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<h1>7. ‘Transcending History and the World’: Ancient Greece and Rome in Versus Fighting Video Games

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<h2>Introduction

Even gaming experiences that focus intently on the present moment can be enriched by legacies of the distant past. This article is a critical survey of allusions to ancient Greece and Rome in an unlikely choice of video game genre: versus fighting games, also called one-on-one or binary combat games, whose popularity was first established in arcades and on consoles in the 1980s and 1990s and remains strong today¹. It is ostensibly one of the least historically oriented video game genres; for example, none are included among the many titles cited in Metzger and Paxton (2016). Yet a surprising number of these games contain some reference to the classical past, including six of the most influential franchises that will form the case studies for this chapter: Capcom’s *Street Fighter* (1987-2018), Midway’s *Mortal Kombat* (1996-2019), Rare’s *Killer Instinct* (2013), SNK Playmore’s *The King of Fighters* (2005-2009), and Namco’s *Tekken* (1994-2017) and *Soulcalibur* (1996-2018) series.² In this chapter I uncover those references, comparing them for the first time, to show that their roles in the gameplay experience vary considerably. I then go on to identify more such references among the large number of derivative games, whose very existence helps to define their models as seminal and influential: even the most derivative and negatively received examples can offer surprising insights. The driving force behind all such references, I shall argue, is that the genre is inherently geared towards multiculturalism – albeit in a fundamentally casual and usually decentered or tangential way. Accordingly, its designers and players find merit in the malleability of history, rather than just its authenticity. Understanding how this type of video game turns ancient Greece and Rome into ingredients for a cultural mishmash can therefore help us to understand how any cultural property is transformed, for immediate and casual consumption, in a new imaginative context.

According to Chapman (2016: 17-18), studying historical games requires a ‘formalist’ approach, in that both the general and the specific structures of the game form have implications for their meaning. This is equally true for historical content in the games discussed in this chapter, whose settings – whether present, future, or fantasy – are primarily non-historical. It will be easier to understand the game designers’ choices in representing the classical past if I reconstruct some unwritten rules for 1980s and 1990s versus fighting games, which were popularized above all by *Street Fighter 2: World Warrior* (Capcom 1991), but were already evolving in the years before it. There is typically a roster of colorful characters who fight one-on-one in rounds of a tournament, and whose design mainly consists of their appearance, their moveset (fighting style), and a few lines of speech. Each has a home stage that forms a backdrop for the main action, which usually scrolls as

¹ On the evolution of the versus fighting game genre, see Harper 2014; Ware 2015.

² For case studies in how classical antiquity is shaped by the relationship between play mechanics and narrative in a range of video game genres, see Mcmenomy 2015.

the characters move, and is often partly animated. These backdrops vary in palette and atmosphere, and the variety of locations effectively adds a form of tourism to the game experience. As in other game genres, progress is sometimes tracked on a simple in-game map, indicating progression with icons that successively appear or disappear. These maps are impressionistic, designed more to show contrasting episodes than a unified world (on the implications of maps and mapping in videogames, see Florence Smith Nicholls, this volume). The gameplay experience is cumulative, in that sequential and increasingly challenging opponents give the player a sense of progress: advancing through victories reveals more game-world content, both visual and thematic. The 'end boss' is usually isolated, with a science-fiction or supernatural setting and design that distances them from the geography through which the player has passed. The overall effect is that every place and culture in the game is 'beatable,' a potential feather in the player's cap, or alternatively just a stepping-stone towards the endpoint of the final adversary.

Versus fighting games are heavy on visual and kinetic experience and correspondingly light on narrative and character development. There has been no previous study of how they engage with classical antiquity, partly because doing so means reading against the grain and between the lines. It can give rewarding insights into how historical content is remediated for audiences who are not primarily interested in historical authenticity. This chapter shows what happens to ancient Greece and Rome when they become the property of players and designers – game consumers and creators – whose general lack of a scholarly background in classical studies liberates them from seeing this material in preconceived ways. This chapter also reveals a surprisingly close relationship between spatial and temporal movement, as the imagined past becomes embedded in world geographies.

There is much more classical material in fighting games that lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Scrolling beat 'em ups, for example, give us a Roman centurion resurrected by a Greek god in *Altered Beast* (Sega 1988), and Cleopatra as the final boss of *Double Dragon 3: The Rosetta Stone* (Technos Japan 1990); other relevant examples include Konami's *Metamorphic Force* (1993) and Animation Magic's *Mutant Rampage: Bodyslam* (1994). I have also excluded several games directly set in classical antiquity, of which there are both original concepts and (increasingly obligatory) tie-ins with film and television franchises, though these would reward more extended attention. Instead, I intend to show that a historical element is most revealing under two conditions: first, when it appears among a miscellany of stereotypes or stock themes, and second, when it is presented to the player in the periphery of the gaming experience. In an important sense, this is the most culturally relevant way that the classical past could possibly appear.

<quote>If, as critics argue, the rapid-response binary combat game lacks story and community, and if it is indeed based on "sketchy and stereotypical characters," then I would argue that these very characteristics make it a significant and interesting cultural product worthy of critical attention.

<quote>Hutchinson 2007: 285

Versus fighting games reflect the most generalized and casual expectations for what that past is, and how it might be defined against other pasts and places. It is appropriate that ancient Greece and Rome can literally appear in the background, creating a relationship with players whose attention is focused on the foreground.

<h2>Special Moves: Famous Names in Versus Fighting Games

We can now turn to specific examples of how ancient Greece and Rome have crept into versus fighting games without forming the main theme. This takes place through individual characters, stages, and other separate elements, though certain recurrent patterns emerge. The major series have generally included classical culture in two separate ways: either by endowing characters with Greek mythological features, like the *Soulcalibur* series, or using heritage sites as backdrops, as in *Tekken*. I will discuss six leading franchises in the order in which they first appeared, concluding with *Soulcalibur* as not only the most recent, but also the most prominent example.

The *Street Fighter* series (beginning in 1987) has a modern-world setting with fantasy elements: in the 1995 reboot *Street Fighter Alpha: Warrior's Dreams*, the home stage of Rose the Italian fortune-teller is based on a digitized photograph of the ruined Colosseum. Online commentators have noted that this location is a direct copy of a climactic scene in the martial arts movie *Way of the Dragon* (dir. Lee 1972), down to the inclusion of animated cats moving back and forth. Yet, in a later *Street Fighter* game, classical culture appears again through a character in the foreground, and the implications are very different. In the *Street Fighter III* (1997-1999) trilogy, the final boss 'Gill' is a superhuman clad only in a white loincloth who fights in the Greek pankration style, and is based on a combination of elements from Greek myth and the Old Testament. He controls the elements of fire and ice, and his genetically-enhanced muscular body is colored a striking combination of red and blue, which together with his arrogant demeanor and flowing blonde hair seems inspired by Frantisek Kupka's 1910 painting *Prometheus*, itself inspired by Greek myth. Gill is the leader of the elite Secret Society, a shadowy organization influencing world events, and his home stage in *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* contains Illuminati and Masonic symbols. More importantly for the present study, this background contains several allusions to the ancient world: temples with marble pillars and triangular pediments, a row of fires burning, a domed ceiling, and an ancient Greek or Egyptian bireme in dock, adorned with a painted eye. In Gill's ending sequence, before he parts a sea to lead his people to a promised land, he ambiguously declares "2000 years was too long." Classical and messianic elements are intimately linked in the character of Gill, who seems to embody the distant past even though he inhabits a more modern setting.

As in many other respects,³ *Street Fighter* contrasts sharply with the *Mortal Kombat* series (beginning in 1992) in its uses of classical antiquity. *Mortal Kombat* has a horror-fantasy setting primarily based on Chinese mythology, in which Earth is only one of many realms. Yet even here a minimal classical influence appears, in a character named Motaro. Introduced as a sub-boss in *Mortal Kombat 3* (1995), Motaro is portrayed as a type of centaur, with a horse-like lower body, ram-like horns, and a long metallic tail. It is explained that he belongs to a fierce race called the Centaurians, though there is no direct allusion to Greek mythology. That occurred later when Kratos from *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio 2005) appeared as a guest character in the PS3 and PSVita editions of *Mortal Kombat* (2011), though he is simply summoned through space and time by Shao Kahn instead of harmonized with the plot. (On Kratos' subsequent appearance in *Soulcalibur V* (2012), see below.) Most recently, in *Mortal Kombat 11* (2019), a more definite allusion to Greek myth was introduced in the character of Kronika, the Keeper of Time. She is called a 'Titan' and is superior to the Elder Gods, who include her own children. Indeed, the name 'Kronika' seems to echo both Kronos, father of Zeus, and Chronos, the embodiment of Time. The allusion to the Titans of Greek myth is confirmed by the name of Kronika's servant who embodies the sands of time, Geras, which is 'old age' in Greek. Not even the highly distinctive setting and aesthetic of the *Mortal Kombat* franchise excludes references to classical antiquity.

The *Tekken*, *King of Fighters*, and *Killer Instinct* franchises all began in 1994, all combine modern-day settings with fantasy elements, and all have at some point included classical ruins as stage backgrounds.⁴ Namco's *Tekken* series has some science-fiction elements but its graphical style is comparatively realistic, and the classical past is limited to heritage sites. The home stage of Nina Williams in the first and second games contains digitized photo landscapes of the Athenian Acropolis. The stage is named 'Acropolis' in the first game and 'Athens, Greece' in *Tekken 2* (1995) – it is not explained why this Irish character is located in Greece. The Parthenon had already appeared in the backgrounds of several games, including the early versus fighting game *International Karate* (Archer Maclean 1985). Graphically enhanced Parthenon backgrounds reappeared in *International Karate 2000* (Studio 3 2000) for the GameBoy Color and *International Karate Advanced* (Studio 3 2001) for the GameBoy Advance. It was one of eight real-world backgrounds in that game, as were the Pyramids of Giza, indicating the global scale of the tournament being depicted. A direct connection between *Tekken* and *International Karate* is unlikely, but both games probably had the same motives for including the Parthenon. It is one of Europe's most iconic buildings, easily recognizable as a location in Greece, and made all the more atmospheric by its ruined state.

³ A list of contrasts between the first-generation (2D) *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat* games might include the following: Japanese/American developers, family/mature audiences, emphasis on fluid combat/finishing moves, hand-drawn/digitized sprites, bright/dark palettes.

⁴ On the role of archaeology in video games, see Gardner 2007 and especially Reinhard 2018; on classical ruins as video game environments, see Lowe 2012.

By contrast with *Tekken*, SNK Playmore's *King of Fighters* series did not include ancient heritage sites until its fifth game: in *The King of Fighters '98* (1998), the 'Desert' stage is an indeterminate Egyptian location, with ancient temple ruins and a pyramid visible in the background. A more specific site appears in *The King of Fighters XI* (2005): although the backgrounds are hand-drawn, a stage named 'Aqueduct' shows tiled rooftops in front of a near-photographic image of the famous Roman aqueduct at Segovia in Spain. The use of archaeological sites in this franchise bears little relevance to its multiple story-arcs, which is evident from the vague names of stages; for example, Angkor Wat is 'Ancient Ruins.' Thus a stage introduced in *The King of Fighters 2002: Unlimited Match* (2009) is simply called 'Battle Arena,' even though it appears to be a version of the Roman Colosseum reconceived in homage to the character Athena Asamiya, canonically a descendant of the goddess Athena. A large illuminated statue of Athena looms in the background, and there are inscriptions in Greek saying "The King of Fighters." This merging of Roman and Greek architecture may reflect a homogenizing East Asian view of Mediterranean antiquity, which could also explain why *Street Fighter's* Gill combines aspects of both a Greek god and an Old Testament prophet.

Finally, the *Killer Instinct* series, which has a contemporary science-fiction setting, engaged with classical antiquity for the first time in its 2013 reboot by Double Helix Games. At this point a new character, Aganos, is supplied with a detailed historical narrative that deserves some description here. According to his official backstory, posted online under the title 'Peacemaker' in 2016, Aganos was originally one of many bronze war-golems built by the Mycenaeans. The game's 'Rivals' mode states instead that Aganos was created in Babylon in 1500 BCE, and defended the Babylonian king from usurpation in 556 BCE: historically, this was the date when King Neriglissar left the throne to his young son Labasi-Marduk. Aganos outlasted all others, replacing his broken parts with rocks and vines, eventually becoming bodyguard to an unnamed King of Babylon who gave him his Greek name (*ἀγανός*, 'gentle'). Aganos' stage is 'Forgotten Grotto,' a coastal cavern with ruined Greek architecture and statues in the foreground, and in the distance a ruined island city (see Figure 7.1).⁵

<<fig. 7.1>>

<caption>Figure 7.1: Concept art for the Forgotten Grotto stage in *Killer Instinct*, 2013.

The stage soundtrack composed by Panos Koliass mirrors the foreground action, emphasizing the historical grandeur of the site and alluding to past violence: its title is 'Polemos' (war), and a choir chants in modern Greek "Battle, War, Victory, Pain; Justice, War, Terror everywhere." Likewise, performing an Ultra Combo causes a metal golem resembling a pristine Aganos to assemble in the background, and during a Stage Ultra it turns the loser to stone, who then crumbles into the wind as if lost in the past. Aganos' nemesis is the corpse-

⁵ On how classical landscapes are reimagined in video games, see André & Lécole-Solnychkine 2013; André 2016.

like Babylonian vizier Kan-Ra; both have magically survived to the present day in ravaged forms. According to Kan-Ra's own official backstory 'Death is No Obstacle,' he originally stole his two Egyptian daggers from the temple of Melqart in Tyre, after provoking Alexander the Great into besieging the city. This implicates Kan-Ra in the real historical events of 332 BCE, just as Aganos is associated with the Mycenaean civilization. *Killer Instinct* is therefore exceptional among the games discussed in this chapter, in that two characters are actually old enough to be part of the ancient history they contribute to their games. In effect, the stage becomes the character, since the imaginary scenery of the Forgotten Grotto is made of almost the same materials as Aganos' own antiquated and overgrown (yet still powerful) body.

Turning at last to the *Soulcalibur* series, we are confronted with the most prominent element of classical antiquity in any versus fighting series: the Athenian warrior Sophitia Alexandra. As Hutchinson argues, the characters in *Soulcalibur* reflect Japanese cultural stereotypes, with Sophitia as "the ideal figure of the Western woman" (2014: 162). The brave but innocent Sophitia has been a playable character in every *Soulcalibur* game to date, from the original *Soul Edge* (1995) through all six *Soulcalibur* sequels and four spinoffs. During this time the roster has expanded to include her sister Cassandra, daughter Pyrrha and son Patroklos, and even the final boss of *Soulcalibur V* (2012), a Sophitia-like embodiment of the Soul Calibur sword named Elysium. Although the games are set in the late sixteenth century, Sophitia was summoned to the Eurydice Shrine, her home stage, where the god Hephaestus endowed her with the Omega Sword and Elk Shield that resemble the equipment of an ancient Greek hoplite.⁶ Sophitia also wears a sexualized version of an ancient Greek peplum, sometimes combined with leather sandals or a laurel wreath; her hair has become gradually blonder and her apparel bluer, coordinating with those of her fellow European, Siegfried the German knight. Sophitia represents the Greece of classical myth, which is far more familiar to players than the Ottoman-occupied Greece of the sixteenth century, both globally and in Namco's home country of Japan. Even Lizardman, who was originally designed as Sophitia's shadow character with an identical moveset, acquires ancient Greek characteristics: he is revealed to be a Spartan who went astray and was transformed into a monster by Fygod Cestemus, an evil cult who worship Ares.⁷ Lizardman appears under his true name 'Aeon Calcos' (which is Greek for 'Bronze Age') in *Soulcalibur V*, and his new double-axe fighting style is shared with Kratos from *God of War*, a fellow Spartan who has been resurrected from ancient Greece as a guest character in that game.⁸ Sophitia and related characters bring ancient Greek mythology into the *Soulcalibur*

⁶ In *Soulcalibur IV* (2008) and *Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny* (2009) the Eurydice Shrine is replaced by the 'Garden of Thesmophoros,' which is similar but without a Hephaestus statue and surrounded by jungle. Together these names imply some research into Greek religion, since, although best known as the name of Orpheus' wife, 'Eurydice' was also a title of Persephone, and 'Thesmophoros' was a title of her mother Demeter.

⁷ In fact, Fygod Cestemus created the golem Astaroth in order to help Ares overthrow his father, Zeus.

⁸ In an additional reference to classical literature, Aeon's moves are dubbed 'Mezentius Style,' 'Camilla Style,' or 'Turnus Style.' Mezentius, Camilla, and Turnus are the chief enemies of the hero Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, a Roman epic set in the world of Greek myth.

series, even though they inhabit a much later setting. In this they resemble Gill in *Street Fighter III*, but in a more extended fashion that even accommodates the Olympian gods into a sixteenth century story-world. As a result, the *Soulcalibur* games are, in the words of their unseen Announcer (quoted in the title of this chapter): “Transcending history and the world, a tale of souls and swords, eternally retold.”

These six commercially prominent franchises show that points of contact with ancient Greece or Rome can take various forms, but also that they can appear suddenly in one of several sequels.⁹ The main exception is classical heritage sites as backgrounds, above all the Parthenon, which becomes almost a trope of versus fighting games, and will appear again in the next part of this chapter.

<h2>Button Mashing: Minor Franchises

Most of the fighting games of the 1990s, and some beyond, can fairly be called imitations of one of the six franchises discussed above, and this influences their inclusion of various incidental Greek or Roman elements. One notable imitator is Data East’s *Fighter’s History* (1993), which was so similar to *Street Fighter 2* that Capcom unsuccessfully sued for copyright infringement. The character representing Italy is a wrestler named Marstorius, whose appearance was clearly modelled on the American professional wrestler Bruiser Brody. He wears a leather cuirass and toga-like white skirt, with fringed leather boots and leather cuffs. His stage backdrop in the first game is a pixel-art rendition of the Trevi Fountain and in the Neo Geo sequel *Fighter’s History Dynamite* (1994) it is a digitized photo of the ruined interior of the Colosseum. This present-day scenery contrasts with the character’s name and costume, which appear to be ancient Roman. Similar nuances arise in Namco’s less direct imitation of *SF2*, *Knuckle Heads* (1992). The Greek character, born in Athens and competing for money according to his in-game character details, is a caped hunchback named Blat Vaike who wields a giant metal hammer. Yet, his home stage follows the conventions of the genre far more closely: a large building in the background is unmistakably the Parthenon, surrounded by a crowd of what appear to be ancient Greeks (see Figure 7.2).

<<fig. 7.2>>

<caption>Figure 7.2: Screenshot: Blat Vaike’s home stage from *Knuckle Heads*.

There is a similar phenomenon in ADK’s own *SF2* competitor, *World Heroes 2* (1993), in which both final bosses – the shapeshifting androids Neo Geegus and Dio – are fought in Italy. Their stage is clearly the Colosseum, but in pristine condition and containing a huge stone statue of Neo Geegus. As SNK Playmore co-developed and co-published *World Heroes 2*, this stage probably inspired the adapted Colosseum with Athena statue in the 2009 *King*

⁹ This arrival in sequels happens in other game genres too: as just one example, the platformer *Megaman 6* (Capcom 1993) features a horse-man robot named Centaurusman, who was built to work in an archaeological museum and occupies a stage filled with ancient ruins.

of *Fighters* game, discussed above. In the first match, the stadium is filled with spectators. An energy weapon then strikes the building, and the second match takes place in its empty ruins. The (initially) non-ruined condition of the arena, together with the presence of cheering crowds, implies that the site itself has been transported from the past – whereas in the storyline, it is the heroes who have been gathered from history to the present day.¹⁰ The Parthenon of *Knuckle Heads* presents a slightly different paradox, since it appears in its modern, ruined state. Its spectating Greeks might conceivably be historical re-enactors, although Vaike himself is not. More likely they are simply living accessories to the classical authenticity of the ancient building, just as Sophitia is an accessory to a semi-mythical ancient Greece, and Marstorius (and the Roman crowd in *World Heroes 2*) are accessories to the ancient city of Rome. The cultural eclecticism of the versus fighting genre can embrace characters and backgrounds from ancient pasts, even when they confuse or contradict the overall chronological setting of the game.

A range of other versus fighting games include on their rosters either Greek deities, or historical ancient Greek or Roman fighters, or a combination of both.¹¹ It is notable that many of these were arcade games, released either primarily or only in Japan, though there is also a series of 1990s PC games from various countries. *Mutant Fighter*, called *Death Brade* in Japan (Data East 1991), features Amazoness, Hercules, and Minotaur characters alongside postclassical monsters including Werewolf and Dragon.¹² In more recent years, *Tournament of Legends* (High Voltage Software 2010) and *Gods of Rome* (Gameloft 2015) have revived the formula of combining classical characters with figures from other world mythologies. *Blandia* (Allumer 1992) features a Greek warrior named Diokles, and its final boss watches the bouts in a large bowl of water, an obvious imitation of the Olympian gods in the 1981 movie *Clash of the Titans*. *Red Earth*, called *Warzard* in Japan (Capcom 1996), has a high-fantasy setting, but in the Japanese version one of the stages is called ‘Greedia,’ clearly hinting at Greece; it contains ruined (and breakable) marble columns, and is represented on the world map with a classical temple, which collapses into ruins when it is completed. Versus fighting games for the PC in the 1990s frequently feature Greek or Roman warriors. The shareware game *Battle Wrath* (Cerebral Gaming Systems 1995) includes a gladiator called Flavius Scipio among warriors from different eras; likewise, *Savage Warriors* (Atreid Concept SA 1995) has a gladiator called Carceres (‘starting-gates’ in Latin), *War Gods* (Eurocom Entertainment Software 1996) a gladiator called Maximus, and *Time Warriors* (Silmarils 1997) a Spartan named Apokles. There is no single game inspiring all of these various examples. Instead, they all reflect the same motive of introducing cultural variety, which lies at the heart of both the ‘warriors throughout time’ scenario and

¹⁰ The ordering of stages does in fact become chronological two sequels later in *World Heroes Perfect* (ADK 1995), although its only ancient stage is ‘The Megalithic Age,’ set in Egypt. The ease of this change, which passed without comment in reviews, underlines the fluidity of the boundary between temporal and spatial tourism in versus fighting games.

¹¹ On the differences between Greece and Rome in the popular imagination, see Nisbet 2009.

¹² On the history of Hercules as a video game character, see Chmielewska (2016).

‘supernatural pantheon’ scenarios, since both are effectively sub-variants of the worldwide tournament scenario.

<h2>Dumpster Diving: Unsuccessful Imitations

The only way to understand fully how a culture looks to a non-classically-trained audience is to examine the full range of its representations, from the best-known to the most obscure. The final subtopic for discussion is what I call ‘dumpster diving:’ this means going beyond the best-known examples of a genre, and even their moderately successful imitators, into the remnants and the trivia. This is how to get the real dirt on any field of mass-audience reception studies, since it reveals what has truly soaked through from the background cultural fabric.¹³

In this final category, I shall discuss one direct imitation of *Street Fighter 2* and four of *Mortal Kombat*. Most feature softcore pornography as a simple selling-point; the exception is *Thea Realm Fighters* (High Voltage Software), which was in development for the Jaguar in 1995 but never saw the light of day. Surviving images show a typical blend of relatively low resolution sprites and high resolution backdrops, one of which includes a Roman-style wall mosaic depicting a charioteer.¹⁴ The remaining games for discussion all contain female nudity, and constitute a small and undistinguished subgenre of versus fighting games, which nevertheless offers some insights into how classical influences work. The first example is *Strip Fighter II* (Games Express), a bootleg game for the TurboGraphx-16 that appeared around 1994 after *Street Fighter 2*, and reflects the taste for adult-themed games in the Japanese video game market of the time. The roster includes a character called Medusa, whose fighting style is similar to that of Blanka in *Street Fighter 2*. She fights using her waving red hair and wears a snake-like green bikini, and her home stage is littered with ruined classical columns and broken statues. Surprisingly, classical allusions recur in two later softcore franchises of versus fighting games, which imitate *Mortal Kombat* in its use of digitized images of real actors. *Catfight* (Phantom Card 1996), an all-female pastiche featuring gore, was published by ‘Atlantean Interactive,’ a temporary brand for the pornography company Vivid Entertainment. It is almost unplayable and sometimes called the worst game ever, but three of the digitized photos that constitute the stages are archaeological: the Parthenon (once again), some stone steps in a Greek archaeological site, and Stonehenge. In 2002, Creative Edge Studios released another all-female imitation of *Mortal Kombat* called *Bikini Karate Babes*, which was better executed but still negatively received by critics. This time most of the nineteen character names are Greek or Roman (Aphrodite, Venus, Athena, Kakia, Thalia, Gemini, Lucina, Nemesis, Voluptas, Persephone, and Isis), and one of the stages features an imaginary statue of Venus in the background. In

¹³ Cf. Nisbet (2009: 154) on pornography as “a global economy and language whose representations of the ancient world are in some ways the best index we have of what ‘Rome’ means to an international mass market.”

¹⁴ I thank one of the participants at the *Interactive Pasts Conference 2* in October 2018 for plausibly identifying the charioteer’s face as Daniel Pesina, better known as Johnny Cage in *Mortal Kombat* (1992), who was involved in this production.

2011 a sequel with somewhat improved graphics appeared, entitled *Warriors of Elysia* (Creative Edge Studios), with some additional characters along similar lines including Vesta and Cassiopeia. The inclusion of ancient Greek content, both in *Bikini Karate Babes* and its sequel, and more obliquely in *Strip Fighter II* and *Catfight*, might be intended to offset, or indeed heighten, the absurdity of the premise using traditionally highbrow connotations. The three imitations of *Mortal Kombat* could have at least two more motives. Firstly, ancient Greece is a convenient alternative to the Chinese-based mythological fantasy of the model. Secondly, there may have been a sexual frisson around female warriors from ancient Greece in the 1990s, following the popularity of *Xena: Warrior Princess* on syndicated television (1995-2001), with its attractive lead actress and implied lesbian subtext. This seems particularly likely in the case of *Catfight*, given the choice of 'Atlantean' as the name of its publisher, together with a title logo featuring a Hellenic-looking city of Atlantis. Yet, Greek myth may have been nothing more than a convenient source of names for supernatural and sexualized female characters.

<h2>Conclusions

In this chapter I have presented a critical survey of classical references in versus fighting games, most of them originating in the 1980s and 1990s but in some cases living on through sequels and reboots up to the present day. I have included six major franchises, a host of minor ones, and finally a few notorious failures: the good, the bad, and the ugly, so to speak. This is intended in part as a model for assessing the impact of any defined area of cultural content – in particular, a historical period – across a whole genre of video games. The body of evidence is discontinuous in several ways: the games were produced in a commercially competitive and fast-moving industry, in geographically and culturally diverse conditions, often for specialist audiences, and until recent years with very little documentation. Yet, with diligent work it is possible to reveal both the distinctiveness of each treatment, and some overall patterns or trends that emerge as characteristic of the genre.

The results show that all these franchises, despite having modern-era fantasy settings, mix cultures freely enough to incorporate ancient Greek and Roman elements in some form; this often occurs in sequels, and is more frequent in generic imitations. The imaginary game-worlds of versus fighting games turn classical antiquity into entertainment, and that means refractions of the past rather than straight lines from it. Ancient Greece and Rome enrich the lively mixture of people and places that has always defined the genre, especially after the breakthrough moment of 1992 when *Street Fighter 2: The World Warrior* offered multiple playable characters in a global context. The most surprising result of this survey has been to show how often history and geography are merged into one another. Whether or not supernatural factors are invoked, characters such as Marston, Gill, and Sophitia import ancient Greece and Rome into latter-day settings in a mishmash manner that might be called illogical or, better, impressionistic. Like a temporal version of the icons on an in-game map, these characters are emblems and mascots of past cultures rather than actual

historical samples. The same is true of the real or imaginary archaeological sites we have seen in the backgrounds of stages, from Egypt and Athens to Rome and Segovia. It has become clear that classical allusions play out very differently through the roster than they do through the stages (and often in different games). However, be it through characters or through places, players of versus fighting games become casual cultural tourists, encountering ancient history and myth in various combinations of past, present, and future.

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