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Today, many people enjoy their first encounter with antiquity not by consulting classical texts in academic Loeb or OCT editions, but through classically inspired fantasy novels, films, television series, and, increasingly, video games. Apart from being created for entertainment purposes, video games may also offer unique learning possibilities. As such, this short article aims to present how the experience of playing allows modern audiences to learn about antiquity. My goal is not exhaustivity, but to provide an introduction to the ludic reception of antiquity.

As I expect many scholars of classical studies will be unfamiliar with the principles of game studies, this article briefly surveys some of the discipline’s core concepts that will structure the remainder of the discussion. The article then explores how players are able and invited to learn by playing these games.

Game studies

One seminal study of academic research into video games is *Cybertext* by Espen Aarseth (1997). Aarseth explores ‘ergodic literature’, i.e. texts in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1997: 1). In terms of text traversal, non-ergodic book literature only allows its user/reader to move her/his eyes across the text and periodically turn the page. Ergodic literature, on the other hand, demands actual actions (ἔργον) by the user to make her/his way (ὁδός) through the text (1997: ibid.). Video games are but one example of ergodic texts: think, for example, of interactive videos uploaded to YouTube.com or interactive drama plays. Ergodicity is, therefore, not exclusive to the computer age and examples can be found throughout history.

Gonzalo Frasca (2003) draws attention to another set of terms that will prove useful for our discussion of learning through video games. Video games, Frasca says, are not merely ‘representational’ media, but also ‘simulational’ media. A novel, for instance, represents an action through words and sentences: the reader is usually not allowed to influence the action. Similarly, paintings or movie pictures depict specific actions using visuals and/or motion, but they, too, can only represent the action. In a video game, however, the representation is supplemented by a layer of simulation. “To simulate,” Frasca says (2003: 223), “is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system.” The model thus acquired “reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions” (2003: ibid.).

I will illustrate this with the example of a sea voyage: in the *Odyssey*, Homer describes how Odysseus and his men sail away from Ismarus after the battle with the Cicones (9.62-63). The description is representational and non-ergodic. The painting *Moonlight Sail* by Edward Moran (1899) adds a visual dimension to the sea voyage, but the ‘text’ remains purely representational. Cinema operates within the same context: a film like *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003, Gore Verbinski) makes the visuals move (i.e. short shots cut together to form a moving sequence), but only does so within the confines of representation. However,
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the video game *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018, Ubisoft Quebec), set during the Peloponnesian War, allows the player to walk through the port of Piraeus and board her/his own ship to sail across the Aegean. The port, the crew, the ship, the sea, etc., are represented, but all are part of a simulation in which the user not only views these representations but also acts within them. It is the player who walks through the port and removes the ship from the docks. S/he does so by pushing buttons on the controller.

The game simulation, therefore, is ergodic: the text is only allowed to unfold due to the player’s own actions. It follows that two separate game experiences will never be exactly the same: “To paraphrase Heraclitus,” Frasca writes (2003: 227), “you never step in the same video game twice”. In the context of learning through video games, this means that every learning experience is intrinsically individual and personal.

**Learning by playing**

The following discussion is structured according to the terminology introduced above. We also discuss what one might learn from considering these ludic reinterpretations of antiquity as adaptations.

**Representation**

In this section, several elements of a variety of games are surveyed within the context of learning through what video games include or represent.

Some in-game environments are lavishly detailed and offer an immersive outlook on the reality of the past. During one of my own high-school classes on Xenophon’s *Socratic Oeconomicus*, I used a gameplay recording of the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios on the Athenian agora from *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* in order to give the students an idea of the setting of Socrates’ narrated dialogue with Ischomachus (fig. 1). The game shows the agora as a place that is ‘alive’: Athenians stroll through the market and talk to each other. In my opinion, this vivid representation serves as a better visualization of antiquity than a static image.

In *Rome: Total War* (2004, Creative Assembly), a map of the Mediterranean represents the site

![Fig. 1. The Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios in the Discovery Tour of Assassin’s Creed Odyssey.](#)
on which the player makes her/his historical conquests. This map informs the player of classical geography (towns such as Messana or Crotone are represented) and historical conflicts. The developers of *Apotheon* (2015, Alientrap) designed the in-game environment as an ancient black-figure vase painting, which familiarizes the player with classical art. The player's avatar is colored in black against a red background, and geometric motifs like the meandros figure as well (fig. 2).

Multiple games include historical events. In *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, for instance, the player is guided through the Athenian plague of 430 BC. The streets exude a murky atmosphere and show the heaps of corpses as we know them from Thucydides (2.52, ἀλλὰ καὶ νεκροὶ ἐπ’ ἀλλήλων ἀποθνῄσκοντες ἔκειντο; see also Vandewalle 2019: 148 on this).

The same is true for characters. In our previous example of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, the player is acquainted with representations of historical figures such as Perikles, Aspasia, Brasidas, Archidamos, Pausanias, Sokrates, Alkibiades, and more, which increases the player's knowledge of ancient Greek history, politics and philosophy.

Some games use classically inspired nomenclature for in-game objects or abilities. The multiplayer game *Smite* (2014, Titan Forge Studios) pits players against each other on a mythological battlefield. Each player selects a certain god from a variety of mythologies and uses specific abilities to attack other players. *Smite*’s version of Zeus, for instance, possesses a certain ability called ‘Aegis Assault’ which allows the player to throw the mythological shield at an enemy. The aegis is presumably not the most commonly known aspect of Greek mythology, but the game makes the player knowledgeable about it.

Despite English serving as the main language of most video games, some examples do include short Latin and Greek phrases or texts. In *Assassin’s Creed Origins* (2017, Ubisoft Montreal), set in Ancient Egypt at the end of the Ptolemaic period (48 BC), in-game non-playable characters (NPCs) such as Roman soldiers or the citizens of Alexandria might shout short sentences such as the Greek τί πράττει; (‘what is he doing?’), ὦ πω πω πω πω, τί ἐστιν τοῦτο; (‘uh-oh, what is that?’), ἰδιώτης ἀνθρώπον, οὐκ ἔχει πέρας (‘idiot, he has no limit’), or the Latin bastardus! (‘bastard!’) and siste! (‘stop!’). Playing Origins, the user is thus motivated to engage with the Latin and Greek

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*Fig. 2. The design of *Apotheon* is inspired by the black-figure vase painting of ancient Greek pottery.*
languages outside of an institutionalized context of education. Some loading screens in *Rome: Total War* also contain excerpts from ancient texts, such as ‘fas est et ab hoste doceri’ (translated by the game as ‘it is right to learn, even from the enemy’), which stems from Ovid, *Met.* 4.428. *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* even includes the following inscription in the Sanctuary of Asclepius in Epidaurus (fig. 3):

Λύσων Ἐρμιονεύς παῖς ἀϊδής. οὗτος ὑπὰρ ὑπὸ κυνὸς τῶν κατὰ τὸ ἱαρὸν θε[ραπευόμενος τοὺς ὀπτίλλους υγ[ιὴς ἀπῆλθε.

Lyson from Hermione was a blind child. In a waking state, he was healed by a dog from the sanctuary, and he walked away with healthy eyes.

The text from the game is a real inscription (*IG IV²* 1.121 = LiDonnici [1995: 98-99, Α20]) from the 4th century BC. It is one of the Epidaurian miracle inscriptions. Again, the game brings the player into contact with Latin and Greek texts that s/he might not have been familiar with before.

Lastly, some games also include encyclopedic information on the ancient subjects they represent. The interface menu of *Smite* allows the player to consult ‘lore’ information on each of the in-game gods. For instance, the game recounts how Mercury stole Apollo’s cattle, invented the lyre and killed the monster Argus. The recent and aforementioned *Assassin’s Creed* games also contain a ‘Discovery Tour’, a ‘virtual museum’ where the player can stroll and discover facts about the game’s ancient settings. The player might walk to a certain location (e.g. the Athenian temple of Athena Nike) and view an educational video written by real-life archaeologists. These tours enable an exceptionally immersive learning experience, by allowing the player to virtually visit authentic recreations of ancient monuments.

**Simulation**

As Janet Murray writes, a consistently and convincingly designed simulation “lead[s] to the feeling of agency, which in turn deepens our sense of immersion” (2016 [1997]: 114). The ludic aspect of simulation is inherently connected to the already discussed aspect of representation, yet adds a dimension of (inter)active immersion not found in other media. This subsection focuses on the educational potential that these simulational actions hold.

In *Rome: Total War*, the player acts as one of several prestigious Roman families and aims to expand her/his territory through military force and the construction of settlements. The game also allows the enactment of historical battles, such as the battles of Lake Trasimene (217 BC), Gergovia (52 BC), and more. Success hinges upon tactical strategies and military insight. Jan Frode Hatlen (2012) conducted interviews of history students on

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*Fig. 3. One of the Epidaurian miracle inscriptions, found in Assassin’s Creed Odyssey in the Sanctuary of Asclepius. The in-game text does contain one typographical error, as it mistakes the sigma of τοὺς for an epsilon.*
their experiences with *Rome: Total War*. Most of the students stressed that “the feeling of being a Roman commander” (2012: 188-189) was one of the main attractions of the game, and Hatlen writes that one interviewee admitted that “[when I play] I have to think how an army commander would think” (2012: 188). The game, it seems, pushes players into a different mode of thinking (that of a military commander), and in doing so, not only informs the player what Roman soldiers looked like, but also teaches what one might do with them, which considerably enhances one’s perception of historical conflicts.

Simulational action might also lead to contemplation. In *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, one sidequest entitled *The Sokratic Method* (see Vandewalle 2019: 150, 152 on this example) forces the player, per Sokrates’ request, to contemplate whether it is just that a Delian rebel, who stole from a temple in order to help his people, is sentenced to death. The sidequest encourages the player to save the rebel from the authorities, but ultimately the player decides if the rebel lives or dies. If this example stemmed from a text by Plato, we would expect a theoretical elenchus on the nature of justice, which could prove or disprove the guilt of the rebel. The game simulation, however, adds a practical application of the discussion, since completion of the sidequest requires an action informed by the player’s philosophical convictions, which results in a specific outcome and decides the course of the game text. This practical dimension perhaps changes how players and/or students approach these arguments and ultimately only deepens our understanding of contemplative, philosophical texts.

**Adaptation**

Finally, I believe there is a lot to learn when these games are considered as the end point of an adaptation process that brings the ancient world (source text) into contemporary media (target text).

We might, for example, look at the properties of the target texts and analyze how the past is mobilized today. Metzger & Paxton (2016) list eight so-called ‘deployments of the past’: antiquarian (focused on historical accuracy), monumental (focused on the glory of the past), critical (prompting discussion of how history has unfolded, by e.g. allowing counterfactuality), wishstory (idealizing the past), composite imagination (blending elements of different time periods), borrowed authenticity (e.g. making mythological material more authentic by incorporating historical elements), historical provenance (locating contemporary problems in historical situations) and legitimization (e.g. adding encyclopedic information to legitimize the game not only as entertainment but also as a historical product). Similarly, André & Lécotel-Solnychkine (2013) list five possible trends in historical game design: stéréotypie (making in-game sites recognizable through stereotypical elements), iconicité/artisation (a depiction of antiquity inspired by specific works of art), autoréférentialité (a depiction inspired by other games), déréalisation (the negation of realism through amplification, spectacularisation or dramatisation) or pure invention. These terms provide a useful framework to analyze not only how antiquity is presented today, but also who/what we, the 21st century audience, are in relationship to history. What do we and/or the current entertainment industry find particularly attractive about the past? The discipline of reception studies is not just the tracking of antiquity throughout history, but also entails a meta-sociology of the self, studying the relationship between us and cultures continually re-imagined as time unfolds (see also de Callataÿ 2018: 7).

I will apply both frameworks to two examples. The opening of *God of War II* (2007,
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SCE Santa Monica Studio), a good example of modern invention, consists of a so-called ‘boss battle’ between the protagonist Kratos and a vivified Colossus of Rhodes.\(^{19}\) The very concept of this scene is monumental, as it pits the God of War against a literally colossal opponent. The towering Colossus, the flaming arrows in the background and the expressive choral music all amplify, spectacularize and dramatize the scene. The game also borrows authenticity by setting its mythologically inspired battle in a historical location. This location is the result of composite imagination as it, for example, includes buildings with arches, despite the fact that arch structures did not exist in classical Greece. Lastly, the scene also works autoreferentially by mobilizing the conventional depiction of boss battles in the God of War franchise as well as in other games within the genre.

Assassin’s Creed Origins\(^{2}\) version of Egypt takes a different approach. Running through Alexandria and historical monuments like the Great Library, the player is struck by a predominantly antiquarian deployment of the past. Careful attention is paid to the meticulous representation of ancient settings, which legitimizes the game as a historical product. The focus on grand, polished edifices also characterizes Origins’ design as monumental. There is a tendency towards artialisation, as the game design was clearly inspired by late 19th-century academicist painters such as Gérôme, Alma-Tadema, Cabanel and others (e.g. the emphasis on carpets, curtains, flower petals, [black] marble, lions, plants and other elements often found in the academy style). The narrative of the Assassin’s Creed franchise, which involves the Order of Assassins manipulating important events throughout history, presents a ‘what if’ scenario and renders this game a critical reevaluation of history. Finally, the design and mechanics of Origins reference previous entries in both the franchise and its genre, and are therefore autoreferential.

These examples illustrate but two styles in which antiquity can be adapted onto the videogame screen. The first hinges predominantly upon the grandiose aspects of mythology, while the second presents itself as an authentic reconstruction of ancient reality. Analysis of these texts brings insight into the contemporary poetics of antiquity adaptation, as well as the specific aspects of antiquity that speak to us as a 21st-century audience. Both are the result of a process of learning.

Hopefully, it has become clear that the activity of playing a ludic imagination of antiquity presents many possibilities to learn about the past. The stories of antiquity remain popular when new media arise and continue to inspire in the 21st century. As these games inform their players of various aspects of antiquity and potentially spark further interest into ancient cultures, it is useful to know what kind of knowledge is transmitted, and how contemporary audiences engage with the ancient past.

1 This paper was presented as a lecture at the first ‘Symposium voor jonge classicist’ [Symposium for young classicists] on the theme ‘Docendo discimus: leren in en over de oudheid’ [Docendo discimus: learning in and about antiquity], in Leiden on 30/11/2019. The Dutch title of the lecture was ‘Wat men van spelen leren kan: games over de oudheid in educatieve context’. The present article is a shortened and modified version of the lecture. I wish to express my deep gratitude to the organization for allowing me to speak at this event.

2 During the lecture, I also gave a short overview of

some of the most recent and popular video games set in antiquity, which I left out here due to space constraints. This overview was also discussed in light of Dunstan Lowe’s typology of classically inspired games (2009: 68), which divides all current games set in classical antiquity in ‘empire building games’ (games that simulate the often military contact between historical nations) and ‘hero based games’ (often mythologically inspired games that take the player through a narrative as a well-defined protagonist). See D. Lowe, ‘Playing with Antiquity: Videogame Reception of the Classical World’, in D. Lowe, K. Shahabudin eds., Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press 2009) 64-90.


4 Aarseth (1997: 10) names Ayn Rand’s Night of January 16th (1936) as an example of an ergodic drama text. The play involved members of the audience as jury members during a court hearing. The ending of the play depends on the jury’s decision of guilt or innocence.


6 I am aware that non-traditional, ergodic films do exist. Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (2018, David Slade) would be one such example. Such films are, however, small in number. For the present discussion, I will devote my attention to the more traditional forms of cinema.


8 I follow the typography of the in-game transcriptions throughout this article.

9 At the time of writing, Smite features a total of 107 playable gods across 14 pantheons (Arthurian, Celtic, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Hindu, Japanese, Mayan, Norse, Polynesian, Roman, Slavic, Voodoo and Yoruba).

10 It is obvious that some of these sentences contain grammatical errors. The words ἱδιώτης ἀνθρώπον do not share the same case; the accent on ἄνθρωπον is false; and the word ἱδιώτης was not used in the modern sense of ‘idiot’. Similarly, the Latin word bastardus was only used in Medieval Latin as a juridical term, and should have been implemented in the vocative case (‘bastardus’). However, these sentences still have educational merit despite their mistakes.

11 L.R. LiDonnici, The Epidauran Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation and Commentary (Atlanta 1995).

12 Epidaurian miracle inscriptions were short texts displayed in the sanctuary that served as proof and a sign of gratitude for a miraculous healing.


15 If the player adopts a fruitful strategy, it becomes possible for the Roman commander to win the Battle of Lake Trasimene. Historically, however, this battle was lost to Hannibal. If the simulation is won, the player engages in ‘counterfactuality’. Counterfactual scenarios inform the player of the conditions under which history came to be what it is, and give the player an idea of how history might have turned out differently.


19 In video games, a ‘boss battle’ is a battle between the player and a significant opponent controlled by the game program. A boss is more powerful than other in-game adversaries and is usually encountered at the climax of a level. Examples include the aforementioned Colossus in God of War II, the Minotaur from Assassin’s Creed Odyssey, or the Centaur Nessus from Rise of the Argonauts (2008, Liquid Entertainment).