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Play It Forward: Ancient Greece and Rome in Digital Games

Dunstan Lowe

Things move fast in digital gaming. One of the best-selling English translations of Homer's *Odyssey* is by Robert Fitzgerald, which after sixty years in print has sold over three million copies. Ubisoft's game with a title borrowed from Homer, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (which is actually set during the war between Sparta and Athens) took just eighteen months to sell over *ten* million copies. Their previous *Assassin's Creed* game, *Origins* (2017), is set in the Egypt of Caesar and Cleopatra and has also sold ten million copies. Numbers like these suggest that of all the people alive today with an interest in ancient Greece or Rome, thousands—perhaps millions—first encountered them through the work of game developers like Ubisoft. This trend is set to continue.

Gaming is increasingly central to modern life, and this is giving it power to shape public awareness of history as a whole. This is not just about many hours we play antiquity-themed games; more importantly, gaming itself is a unique way to engage with the past. Interacting with the classical world to achieve goals is a fundamentally different way to experience it than, say, watching TV or reading a book. For example, when they are designed to educate, games can go much further than TV or books. Both *Origins* and *Odyssey* have a 'Discovery Tour' mode, in which fictional and historical guides teach the player about specific topics. Ubisoft provides materials for using Discovery Tour in classrooms, and many teachers have done so. Discovery Tour also exists for *Valhalla* (2020) which, although set in the ninth-century Norse invasion of Britain, contains Roman collectibles and even Roman locations: the London Mithraeum and Hadrian's Wall. Although *Assassin's Creed* games have an overarching science-fiction plot, they are known for absorbingly rich historical detail. Gamers in their millions evidently enjoy this, regardless of educational background.

Heroes and Ruins in Online Gaming

As online games have become increasingly accessible and mainstream in recent years, some of the best-known have brought elements from ancient Greece and Rome into mixed-up fantasy worlds. *Minecraft* is the bestselling game of all time because players can build what they like, so there have been many fan-made Parthenons and Colosseums, but 2015 saw the release of a 'Greek Mythology Mash-Up pack'. Its themed content (including 39 skins for gods, heroes and monsters, as well as textures and music) was showcased in an inbuilt map with miniature representations of Troy, the Labyrinth, and Atlantis. However, the skins included Theseus, skeleton 'Spartoi', Perseus, Stygian Witches, Medusa, and a Sea Monster. These undoubtedly recall the mythological movies *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans*, featuring Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion effects.

Classical antiquity has been very visible in online combat games too. Worldwide locations in *Overwatch* (launched in 2016) include two sets of classical ruins, one real and one fictional.

The archaeological site of Petra in Jordan is a deathmatch arena. Larger ‘control’ arenas include a high-tech ‘Temple of Anubis’ on Giza Plateau, and ‘Ilios’, a fictional Greek island resembling Santorini. Its landmarks include a lighthouse, a vast 300-style well, and an impressive excavation site. A colossal warrior statue is also visible out at sea. On Ilios, classical remains contribute to a picturesque holiday atmosphere: they add a heritage element to a kind of virtual Greek tourism. *Overwatch 2* (2022) adds an equally scenic Rome, enabling combat inside the Pantheon and under part of the Colosseum, two of the most popular ancient sites for real-world visitors.

In early 2020, *Fortnite* (which has double the players of *Overwatch*, at over 125 million) introduced a major villain named Midas who has the golden touch, though he is a modern-day crime lord owing more to James Bond’s Goldfinger than to the legendary Phrygian king. Later that year, a new location called Colossal Coliseum appeared, together with a gladiator named Menace who resembles Russell Crowe’s Maximus from the 2000 movie *Gladiator*. This square building was turned into ruins with a farm built among them, called Colossal Crops, before being finally replaced: though the arena itself aged into the past, Menace himself lives on in the game’s roster.

Finally, there are dozens of Greek and Roman characters in *Smite*, one of the most successful MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) games. As the title suggests, players attack one another as gods and legendary beings: the original seventeen characters featured Arachne, Artemis, Hades, and Zeus. Although many polytheistic traditions are now included, and (as of mid-2021) there are 116 characters, eleven are Roman and 22 are Greek, together representing more than one quarter of the game. This is a significant stake in the imaginations of *Smite*’s 40 million registered players.

In short, we find Greek and Roman places and characters reaching tens of millions of players in online games. The treatments are generally light in mood and influenced by cinematic action (*Clash of the Titans*, *Gladiator*) rather than ancient sources. This should remind us that Greece and Rome are well embedded in people’s imaginations beyond any educational agenda, and often show up in contemporary or fantasy settings.

The World At War

Ancient Greece and Rome have a promising future in digital gaming for two reasons: first, they remain ever-important in the strategy games genre, and second, they have inspired some of the most innovative and imaginative games from independent developers. Whether real-time or turn-based, strategy games involve controlling the development and actions of a culture to outperform its rivals. Three decades of Roman strategy games have included *Praetorians*, four *Caesar* titles, and numerous others. There are two Rome-themed games in the *Total War* franchise, and more recently the character-driven spinoff *Total War Saga: Troy* (2020), which treats Homer’s *Iliad* as Bronze Age history. In *Civilization*, the most important strategy franchise, both Greeks and Romans have been present since the first game in 1991: as of *Civilization VI* (2016), Macedon and Byzantium have their own cultures. A newer grand-strategy game, *Humankind* (2021) involves layering cultures across six historical eras, and has even more diverse ancient cultures including the Mycenaeans, Carthaginians and Celts. For better or worse, the Romans’ reputation for militarism and city-building made them dominant in strategy games, though the current trend is for a more inclusive view of Mediterranean (and world) history. Games in various genres (I have already mentioned *Smite*) are confronting Greece and Rome with other global cultures. One

recent example is the *God of War* franchise, which in 2018 relocated Kratos the Spartan into Scandinavia; another is *Immortals: Fenyx Rising* (2020), which has a Greek mythological setting, but (in one of its downloadable expansions) subsequently moves into Chinese mythology.

Smaller, independent game developers have been acclaimed for fresh approaches to classical themes, particularly Greek myth. *Apotheon* (2015) pits the warrior Nikandros against the Olympian gods in a visually striking style that imitates black-figure vase-paintings. Players of *Okhlos* (2016), whose name means ‘mob’ in ancient Greek, attack the gods more comically by assembling a rampaging cluster of Hellenic warriors, peasants, and even livestock. *The Forgotten City* (2021) is another acclaimed independent game, which actually began as a fan modification of the open-world fantasy game *Skyrim*: this proved wildly popular and was rebuilt from scratch as an original game. The player must uncover the intricate and morally complex story of a lost Roman town whose residents are trapped a time-loop: clearly Roman history can inspire interactive fantasy storytelling as well as Greek myth.

In all this variety of content and style, the special ingredient separating games from other media is interactivity. Playing as characters in ancient settings, we somehow share their goals and experiences. This creates compelling experiences—but we must avoid shrinking whole lives down to hitpoints, rankings and wins. Culture was, and is, more complex.

Ancient Greek Dungeon-Crawling

Any discussion of classical Greece and Rome in contemporary gaming must include *Hades* by SuperGiant Games, which won dozens of major game industry awards and which many call Game of the Year 2020. In *Hades*, Zagreus (a marginal god in ancient sources) is the rebel son of Hades himself, trying to escape through the underworld in a constant cycle of failures and progress. Zagreus gradually untangles a network of family problems linking dozens of Olympian gods and underworld inhabitants, though its core is his difficult relationship with his father. Many familiar figures have original and clever twists: we find a black Athena, a happy Sisyphus eternally pushing his boulder, and a Minotaur who bonded with his killer Theseus in the afterlife to fight as brothers in arms. Zagreus can get romantic with two other characters, one male and one female. There are allusions to Greek literature and history: at one point, Zagreus tells some nonsensical adventures to his poet friend Orpheus as a joke: this implicitly explains the real ancient texts known as the *Orphic Hymns*. Although the game’s ‘roguelike dungeon-crawler’ structure reveals dialogue piecemeal, the full transcript has over 300,000 words, more than Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. Small wonder that critics praised the characterisation, along with the game’s gloomy and elegant art style and music. As with *Assassin’s Creed*, extensive research produces rich and vibrant game-worlds: scholarship underpins and enables creativity.

In recent digital games, ancient Greece and Rome have inspired varied treatments across a range of game styles, from frantic combat to educational tours. Their current appeal seems strongest when the broadly familiar is combined with something unfamiliar. In some cases, this means confronting them with other global cultures, as in *Fortnite* or *Smite*, and in other cases it means updating them for modern times, as in *Hades*. Things do move fast in digital gaming, but classical antiquity is clearly keeping pace. If you are a gamer, now is a good time to make the ancient past playable your own way.

Biographical note:

Dunstan Lowe is Senior Lecturer in Latin Literature at the University of Kent. He never dreamed that he would one day write and teach about videogames.

Four Options for Images:



The Parthenon in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018). Screenshot by author.



Medusa and Perseus in *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011). Screenshot by author.



Menace the gladiator in *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). Screenshot by author.



Athena in *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020). Screenshot kindly provided by Supergiant Games.