Classics For All:
Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture

Edited by

Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

CHAPTER FOUR

PLAYING WITH ANTIQUITY: VIDEOGAME RECEPTIONS OF THE CLASSICAL WORLD

DUNSTAN LOWE

In the 21st century, classical antiquity is read, heard, watched and performed. Increasingly, it is also played. Few of those who write about its modern receptions—even those taking place in contemporary popular culture—acknowledge that in the last twenty years video games have become a major means of public access to the classical world.[1] It is a commonplace of critical writing on video games to open with the claim that games make more money than Hollywood,[2] and even though it is hard to define "revenue" given the variety of economic mechanisms surrounding videogame software, the industry is certainly bigger than most people realise. According to Stephen Jones, video games are "arguably the most influential form of popular expression and entertainment in today's broader culture" (Jones 2008: 1). Such a medium should not be overlooked as part of our understanding of how the ancient world is perceived in the modern world.

The number of classically-themed games, increasing steadily, has reached a climax in the last decade: at the strictest estimate, the number of games across all formats featuring direct references to classical antiquity now stands at over two hundred. At the time of writing, high-street videogame releases for 2008 include *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, *Europa Universalis: Rome*, *Fate of Hellas*, *God of War: Chains of Olympus*, *Great War Nations: The Spartans*, *Imperium Romanum* and *Rise*

of the Argonauts, all set in the ancient Mediterranean. These games are the main point of access to classical culture for an increasing number of young people: according to the website of the Entertainment Software Association, 25% of America's most frequent home-computer players and 35% of its most frequent console gamers are under eighteen years old.[3]

Like other contributions to this volume, this chapter is an invitation to the study of a new field with a new audience for Classics. It has two simultaneous aims. One is to reveal the nature and extent of classical influence in video games, and situate this in a wider picture of the converging relationships between different media. The other is to show how the concept of "play" might contribute more widely to classical reception studies.

Theories of Play and Video Games

Charles Martindale, who campaigns for the return of "aesthetic" criticism of classical literature and its postclassical influence, famously pronounced that "meaning...is always realized at the point of reception" (Martindale 1993: 3).[4] This neat formulation stresses that all re-presentations of the classical world and its culture are inherently creative. Arguing that this creativity should be viewed optimistically, Ralph Hexter uses the metaphor of play: "So let the games begin" (Hexter 2006: 31). The postmodern view that the classical tradition is what you make it has helped the discipline of Classics to grow beyond its traditional limits into the study of all kinds of postclassical cultures, including our own. Video games are therefore not only the latest, but the best example of classical reception: if antiquity is metaphorically "played with" by the various media which refashion it, video games make the process literal. The game's creators are one part of the process: the player is the other, also an active participant. Their relationship is like that of the playwright and the actor: Pantelis Michelakis (2006: 216), discussing classical reception in theatre studies, has criticised scholars who reduce dramatic performance to "an illustration, translation, or fulfilment of the text", an approach that undervalues the shapeshifting nature of "live" classical drama. This argument actually has an increasingly wide application to forms of mass entertainment based on the ancient world. Other explicitly creative forms of "play" with antiquity tend to be found in less high-brow

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[1] Nisbet (2006: 42-43), Gardner (2007) and Wyke (2007: 36-40) are notable exceptions.
[2] While this is almost impossible to determine and probably not yet true, US game software sales in 2007 did total $9.5 billion (Entertainment Software Association website at http://www.theesa.com, accessed 11 June 2008).

[3] See n. 2. These proportions are in fact lower than in 2006, but this reflects an enormous increase in video game playing among the over-40s.
[4] The phrase is also repeatedly quoted in Martindale & Thomas (2006).

media, for example table-top games such as *Republic of Rome*,[5] or historical prose fiction which explores "alternate histories".[6] The metaphor suits the afterlife of antiquity in general, since all receptions of classical antiquity are implicitly forms of play, but applies especially well to mass entertainment. Video games are of their time, both as a new medium, and as a place for the ancient world to be reborn and re-examined.

Game-playing is also inherently suited to dominant approaches in contemporary reception criticism because the player is responsible for "making" part of the experience they receive, just as the reader is now seen by literary theorists as re-making the text. "Play" is one of many terms that Jacques Derrida turned into a critical tool;[7] Jean Baudrillard based much of his work on the concept of "simulation".[8] Within the rules of the game, the player has the potential to make changes to the narrative. Whenever the game has been an interpretation of Classics—whether, like *Age of Mythology*, drawing on ancient stories, or, like *Rome: Total War*, drawing on ancient history—the player's relationship with Classics has been influenced in two opposite ways. One is that the power of the canon is reduced: the subject matter is rarely, if ever, constrained by source material, and the distinction between fact and fiction routinely disappears. The other is a movement *towards* history rather than away from it, with the development of new ways of simulating the look and feel of the past: as it were, the invention of new forms of authenticity. Advances in technology and the advent of a techno-literate generation of classical enthusiasts are already producing exciting new ways of approaching and reconstructing the lived experience of individuals and communities in the real past.[9] Whether they seek "authenticity" or not, those who choose to engage with classical culture through video games see something distinctive about it. Even in this commercially-driven medium, their

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[5] *The Republic of Rome* (Avalon Hill/Jeux Descartes 1990). I thank Myles Lavan and others for help with this game.

[6] See Ferguson (1997) for an application of "alternate histories" as a thought-experiment by academic historians. Fan fiction based on classical film and television, and self-published novels about antiquity, both retell established narratives from new and personal perspectives: Nick Lowe explored this at the 'Classics Hell' conference that inspired this volume (see Introduction) in a paper entitled "Greek slash: Reading the unreadable in classical fiction".

[7] E.g. Derrida (1978); cf. Aycock (1993).

[8] See esp. Baudrillard (1981).

[9] Computer modelling is the most convenient and versatile reconstructive tool yet. Three-dimensional models, such as Matthew Nicholls' reconstruction of the city of Rome in the age of Constantine, have diverse applications in both research and teaching.

continuing search for the things which make Classics appealing has already created a thriving new sub-domain of the classical tradition, which is now ripe for study.

Videogame studies can contribute their own ways of thinking about classical reception, as well as vice versa. The field emerged in the 1980s and 1990s within the interdisciplinary brew of Media Studies, and developed rapidly, around the solid core of a controversy. Two opposing views of the formal qualities of video games were put forward, dictating very different definitions of what videogame studies should do. On one side was the "narrativist" (or narratologist) approach, in which games (from role-playing adventures to logic puzzles) were treated as a linear experience, delivering a sequential "story" like other visual media. This approach only conceded in passing that that playing—unlike reading or viewing—is interactive rather than passive, and saw different game experiences as different paths through a narrative map, each one a linear journey.[10] On the other side was the "ludologist" approach, which assumed that interactivity makes video games inherently non-linear and makes the ideas of fixed narratives inappropriate:[11] in Raph Koster's words (2005: 86), "the stories that wrap the games are usually side dishes for the brain". In fact, some game types are heavily narrative-led, others barely so— classically-themed games span the range. There is therefore much to support both views.

Classicists can benefit from seeing both sides of the debate around which game studies developed. Taking the view of the narratologists, we can trace paths of development between media over time: video games have incorporated elements from successively complex narrative media, from text to static images, to increasingly sophisticated animation, and now to "real-time" three-dimensional graphics with complex simulated physics. Classical themes have been present at every stage of this evolution, often through the influences of other media. Comparing games with other media such as television or film is useful, because games *can* imitate them, and the ways that they do or do not are instructive.[12] Conversely, taking the view of the ludologists, we see the inescapable fact that some games—such as MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games)—are almost never experienced in the same way on

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[10] E.g. Murray (1997). Cf. Grodal (2003: 147).

[11] Most famously, Aarseth (1997). For an alternative formulation of the ludologist view see Poole (2000: 92).

[12] Wright (2003: xxxii). Cf. Wolf (2003: 47): "video games have come to rely on conventions from film and television, allowing...their diegetic worlds to seem more intuitive and familiar to players".

different occasions, and can never be more than partially structured by a "narrative" in any sense. Many video games (sometimes known as "on-rails" games), mainly platformers, role-playing games and shoot-'em-ups, follow a prescribed sequence of events and can clearly be "read" as narrative texts. Others are more open-ended, however, with multiple paths and outcomes. (This distinction between two fundamentally different styles of computer game has affected the forms taken by antiquity in video games, and will be discussed further below.) Video games escape fixed plots in other ways too: multiplayer games allow other humans to act unpredictably; customised or "modded" scenarios go beyond the intentions of the game's original creators;[13] "sandbox" activities permit the conventional goal of "winning the game" to be ignored, or even absent;[14] and persistent online worlds which are subject to ongoing development are literally works-in-progress. In all of these cases, narrative is a less dominant concept.

The narratology-ludology distinction is therefore not absolute, but is a useful way of dividing classics-themed games into two types, offering different approaches to classical material. We can call the first type the "empire-building" game, which tends to be open-ended (like a board game) and focuses on dynamic interaction between peoples and nations, usually in a historical or pseudo-historical context. The second type is the "hero-based" game, which is typically more narrative-driven and focuses on an individual protagonist, usually in a mythological or fantasy context. This is a far more diverse category, involving platformers, Role-Playing Games and arcade-style "action" games among other styles of play. The differences between the two are significant and instructive.

Games and Other Media

Classical content in the video game carries a great deal of baggage. More than any other medium, it has subsumed all kinds of material accumulated from both "high" and "low" culture, both innovations and clichés, from previous versions of antiquity from the Renaissance to 20th-

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[13] "Modding", the modification or redesigning of games by amateur programmers, is somewhere in-between the malicious "hacking" of software, and the use of "level editors" and other customisation tools included within the software itself (Galloway 2006: 107-126). Ghita & Andrikopoulos in this volume discuss the process of modding as applied to a game set in ancient Rome.
[14] "Sandbox" is a term used to describe creative play, with numerous optional goals, as when children play in a sandpit.
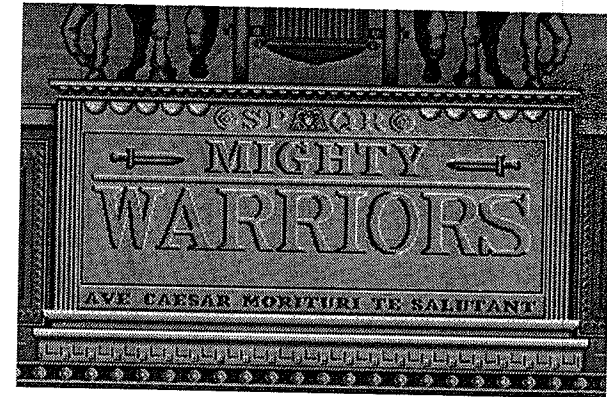
Fig. 4-1: Title screen of *Mighty Warriors* (Elettronica, 1990)

and 21st-century film. Much of the content in games comes from other (especially visual) mass-cultural products. For example, the final Colosseum showdown in *Spartan: Total Warrior* takes place in an arena whose perimeter is strewn with red spots or petals; this image is probably borrowed from Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), who got it from Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1872 painting *Pollice Verso* (Cyrino 2004: 129-130). Gérôme's other famous gladiatorial painting, *Ave Caesar, Morituri Te Salutant* (1859), provides a second branch of communication between antiquity and video games: its title, a misquotation of Suetonius, appears as the subtitle of *Mighty Warriors*, a *Street Fighter*-style arcade fighting game set in classical antiquity (Fig. 4-1).[15]

Another example of rapid evolution from one medium to another is the point-and-click adventure *Salammbo* (PC: 2003), which portrays the involvement of the slave Spendius in the intrigues of Salammbo, Carthage's princess, as events unfold which eventually lead to the city's downfall. The game is based on a series of three graphic novels of the same title by Philippe Druillet (1980), which was in turn based on Gustave Flaubert's celebrated novel (1858), itself inspired by the first book of Polybius' *Histories* (2nd century BCE). Each stage of this relay race has added its own elements of fantasy to the story of the last days of Carthage. These are only two examples of the many classically-themed video games generated as part of a "franchise", i.e. originating in a different medium. While some franchises have arisen and thrived within the videogame

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[15] According to Suetonius (*Life of Claudius* 21.6), participants in Claudius' mock sea-battle saluted him by saying *ave Imperator, morituri te salutant* ("Hail, emperor, those about to die salute you").

medium, most notably the long-running *Caesar* and *God of War* series, others have *crossed into* video games, for example Asterix from comic books and films, or Xena from the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*.[16] In this sense, classical video games have not only imitated games with different content, as mentioned above, but also frequently imported their own content from other media.[17] The majority of classically-themed video games are therefore doubly privileged as weathervanes of popular culture. According to Gideon Nisbet's formulation (2006: xii), cash-ins and knock-offs are better indicators of what is really going on in popular culture than the very innovations which they elevate to "seminal" status.

There is one final observation to make about how classical themes travel between media. As shown by the examples of Gérôme and Flaubert, classical themes—whether or not they pass into video games—can migrate from one medium to another, regardless of target audience or degree of cultural prestige. The rich tradition of classical receptions at both ends of the cultural hierarchy offers the player two long-standing (and diametrically opposite) stereotypes: the authority and grandeur of "high-brow Classics", and the earthiness, colourful paganism and gory violence of "low-brow Classics".[18] Each has its own appeal; the incongruous blends which they constantly form, especially in media such as video games, are even more appealing. Consumers of these media are not often formally educated in Classics, but their cultural background is filled with echoes, traces, and caricatures of antiquity.

Arguably, Classics has appealed to videogame players because knowledge of antiquity now possesses a certain mystique for mass audiences. Many games employ Greek and Latin (both correctly and incorrectly), although they are understood by a minuscule percentage of players. Ancient languages confer both credibility and an evocative otherness. Johan Andersson, the producer of *Europa Universalis: Rome* (PC: 2008), self-consciously played on this by concluding an interview with GameSpot as follows:

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[16] There have been over twenty different *Asterix* games, most recently *Asterix at the Olympic Games* (DS, PC, PlayStation2, Wii: 2008), and four *Xena* games.

[17] Though videogames are interactive and therefore, as Wolf & Perron emphasise (2003: 14), can never be treated simply as "remediations" of other visual forms, even when they explicitly evoke them.

[18] Bondanella (1987: *passim*, esp. xiii, 5, 213, 253) argues that popular (cinematic) versions of Rome create strong antitheses between stability and corruption, public virtue versus private vice.

GS: Finally, is there anything else you'd like to add about *Europa Universalis: Rome*?
JA: "Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam."
GS: Yes. Thank you for that.[19]

For some of the game's prospective consumers, Andersson's quotation of a Latin tag attributed to Cato the Elder provokes curiosity; it rewards others—those with sufficient knowledge to recognise the reference—with participation in an inside joke. Yet although Classics can still belong to specialist elites, in another sense it belongs to everyone. Part of the cultural prestige of classical subject-matter derives from its central place in Western education until relatively recent times.[20] Many classical video games, especially strategy games like *Europa Universalis: Rome*, or *Rome: Total War*, include background information through encyclopaedia-like resources, and use plausibly accurate maps and names. In so doing, they set themselves up (either explicitly or implicitly) as sources of documentary information as well as entertainment. Publicity materials for Sid Meier's *CivCity: Rome* (PC: 2006), for instance, played up the inclusion of a "CityPedia", a form of integrated reference work. This resembles, but exceeds, educational claims occasionally made in other media such as cinema. Most historically-themed games, but classical ones in particular, choose to exploit the impressiveness and worthiness of their subject-matter: since it is something worth knowing about, engaging with it must be (or at least resemble) learning.

The figure in a video game by whom the player is represented—the "avatar"—is its most iconic element. Changing trends in these "identities for players" suggest an evolution in how the medium has represented antiquity over time. There is a loose correlation between the changing state of game technology and the nature of the classical videogame hero, which in turn reflects the close relationships between video games and other media. Games in which the player takes the role of a mythical hero, such as Theseus or Odysseus, belong mainly to the early days of home computing and are predominantly text adventures: a "book phase". The *Astérix* franchise produced numerous games in the eighties and early nineties, predominantly cartoon-style platform or puzzle games: a "comic-

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[19] "Europa Universalis: Rome Q&A–First Details", GameSpot.com (http://uk.gamespot.com/pc/strategy/europauniversalisrome/news.html, accessed 9 April 2008). In point of fact, much like Gérôme's *Ave Caesar*, this exact phrase (meaning "As for the rest, I believe that Carthage should be destroyed") does not occur in ancient texts: see Little (1934) for a full discussion.

[20] See e.g. Culham & Edmunds (1989); Winterer (2002).

book phase". In the last two decades, maturing videogame audiences have been offered games with more realistic and more adult content, featuring gladiators and other heroes of weapons-based combat: a "film phase". Although this character-based history of Classics in video games is a gross simplification, it is true enough to show that the subject matter has evolved along with form, staying relevant to a changing and diversifying consumer base.

Games and Cinema

Unsurprisingly, the recent flourishing of classical computer games can be linked to the resurgence in popularity of classical antiquity in cinema. Only in recent decades has cinema become well-established as a field of classical reception studies. It is now the staple of mass cultural reception studies and teaching in Classics, and has been a leading influence on the contemporary popular understanding of ancient Rome (Wyke 1997a: 3). In lamenting the unambitious nature of most contemporary videogame writing, David Freeman asks: "So are games entertainment, or are they art?" He immediately answers, "Obviously, like film, they're both" (Freeman 2003: 293). Freeman's choice of film as the analogue—and even aspiration—for video games is natural given the formal similarities between them. They use the same special effects houses and have similar systems of certification for adult themes; both hijack domestic television screens; and both use video clips, sound, opening titles and closing credits (Wolf 2001: 2).[21] Video games and cinema are now cross-pollinating to an increasing degree, and films based on games are at least gaining in commercial viability, if not critical acclaim.[22] This convergence is affecting the evolution of the ancient world in popular culture.

Scott's epic film *Gladiator* (2000) had no licensed computer game, but can instead be credited with casting up an entire wave of classically-themed games, which began to break in 2005. One sign of its influence on games—what has been called the "*Gladiator* effect"—is the sudden

[21] King & Krzywinska (2002: 12) and Galloway (2006: 39) have also emphasised videogames' use of "cinematics".

[22] King & Krzywinska (2002: 2). There have been tens of films based on videogames (notably *Super Mario Bros*: 1993, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*: 2001, *Doom*: 2005, *Resident Evil*: 2006-2008) and perhaps hundreds of games based on films. Licensed classical examples include *Alexander The Great* (US)/*Alexander: The Heroes Hour* (EU) (2004), *300: March To Glory* (2007) and the awkwardly-titled *Hercules Action Game* (US)/*Disney's Action Game featuring Hercules* (EU) (1998).

popularity of the late 2nd century CE. The first full-scale MMORPG with a classical theme (launched 16 July 2006) was set in Roman Britain in 180 CE. Not only were its creators inspired to borrow the dramatic date of *Gladiator*, but they named the game itself after Russell Crowe's rallying cry, *Roma Victor*.[23] The advertising of games featuring gladiators has explicitly evoked Ridley Scott's visual style. The original box cover of *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance* (2003) showed a gladiator wearing a mask-helmet very like the one selected by Russell Crowe's Maximus, while that of *The Gladiators of Rome* (2002) showcases an even closer imitation on a red background.[24] More intriguingly, the last three levels of *Spartan: Total Warrior* respectively involve the revenge-killing of a Roman general in single combat; a journey through Rome's sewers; and a victory against the Praetorian Guard, all of which featured in early drafts of the *Gladiator* screenplay (Solomon 2004: 12). This suggests that "fashions" in the portrayal of classical antiquity are not necessarily mere imitation: they can be independent responses to the same underlying trends in popular culture.

Cinematic conventions have influenced the look of video games in general, and this is evident in their portrayals of the ancient world. Whereas the "new wave" of Hollywood films set in the ancient world have all made use of computer-generated imagery,[25] the movie version of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* was the first to depend primarily on it, and therefore (as critics have agreed) has some affinity with contemporary video games.[26] Like films, games are massively collaborative, with a long list of credits. Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) set many trends for the cinematic portrayal of ancient cities, including the use of cutting-edge

[23] Unfortunately for a game whose makers took pains to achieve authenticity (for example, imitating locations on and around Hadrian's Wall), the inherited name is a piece of bad Latin: because "Rome" is feminine, it should be *Roma Victrix*.

[24] All three designs share a very atypical combination of characteristics: silver colour, spikes on the crown, "scowling" contours on the brow, ridges over the cheekbones, long straight cheek-pieces, full encasement for the nose, and no mouth covering.

[25] Including *Gladiator* (dir. Scott 2000), *Troy* (dir. Petersen 2004), *Alexander* (dir. Stone 2004), and *The Passion Of The Christ* (dir. Gibson 2004).

[26] In an online article for *Variety*, Ben Fritz notes that several prominent film critics made pejorative comparisons between Snyder's *300* and videogames: "For today's movie critics, videogames are the new MTV music video, a shorthand insult for any movie deemed too heavy on effects and visual panache at the expense of plot and coherence" ("'300' critics cling to consoles", http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117961144.html, accessed 14 March 2008). See also Turner in this volume.

special effects, lavish set design, and hundreds of extras (Bondanella 1987: 207).[27] These conventions have all influenced the look of the ancient world in video games, and this is particularly obvious, for example, in the title sequence of *Rome: Total War*, a montage of swarming armies, flaming missiles, explosions, sweeping landscapes and rampaging elephants. Further inheritances from cinematic antiquity include the use of stilted and cod-archaic dialogue to indicate an elevated, historical, and "epic" register, as well as British accents for the villainous Roman oppressors.[28] Roman, Greek, and Egyptian music in games is the same as in cinema—Eastern, orchestral, and military. Nor are these parallels unconscious: for fans and critics, "cinematic" (like "epic") is a term of approval when applied to video games. Indeed, replicating the faults of the camera—soft-focus, "shaky-cam", lens-flare, and motion-blur—has become a point of pride in videogame craftsmanship. However, as game design consultant David Freeman warns (2003: 10), the game designer cannot count on some of the basic resources of screenwriting—namely, controlling the order of events and the timing between them. We should therefore be careful not to confuse superficial resemblance with identification. Although modern videogame versions of antiquity owe their "look" to cinema, they are not enslaved to it. Different constraints are at work, imposing alternative transformations on classical subject matter.

Expect the Expected

Every manifestation of the classical tradition in mass culture in some way reduces antiquity to a simplified code of signs. This is especially clear in video games, which transform the ancient world into entertainment which is both readily understood, and based on easily-learned rules. Although each new generation of videogame technology makes games more naturalistic, the reality of the ancient world is an unmanageable and complex object of study, which no amount of visual enhancement will

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[27] *Cabiria*, too, is based in part upon Flaubert's *Salammbô*, discussed above. It is also notable for first introducing the muscular Maciste, who subsequently became the protagonist of dozens of *pepla* (see Shahabudin in this volume).

[28] In *Spartan: Total Warrior*, voice-actors fake both "Cockney" and "posh" depending on the social status of the Roman in question. In *Rome: Total War* the tutorial characters both have obvious Australasian accents, presumably because these sound English to most American ears. Similar aural conventions in cinematic antiquity have been noted by numerous commentators, including Ahl (1991: 50), for whom the British gods and American heroes in *Clash of the Titans* (dir. Davis 1981) implicitly claim America as the inheritor of Britain's theatrical tradition.

reduce to a playable game. The goals of entertainment and accessibility are continually in tension with historical accuracy, trimming its details, pruning its nuances, and filling in its grey areas. Any game is built out of rules (even if only the first rule of consenting to imagine "what if"). Rules reduce subject-matter to uniformity, predictability, limits and systems, thereby inducing fairness. In this sense, even the most story-like of electronic games is at heart a playable structure, which is then enriched with images, sounds, characters, and so on. No matter how many opportunities there are to clothe the frame with lifelike detail, whether representing the entire history of the Roman Republic, a battle, or a single chariot race, the video game must fall well short of reality itself. The mechanics of the game must be easily comprehensible, and must represent antiquity using very limited practical resources. For both reasons video games are a schematic medium.

This is clearly illustrated by a popular type of game, sometimes described as "city-building", "strategy" or "4X" (eXplore, eXploit, eXpand and eXterminate),[29] which I will collectively call "empire-building" games. The earliest examples were resource-management simulators with little or no window-dressing. They represented war onscreen through statistics, numerical tables, and a very rudimentary map.[30] The unrealistic logic and fairness of game rules remain under the surface of more recent empire-building games such as *Fate of Hellas, Great War Nations: The Spartans*, and *Europa Universalis: Rome*, all released in 2008. They are direct descendants of the early number-crunchers: strategic and tactical games which, although graphically lush, continue to represent history using highly schematic methods. The most striking thing about them is their regularity. Beneath the cosmetic detail, terrains are usually composed of regular diamond-shaped or hexagonal tiles. Buildings or people of the same class are uniform in their appearance and properties; unpredictable factors are used to add variety, not to subvert the internal logic of the game. These simplifications give videogame ancient history the assumption that history is inevitable and governed by logic. They are necessary because players are not able or willing to take on board the debates and uncertainties of academia, but also because they make for more accessible and flexible play. For example, in *Rome: Total War*'s Campaign mode, each city in the player's empire has a "culture clash" statistic, a factor in whether its population will revolt. Each public building in each city belongs to one of five ethnic alignments. The culture clash

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[29] See Gita & Andrikopoulos in this volume, page 111.

[30] For instance, *Roman Empire* (1982), *Legionnaire* (1982), *The Fall of Rome* (1984), *Annals of Rome* (1986).

rating is based on the ratios between them. If the factors behind the level of unrest in a city were represented as complex and to some extent inexplicable, rather than reduced to a numerical value, the historical authenticity of the game would be greater, but the player's experience would be more passive and therefore less satisfying. Schematic depictions of ethnicity in empire-building games have attracted criticism: *Civilisation IV* in particular, which claims to represent cultures in a historically accurate way, has been accused of pushing an insidious ideological agenda.[31] Although misrepresentations of the peoples of antiquity provoke less controversy, their cultures and histories are just as prone to being stereotyped and subjected to ideological agendas, if not more so. Schematising therefore has the power to distort popular perspectives on the ancient world. It becomes all the more effective as it is progressively better masked by rich visual detail: although they look and feel increasingly lifelike, video games can still portray the past from a prejudiced or distorted historical perspective.[32]

Unhistorical distortion can result from complexity as well as simplicity. In *Rome: Total War* the great diversity of units is misleading. Some of the military troops available are realistic (such as Equites, or cavalry), some almost entirely fantastical (such as Head-Hurlers). Many units are somewhere in-between: these include Praetorian Cavalry, Gaulish druids, and three varieties of Gladiator. In these cases, the "highlights" of popular knowledge about the ancient world are standardised into a neat list of combat units. After all, what are the Gauls without druids? Making games accessible can mean not only subtracting complications and nuances, but also the opposite: adding expected visual and thematic cues to reassure the consumer that they are experiencing the grandeur of genuine classical antiquity. Paradoxically, factually inauthentic details "feel" more authentic. This results in a "box-ticking" approach, whereby certain highlights of the classical world (those firmly anchored in the popular imagination) *must* be present, regardless of chronological, geographical, and other pragmatic constraints. The inclusion of druids and gladiators in the armies of *Rome: Total War* is a case in point. Another, more widespread illustration is the way that the Colosseum betokens ancient Rome for modern audiences. This cultural shorthand is applied more rigorously in video games than in any other medium.

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[31] See e.g. Galloway (2006: 95-104).
[32] Galloway (2006: 72-75) makes a useful distinction between "realism" and "realisticness": for example, a game about gladiators may have very "realistic" blood but portray a very "unreal" version of gladiatorial combat.

Although there are other emblems, the Colosseum is the most indispensable piece of Roman imagery: nowhere is this plainer than in video games. Catharine Edwards notes that the building has long held special appeal, and attributes this to its enduring physical presence, which has probably earned it greater symbolic power than it had in its original function (Edwards 1996: 3-4). Others have remarked its new "revival" in the 19th century, when painters and novelists, rather than dwelling solely on its desolation, began to recreate it romantically as a scene of lively (and even lurid) action.[33] Examining the place of the Colosseum in popular cinema, Martin Winkler notes that several Hollywood epics install it prominently in Rome's landscape in times long before it existed historically (Winkler 2004a: 89). Drawing more broadly and deeply on other media than even film or television before it, the computer game continues the classical tradition's various trajectories of transformation, among them the emerging ubiquity of the Colosseum. This applies to both of the game categories described above. Empire-building games provide opportunities to create metropolitan amphitheatres with almost no chronological restraints.[34] In hero-based video games, the Colosseum so regularly pre-dates itself that Rome almost cannot exist without it. *Spartan: Total Warrior* wins the palm for this, pitting Sparta against the emperor Tiberius in the year 300 BCE, and staging its climactic battle in the Colosseum 380 years before it was built. (Fig. 4-2.) Yet most games adapt their material to fit in the "highlights" of the ancient world—the "celebrities", iconic images, and great moments that audiences already know from prior experience (from school or college or, increasingly, from other popular media such as television and mainstream cinema). This explains why, in video games, there is no Pompeii without an eruption, no Macedonia without an Alexander, and no Nero without fire.

As the example of the Colosseum indicates, video games have not invented box-ticking as a mode of classical reception. They have merely made it their central feature. Selectivity is inevitable wherever "Classics" is made an object of attention; in fact, as an amalgam of canons and syllabuses, the classical tradition itself is largely based on the idea of selecting cultural highlights. In other phenomena of classical scholarship, too, we see that Classics continually struggles with the necessity of schematising the ancient world: to make antiquity comprehensible, scholars divide history into periods, prize one contradictory fact above

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[33] Vance (1989: 48); Winkler (2004a: 98); Hopkins & Beard (2005: 1-12).
[34] Empire-building games permitting (and hence encouraging) anachronistic Colossea include the *Civilization* series (1991-present), the *Caesar* series (1992-2006), *Rome: Total War* (2004), and *Glory of the Roman Empire* (2006).

another, and treat fragmentary evidence as a representative picture.[35] Through their visual and functional rubrics, video games render antiquity into accessible and engaging products, and they have this in common with many other media, even the academic discipline of Classics itself.
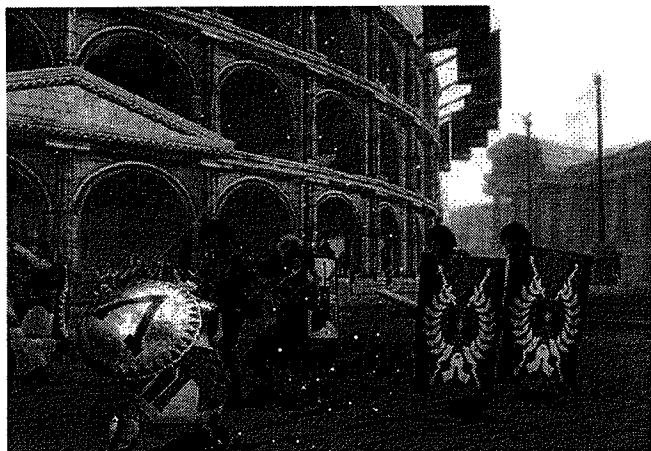

Fig. 4-2: The Colosseum, circa 300 BCE, in *Spartan: Total Warrior* (Creative Assembly, 2005)

Before asking how video games change ancient history, we should ask how ancient history has changed video games. This is most evident in games based on empire-building and military tactics, which form the videogame market sector most dominated by history. Some of the earliest and most influential "history simulation" games were created by the small British software company MC Lothlorien Ltd, who used ancient history tabletop games as one of their main sources of inspiration, and took a Greek helmet as their company logo.[36] Rome and Athens, besides having instantly recognisable armies, were obvious themes for games based on acquiring territories on the map. Rome in particular is often seen as having grown almost unstoppably from a single settlement into the largest empire in the known world: history's most obvious "win". This determined the development of territory-based games, most of which have depended mainly on war—even in games in which diplomacy plays a prominent

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[35] An instructive parallel from textual criticism is the well-known methodological problem that if something appears once, the temptation is to regard it as a mistake, and if it appears twice, to regard it as the rule.

[36] MC Lothlorien's classically-themed games were *Roman Empire* (1982), *Tyrant of Athens* (1982), *Peloponnesian War* (1983) and *Legions of Death* (1987). Another game planned for the ZX Spectrum, but never produced, was called *Circus Maximus*.

role, the expansion of nations leads inevitably to battles and the survival of the fittest. An offshoot of the militaristic conquest game is the citybuilding game, which focuses more on the development and management of cities,[37] but expansion is again the goal, and many games contain both of these elements. The classical world has never been the only pretext for militaristic empire-building—for example, only the third game in the (so far) five-game *Total War* series is set in classical antiquity—but it has been a perennial favourite.

Strategy games based on battles and wars, being fundamentally competition-based, highlight an important and unique aspect of the video game medium: their ability to provide alternative outcomes. This has the potential to provide a view of history which is very different from that of most other media. For example, in *Rome: Total War*, failure and extinction is always a possibility, and furthermore the full experience is only had by starting again after winning as the Romans, and playing as the Carthaginians and the Teutons. There are also one-off battles available, based on historical scenarios such as Carrhae or Zama, in which the replication of history is at stake. The task of playing as Rome, or indeed as other nations, with the object of conquering the world may encourage players to develop simplistic views of history as "grand narratives" dependent on identifiable factors (and perhaps even influence their understanding of modern nationhood). Yet balancing this is the far more positive possibility that the very fact of multiple potential outcomes will cause players to see history as contingent and unpredictable.

By contrast, in hero-based video games including most classically-themed role-playing games, and "action" titles, the player controls one or more individual protagonists whose usual traits are strength, agility and aggressiveness. Their actions are responsible for the course of history, often affecting not merely the fate of the community, but that of the world or the cosmos. The majority of such games depict worlds in which ancient history is replaced or blended with classical mythology, and in marked contrast to most classical cinema, they frequently depict the supernatural in prominent and spectacular form.[38] The link between Classics and

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[37] Classical examples include *CivCity: Rome* (2006), the *Caesar* series (1992-2006) and *Zeus: Master of Olympus* (2000).

[38] Hollywood's reluctance to represent pagan gods may stem from anti-blasphemy laws. The visual styles of many videogames about classical mythology show the influence of *Jason and the Argonauts* (dir. Chaffey 1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (dir. Davis 1981). These two films, and the *pepla* of the 1950s and 1960s (see Shahabudin in this volume), have been exceptionally influential on the look of antiquity and classical mythology in new media: few English-language films have

patriarchy has been well-documented, and there is still a prevalence of young males among the videogame-playing community. These two factors (perhaps aided by male bias in the industry itself)[39] combine to produce the celebration of masculine stereotypes in games. It is therefore unsurprising that most heroes in classically-themed video games are either "great men", or muscular warriors, or both. Hercules is naturally one of the most popular protagonists,[40] as is Asterix; there are also several distinct character-types among classical heroes. Mythical celebrities including Perseus, Theseus and Jason were especially popular in "text adventures" during the early days of home computing, but their popularity endures.[41] Historical "heroes" tend to be based on substantial narrative sources, especially history; Caesar and Alexander the Great are popular, but the use of ancient texts has produced less obvious protagonists, such as Octavian's general and relative Marcus Agrippa, or Onesimus the Christian convert, whose story is told in St Paul's *Letter to Philemon*.[42] However, character-types such as detectives, charioteers and ambitious slaves have also undertaken ambitious video game adventures, and in recent years the most popular type by far has been the gladiator.[43]

This is ironic, given the fact that no gladiator protagonists appear in classical literature, and that gladiators were rarely considered worthy of emulation by Roman authors and usually despised (Barton 1993: 11-81). It can be linked to the overall rise in violence, gore and spectacle in computer games since 1990 and above all to the stimulus of gladiators in cinema including *Spartacus* (dir. Kubrick 1960) and *Gladiator* (2000). In fact, the incapacity for emotional nuance still shown by most video games, accompanied by a focus on physical exploits, can be identified as a major factor in the proliferation of classically-themed computer games. Greek myth offers a number of "quest" scenarios, and popular conceptions of ancient history (especially when combined with fantasy) are filled with

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portrayed the Olympian pantheon (Ahl 1991: 40), though *Hercules in New York* (dir. Seidelman 1970) is a notable exception.
[39] Jenkins (2003) argues that *Purple Moon*, a company producing "games for girls", was unsustainable in an industry which invests conservatively, supporting established marketing formulas only.
[40] Hercules is the central character in at least eleven video games (many of them tie-ins with other franchises), and features prominently in many others.
[41] Between 1981 and 1990, the myths of Perseus, Theseus and Jason inspired at least two games apiece, and that of Odysseus/Ulysses a further four.
[42] Agrippa and "Octavianus": *Shadow of Rome* (2005); Onesimus: *Onesimus: A Quest for Freedom* (1992).
[43] Games with gladiator protagonists were published in 1984, 1985, 1988, 1989 (twice), 2003, and 2005 (twice).

opportunities for heroism in the form of tyrannies, conspiracies and wars. Classical antiquity in video games therefore, in both mythological and historical forms, has had its violent and military aspects selectively emphasised and enhanced. In the classical scholarship of the same few decades, however, interest has gone the opposite way, diversifying into a broader view of ancient culture which prominently includes the experiences of women, foreigners and slaves, and subjects other than political and military "great men". The contrast is striking.

According to games designer and commentator Raph Koster (2005: 86, 176), video games have not yet reached their full potential because they "tend to be power fantasies": goal-based activities barely enhanced by unsophisticated stories involving lurid sex and violence. Other designers speak of increasing subtlety and depth in the emotional and aesthetic experiences offered by video games, forecasting a future maturity on a par with that of cinema or the novel.[44] At present, video games have entered a long "adolescence" in which many titles treat mature content in an immature fashion; this is especially visible in games that focus on male protagonists. For the present discussion it will be useful to focus on two action games with similar themes: *Spartan: Total Warrior* on the one hand, and *God of War* (and its sequels) on the other.[45] These two games, released simultaneously, signalled the emergence of the Spartans to rival Rome's soldiers and gladiators as the new action heroes of ancient history video games, two years before Zack Snyder's film version of *300* was released.[46] The similarities are not coincidental. Both games feature Spartan heroes fighting mythical enemies in a pseudo-historical setting, who battle their way around the world, accumulating supernatural combat skills, until finally killing Ares, the god of war, in single combat. Both games divide their ancient worlds cleanly along political and ethnic lines: in *God of War*, the "Greeks" (and more specifically, Spartans) find themselves fighting for survival against "the Barbarians". *Spartan: Total Warrior* also features "the Barbarians", although the main villains are a third nation, the Romans. The life stories of the two heroes are very different, but show that certain stereotypes of classical heroism (and contemporary machismo) continue to recur, linking recent video games with both early text-adventure heroics and modern popular cinema. The

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[44] E.g. Wright (2003: xxxi-xxxii).
[45] *Spartan: Total Warrior* (2005), *God of War* (2005), *God of War II* (2007), *God of War: Chains of Olympus* (2008) and *God of War III* (forthcoming 2009).
[46] The current of influence continues to flow in both directions, as the first level of *God of War: Chains of Olympus* portrays the battle of Marathon (which involves a giant basilisk), climaxing in a duel with the Persian king.

hero of *God of War* is Kratos (the Greek word means "Strength"),[47] a successful general who dedicates himself to Ares and unwittingly trades the power of invincible rage for the lives of his family, whom he murders in a blind rage. A bald, muscular and craggy-featured figure, scarred across the face and supernaturally white-skinned (bleached by the ashes of his family), he fights with two blades which are attached by chains to his arms. An ongoing theme of the series is Kratos' ability to defeat or kill the most prominent Greek gods and supernatural beings; his eventual victory in the original game shows him to be more powerful in battle than Ares himself. The same is true of *Spartan: Total Warrior*'s hero, the unnamed "Spartan". A clean-shaven and more conventionally handsome figure, with dreadlocks (an update of the historical Spartans' long hair),[48] he also accepts the patronage of Ares in exchange for the carnage and blood his successes will produce (during intense bouts of violence, the exultant growls of Ares are heard). It is finally revealed that "The Spartan" was hidden by the other gods to be raised by King Leonidas, after his mother, Aphrodite's handmaiden, was killed by Ares for revealing his affair with her mistress. The discovery of either divine or royal birth, and the attainment of either divinity or imperial power, are very popular outcomes for hero-based narratives in classical video games. Indeed, most of them follow either this pattern or the other two famously stereotypical videogame plots: overthrowing an evil power, or rescuing a princess. The popularity of these stories in classical video games indicates that the patriarchal bias of classical myth (and perhaps also historical biography) has in a sense been reinvented. It has successfully coincided with the masculine heroics favoured by videogame audiences down to the present day: the player's actions are based on combat, and portrayed on the grand scale.

User-Created Content

Classically-themed games provide access to a world that many players will never have been taught about, enabling them not only to consume antiquity, but to discuss and appropriate it too. The term "user-created content" (or even "useractivity"), as shown by other contributions to this

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[47] Kratos ("Strength") and Bia ("Force") are personified as henchmen of Zeus in Aeschylus' play *Prometheus Bound*, but the name was probably coined afresh with the help of a dictionary.
[48] The connotations of different hairstyles are complex; suffice it to say here that although long hair and dreadlocks both potentially denote alternative subcultures, the latter is more explicitly multicultural and youth-oriented.

volume, is now relevant to classical reception studies. Diverse new practices have appeared in which creative content no longer travels downwards from a privileged source to the wider public, but rather upwards from them, or sideways among them. Some of these practices have been grouped under the term "Web 2.0", although not all are restricted to the internet. Among the most common are blogging and personal webpages; in addition to the "modding" of video games (mentioned earlier), fan fiction and slash fiction build new narratives for cult characters of film, television and literature; even mobile phone videos and their subsequent publication on websites like YouTube. As new forms of classical reception emerge from these blurrings of the division between creators and consumers, the play metaphor becomes ever more literal. This is appropriate since, as Jones (2008: 45) points out, the growth of "user-created content" itself can be traced back to early videogame fan communities.

Yet "play" still depends on rules, and games which participate in the classical tradition do in fact retain a powerful role in shaping the player's perceptions of antiquity. Their distinctive characteristic as games is that they require input from the player, but—importantly—this input is itself modified by the requirements of the game. For example, when the object is to raise an army in order to overrun the enemy's territory, the player "learns" how this is done through the continuous feedback of successful or unsuccessful consequences to their actions. This "learning" could also be seen as "being trained". While in many cases encouraging a degree of experimentation, this goes beyond the powers of other media to encourage a particular "worldview":

> While film or TV may influence behavior, in the video game, the player is called upon not just to watch but to act; simulation becomes emulation, and sympathy becomes empathy (Wolf 2001: 3).

A game might teach the player a particular "politics" or military strategy, which may then influence their view of the history they are re-enacting. This is a hazardous phenomenon from the point of view of classical pedagogy, given the fact that games must involve some fantasy elements (and often involve a great deal). However, it allows the player to be creative, or indeed to learn information with relevance outside the gameplay experience: for example, it may be made necessary to remember that Ostia was Rome's major port in order to carry out a task within a game, but the player does not stop knowing this once the task is fulfilled. Creativity and learning are both desirable forms of engagement with the classical tradition, and the diversity of game styles can accommodate both.

Tracking classically-themed video games as an emerging discourse within modern popular culture reveals the precise nature of their considerable influence on popular perceptions of Classics, and allows the theory and the content of video games to be integrated beneficially among other media in classical reception studies.

Classical antiquity has been present in every style of video game and in every "generation" of computer hardware, but in all cases—even within the interesting but decidedly marginal market of education-based software—it is aimed at consumers who know little about it. This makes "classical" video games arguably the best index of how the ancient world is perceived other than as an object of formal study. Salvatore Settis (2006: esp. 2-4) has suggested that contemporary society is re-evaluating classical culture in a paradoxical way. Ancient Greece, he claims, is increasingly promoted as the foundation of central principles of Western culture, such as democracy, but simultaneously demoted and marginalised as an object of study, with the result that "we talk about the Greeks and Romans more—in an increasingly lifeless, standardized and atrophied form". He illustrates this argument with a critique of postmodern architecture, which playfully uses classicising elements out of context. For Settis, this is often "entirely arbitrary" and "gratuitous" recycling, in which being unwilling (or unable) to imply the paradigms of the classical tradition makes the gesture meaningless. Although the very act of recognising something as "classical" depends on the "paradigms" lingering around it, this idea that classical culture is being transformed into a simplified and recognisable vocabulary of signs is important. It applies to many of the cultural products discussed in this volume, and video games are foremost among them. One good example of this is video games set in multiple "time zones", with different environments or levels set in different eras and locations in world history. Such games almost never vary the basic rules of the game or the visual style, and instead apply largely cosmetic changes, based on the most essential symbols for each era, which cue the player's preconceived ideas and either contradict or (far more often) support them. Therefore, when the protagonist of *Time Slip* (1993) travels to Rome in "39 BC", we see a sailing-ship, some marble columns, a desert settlement including an arena with lions and red-skirted "gladiators", and finally a large building with more marble columns. Such sights are all it takes to distinguish Greece, Rome, or indeed the supremely generic "Greco-Rome" from other spatial and historical contexts. Alastair Blanshard (2005: 166) comments that in cultural products as stylised as the film *Disney's Hercules* (dir. Musker & Clements 1997), Greece can succeed as a "brand": "A whitened column, a short tunic, a key meander

painted on the wall are all it takes to transport us there". This is the attitude behind many evocations of the ancient world in video games. Settis sees it as the dilution of Classics; we may also see it as distillation. Such visual and thematic codes for the classical world remain potent even to audiences with little or no engagement with Classics, whether through formal study or otherwise.

Accuracy

As mass entertainment, catering to a non-scholarly audience, videogame versions of antiquity vary wildly in their factual or interpretative accuracy. Symbols from the classical tradition are often decontextualised, and freely mixed with elements from other cultures or from fantasy. We should not call this "postmodern", but instead see it as a feature common to popular media in any age. Whether literary, visual or participatory, popular classical receptions can reject or invert cultural canons and hierarchies, but—first and foremost—they are free not to recognise them in the first place. This is a useful way of approaching indirect or inaccurate classical presences in modern media. For example, almost every instalment of the long-running *Castlevania* series has featured disembodied flying heads with snaky hair, called Medusa Heads;[49] several have also featured "Medusa" as a major end-of-section opponent or "boss enemy" (either a giant Medusa Head or a humanoid, unclothed and serpentine below the waist, and always snake-haired).[50] Yet this series is primarily inspired by gothic horror, and most of its numerous "monsters", including mummies, werewolves, swamp-men, and animated suits of armour, are imitated from horror B-movies.[51] The *Castlevania* series has integrated this small piece

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[49] Twenty original titles have been produced between *Castlevania* (1986) and *Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia* (forthcoming 2008). Other boss enemies of distinctively classical form and name have included Cerberus, Cyclops, Hydra, Manticore, Minotaur, Scylla and Talos.

[50] The film *Clash of The Titans* (dir. Davis 1981) is probably the origin of the snake-tailed, large-breasted Medusa commonly seen in videogames: the type appears in dozens of games, whether set in worlds based on culturally eclectic "high fantasy", or in the ancient world. The best-known examples appear in the *God of War* series: Medusa in the first game, and her (obese) sister Euryale in *God of War 2*.

[51] This is visually cued in the title graphics of the first three games, which imitate 35mm projector film. Conversely, the Hammer horror film entitled *The Gorgon* (dir. Fisher 1964), featuring Medusa's sister "Megaera", is set in early 20th-Century Germany.

of classical culture into its own eclectic story-world, which draws on many other "mythologies" old and new:[52] "Medusa" is now at several removes from antiquity, originating from an undefinable source and filtered through an unknowable number of prior receptions (including, of course, successive *Castlevania* sequels). This reception of a classical figure through little more than a name is only one end of a broad spectrum, however. There is a strong contrast with, say, the stealth and combat game *Shadow of Rome* (PlayStation2: 2005), which features "Octavianus" (the future Augustus) as a protagonist. Along with his friend Agrippa (the other playable character), Octavianus undertakes to discover the conspiracy behind Julius Caesar's murder, encountering Maecenas and Cicero along the way. Here the content is more concrete, evoking a specific historical time, place and cast of characters, creating a stronger claim to "classical culture" than *Castlevania*'s invocation of a more nebulous and indirect "classical tradition". However, the game involves extreme fantasy violence in the gladiatorial arena including beheadings, immolations, and the use of severed limbs as weapons, and ends in a confrontation with the giant usurping emperor "Antonius" (Mark Antony), who must be ahistorically killed in single combat (historically, he committed suicide after the battle of Actium). *Castlevania* contains only an echo of a long-travelling classical theme, whereas *Shadow of Rome* imposes its own intriguing new distortions on a well-known and detailed historical narrative. Yet neither gameworld is fissured by self-conscious disclaimers or irony over classical culture: classical culture is just another source of material. The distinctive connotations of privilege that the ancient world can carry do not prevent changes, subversions and recombinations in a medium based on play. In fact, they seem to encourage them.

The preceding discussion has shown that the diversity of video game styles has led classical subject-matter in different directions, and that this is plainest in the two main branches of classical video game. Empire-building games usually chart narratives of ascendancy through military history, whereas hero-based games usually model classical myth into grandiose fantasies surrounding the exploits of an individual, superhuman avatar. In this respect, among many others, video game portrayals of antiquity resemble cinematic ones: films such as *Gladiator* or *300* fit conventional Hollywood categories, regardless of their subject matter. Yet the diverse range of classically-themed video games are united by two

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[52] Roland Barthes' discussions of popular culture offer a useful definition of "mythologies" which can include any set of signifiers, especially in modern media. See, e.g. Barthes (1972).

distinctive features, which distance them from equivalent classical entertainments in other media. One is that the consumer, the player, is central to the experience and determines the outcome of events in the game. The other is that their largely non-classicist consumers, with less sense of an intellectual stake in Classics than arguably any prior generation, often expect and even relish elements of revisionism in how the ancient world is portrayed. For example, part of the pleasure of military-historical war games such as *Rome: Total War* or *Civilization IV* is the possibility that Egypt might defeat Rome—or even Gaul—and few players would object to the presence of zombies or flamethrower-wielding legionaries in *Spartan: Total Warrior* on the grounds of historical inaccuracy. In video games, classical antiquity is one fantasy world among many others, albeit a particularly rich and evocative one.

For classicists, video games should loom large in the bewilderingly creative present and future of classical culture as mass entertainment. The freedom of the player within the game is mirrored by the unparalleled liberties taken with the ancient world by games designers, and furthermore by the growing importance of user-created content, a modern (though not necessarily postmodern) cultural habit which games players have taught to the wider world. Ancient Greece and Rome and their neighbours retain a secure foothold in the public imagination, as shown by the huge popularity and financial success of recent games such as the *God of War* series or *Rome: Total War*. Within their huge mass audience are some who want to see ancient sources followed and others who want to see them flouted, but all seek the interaction and open-endedness of the game medium. In several senses, the concept of play fundamentally changes the way the ancient world is portrayed.

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CHAPTER FIVE

"I FEAR IT'S POTENTIALLY LIKE POMPEII": DISASTER, MASS MEDIA AND THE ANCIENT CITY

JOANNA PAUL

WASHINGTON—Can Barack Obama be stopped? Of course.
Overnight is a lifetime in politics. Like Tuesday night.
By every yardstick, Hillary Clinton was supposed to lose badly. Every poll
had her trailing Barack Obama, most by double digits.
Even some of her most die-hard loyalists admitted it was beginning to
smell like the Last Days of Pompeii around the Clinton bunker.
(*New York Daily News*, 9 January 2008).

Illustrating the political turmoil at a fraught moment in American
politics by way of a casual reference to Pompeii, as the *New York Daily
News* chose to do in the wake of Hillary Clinton's unexpected victory in
the New Hampshire primaries, is striking: what can Senator Clinton's
battle to secure her nomination as Democratic presidential candidate
possibly have to do with the devastation of the ancient city in 79 CE? Yet
at the same time, it is neither unique nor especially surprising. In recent
years, invocations of the destroyed city have become almost a
commonplace in the mass media, particularly in the United States, and
arguably increasingly so since September 11, 2001. The majority of these
references, unlike the *Daily News* example, tie Pompeii to urban
catastrophes of some kind. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August
2005, one of the most frequently repeated soundbites was former mayor
Marc Morial's lamentation, "We've lost our city; I fear it's potentially like
Pompeii". But the connections are more complex than simply comparing
two natural disasters. As we will see, framing events such as 9/11 in terms
of Pompeii can introduce an unsettling, often politicising and sometimes
controversial dimension, which might in turn help to explain Pompeii's
use in apparently far-removed contexts like the electoral struggles of 2008.