversion and experimentation with the standard VN framework.[150] The corpus of visual novels, and the related anime and manga media, may well be partially misunderstood. For example, despite the negativity often associated with this subgenre, the VN is especially popular with female audiences. A recent study published by *Quantic Foundry* found that 'Casual Puzzle', 'Atmospheric Exploration' and 'Interactive Drama' games attract significant numbers of female players:[151] all, and particularly the latter, are associated with the VN. None of this is to suggest that "games for girls" must include 'drama' or 'exploration' in lieu of action and violence. Female players play all sorts of games, as the statistics above suggest. But the VN can offer an experience which de-genders necessarily masculinised competition based solely on violence, racing, and constructing giant buildings,[152] one in which Aphrodite is no longer the sexualised lust-object (as in *God of War*, Chapter 2), one in which embodiment, internal monologuing, patience, speech, choice, and a thoughtful approach, become the ideal venue in which to confront the offensive treatments and contradictory alienation of women in videogame culture.

Melos, *"Sapphicness" and same-sex attraction*

*Melos* puts the player in control of Ambrosia, a well-liked poet and musician in ancient Greece. The player must navigate several choices, directional and conversational, to find the most suitable way of expressing her secret love for her best friend, the Spartan bodyguard Antiope. The game opens with the Greek text of the first lines of Sappho's Hymn to Aphrodite (Fragment 1), accompanied by an English translation. The background screen then changes to a reproduction of Alma-Tadema's *Sappho and Alcaeus* (1881),[153] a static backdrop which acts as an implied gameworld. While some view this painting as one of 'tame' passive women,[154] it may be seen to at once set a tone of authenticity while knowingly inserting women into a performative setting.[155] These opening seconds

[148] Peer 2018: 64.
[149] Wieber 2017: 345.
[150] Lamerichs 2012: 59.
[151] Yee 2017.
[152] Jenson and de Castell 2008: 17. See also Thornham 2011: 4 for gameplay as 'penetrative sex without "real" consequences'.
[153] Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, 37.159.
[154] Spentzou 2008: 369.
[155] Stehle 1997: 7 treats ancient women poets as active performers who create their own identities.

ultimately seek to establish a Greek world with women visibly in it and to position the musician/poet main character as a part of that atmosphere: for while the painting shows Alcaeus playing and Sappho looking wistfully on, the game presents Ambrosia as performer automatically and without quarrel, thereby implicating her within this world's musical community.[156] The game then connects the player with her protagonist via an inner monologue in which Ambrosia expounds upon her desire for Antiope: 'I have turned obsessive, possessive. I sleep little and badly, cannot bear the shortest of separations, constantly observing her and overinterpreting each and every of her words and actions.' This intimate description is markedly like Fragment 31, in which Sappho describes the physical reaction of a lover upon seeing the loved one.[157] There, Sappho speaks as if watching the woman she lusts after: 'when I look at you… my tongue has snapped; at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh… sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over'. Fragment 1 is also echoed here, wherein Sappho speaks of her 'maddened heart', 'ache and anguish'.[158] Sappho also foregrounds the chief aim of the player through Ambrosia, calling on the goddess 'to help stir the beloved from passive indifference into active affection'.[159] As such, her poetry is used here to illustrate Ambrosia's obsessive, overwhelming attraction towards an unbeknownst Antiope, utilising the 'intensity' interpreted from the fragments by post-antique commentators to facilitate a particular atmosphere of love and lust.[160] Although Greek love and passion (*eros*) are differing concepts from the romantic modern, in that the former was envisioned as an external force visiting the body of the lover, the developer uses the language of the fragments to convey the emotions and feelings of the protagonist, thereby synchronising her state of mind with that of the player.

Rather than requiring the player to operate as Sappho herself, the game uses a range of emotive impressions and possible interpretations of her poetry, and the wider myth around the poet herself, to help formulate the Ambrosia character, her aims, and so the objectives of the player. Ambrosia herself evokes the name 'Sappho' in the opening sequences, informing the player that Sappho has recently passed away. She therefore sets the terrain for a virtual Greek world in which Sappho's influence is still strong, yet her absence allows the developers to avoid getting bound up in the inscrutability of Sappho as a historical figure,[161] freeing the developers and permitting them to

[156] It therefore gets to sidestep the paradox in ancient Greece between female performers constructing their own identities within a society that only allowed men to define women's identities, Stehle 1997: 72-3.
[157] Balmer 2013: 76.
[158] Sappho Fr. 31 and Fr. 1 respectively.
[159] Greene 2002: 91.
[160] Later receptions of Sappho in antiquity perpetuated the notion of Sappho's poetry as typified by 'flashes of intensity' capturing what was seen to be a pointedly female 'suffering' through song, Williamson 2009: 355-6.
[161] Lefkowitz 1996: 32. She is the 'desperate lover of girls, suicidal mistress of a younger man… symbol of the Eternal Feminine', Snyder 1989: 1. Rayor 2014: 2 notes 'half-truths' of Sapphic sources.

construct instead a Sappho-like original creation. This setup therefore nevertheless instils a "Sapphicness" which permeates the play experience. "Sapphicness", a general atmosphere in the game created by allusions and tacit references to the poet, relates to a wider 'fictional, textual "Sappho"', a Sappho-esque figure constructed by the reader and identified by Stehle through the literary sources.[162] The reader is exposed to fragments of "Sapphicness" which collaborate to form a general impression. This "Sappho" was sought after by the poets Katharine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper, operating under the pseudonym Michael Field: the two writers endeavoured to construct the ancient poet as 'a composite image of many Sapphos… a multiplication of different poems'.[163] The intangible complexity of both "Sappho" and "Sapphicness" are reflected in the play process of *Melos*, which also expresses oblique and transparent references to both Sappho and the wider universe of Greek female literature interchangeably. Through this, players gain access to urgent themes of love, lust, and attraction which they are then required to navigate as part of the game challenge.

The first set of choices tempts the player to 'Stay' at the Alma-Tadema gamespace rather than 'Go' to find Antiope: to 'Stay' results in an abrupt ending, called 'Ending 6 – Coward'. Nevertheless, if the player chooses to locate Antiope, and yet still refuses to engage in meaningful conversation, another 'Coward' ending reveals Antiope's plans to depart from Ambrosia indefinitely. Otherwise, choosing to divulge Ambrosia's true feelings too aggressively results in 'Ending 4 – Despair' in which Antiope reacts violently. All the while Ambrosia provides the player with a running commentary. The game is thus set up to provide the player with many possible ways to operate. However, the choices made are far from arbitrary, as they are set up to motivate the player into thinking carefully through her choices lest she reach a "bad" ending. The 'complex merging of female voices… [and] the speaker's dynamic, rather than static, visual descriptions of the desired woman', as Greene characterises the tone of Sappho's poetry,[164] are realised here in the form of player management of the text and player responses to it through input of directional and speech commands. The abstract notion of desire, informed by Sappho's vibrant and urgent poetry and the post-antique characterisations applied to it, here prompts the player to ruminate on Ambrosia's love, desire, and potential vulnerability, rather than engendering a "take action, get reward" system typical of videogames.

[162] Stehle 1997: 323. See also Prins 1999: 3.
[163] Prins 1999: 75 on the poets Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper.
[164] Also typical of Sappho, Greene 2002: 83.

The player navigates this complexity, refracted through the phenomenon that is "Sappho", to trouble the rules that usually govern how women are represented and made operative in videogames. To the player, Ambrosia is a personality rather than a sexualised figure. By positioning Ambrosia as the protagonist, with the player always in first-person mode, her full physical form is never seen. This prevents the possibility of the player seeing her as 'fantasized body',[165] even as it centralises her as the most essential vehicle for player interaction within themes of love and lust. Ambrosia's face appears in the lower left of the screen to show the player that she is speaking (Image 5.7). The only other character the player sees is Antiope herself, who is always attired in an appropriately "regular" manner and maintaining a stoic posture (Image 5.7). Although desire is a central theme of the game, the textual passages attempt to generate a more sensual rather than overtly sexual tone. When Ambrosia recalls a moment in which she helped Antiope to oil herself before the Olympic Games – 'A pleasant moment certainly' – this only reflects one of many dimensions of attraction, from the physical to the psychological, which continue to frustrate Ambrosia. Her description of 'each line, each curve of her body, every movement of her sculpted muscles revealing a new detail, a new secret', rather than for the purposes of titillation, further syncretize Ambrosia's emotive monologuing with the player's need to engage thoughtfully with the predicament of the protagonist. Furthermore, even at its most sexually explicit the game refuses to position Antiope as an obvious lust object to be obtained through player choice-making.

[165] A term employed by Judith Butler 2006: 98.

**5.7:** The player, and Ambrosia, face Antiope.

For Antiope herself is not "winnable" as an in-game reward. The "best" ending, 'Truth', is achieved when a measured, thoughtful and gradual approach towards telling the 'Truth' to Antiope is undertaken by the player. Ambrosia reveals her love for her friend, but Antiope does not reciprocate. 'You're a [sic] extraordinary friend, but… I have no romantic interest in you.' This is atypical of the visual novel, particularly of the 'dating sim' subtype which allows a male protagonist to pick-and-choose between a cast of female characters in a way that reaffirms the masculinity of the typically male player.[166] It also reflects the opening lines of Sappho's Fragment 1, which is concerned with the 'ache and anguish' of unrequited love. The developers have used this Sapphic precedent to subvert the usual mechanisms of the visual novel, though not merely for the purposes of an unhappy ending. Ambrosia is able now to keep a level head, understanding that despite this unrequited love her relationship with her 'is now at least *healthier* that [sic] it was previously'. Rather than pandering to player and protagonist desire, the game focusses instead on achieving a mutually beneficial understanding between, and of, the characters. Typical masculine paradigms are therefore subverted: Antiope cannot be "taken", or coerced, and nor is that the wish of the protagonist. Also, through thoughtful approaches to speech and decision-making on behalf of the protagonist, Antiope comes to reveal her own personal insecurities and complexities, waving away Ambrosia's declaration of love by stating: 'You love the part of me I've let you see.' Both agents

[166] Taylor 2007: 199, 204.

possess character flaws and the player is never able to bring them together in a sexual or romantic context. Nevertheless, Sapphic precedents set particularly by Fragment 1 resonate with the aims of the developers to explore the complexities of same-sex attraction and friendship. After removing any opportunity to gaze at Ambrosia as object of desire and disallowing any possibility for Ambrosia to connect with Antiope romantically, the player-as-Ambrosia instead "wins" a better idea of the two characters, as well as a healthier, more complete companionship between Ambrosia and Antiope.

Rather than setting up an exercise in wish-fulfilment by sexualising Antiope and allowing the player, through Ambrosia, to "get the girl", the game translates the unseen lust object of Sappho's Fragment 1 into a character with agency and personality. This setup means that player operation with Ambrosia is directed as much towards self-assessment and self-awareness as it is towards Antiope as potential lover, allowing the germination of a narrative that falls outside videogames' usual remit. When monologuing, Ambrosia often references figures and creatures from myth: 'I love Antiope with all my heart. And that's why at this very moment, I'm more furious than the three Erinyes together.'[167] The text also engages more subtly with perceptions of Greek Archaic female poets, not just of Sappho, as self-consciously expressive of inner-thoughts and feelings.[168] Such multifaceted, explicit and tacit, reconfiguration of ancient materials, and characterisation of Ambrosia as a knowledgeable, culturally-aware professional, situates *Melos* alongside current trends in contemporary scholarship that reject the notion of female Greek poetry as a corpus of 'girlish amateurs', of work 'devoid of art and decidedly free of homoerotic resonances'.[169] Rather than ignoring the 'loss of [the] female literary tradition',[170] the developers use "Sapphicness" and, to a lesser extent "Greekness", to reconstruct it in some fashion, as a response to the call of its originating Game Jam, and as a rectification of the lack of considered female representation, and especially lesbian representation, in videogames (ancient and otherwise). It is therefore not strictly a direct reconstruction of the gendered performances of ancient Greece Stehle identifies,[171] but nevertheless automatically assumes and presents a female literary tradition and uses that to characterise the gameworld and its unique narrative experience.

[167] This quote from Ambrosia refers to the Erinyes, or Furies, who can usually by identified in classical sources through writers' use of strong language, e.g. Aesch. *Eum*. 330-331 ('mind-destroying chant of the Furies'), 365-266, 664.
[168] Balmer 2013: 136; Arthur 1980: 65 makes a similar observation regarding Erinna.
[169] Skinner 2002: 73-4.
[170] Quote from Williamson 2009: 369, and identified by Hartley 2016: 115-6.
[171] E.g. Stehle 1997: 69-70, and throughout.

This version of Greece is closer to the modern world, or rather, closer to how the developers desire the modern world to be, concerning representation and equality. While portrayals of male homosexuality are becoming more frequent in antiquity onscreen,[172] there is, as the Jam criteria states, a noticeable lack of gay and lesbian characters and relationships in videogames to date, and so a significant lack of ancient homosexuality in virtual worlds. Female sexuality in film and television is also often set up to service the male gaze, a dynamic *Melos* consciously avoids in favour of nuanced, female-only representation. The game attempts to rectify issues of underrepresentation by drawing on popularly understood conceptions of ancient Greece as a culture that normalised same-sex relationships,[173] and using it to explore same-sex attraction. Most notably, the game leans on twentieth (and twenty-first) century characterisations of Sappho as a figurehead of the lesbian, bisexual and transgender movement.[174] The creators follow roughly a trajectory set by female artists of the past, providing Sappho, or rather the Sapphic Ambrosia, 'a speaking voice'.[175] This voice is incorporated into the game and co-operated with by the player, who connects with Ambrosia and her feelings of overwhelming affection and frustration and tries to find a healthy way in which to remedy this. For though the romantic connection can never be made, at no point does Antiope deem homosexuality inappropriate: it is instead shown to be an entirely normal phenomenon within the frame of the game. By locating *Melos* in a Sappho-infused Greek environment that acknowledges lesbianism as natural and acceptable, the developers allow players to perform in a way that confirms the inherent normality and decency of this without shying away from the social difficulties it may bring.

This kind of subversive play can be considered an almost-literal iteration of Butler's own characterisation of gender, as players destabilise assumed definitions of sex and gender by recognising it as intrinsically subjective.[176] Shaw believes that, to participate in subjective gender performances as defined by Butler, one first needs to 'draw on a broader system of meaning that helps render those utterances, those performances, intelligible'.[177] *Melos* does just this in its attempts to widen what it means to be a woman in love. It accomplishes this by engaging in the reapplication and reconfiguration of the "Sapphic" spirit: after all, 'each age invents its own Sappho', the result of which depends on the 'social attitudes' of the time.[178] The result here is a highly

[172] E.g. Starz *Spartacus,* Mueller 2018: 142-3.
[173] Jenkins 2015: 33. He also tells us at 2015: 93 that this reading of antiquity is usually considered 'leftist' or 'progressive', though notes this is not always the case.
[174] Andreadis 2014: 29; Jenkins 2015: 19.
[175] Lipking 1988: 97.
[176] Butler 2006: 187-8, 191; Shaw 2014: 66.
[177] Shaw 2014: 67.
[178] Lipking 1988: 58.

contemporary new way to consider the present, virtual and real, through equally new-and-old ways of envisioning the Greek past. It further provides a more nuanced play experience by disallowing a "winnable" scenario, implementing the themes of love, lust and same-sex attraction as things to be explored rather than obtained. The player of *Melos* simultaneously patches up the gap in the videogame tradition where few fully-realised female characters can be found, attempts to rectify the lack of appropriate attitudes to same-sex relations (in and out of games), and addresses the gap in the ancient corpus where little evidence remains (or consideration has been given) relating to women of the ancient world.[179] This is achieved through simultaneous use of the fragments of Sappho, the progressive attitudes and endeavours of previous "Sapphic" writers and observers of the past, and the affordances of the visual novel framework.

*Confronting Helen's problems in* Helena's Flowers

*Helena's Flowers* (*HF*) uses the same basic VN structure and similar functions as *Melos* to present a science-fictional retelling of post-Trojan War events from the perspective of Helen. The Helen figure, here Helena, is stranded on a planet after her ship crashes on an escorted journey back to Sparta. The richly drawn landscapes that provide a backdrop in the game are, like '"sword and planet films", florid, colorful and spectacular, using a visual scale that is at once epic, but also a twist on the conventions therein'.[180] The 'twist' here is that, while the Trojan War story remains the same in *HF*, each character is replaced with a female equivalent: Helena has abandoned Menelaus (here an Empress, never shown onscreen) to be with the Paris-figure, here Alexandros (an alternative name for Paris, also female and never shown) in Troy. This gender-swap is similar to the techniques used in the *Ody-C* comic series (2014), a retelling of the *Odyssey* written by Matt Fraction wherein male actors were removed to propose a female-only mythical Greek world. In doing so here, *HF* explores female-female relationships and avoids, for example, assessments of Helen like that of Isocrates, in which her worth is judged primarily by the calibre of the men she attracts.[181] *HF* is broken up into 20 in-game (not real-time) days which act as distinct stages. As each day starts, the player is given a choice between visiting just two possible areas: the 'Flower Field', or the 'Crash Site' of the ship. The player can only visit one area per day, and both regions present different opportunities to engage with Helena, her thoughts, feelings and motivations. The Flower Field is a space for Helena, and thus the player, to contemplate her position in society, while at the Crash Site the player meets and speaks with the only other survivor, Penthesilea. Helena's isolation allows players to get into her

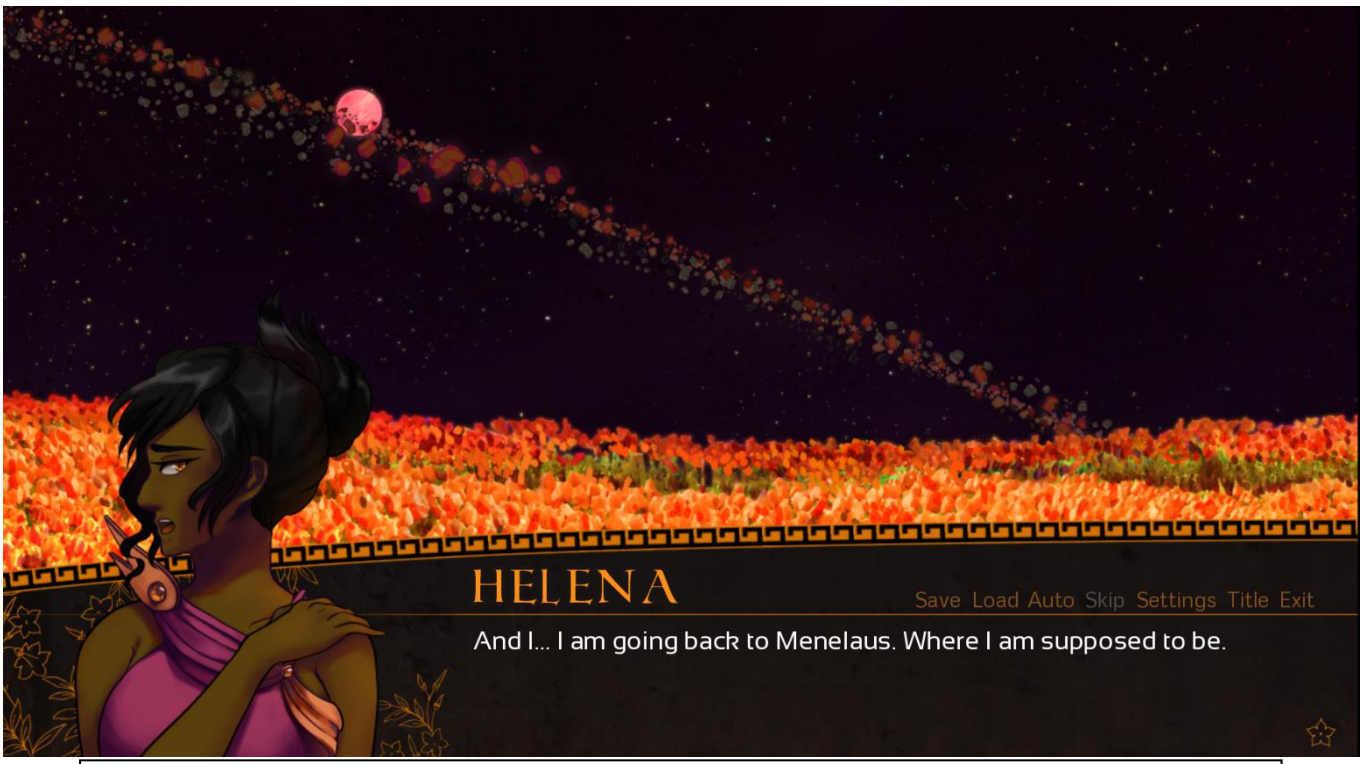
[179] Zajko 2007: 389 on 'disconnected evidence'.
[180] Johnson 2018: 29.
[181] Isocrates 10.22-37 goes on at length about how great Theseus is in the middle of a polemic about Helen.

mind, to occupy her role as infamous beauty and causer of war, and to then interpret her inner monologues and thoughts on these imposed characteristics. The player must decide between either prioritising Helena's inner-thoughts or engaging conversations with Penthesilea over the 20-day period until one of six Endings is reached.

The Crash Site allows Helena to come to terms with her actions and her fellow Greeks' perceptions of her by speaking to the only other character present in the game. While Penthesilea is an especially limited character in myth, being an Amazon warrior who appears only in relation to Achilles,[182] the Greek hero himself takes no role in the game. Penthesilea acts foremost as a foil to Helena, though not necessarily at the expense of her own character. Spending most of Helena's time at the Crash Site allows an uneasy but rewarding companionship – non-sexual – to develop between her and Helena. The game places a thematic premium on female friendship, requiring the player to better understand Helena while simultaneously getting to know her fellow survivor. Here, social interaction allows player expansion upon the characters, their thoughts and personal issues, thereby allowing Penthesilea to be characterised as an actor with a unique personality instead of positioning her within the usual "female as reward" dynamic. At the Crash Site, Helena is guarded, speaking self-consciously in veiled self-criticism and through barely-concealed insecurity. 'You must be laughing to yourself', she says to the soldier, 'seeing the great Helena of Achaea, the most beautiful woman in the galaxy, in such a state.' Yet the more time spent with Penthesilea, the more Helena reveals conflicted assessments of herself. In giving Helena a female companion to explore these issues the developer fulfils the requirements of the Game Jam to prioritise female-female relationships. Yet it also refuses to distance Helen from other female agents, as, for instance, in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, wherein she appears only after sustained criticism *in absentia* by other female characters, and once present seems to deny feeling any guilt. She then turns against both Hecabe and Priam as a means to defend herself, blaming them for the War.[183] That the player must engage thoughtfully in social interaction between the two characters is exemplified when the player skips between the Field and the Crash Site without any thought towards their ultimate goal. This always leads to the 'Bad Ending', where Helena, out of the player's control, murders the pilot. She does this, the text tells us, out of fear that her secret will be revealed by Penthesilea: that she is just an ordinary person, and not an idealized beauty. This tension around Helen(a)'s perceived beauty, along with her own self-blame and self-criticism regarding the wider events of the war, form the crux of the game

[182] Most famously the Attican black-figure amphora, London, British Museum, 1836,0224.127.
[183] Eur. *Tro.* 915-965.

and its narrative, and informs player decisions. Like in *Melos*, the game only "punishes" the player if she does not pay attention to the complexities of the narrative and the characters.




**5.8:** Helena reflects.

At the Flower Field, Helena is introspective and often harshly self-critical. Here, Helena and the player engage in a more modern evaluation of the Helen figure, questioning her beauty and the role this has to play in her perceptions of herself. In one instance, Helena asks the flowers: 'Has anyone ever told you that you're not pretty enough to be a flower?' Later, upon seeing a broken flower amidst the Field, she reflects on the odd one out and refers to it, and herself, as 'a gift [chosen] for a show of devotion', qualified by the question: 'And who would even pluck such an ugly flower?' The lower-left portrait on the screen shows how Helena truly feels through inner monologues: for example, Helena speaks to herself, and so to the player, concerning her hesitant acceptance to be as others wish her to be (Image 5.8). Self-loathing and self-criticism are quite typical of the Helen written by Homer, particularly in the *Iliad,*[184] but here these behaviours constitute a central part of the play process. At the Crash Site, too, she states sardonically about herself that Helena of Achaea is 'a harlot who ran off', and that other peoples' perceptions of her as this constitutes a 'role I'm meant to play'. The purpose is not necessarily for the player to "cure"

[184] 'what a cold, evil-minded slut I am!', Hom. *Il*. 6.345.

Helena of her anxieties, but to help her to explore them in thoughtful ways either through introspection, conversational "talk therapy" with Penthesilea, or a healthy mix of the two.

This is nevertheless an iconoclastic deconstruction of the supposed beauty of Helen which is, by far, her most enduring and well-known attribute. Isocrates, for example, focusses primarily on what he perceives to be the power of beauty in relation to Helen, that 'the gift of beauty… by its nature brings even strength itself into subjection to it'.[185] This is converse to Helena's feelings concerning her supposed beauty: the 'Bad Ending' tells the player she has failed solely because she has not appropriately or thoroughly considered the impact of this characteristic that has been imposed upon her. Failure to successfully explore the theme of beauty and the way this perception of her affects Helena is reflected in other Endings wherein the player has made few wise choices. In one, Helena is dragged kicking and screaming onto the ship. 'By the time we landed in Achaea, I had lost my voice', she says. 'Or perhaps I had never had a voice in the first place.' Another Ending has Helena remaining in isolation upon the planet, removing her from other peoples' blame by cutting her off from the world. In this instance, the player has not helped Helena to critique this "beauty" paradigm well enough to provide a satisfactory result. If the player does not treat her protagonist with genuine care and attention, Helena will end up no better off than before. There are, however, more optimistic results to be achieved. If the player repeatedly visits the Crash Site for all 20 in-game days, Helena and Penthesilea reveal to each other that they are unhappy with their home lives, and bond over this. Image 5.9 shows Penthesilea speaking toward the player and Helena, while the lower-left portrait shows Helena's reaction to it. In this instance, the player is focussed on what is said, how it is said, and so the effects this interaction has on both characters. As mentioned above, this forces the player to consider Penthesilea to be as much of a character, with thoughts, feelings and motivations as Helena. Choosing to press for more information draws out the "real" characters and allows them to connect. At the end of this run-through, Helena is resigned to resuming her 'rightful' place in Sparta – nevertheless, she now has a friend in the soldier, resulting in the 'Best Crash Site Ending: A Place To Call Home.' On the other hand, repeated visits to the Flower Field results initially in a barrage of self-criticism until Helena outwardly identifies herself with the flowers. She eventually becomes angry at them for being pretty and useless, pulling one out of the ground to reveal a hidden edible fruit at its roots. Helena's first impression are proven wrong: the pretty flower is not useless but is discovered, through exploration, to be functional and useful as well. This results in the 'Best Flower Ending – The Helenas Together', where Helena remains alone but is nevertheless removed from societal constraints and, crucially, has come to terms with her past life and role(s).

[185] Isoc. 10.16.

The primary difference between this game and other treatments of Helena are that, through considered interactive engagement, the player mediates her imposed role by listening and reacting to inner-monologuing self-criticism and conversation with another female character. “Bad” play results in an unexpectedly violent ending, while thoughtless, careless play forces Helen into a life of continued isolation and subservience. Ultimately, it is only through conscious, social play with Helena herself and via her interactions with Penthesilea that the player can restore Helena’s autonomy and sense of self.

For this Helena is ultimately defined by her desire for autonomy, and her desire to escape not just the imposed moniker of “most beautiful woman” but the broader constraints that force her to adopt specific roles. This is achieved through her portrayal by the developer as troubled and thoughtful; through her in-fiction desire to locate a suitable future life for herself; and through the player who, in their embodiment of Helena and intimate occupation of her role, attempts to provide her with some lasting agency in the unforeseen future. She is not the ‘passive object of the viewer’s gaze, her power and her culpability dependent on her visual attractiveness and physical desirability’ as in past depictions,[186] but exists here to be co-operated with by the player to help her come to terms with her abandonment of Menelaus, the blame placed upon her by her people, and her constant qualification as beautiful. The virtual Helena is not a despairing inanimate object, but is instead, much like Sappho’s Helen, an active woman who makes autonomous decisions, ‘forsaking her traditional role as a daughter, wife, and mother’.[187] While Sappho’s fragment expresses disbelief that Helen could go ‘sailing off to Troy with no thought at all for her child or dear parents’,[188] she nevertheless provides Helen with personal autonomy and agency merely by allowing her to do this, as opposed to immediately designating her as passive abductee. The game, too, requires the player to locate Helen(a) as an ‘” actual”’ woman rather than as a figure in-relation-to male counterparts,[189] a treatment of her as ‘autonomous subject, the hero of her own life’.[190] There are, of course, issues to be had with “controlling” Helen by a (male or female) player. But at least within the fiction, since Penthesilea is the only other visible character in this all-female universe, the Helen figure is no longer an agent to be conquered or “owned” by her male husband, as she is so often rendered.[191] Helena furthermore comes to us as an already-complicated and ultimately human character desiring our input and prompts, rather than our outright domination. This complements the message the

[186] Haywood and Mac Sweeney 2018: 70 on eighteenth-century paintings.
[187] Balmer 2013: 85, 87.
[188] Sappho Fr. 16.
[189] Rabinowitz 1993: 9.
[190] duBois 1996: 88.
[191] Blondell 2013: 4-5.

player eventually uncovers, that through measured approaches one can achieve self-liberation from exterior societal demands. While the player must assist in "saving" Helena, she at least does so by critiquing this standardised characterisation, breaking down the stereotypical "Helen" profile and forcing players to consider the paradoxical and unattainable standards foisted upon her to help the character become more self-possessing and so "win" the game.

**5.9:** Penthesilea speaks.

Helena's treatment and characterisation here reflects other contemporary, often feminist, realms of reception which have reconfigured Helen as complex, and stands in marked contrast with classical and modern, often male-authored, one-dimensional representations. The most famous literary Helens are written by men such as Homer and Euripides. Unlike the game, which proposes multiple ways of dealing with Helen's anxieties, myth always makes Helen go home to Sparta. In the *Odyssey*, she is already there, thoroughly re-domesticated within Menelaus' household.[192] Euripides' *Trojan Women*, too, positions Helen as an easy target for other the other women's blame, and also forces her back to Sparta at the end of the play. In both, she is predetermined as at fault, and consequently made a passive figure subject to other actors' labels and designations. Later receptions continue this trend, though add modern (often faintly misogynistic) flavours into the mix. While

[192] Although she does take a seat beside Menelaus after appearing from her 'lofty perfumed room', Hom. *Od*. 4120-145.

Haywood and Mac Sweeney see Rossetti's painted Helen (1863) as 'a dangerous and subversive individual, destructive through her desirability and beauty', and so as an ambiguous and multifaceted character,[193] Rossetti's Helen is ultimately an attractive femme fatale made dangerous through her looks. The Helen of *HF* disallows simplistic readings by placing the multifaceted character at the very centre of play. This is why one Ending can result in total isolation, which in itself is not necessarily healthy,[194] where another culminates in the unhappy restoration of the status quo. The game asks the player to work with Helen, to understand her issues and so attain the elusive 'Best Endings'. Her characterisation is therefore more akin to considerate, contemporary renditions like those of modern Greek female poets, identified by Spentzou as illustrating a Helen both 'flattered' by her attention, yet simultaneously stifled by it, oppressed by an 'eternal beauty' that ultimately 'numb[s] her mind'.[195] The stereotypes so often applied to her remain, but are treated in such a way as to enrich the character and to deepen the play process. While she is not quite the Helen of Rossi's *Odissea* (1968), 'a woman who can hold her own',[196] since as a videogame character she necessarily requires a player to co-operate with her, she is intrinsically modernised and complexified when played correctly and in cognisance of the many possibilities of the Helen character. This rendering of the character speaks towards a particular trajectory of "remembering" Helen. In a recent publication, Winkler provides a selective chronology of Helen in film that shows her as 'damned damsel (for adultery and for causing a huge hue) and blessed damozel… as seductive siren and *femme fatale*'. These, he says, form a representational tradition which he hopes will live on and 'keep Helen's memory alive'.[197] But it might be asked what sort of memory this engenders for contemporary receivers, and what kind of alternative memories can be imparted with projects like *HF* which depend on newer, more radical ways of rendering ancient women. By modernising Helen, giving her a voice and allowing the player to hear and respond to it, the player can now change the meaning of that Helen, and can as a result explore and respond to the issues raised by her.

This movement away from the typically classical Helen, and retrogressive twentieth-century portrayals of her, towards a complicated vision of the character is crucial, as it denotes a conscious reconfiguration of the Helen figure to centre play around player-led self-reflection and the interrogation of contemporary social roles. Although the dialogue is slightly ham-fisted, *HF* successfully uses the traditionally disparaged character of Helen to offer unique play experiences

[193] Haywood and Mac Sweeney 2018: 67-8. This is certainly true, to some extent.
[194] It is potentially representative of the *hikikomori* archetypal anime fan, who purposefully isolates him/herself from the world to avoid society and its many potential problems.
[195] Spentzou 2008: 361 on the poetry of Sinopoulos, and Spentzou 2008: 367-8 on Ritsos, 2008: 367-8.
[196] Winkler 2017: 322.
[197] Winkler 2017: 363, 365.

that attempt to confront and interrogate current gender politics. Day believes the Helen of the *Odyssey* indicates male discomfort concerning women's sexuality and male identity:[198] *HF* removes the male component from the story entirely and demands focus on the experience of Helena as subject to imposed societal norms, although the game does not explore sexuality as such. Just as the receptions of Helen above indicate a woman that moves with the times,[199] *HF* presents a Helen who offer players the opportunity to co-develop a complex character, one who is reflective of what feminist videogame scholars recognise in young women as 'a devastating loss of self-confidence… as they enter into a culture that consistently devalues their interests, skills, and abilities'. The constant pressure that forces women and girls to feel like they need to be consistently and unfailingly 'beautiful' is translated here into the thoughts and feelings of Helen herself,[200] which are navigated by player decision-making. If videogames are a 'potential source of identity-based problems',[201] games such as these allow women and girls to construct their own identities through Helena in ways they might recognise personally. In the same way many of the ancient games in this thesis could be characterised as instruments of escapism and violent stress-relief, *HF* carves out a space for a type of gameplay less represented in videogames, one that draws focus onto the individual and the exterior real-world contexts that trouble her. Just as female-authored poetry in antiquity was a means to provide women with, as Skinner sees it, 'survival tricks for living within a patriarchal culture… for expressing active female erotic desire, for bonding deeply with women',[202] *HF* aims at helping female players cope with their own social pressures. Helena, like girls today, and like the reconfigured Helen of the modern Greek poets above, are expected to be many things at once:

> 'both frail and enduring, helpless and competent, fun loving and sensitive, emotional and available, needy and nurturing, vain and moral. Girls need games in which they can rehearse and express the ambiguities and contradictions of femininity… Girls need games in which they can take their own side, throw caution to the winds and watch what happens.'[203]

This particular Helen is designed to be representative of both past (mis)treatments of Helen, and reflective of present-day attitudes towards, and mistreatments of, women and girls. This dual motivation is evidenced within the gameplay itself, wherein players experiment with choice of

[198] Day 2008: 84.
[199] Eighteenth and nineteenth century paintings, for example, reconfigured Helen in these ways as responses to the Suffragette movement. See Haywood and Mac Sweeney 2018: 71-72.
[200] Gauntlett 2002: 77.
[201] Williams et al 2009: 831.
[202] Skinner 1996: 135.
[203] Brunner et al 2000: 87.

movement and speech decisions to locate a way to free Helena (and so, conceivably, the player) from those constraints placed upon her. In assisting in this new, characterful and increasingly self-possessing Helen, the player simultaneously confronts and considers those very issues and the effects they have on her personal and mental wellbeing.

In *Helena's Flowers* and *Melos* both, popular conceptions of ancient women allow for new ways of representing women and playing as female characters, creating a space in the videogame continuum that subverts themes of violent conflict inherent in videogames,[204] moving away from a lack of diverse female representation in the medium,[205] and avoiding homogenous and typically one-dimensional "male" interests. This is made possible by the multi-branching, choice-driven framework of the visual novel, a subtype of first-person game that itself mirrors recent feminist critical trends which favour an 'open-endedness of the reading process', one that does not position feminism as 'a monolithic frame of reference' but as a fluid intellectual space to consider issues facing women and girls.[206] Particularly with *HF*, the player engages in an amateur '"feminist Classics"… rethinking… the possibilities for the field',[207] and reimagining possibilities for Helen(a). This is done, as the Jam states, specifically in response to a call for more female-female relationships in videogames to combat the lack of such representation in more commercially-available titles. It further allows girls to 'throw caution to the winds' by allowing several possible paths by which to negotiate Helena's imposed social roles. Such rejigging of gender norms is necessary, for if socially ingrained conventions influence 'how the sexes "should" and "should not" behave',[208] projects like this exist to directly confront such assumed "shoulds" and "should nots". Gender performance 'relies on a reduced and recognizable set of behaviours, traits, and qualities that signify the essential "whatness" of a given gender'.[209] Both games embrace this ultimate goal as they attempt to develop the capacity for videogames to present new definitions of 'should' and 'whatness' largely or entirely unseen in previous games. This is made possible in *HF*, it is argued, by the game's reinterpretation of Helen of Troy along similar lines to those other creative projects which eschew her usual treatment. *Melos*, too, is made possible by the layered network of receptions spinning out from the fragments of Sappho, and the web of possibilities surrounding the poet and her works. Both games' rendition of the Sappho-like protagonist and the Helen figure offer something new for the player by partially relying on (usually feminist) treatments applied to Greek female characters of the past. *Melos* and

[204] Which Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2000: 50, 53 claim might turn some girls away.
[205] Friman 2015: 11.
[206] Zajko 2008: 198-9.
[207] Zajko 2008: 199.
[208] Fox and Bailenson 2009: 150.
[209] Ouellette 2013: 50.

*HF*, like *Eleusis* with the Mysteries, utilise a wide spectrum of connotations associated with Sappho/Helen, from classical sources to modern appropriative patterns, to provide players with twofold attacks upon male-authored, misogynistic representations of women in antiquity, and on the undue lack of attention paid to women in games, its industry and culture.

## 5.5 Conclusions

While the games here represent several different subtypes, this loose collective of first-person games all demonstrate a uniqueness of perspective used to draw players into the gameworld, its events, and eventually its underpinning messages and subtexts. Whether confusing and obfuscating the player's sense of reality in *Salammbo*'s alien Carthage, exaggerating player uneasiness in the dark cultic world of *Eleusis* or allowing the player to occupy the roles of "Sapphic" lesbians and otherworldly Helens, the first-person framework provides a platform for perhaps the most experimental, varied, and immersive virtual ancient worlds. It is experimental because, unlike the games of previous chapter, they are not necessarily built on a foundation of recognisable antiquity and so co-operate with fewer tangible identifiers than those of other genres. Instead, the games of this chapter rely on whole ranges of ideas and concepts to represent unorthodox antiquities. Developers pick specific fragments and meanings and insert them into the game, and in doing so encode ideologies into the very operations of the game to allow interrogation of contemporary anxieties and issues. However, those play processes are further diversified by the uniqueness of the games they take place in. In *Salammbo*, players are confronted by decidedly non-ancient spaces and peoples, relying not on dim resonances of antiquity but on much broader, less familiar signifying materials. *Eleusis*, too, sought to position players in uncomfortable, uneasy spaces, utilising the weirdness of the Mysteries and broader horror conventions to frustrate usual play procedures. Through diverse representational and narrative strategies, players may then negotiate and act upon a spectrum of meanings and subtexts. This is easiest to see in the VNs where literary figures are reconfigured and subverted to question female roles in our world, the gameworld, and the wider videogame realm (real and virtual), but also in *Eleusis*, where the many meanings attributed to the Mysteries inform the environmentalist tones of the narrative and particularly the final decision in its ending sequences. The first-person perspective is therefore key here, as it exaggerates the player's sense of closeness not just to an array of virtual ancient spaces, but to the versions of those spaces and materials concocted over time, and the many themes and questions they ultimately expound.

The capacity for the games to "reach out" like this relies on their treatment of ancient materials as products of layered receptions, intertextually referencing classical sources and

facilitating transmedial movement of visual symbols, themes and ideas. It was therefore possible, even necessary, to identify those multilateral networks of possible interpretations and past appropriations in each game. Looking at games as products of these networks not only identifies the complicated use of the ancient materials within, but 'complicates the assumption of historical progress and calls into question the seemingly fixed vantage point of the reader in the present'.[210] This in turn allows us to see numerous 'cultural processes' at work. These include not just the classical locus (Helen, Eleusis, Polybius' Carthage), but the many things they have represented, and the many things they could possibly represent. Like the games in previous chapters, they remain engaged transmedially with other materials, notions and concepts from within and without the ancient storyworld. However, despite the disparate bodies of conventions that make these games what they are, most (if not all) of that signifying material can be related to the single ancient locus the games are based around: the Mysteries, Carthage, Helen, "Sappho". Whether despite or because of the pointedness of these reception techniques, so much more can be read within these games: the contemporaneity of their aesthetic (*Salammbo*); their targeted but wide-ranging approach to disparate bodies of conventions and imageries (*Eleusis*); and their pointed use of classical materials to interrogate modern anxieties in the VNs. *Eleusis* especially demonstrates how the many complexities of the Mysteries can be channelled into a meaningful game experience that reflects and expands on a range of contemporary issues. The diversity of material allows the game to encapsulate twenty-first century anxieties of ecological threat, for example, which the player encounters and contemplates, while maintaining a subtler, more nuanced horror experience at once connected to themes of "Greekness" and popular conceptions of occultism and New Age spirituality. As expounded upon throughout the analyses, these games all attract iconographies, imageries, and themes, oftentimes phenomena less associated with antiquity, and point them in specific directions to provide visually and narratively experimental, dense and poignant experiences. Similarly, radical modes of representation, like the lesbian Ambrosia in *Melos*, constitute an antidote to the traditionally heteronormative values characteristic of so many videogames of today. The developers of the VNs applied ideas surrounding classical materials both to address the lack of considered female presence in games and to provide a conduit through which players can ruminate upon and confront the complexities of the modern female experience. The methods used here to analyse these games demonstrate the benefits of looking transmedially, and across time and space at the networks that surround and permeate antiquity. A better understanding of these games can

[210] Prins 1999: 246.

therefore be reached by embracing the grey areas *around* ancient materials present within those games, and by sketching, as this chapter does, a nexus of interpretations spiralling out from them.

# Not Game Over: A Conclusion

Cinematic and other pop-cultural motifs of god-killing, blood-spilling, and architectural destruction in Chapter 2: the exploration of vast, mythical foreign lands in Chapter 3; empire-building and world domination in Chapter 4; and weird places, new stories and contemporary messages in Chapter 5; this thesis has demonstrated the diversity of representative strategies that define classical antiquity in videogames. This array of themes and experiences happens not just on the level of representation however, but as an experience co-produced by a direct receiver, a player. In exploring how antiquity works and is altered by the videogame medium, this study has not only shown that the treatment of ancient materials within these games correlates with their malleable, multifaceted character within the transmedial environment, but that the player has an essential role to play in receiving, refiguring and co-creating these visions of the ancient past. Thus, antiquity is altered by its new virtual contexts, and then further altered by the receiver. These procedures are undertaken by the player who engages with a distinctly "popular" antiquity: the images and versions of antiquity within ancient-world videogames constructed and operated through a variety of previously-encountered symbols, conventions and themes existing across a broadly cultural spectrum. It is on this familiar, cognitively available premise that players undertake their adventures in these ancient gameworlds. This phenomenon of "ancient gameplay" is a new perspective, constructed for this study to encapsulate the processes that go into the creation of and connection with these "popular" virtual ancient worlds. An interrogative framework defined by genre, that semi-fixed "orderer" of videogame representational strategies and playstyles, reveals the unique capacity of antiquity to fit into an array of genre apparatuses and sometimes even to act upon and alter them to produce fresh new instances of reception. When ancient materials are put to task, they also disclose their capacity to possess and evince diverse meanings. As much as barbarian-oppressing and deity-butchering suggest that elements of antiquity remain fixed in the popular imagination, Graeco-Roman videogames have been shown to provide confrontational and stereotype-busting remedies to this standardised conception of the ancient past, often by co-opting and sometimes confronting modern attitudes. As long as antiquity continually proves to be pliable in this way, it also demonstrates repeatedly its own strength in reflecting the contemporary world, to help critique its issues and to confront us with our own cultural proclivities and behaviours. Even in the most standard of ancient worlds there are flourishes and details that can be utterly transformative to both the play process and wider impressions of antiquity in the collective imagination. This is due most of all to two central features developed upon throughout this study: a vision of "popular antiquity" that is situated within the broader cultural network, and the capacity of the player to act upon these ancient games as they

draw on and interact with the transmedial continuum of "knowledges" and ideas pertaining to the ancient world.

In Chapter 2, *God of War* and *Apotheon* were shown to make use of tropes associated with ancient-world film and television: flawed heroic or anti-heroic individuals tackling all-powerful gods,[1] and individual peoples enacting justice (or revenge) against authority figures. The player operates directly upon that situation by acting violently in real-time, not just watching but actively taking part in the necessary brutality. Decades of onscreen antiquity inform these representations and the play activities within, allowing game and player to reflect and collaborate with a rich cinematic tradition in new, direct ways. Gladiatorial action-oriented games operate along very distinct trajectories relative to central tenets of Roman onscreen epics by positioning the player as both spectator, like viewers of films, and fully complicit actor. Through combinatory use of pop-cultural reconfigurations by developers, original interpretations of the ancient sources themselves, and the affordances of the genre, players of action-oriented games become implicated within the wider epic tradition as they progress. For example, the Kratos protagonist of *God of War* can be read as a configuration of accumulative ancient and modern tragedy/revenge paradigms simultaneously as players directed him through characteristically grand architectures and into over-the-top displays of brutality. *Apotheon*, too, saw heavy use of both literary record and classical visual aesthetics to make a wholly unique interactive experience which nevertheless drew on combative gameplay mechanics and representational strategies typical of what I call the "epic game tradition". Classical sources were drawn on directly and explicitly and often woven into the fabric of the game itself to formulate unique game challenges. Yet as demonstrated in the fight with Artemis, the player must intermittently, sometimes simultaneously, operate both alongside the classical canon (by accepting the premise of the Actaeon myth) and against it (by denying it and killing the goddess). In both Greek and Roman action-based titles, a confluence of past fictional antiquity, cornerstones of classical traditions and features of the epic mode collaborate to provide new opportunities for the player. Often, these action-packed ancient worlds do not operate in normative ways: in *Okhlos*, for example, destruction and deicide gave players the chance to participate in class warfare against the monolithic powers-that-be in a tongue-in-cheek interpretation of the mythological canon. *God of War*, on the other hand, refashioned Pandora into a desexualised teenage saviour of man. At other times, familiar staples of ancient-world-based fiction were brought out and exaggerated for players to engage with: as in *I, Gladiator*, where the player is the audience, sees the audience, and interacts with the audience, thereby adopting a branch of the Roman filmic tradition and expanding it to fit

[1] For further reading on the recent trend of 'anti-heroic' ancient protagonists, see 'Part III' of the Augoustakis and Raucci 2018 edited volume.

the demands of the videogame medium. As a result, the pre-existing epic world of violence, decadent architectures, blood-sports and mythical monsters is given new life in a range of experiences where the player assumes a central role in creating spectacular sequences and evolving the epic tradition.

Similar representative strategies were located in the CRPGs of Chapter 3, where ingrained stereotypes of Greeks, Romans, Celts, and other ancient peoples were deployed to facilitate near-automatic conversation between player and game. To treat antiquity in such potentially predictable ways is, as Paul says of ancient epic film, a 'totalizing impulse'. Nevertheless, as she goes on to state, this 'need not, should not, colour our critical responses' to the texts.[2] For it is in the reconfiguration of these standardised ancient materials into the CRPG framework that the uniqueness of the genre and its effect on antiquity becomes clear. The entirely normative methods of representing ancient spaces and peoples in these games allowed easy access to the complex themes and subtexts underpinning them. The CRPG, so often set up to provide players with opportunities to explore, speak, and make meaningful decisions in magical and fantastic worlds, transforms the way virtual antiquity is presented and played. For while players of both games initially encountered wholly expected versions of the ancient past, they were nevertheless offered differing ways of exploring ancient spaces. From the open-planned and explicitly imperial Roman Britain gameworld of *Nethergate* to the more linearized foreign lands traversed by *Titan Quest*'s singular hero, the player directly confronts and sometimes rehearses themes of colonial activity and spatial movement through Other realms. The former is *about* imperialism, and so drew players into a negotiation of the consequent themes, whereas the latter is not, and so tacitly produced (and required the player to co-construct) pseudo-colonial subtexts of western exceptionalism through its representations of Greeks and 'Others'. In *Nethergate*, multiple perspectives and decision-making processes gave players the chance to engage thoughtfully and critically in postcolonial reassessments of the native and the Roman imperialist, requiring her to engage with two separate but overlapping campaigns that told different stories about the same time, place, and event. Furthermore, the capacity for the player to roleplay means that, even within these parameters, the player can sometimes function against the grain by altering what it means to be the oppressed native, or the colonial aggressor. As a result, an ancient space and time usually associated with the relatively straightforward Roman domination of the British barbarian gifted players the opportunity to craft their own personal responses to it. *Titan Quest*'s opposing approach to journeys through foreign lands, on the other hand, leaned heavily on the "usual" Greece of cycloptic monsters and columned temples. In doing

[2] Paul 2013: 305.

so, it emanated standard assumptions about the eastern 'Orient', thus requiring players to engage in a rehearsal of colonial-flavoured messages, albeit unintentionally, as she reinforced the assumption that the Greek hero-from-the-west was the intrinsically capable saviour of the ancient world. Antiquity often means certain things to the twenty-first century world as these generic signifying materials indicate, but when deployed in certain ways can be made, by the player, to effectively critique enduring themes of imperialism, colonialism and the Other.

Methods of rendering antiquity in the strategy games of Chapter 4 were initially found to be especially standardised, an "idea" of antiquity even more concentrated and concretized than those of previous chapters. There, a "language" or model was constructed to illustrate the way in which the games demanded players realise the supposed military and economic superiority of the Romans. Consequently, the Roman strategy game consistently presented a highly usual and appropriately familiar "idea" of Rome and its empire, which in turn limited player procedures to a fixed set of possibilities. This model was so strong it bled into other non-Roman or pre-imperial representations, thereby fixing the trajectory of those representations onto predetermined paths. Nevertheless, this genre framework was discovered not to be as inflexible as initially implied. Nor could the seemingly rigid apparatus completely contain antiquity's natural capacity to transform both usual game operations and the player processes that act upon them. *Age of Mythology* got playful with the ancient world by moulding both moments of the Trojan War story and the genre apparatus itself. Players were no longer the all-powerful actor, being required instead to battle against time to construct the Trojan Horse, to sneak through rather than conquer the city of Troy, and to join forces with the 'Other' in co-operative ways indicative of a twenty-first century "multicultural" political climate. Here, once again, imaginative use of ancient materials resulted in an original play experience with a familiar Greek legend. Furthermore, *Age of Gladiators* showed that a represented arena need not comply fully with either the usual boundaries of the strategy game apparatus, nor solely with the rules of the "epic game tradition" of Chapter 2. Instead, the game offered players a hybridization of the two modes, resulting in a person-centric, narratively rich vision of the Roman institution. Strategy games (and *Titan Quest*) sometimes reflect the less palatable side of the western mindset's conception of antiquity, homogenising the barbarian while perpetuating endlessly a flavour of western superiority and exceptionalism through player-creation of classical empires. But in some cases, players encountered fresh antiquities, became immersed in new representations of radically altered materials, and occasionally even encountered progressive and liberal subtexts atypical of the strategy genre.

The games of Chapter 5 constituted especially spirited approaches to antiquity, drawing from the wider array of associations and connotations surrounding the ancient loci represented

within to provide first-person experiences within striking versions of various ancient spaces. From the exaggeratedly experimental *Salammbo* to the interrogation of the roles of women in virtual worlds (and outside them), ancient materials were here used to allow for unique, immersive and emotionally and cognitively involving experiences that forced reconsideration of the roles ancient Greece and Rome might play in videogames and in wider culture. *Eleusis* employed a range of post-antique interpretations of the Mysteries to immerse the player in a dimly familiar (if that) section of Greek culture and enriching it with horror, occultist, and New Age imagery and themes. The game reached out to all manner of real-world referents, nearly all associated with the Eleusinian phenomenon, to draw the player into a narrative emboldened and deepened by that very spectrum of possible readings. By capitalising on the fluidity of ancient materials to connect with numerous interpretations, meanings and agendas, *Eleusis* gave players the chance to choose between the total annihilation of modernity, or the continued devastation of the natural world, in line with vaguely "Eleusinian" readings of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and reminiscent of present-day environmental concerns. Similarly, the visual novels utilised "Sapphicness" and "Helenness" to assist navigation of contemporary gender politics, turning upside-down preconceptions relating to both women in the world of videogames and the ancient women so often misrepresented onscreen. Here movement in 'ideologically loaded games' forced players to interact with the values within,[3] demanding revaluation of Helen of Troy through an explicitly gendered game performance. This is vitally important, because it demonstrates not only the capabilities of the genre apparatus to provide powerful new classical reception texts but implies that the "knowledges" of antiquity demonstrated in Chapter 1 as essential to interactive play are being challenged and remodelled as ancient materials continue to be adopted by the interactive arena. 'The learning processing, enabled through knowledge acquisition, is geared toward shifting attitudes… [and results] in a persuasive outcome that is different from the baseline.'[4] While I stress in the opening chapter and throughout that we do not "learn" antiquity, we nevertheless harvest through everyday exposure (and play) a general "understanding" of it. Unchallenged (re)use of these knowledges engenders repetitive, even harmful, play experiences and narrative messages: "knowledges" gleaned from strategy games about, for example, the Romans and the indigenous peoples of their provinces may perpetuate stereotypical beliefs regarding "us" and "them". As successful as the strategy genre is in presenting a DIY Rome, or the CRPG genre is in affording exploratory practices in strange new lands, they may both reinforce cultural stereotypes and assumptions about the imperial past that some may find unpalatable. Since all videogames have the potential to impact upon ways of thinking, syncretisation

[3] De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2009: xxxiii.
[4] Alhabash and Wise 2014: 1361.

between player and in-game agent through roleplay or the paint-by-numbers strategic approach towards occupying foreign spaces can prompt players to generate and concretize transgressive perspectives of other peoples and cultures as they satisfy the demands of the game. Rebellious reconfigurations, on the other hand, force players to reassess their Carthages, Greek religious spaces, their Helens and Sapphos, and lead players towards (re)addressing the contemporary quandaries they are encoded to represent. Consequently, players are directed into messages of tolerance, acceptance, and the challenging of dimensions of the present-day status quo as the games continually encourage empathy and understanding of others.

Throughout the games analysed in this project, players have functioned through an "epic game tradition" to either replay familiar cinematic moments or go deeper into the themes of tragedy, revenge and redemption that only an 8+ hour interactive experience can bring; they may either uphold or obliterate antiquity's attached colonial values and draw from those play experiences a new perspective on themes of imperialism and encounters with other peoples; they can become fluent in the "Roman language" to create a spectacular, impressive model Rome, or redefine, for themselves, the Trojan Wars and the Roman arena through uniquely treated adaptations of the strategy game framework. There is, furthermore, significant crossover between games and genres, to the point where this thesis could have been structured alternatively by themes. *Age of Mythology* and *Nethergate* prepare their classical materials in similar ways, despite belonging to entirely different genre apparatuses. Both engender new experiences with virtual colonial spaces, and both disallow movement through foreign lands at the expense of the native, even as they adapt differing ancient materials into seemingly opposing play frameworks. Similarly, different appropriations of ancient-world spectacle, like the arena, are treated in almost completely opposing ways while using many of the same conventions (*Age of Gladiators*, *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance*, *I, Gladiator*). This finding implies that the capacity for interesting play experiences and encounters with meaningful subtextual undercurrents rests with the ancient material, and the circumstances into which it is moulded, as much as it resides within the opportunities afforded by distinct genre apparatuses. Developers adopt, and players interact with, precedents taken from antiquity, but both sets of processes are unconstrained by them: and as the ancient materials are continually reconfigured, they become more and more changed by exterior phenomena, by non-ancient conventions, and agendas and themes relevant to the twenty-first century world. It is this broadness of antiquity's reach that led to the complex assessments of *Salammbo* and *Eleusis* in Chapter 5. The ancient materials within were characterised as multi-layered, multilateral and multidimensional nexuses of varying meanings. By connecting not just with a historical or mythological locus but to the networks of association that surround them, these games allowed for

similarly multifaceted game and narrative experiences. The VNs, too, contained non-normative renditions of ancient women to give players the opportunity to play in make-believe antiquities and construct contemporary concerns simultaneously. New assumptions about the ancient world are engendered for players of all genres when it is proven to (and by) them that antiquity can successfully be implicated into other pop-cultural, political, cinematic, ideological processes which in turn results in thought-provoking and sometimes challenging subtextual resonances.

These conclusions were made possible because this study embraced and demonstrated the benefits of looking transmedially at the wider networks surrounding ancient materials. The logic of transmedia, which connects diverse visual materials, themes and concepts, is applied throughout this project. This is therefore similar to Jenkins' realisation of reception texts not as exercises in replicating monolithic, totalizing visions of antiquity but instead as creative artists' endeavours to collaborate with '*specific* works, themes, and events', ideas and fragments, to produce new meanings.[5] This study has therefore approached antiquity in like fashion to Jenkins, though it has extended it further both to construct a semi-formal frame in which to conceive of "popular antiquity" and its many fragments, and to situate the receiver (player) as actor within this nebulae of possible meanings. The transmedial network in which antiquity is implicated is more than just a body of visual and thematic materials, it also encapsulates ideas, concepts and notions surrounding antiquity that give birth to, and are altered by, player (and other reception) processes. Transmedia logic, described in Chapter 1, allows us to see antiquity as a phenomenon always being conceived and reconceived, assessed and reassessed each time the developer presents and, most importantly, the player plays. The movement from text-to-film-to-game, for example, of visual signifiers, narrative themes and their attendant values and messages allows scholars to collect these interconnected reception patterns (like those identified throughout this thesis) into a "whole", a nexus of relationships. This "bigger picture", already demonstrated by the crossover of ancient materials and narrative conventions between genres, allows scholars, developers, and players to recast antiquity as a hugely contemporary and malleable phenomenon that can often reflect modedrn pursuits and causes. This is why Chapter 1 proposed a "popular antiquity" as an enormous, conceptual storyworld, a distinct entity whose existence is made possible by continued creative reconfiguration, movement of materials, and adaptation of both materials and ideas to fit present-day needs and agendas. Fragments of antiquity coalesce to form gameworlds, which themselves operate like storyworlds as their contained narrative elements interconnect to form the game experience. Every gameworld analysed here, furthermore, belongs to and is collected by a nebulous

[5] Jenkins 2015: 224, his emphasis.

"Popular Antiquity" storyworld that (attempts to) contain them. This conceptual realm allows fictional ancient worlds to interconnect with one another and permits the receiver to tacitly draw relationships between those worlds as she encounters antiquity in its many popular media forms. A "Popular Antiquity" storyworld is therefore the product of diverse arrangements and interactions with ancient materials in an array of entertainment contexts. The player of an ancient game gives unity to this conceptual complex, referring subtly and often sub-cognitively to this broader "idea" of antiquity to inform her play and assert control over onscreen events, which in turn allows further development of the storyworld. The gameplay process therefore prompts co-operation with and the shaping of the "popular antiquity" storyworld as it requires players to tap into preconceived notions of the past embodied within this entity and to then put them back into this landscape in new and altered forms. Transmedial theory illuminates this new perspective, demonstrating the "hows" and "whys" of the free movement of ancient materials contained within this multifaceted new media environment.

An open, transmedial and broadly "cultural" approach also makes space to conceive of antiquity in its pop-cultural contexts even as we use the skills and knowledges harvested as professional, interdisciplinary classicists and historians to interpret the ancient sources used within them. Despite the growing popularity of classical reception studies and transmedia scholarship, significant misunderstanding of popular culture and the benefits of analysing it seriously still permeate both the reception studies enterprise and the wider world of academia. Philosopher and writer Ron Srigley recently denounced the effects of 'Netflix and other opiates', of the online world and of new media on an already-marketized university circuit: 'Humanities education is vanishing from the academy because what we want from students is no longer their insight or character, but merely an electronic footprint of their most immediate and unconsidered desires from which to craft a custom consumer world for them to inhabit.'[6] Certainly entertainment corporations, including game companies, wish to make money, but students and teachers both generally still engage with the products they create both critically and in their leisure time. Pop-culture, including videogames, is in direct conversation with antiquity, a relationship which resultantly faces millions of people globally with a diverse range of possible ancient worlds. To better appreciate this complex arrangement is to develop a fuller understanding of the many nuanced ways in which the ancient world is known to, consumed and altered by those who engage with it. To understand antiquity in this vast pop-cultural landscape we need to critically analyse what is happening in games and new media by engaging in interdisciplinary projects that produce understanding both of our subjects and

[6] Srigley 2018.

the cultural contexts that incorporate and appropriate them. This is why I have deviated from the "historying" approach set out in Chapter 1, wherein players are designated player-historians who engage with an alternative type of history. Substituting the term 'historical processes', a phrase describing this theoretical conversation between represented virtual histories and their historian-like players, for the term 'cultural processes' broadens the scope of our investigations and allows us to sketch out multi-dimensional interrelationships between varying imageries, themes and subtexts from both inside and outside the boundaries of historical and classical studies. Classical, historical sources will always be a major part of this endeavour, but we also have to embrace the "popular" if we wish to fully understand where and how antiquity exists in the twenty-first century and move away from 'inward-looking' departmental 'privileging… [of] academic discourse' that narrows the vision and reach of academia.[7] This thesis optimistically promotes popular classics not just as something that happens alongside "real" studies. The project has drawn focus onto virtual ancient worlds that not only interpret the past but interpret the present while the reconfigured past operates dynamically with it, illustrating the significance of antiquity in the ever-expanding universe of creative, popular, entertainment and demonstrating its capacity to offer transformative, meaningful experiences. So, just as Chapman argues for 'the serious consideration of the nature and possibilities of digital games as a historical form', I ask for the serious consideration of all (ancient) videogames, of the world of popular culture, and of the new "antiquity" existing within them. Such an endeavour would inevitably find antiquity to be a near-ubiquitous phenomenon in the cultural products, artefacts and narratives of people from around the world, and so would work towards the collective mission to better understand how the past assists in making sense of the human social and cultural experience.

## Next Steps

There are far more ancient games than are present in this thesis. This project simply is not big enough to even mention them all, let alone fully analyse them. The relatively small number of case studies throughout are chosen as the best examples to highlight key issues with ancient games and to streamline the process of investigating the nature of antiquity in the medium. There are missing subgenres, such as the "hidden object" game, and seemingly narrative-less interactive experiences like gambling programs and slot machines, many of which are decorated with ancient Roman and Egyptian aesthetics and terminologies to attract players with the promise of untold riches.[8] There

[7] Gee 2016.
[8] McCombie 2001: 55-6 sees in the Caesars Palace casino of Las Vegas the use of familiar 'carriers of culture' to create a unique experience for gamblers.

are games which demonstrate largely the same functions as others: for example, *Qvadriga* (Turnopia, 2014) operates in similar ways to *Age of Gladiators* in Chapter 4, substituting spectacle for statistics to "strategize" ordinarily action-packed experiences. Virtual reality is a growing phenomenon, left out of this project because it deserves to be treated as a distinct form of interactive play. It was a conscious decision to choose a limited selection of games to demonstrate *what* antiquity is doing, rather than utilise as many of the (numerous) ancient games that are out there to "show and tell", as opposed to critically analysing. The approach laid out here represents one possible way forward for future studies of ancient-world videogames, which may benefit from more wide-ranging analyses to illustrate the vast spectrum of play experiences and narratives currently on offer.

I would propose further that, to create a fuller picture of how the ancient world operates in videogames, we might also move outwards towards games where antiquity is not the priority of the designer or the player, but where ancient materials are nevertheless used to build fictional worlds. Some (often fantasy and science-fictional) texts approach ancient cultures as a pic-n-mix, extracting signifiers and applying them as and when necessary. There are shadows of this practice in games like *Eleusis*, where the setting is modern, although its primary source of inspiration remains the ancient Greek rites, the site they took place in, and the direct responses to those activities produced over time. *Helena's Flowers* also took place on a distant planet, but nevertheless directed player attention to the characteristics and problems of the Helen figure. Elsewhere, particularly in science-fiction media, ancient materials are utilised sparsely, but effectively, and might indicate the next step in deciphering the uses of antiquity in the videogame medium. This appears to be the current trajectory of onscreen antiquity studies as it is today: much of *The New Peplum* (2018) edited volume finds ancient signifiers in the "distance" of almost-entirely non-ancient films and television series. There, fantastical swords-and-sorcery settings and fictional worlds in outer space initially appear to have little to do with antiquity, yet nevertheless continue the epic onscreen tradition in various subtle ways.[9] This is, as the editor Diak suggests, a vision of antiquity as subject to transmedial logic.[10] To encapsulate antiquity within the world-making parameters of the storyworld and the networking behaviours of transmedia simply permits us to see into these disparate texts and understand how free movement of signifiers and ideas allow antiquity to stray far from its "usual" territory.

[9] Johnson 2018: 21-2.

[10] See above, (Chapter 2), on Diak 2018: 6, 9. Elliott 2015a: 3-4 also speaks of the direct and indirect interactions between classics and science-fiction/fantasy.

This thesis opened with one such instance in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. As that introductory example was further pulled apart, it became clear that the Roman Egyptian world represented within was couched in other historical, present-day, and science-fictional circumstances and conventions. The *AC* games present a historical fiction, which are then nestled in a further present-day fiction,[11] thereby combining past worlds and modern referents into a multi-layered experience incorporating the ancient, the contemporary, and the mythological. We could thus consider the modern setting as Tier 1, the past-setting as Tier 2 and the mythological dimension as Tier 3. The player must contend, often simultaneously, with these three Tiers, skipping between varying science-fictional and fantastical layers and realms of modern-day referents to maintain her play experience. Tier 1 fits the game into tropes of distrustful and controlling mega-corporations conducting experiments behind closed doors, and so taps into contemporary themes of mistrust and paranoia popularised by television series like *The X-Files* (20th Century Fox, 1993-2018). Tier 2, Roman Egypt, requires the player to interpret "Romanness" and "Egyptianness" as they operate roughly within the epic game tradition parameters set out in Chapter 2 and the levelling systems of Chapter 3's CRPGs. This Tier is nevertheless also bound up with prior understandings garnered from operation with Tier 1: according to the series narrative, events in both of these "worlds" move under the authority of the gods (Tier 3), who constitute a science-fictional reconfiguration of the Roman pantheon as extra-terrestrial beings. The wider franchise, furthermore, has been interpreted as a critique of empire: for example, *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012) allows the player to battle against the British in eighteenth century North America.[12] *AC:O* similarly allows players to function as an Egyptian assassin fighting both old Hellenistic and new Roman occupiers. Every level of gameplay operation, therefore, is couched in a number of evocative historical, archaeological, and narrative (science-fictional) referents.[13] These diverse cultural processes interweave to present a complex play and narrative experience, and upon successful navigation and completion of these procedures readings and subtexts may eventually arise. In transmedial and storyworld terms, this means the player moves between popular antiquity, real-world present-day fiction and modern political connotations, and the science-fictionalising of mythological characters, itself a firm motif in science-fiction.[14] A complete image of *AC* therefore cannot be discerned by seeing it only as 'playing with history',[15] but as a text that plays with many other phenomena equally and simultaneously. The

[11] Tavinor 2009: 81.
[12] Mukherjee 2017: 8.
[13] Compagno 2015: 1006; cf. Westin and Hedlund 2016: 5, 10.
[14] The 'Precursors', as the Roman gods are known in *AC*, are conveniently identified as aliens. This gods-who-were-actually-aliens trope is much-used in SF literature and media, E.g. Apollo in the *Star Trek* episode 'Who Mourns for Adonais?' (S02 E02, Desilu Productions, 1967), and more recently Roswell aliens as harbingers and saviours of 21st century humanity in the tenth season of *The X-Files* (2018).
[15] Shaw 2015: 16.

methods set out in this project may now further inform analyses of games like *AC:O* by illustrating the ways in which Roman Egypt comes into contact with an open-world, CRPG-tinged action-adventure experience, becomes entangled with narrative conventions from across television and film, and presents the player with functions resonant with the epic game tradition. This complex confluence then exposes underpinning subtexts of empire. Using the methods applied throughout this chapter to better understand how *Origins*' Roman Egypt is constructed and altered by the player, further application of transmedial theory can then allow us to better understand these comparatively non-ancient 'Tiers' and see what kinds of reciprocal impacts the ancient materials of the game has had upon them. Such an approach would allow focus on the wider reach of antiquity in distinctly non-ancient or pseudo-ancient contexts, thereby permitting the demonstration of an even broader "big picture" in which Greco-Roman materials occupy significant, meaningful roles. For since videogames (ancient-world and otherwise) require players to make sense of their worlds, events and subtexts, investigation into the interpretive and interrogative methods of player interaction would work towards the aims of the wider Humanities project. These "next steps" are therefore proposed as a means to continue implicating antiquity into the broader arts and cultural studies continuum which seeks to uncover the value in both the operation with and study of contemporary cultural artefacts like videogames.

These 'next steps' are important because hundreds of games use antiquity as a secondary, peripheral influence to construct original fictional worlds. This consequently implies that the ancient world occupies an essential position not just in gameplay, but also in the very ways in which people (developers and players alike) conceive of fiction-making and -reading. We might therefore adopt interdisciplinary approaches to discern how ancient materials act as component parts of virtual world-creation and subsequent play experiences within them. In science-fiction and fantasy, from the 'vernacular' and 'recondite' references to ancient Greece in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (20th Century Fox, 1997-2003) to the *Halo* (Bungie, 2001-2017) videogame series' 'complex mythology rooted in ideas of an ancient and mysterious past… mirroring the ambiguity associated with real-world mythologies',[16] ideas and images are taken almost entirely out of context and away from antiquity to uphold contemporary or futuristic fictions. A fictional world in a videogame, for example, exists as a storyworld itself. Developers draw on pieces and fragments of other fictions, histories, mythologies and such to construct that world: including those of classical, or "popular", antiquity. There is growing awareness amongst media, literature, and videogame scholars

[16] *Buffy* utilises Greece both as historical past and in relation to its present-day meanings, Pomeroy 2008: 3. Jenkins 2015: 1-8 also notes extensive use of Sappho in the *Buffy* series. For *Halo* quote and further information, see Harvey 2015: 98-113, quotation from 113.

that pop-culture products can be viewed and approached as narrative storyworlds in this way.[17] Such visions of fictional spaces open media texts up to transmedial analysis, allowing us to better understand how parts of other works and past conventions conflate to engender new fictions and experiences. It is in this world-building, narratological body of scholarship where (non-classical) scholars are now calling for games to be studied as pop-cultural entertainment products in and of themselves, rather than proposing them as a different type of pre-existing academic practice (such as history, or literature).[18] There is no doubt that such a task would be hugely challenging,[19] but it would ultimately proffer the location of antiquity within this ever-moving landscape. This thesis has taken steps towards illustrating a "popular antiquity" as its own storyworld, though one that is always conversing with others and impacting upon them to generate new fictions. Such an approach might then assist in the investigation of antiquity within future, non-ancient endeavours. For example, the *Mass Effect* videogame trilogy (BioWare, 2007-2012), a role-playing franchise, has in-game databases which offer information to the player that fully realises extra-terrestrial alien races, their histories and cultures. The backstories of these alien races often subscribe to histories, customs and behaviours of familiar ancient societies. This database, or 'codex', 'increases player immersion' and enriches the storyworld already in place.[20] Yet even without reading it, much of this information is embedded in the story and assists in player interpretation of the complex epic narrative. Whether reading the extraneous information or acting within the main narrative, the game connects with recesses of the player's mind by utilising preconceived notions of past ancient cultures, themselves popularised and typified by their use in other media texts, to engender player understanding of these fictional beings. The more we look for antiquity in these strange virtual places, the more we discover a fluid, malleable body of references, signifiers and meanings that know no boundaries. By sketching that "big picture", we further prove the indispensability of antiquity to the processes of interpreting fiction.

This thesis represents a first step towards studying the uses and operations of antiquity in videogames. It began by envisioning a new type of reception process, in which antiquity is continually and fundamentally altered by the player. This player is a new type of receiver, acting upon and bringing forth informal "understandings" and phantom "knowledges" of the ancient world, and entering into a conversation with similar ideas and images of antiquity to facilitate the gameplay

[17] For example, a forthcoming chapter by Hobden uses the term 'story-world' to describe the "universe" of Starz *Spartacus*.
[18] See Cutterham 2013: 320-1 on post-apocalyptic game *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008). Carvalho 2015: 136 also wishes to propose history as serving a purpose within the contexts of the fiction and is foremost played (rather than 'historied').
[19] Zakowski 2014: 59 on the *Mass Effect* series.
[20] Zakowski 2014: 64, 68.

process. This new characterisation of ancient materials was developed in order to show how malleable antiquity can be, and how an array of meanings can easily be attached to or exaggerated by it. The project adopted a genre studies approach to further demonstrate how ancient materials were effectively always able to fit within and even alter genre frameworks to provide a wide variety of play and narrative experiences. Because of this arrangement, popular antiquity both within and across genres grants players access to numerous visual, thematic and ideological phenomena, sometimes relying on standardised assumptions and expectations to represent colonial, heroic or violent experiences, while other times upending the "usual" idea of the ancient past and so demonstrating the capacity for antiquity to guide the player towards progressive, political and socially-conscious messages. Such involving interactive experiences will no doubt alter present and future attitudes towards the Graeco-Roman world. It is not fixed in the popular imagination, but shifts, adapts, and assists us in critiquing our own world. It is important to understand, as this thesis has demonstrated, that antiquity never remains neutral, but is always charged with meanings and ideas. The player of these games, balancing those ideas and construing them in diverse fashions as she progresses, sculpts those meanings and, in the process, makes new versions and images of the ancient world. It is no overstatement, then, to say that antiquity assists in creating ideas. Such a perspective emphatically underlines how essential the study of antiquity in both past and present environments are in illuminating and assisting in the greater Humanities project, wherein scholars persevere in investigating and exploring the means by which we understand the human condition and the societies and cultures it exists within, and the methods by which we reflect on the ideas and values that are shaped by us. Through the semi-conscious recognition/interpretation gameplay process, players "recall" shreds and fragments of antiquity and apply them the gameworld to co-produce new versions of the ancient world and, through this, to engage in those very processes of reflection and self-evaluation. This seemingly simple reception process allows antiquity to transform, and be transformed by, the present.

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