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CHAPTER 1
PLAYABLE GIRLS IN ANCIENT WORLDS: *ATHENA* (1986) OPENS THE DOOR

Dunstan Lowe

Introduction

After half a century of existence, digital games now regularly portray women in and around the ancient world, but this situation took time to evolve. In this chapter, I propose the transformative years 1985–7 as a point of origin, when the first playable woman from classical antiquity appeared in a digital game. In that period, many developers created fantasized versions of Greek mythology, just as female protagonists began to gain popularity. This chapter examines SNK's 1986 arcade game *Athena*, the intersection of these two trends, which would both have lasting effects on how classical receptions in gaming evolved.[1]

This chapter is a deep dive into the world of SNK's *Athena* to discover why its female protagonist, so atypical then, was drawn from Greek myth. This will uncover complex layers of 'texts' behind the game, mapping not only how much and in what ways its designers used classical antiquity, but also the larger interface of Western and Japanese culture through which this happens. The irony of any young medium is how quickly the ephemeral and the ever-changing develops its own 'ancient history': in this case the long 1980s, far removed from the present in both technological and sociocultural terms. The book you are reading is part of that maturing process: only now, from a future that sees digital gaming from the inside, can we apply the tools of rigorous intellectual research to that past's cultural products. In that spirit, what follows is not just a study of one game and its semi-sequels. It also aims to model a new approach to gaming receptions: rigorous 'readings' of games-as-texts. This includes approaching their inspirations (classical and otherwise) genealogically, and using all available evidence: magazine features, interviews and marketing materials. I will compare *Athena* with contemporary games, especially *Kid Icarus*, another mythology-themed platformer of 1986 but with a male protagonist.[2] When studying classical receptions in non-Western contexts, including 'Japanese games', it is dangerously tempting to ignore what seems arbitrary or incomprehensible.[3] As I shall demonstrate in this chapter, exploring the game's complex historical and social context is actually key to understanding how a playable Greek goddess could be timely, relevant and appealing in mid-1980s Japan.

With games like *Athena*, Japan's video games industry was shaping how players worldwide imagined past and present global cultures, while also breaking new ground by marketing one franchise across multiple media. SNK would radically reinvent Athena within the year in a game called *Psycho Soldier* – and again the next decade in *King of*

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Fighters. This history, together with the original game's marketing, forbids us from reading 'Athena' as a (purely) feminist icon and shortening the long strides towards gender equality that were made in ancient-world games of the 1990s and 2000s. However, 1985–7 was crucial in digital gaming history as the real starting point of female agency, making deeper engagements possible as the medium matured. I argue that *Athena* (1986) embedded classical receptions in this groundwork, not despite, but *because of* developers' responsiveness to new trends in Japanese culture. As the female ambassador of classical antiquity in digital gaming, Princess Athena embodies the agility of the medium.

Women and antiquity in 1980s Japan

Before we discuss *Athena* and its legacy in detail, it will be helpful to show how ancient-world digital games portrayed women in the mid-1980s, and indicate that the goddess Athena had some currency in Japanese popular culture at the time.

Athena is emblematic of the transformational period of 1985–7 in gaming when new types of female character emerged. Until the early 1980s, technology was largely a male interest and most games portrayed spacecraft.[4] In two early female characters, sexism prevails: *Donkey Kong* (1981) standardized the damsel-in-distress, while *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982) projected prima donna stereotypes onto a yellow circle, now with pink hairbow and beauty spot.[5] In 1985–7, a transitional character-type appears: we might call this the 'subverted damsel', who becomes playable in a sequel.[6] Female protagonists had appeared earlier,[7] but now became mainstream, and not just to attract female customers.[8] Princess Athena is one example, though damsel-in-distress plots stayed dominant in games, including those about classical antiquity. The few that used Greek or Roman history were military or sports-themed, with almost no women.[9] Greek myth was more popular and inspired several 1980s Japanese games, but these make surprising efforts to turn it into princess-rescues. In the same year as *Athena* (1986), three major developers did this. In Konami's *Knightmare*, Popolon rescues Aphrodite from the underworld king; in Irem's *Youjyuden*, a warrior rescues a Minerva statue from a sorcerer; and in Nintendo's *Kid Icarus*, Pit rescues 'Palutena' (Pallas Athena) from Medusa, the underworld queen. Later games treat Greek myth likewise.[10] *Athena* therefore has a typical approach, but exceptional scenario: the princess must rescue herself. Athena reflects the rise of female protagonists in the mass media of 1970s–80s Japan, and especially one character-type: the brave and supernaturally powerful yet naive teenager, with either a hapless love-interest or (like Athena) none at all.[11] This may best explain why SNK chose the name 'Athena' with accompanying Greek elements. Athena is Olympus' attractive, single, female warrior. This made her highly eligible among Western mythical beings as a protagonist for mid-1980s Japanese gamers.

Recent portrayals of the goddess Athena in manga and anime prove her resonance in the cultural moment when *Athena* appeared.[12] In 1977, Hideo Azuma published the light-hearted manga *Pollon of Olympus*, animated for TV in 1982–3: Athena is a prickly supporting character, but SNK's princess arguably owes more to Pollon herself. Pollon is

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Apollo's wayward, well-meaning, comically naive daughter, accompanied by her cousin Eros. In 1978, an imposing, statue-like Athena briefly appeared in the anime *Metamorphoses*, inspired by Ovid's poem.[13] In *Arion*, a 1979–84 manga about the Olympian gods with a movie in 1986, Athena was fair-looking but stern and military.[14] Finally, *Saint Seiya* began in *Shonen Jump* magazine on 1 January 1986, seven months before the *Athena* game. Its first issue introduced 13-year-old Saori Kido, a psychic reincarnation of the goddess Athena. Even if *Saint Seiya* did not influence *Athena*, we can at least say that reimagining Athena as a powerful teenager made sense to Japanese audiences, who had wider interests in Greek mythological fantasy.

One clear indication that female protagonists were unconventional in games about Greek myth is Nintendo's *Kid Icarus*, published the same year as *Athena*.[15] Like Athena, 'Pit' is a deity reimagined with new costume and storyline: his name abbreviates 'Cupid', the Latin equivalent of Eros. *Kid Icarus* could be mistaken for a very loose treatment of Greek myth, especially with its misleading English title.[16] In fact, its plot is more recognizable than *Athena*'s once we understand it as a palimpsest. One half rearranges Perseus' actions in *Clash of the Titans* (1981): with divine help, Pit battles a two-headed dog,[17] gains Pegasus' flying ability, and defeats Medusa using a mirror shield. The damsel-rescue myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is overlaid onto this, upside down. Starting in the underworld, Pit escapes to the surface, then continues heavenward to rescue a Eurydice-like Palutena from a Persephone-like underworld queen, Medusa. The victorious player's performance can earn multiple endings. The worst makes Pit a monster or farmer; the best makes him a fully fledged warrior. A mainstay of Nintendo's Famicom library, *Kid Icarus* proved far more popular and influential than *Athena*. Like Princess Athena, Pit was rebooted in later games including a fighting-game franchise; unlike her, Pit retained his original character and setting.[18] It is tempting to count *Kid Icarus*' damsel-rescue plot (contrasted with *Athena*'s female protagonist and male nemesis) among the reasons for its commercial success. In any case, from a twenty-first-century standpoint, *Athena* looks far more experimental.

Athena (1986): Design, content and marketing

The history of *Athena* and its eponymous heroine is complicated, even for a video game franchise, and its engagement with Greek mythology is remarkably free and creative. Both the game's history and content can shed light on what made Princess Athena the first playable female of any ancient-world digital game.

Athena is a typical arcade platformer, if unusually frenetic and difficult: the player-character travels rightwards by running, jumping and climbing ladders, and must avoid taking damage from enemies. Destroying enemies or blocks may reveal weapons, armour and other useful items; players must defeat end-of-stage bosses to progress. Playing 'as a girl' makes no difference structurally, but is thematically significant.

In form and content, *Athena* was a departure for SNK: it was their contribution to a wave of fantasy platformers with eponymous mascots, rippling out from Nintendo's

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Super Mario Bros (1985).[19] The year 1986 was already a turning-point for the expanding company, and *Athena* became part of this as their eighteenth release that July.[20] The arcade original was Japan-only, but Nintendo's 1987 home version reached American gamers.[21] *Athena*'s numerous power-ups and special items were highly ambitious and unusual: the planner and designer created an role-playing games- (RPG) style multiple upgrade system,[22] which they had recently imported into a space shooter.[23] However, the cornerstone of its marketing was putting a female protagonist in a lighthearted fantasy setting: this succeeded so well that Athena even received fan mail, which was then unusual for a game character.[24] She was becoming not only SNK's mascot, but a celebrity in her own right. This would have lasting implications for the company and, indeed, the industry.

Although the game's female character and its fantasy world were departures for SNK, I shall argue that both took multiple cues from Japanese popular culture, including elements filtered from Western story-worlds and especially Greek mythology. Like most early developers, SNK chiefly made space shooters,[25] and their biggest 1986 game would be *Ikari Warriors*, a *Rambo*-inspired 'run-and-gun' shooter. *Athena* was different, with its cartoonish style, jaunty music and light-hearted premise. In a hallway, a girl in a red dress opens a door: she is sucked in, then falls down into a fantasy world and must navigate hazards to escape. This situation recalls Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and the game was actually promoted as 'Athena's Wonder Land'.[26] But Princess Athena is a more mature character, and not just because she kills monsters. As she falls, the dress flies away, revealing her signature red bikini, diadem and sandals. (There had been one earlier long-haired, bikini-wearing character, Princess Lum, in the science-fiction manga *Urusei Yatsura*: she was on television in anime form throughout *Athena*'s development and release. In that long-running series, Lum's hair became green: Athena's is an equally colourful purple.)[27] This short introductory sequence presents Athena as a sort of Alice-Lum figure, with only diadem and sandals to mark her as ancient (see Figure 1.1). Tellingly, the very name 'Athena' only appears on the title-screen and scoreboard, never during gameplay, not even in the congratulatory message for completing the game. Athena only gains real Hellenic connotations once she starts exploring her new environment.

Athena's accessories, environments and enemies feature more Greek mythological elements than meets the eye. Their names, while technically meta-game elements found only in the arcade manual (and other publications), add useful insights into the designers' intent. The suit of armour and weapons that Athena must collect to progress are best described as classico-mediaeval, a generalized impression of pre-modern European military equipment. Weapons include clubs, bows, wands, flails and swords; the most powerful is the giant Fire Sword. The armour comprises helmet, cuirass, shield and mirror:[28] The most powerful is golden with a lion-head shield. Other items more directly evoke Greek myth:[29] to begin with, Athena can jump higher with (winged) Shoes of Icarus and fly with Wings of Pegasus. The above-mentioned 'mirror' items, which add damage resistance, resemble the shields: it is striking that the Three Legendary Treasures in *Kid Icarus* (1986) are the Mirror Shield, the Arrow of Light and the Pegasus Wings that

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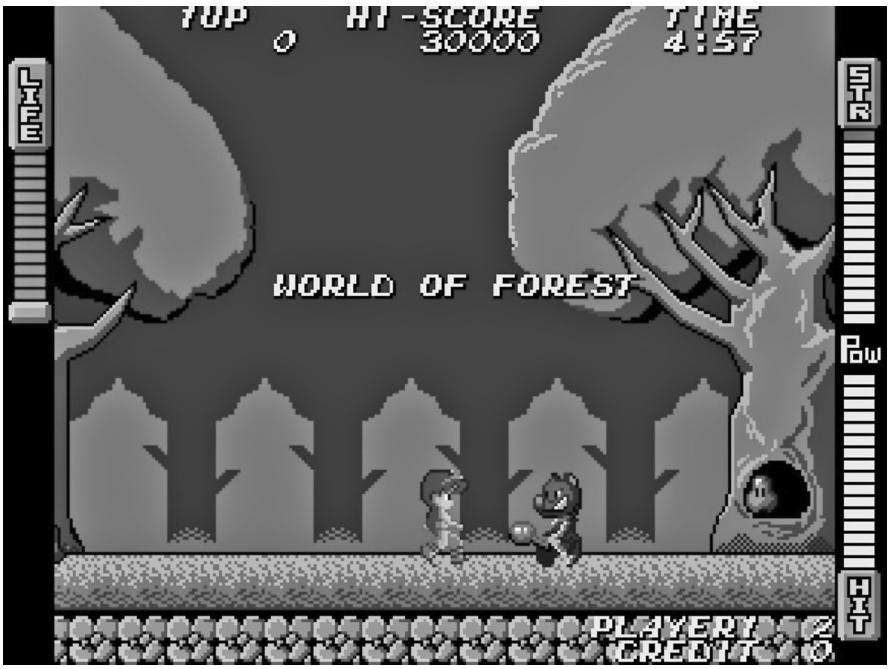


Figure 1.1 Screenshot of Princess Athena as a new game begins in *Athena* (1986).

confer the power of flight. It is tempting to think that *Athena*'s reference to Icarus, its shield-shaped mirror and its Pegasus-wing item influenced *Kid Icarus*.[30] Yet, they appeared only three months apart,[31] so developers more likely adopted widely known tropes, particularly from the 1981 movie *Clash of the Titans*, independently.[32] Other magical items are vaguely ancient: the Shell Necklace transforms Athena into a mermaid, an oil lamp lets her 'find' the correct World through each World's alternative exit[33] and a chest named Pandora's Box lets her defeat Hell World's boss. The mirror, necklace, lamp and chest suggest a girlish interest in personal adornment, offsetting Athena's conventionally masculine armour and weapons.

Athena's last, most valuable item is the Guardian Lyre,[34] which deserves special attention since it gives the only in-game hint at who Princess Athena really is. It is conferred at the end of World of Labyrinth, by a winged woman (instead of a 'boss') known only as 'Titan': she floats down in white robe and diadem, hovers, then disappears, leaving the Lyre. If attacked, she drops the Demon King Lyre as punishment, which strips all items. This enigmatic patron is comparable to Greek goddesses in other 1980s Japanese games, who, in turn, can collectively be traced to *Clash of the Titans*.[35] The player is left wondering: is 'Titan' the real Athena?[36] This reinforces the impression that the design team failed – or refused – to decide what Princess Athena is: the goddess herself, her mortal ward or her reincarnation. As a final twist, the white-robed 'Titan' and her lyre (or harp) occupy an overlap in Japanese popular culture between winged Greek deities and Christian angels.[37] Indeed, the item needed for entering World of Labyrinth

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to begin with is the Messiah Key. This hints at a Christian dimension to the game's premise, as Athena falls from on high into a demon's realm. Perhaps 'Hell World' is more than just the sixth stage in her journey. In any case, even after we find multiple threads of classical antiquity in the game, these prove deeply woven into its allusive tapestry.

More threads of classical reception, though often subtle, can be traced in the enemies populating eight Worlds (Forest, Cave, Sea, Air, Ice, Hell, Labyrinth and Final). I shall discuss minor enemies first, then each World's boss and finally Athena's nemesis Emperor Dante, who is himself composed from multiple sources.

I propose to group the twenty-six minor enemies according to their relationship with Greek myth. First, there are small creatures lacking mythical overtones: slimes, spiders, scorpions, armadillos, winged snakes, fish, anemones and sea urchins. Second, there are humanoids. These include ogres called Kassamu (Chasm?) and several types of knight, but the commonest are animal-headed: Boa (Boar?) have tusked pigs' heads, Pyutan are horse-headed and Ryukaon are wolf-headed wizards. I suggest that these enemies imitate Renaissance engravings of Greek myths about transformation, since 'Ryukaon' is evidently 'Lycaon', the mythical king whom Zeus turned into a wolf.[38] Three other humanoids are more Hellenic in design: Coda is a crossbowman with tunic, beard and winged temples; Minotaurus is bull-headed, with armour and sword; and Medusa has wild hair and a snake-tail. The original Medusa concept art is far closer to the monster in *Clash of the Titans* and reveals the hair to be snakes.[39] Finally, two animal enemies have classical influences hidden in their names like Ryukaon. One resembles a boar-headed quadruped, but is called Cerberus and appears only in World of Hell; the other is a winged lion, in reality an ancient Near Eastern motif, though its Latin name Regulus refers to astrology: Regulus is the chief star in Leo. Overall, we find that perhaps one third of minor enemies involve classical allusions, but unsystematically and through intermediary visual sources. Others are supernatural animals or knights; there is an overall effect of whimsical, sometimes menacing variety, perhaps reflecting the *Alice in Wonderland* influence already noted in Athena herself.

Turning now to *Athena*'s six bosses thematically linked with their Worlds, we find further inspiration from classical myth, and names are again important.[40] World of Forest's boss is 'Hamadrius', a malevolent tree named after the *hamadryas*, a type of Greek tree-nymph. The World of Cave boss is the stone monster 'Ghodem', evidently based on the golem of Jewish folklore. World of Sea's boss is an octopus, 'Neputune' (i.e. Neptune). This seems to mean simply 'master of the sea', although the design of this World itself evokes Atlantis: collapsed, cracked columns are in the foreground, while in the background, gill-faced swordsmen emerge from undersea buildings.[41] World of Air's boss is 'Khimaira' (i.e. *chimaera*), a three-headed, fire-spitting green dragon. Like the Cerberus enemy, Khimaira's appearance was probably simplified to look better on screen. This battle takes place before a ruined Greek temple on clouds: this same fantasy trope appears in *Kid Icarus*, whose Olympus section consists of classical architecture on clouds.[42] The bosses of the Worlds of Ice and Hell, like their Worlds, are not particularly Greek in design. Both are brightly coloured monsters: 'Gryupus' (グリュプス, *gryupusu*) is a tentacled blue sphere whose fanged mouth shoots bubbles. In the context of

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Hamadrius and Khimaira, this probably represents *gryps*, Greek for griffin. World of Hell's boss is 'Madou' (マドー, *sorcery*), a six-armed, one-eyed red monster capable of teleporting and fire-summoning. World of Labyrinth ends with 'Titan' instead of a fight; Final World repeats all six bosses in a 'boss rush', culminating in Emperor Dante. Overall, the influence of classical myth still seems unsystematic, though stronger than for minor enemies.[43] No boss is definitively classical in form, though Hamadrius, Neputune, Khimaira and probably Gryupus have Greek mythical names, and Hamadrius and Khimaira match these in appearance. However, a different logic seems to underlie the bosses' design: they progress from earthly to unearthly (tree, stone, sea-creature, bubble-monster, magical monster, goddess), leading up to the 'final boss'.

Emperor Dante is the crowning example of the cultural eclecticism, and resultant complexity of classical receptions, that we have seen throughout *Athena*. Dante is an enormous humanoid with three horned heads, sword and shield, and a canine lower half with a fanged mouth in his belly. Some assume that he is Cerberus, guard dog of the underworld;[44] his red eyes and huge belly might conceivably fit how his namesake Dante Alighieri describes Cerberus (*Inferno* 6.13–33). However, the triple faces and gaping nether mouth point to a more complicated answer. I suggest that Dante's direct model is the demon Xenon (or Zennon) in Go Nagai's 1972 manga *Devilman*: Xenon's true form is colossal, muscular and fur-covered, with three fanged heads, long horns and a huge face on his abdomen.[45] The name 'Dante' confirms this, since Nagai adapted *Devilman* from his own 1971 manga *Demon Lord Dante*.[46] So, Emperor Dante gets his name from *Demon Lord Dante*, and parts of his anatomy from Xenon in the subsequent *Devilman*, although the Greek Cerberus is still the best explanation for his canine half. The only elements still unexplained are Dante's wild red hair and the studded bands on his left wrist: I suggest that these derive from Calibos in the 1981 *Clash* movie, especially combined with horns, fangs and a bare chest.[47] So, Emperor Dante – like Athena herself – combines classical and post-classical Western ingredients with more recent Japanese inspirations. Ironically, even the name Dante belongs to manga: this fact in itself shows the value of approaching classical receptions in games genealogically. So long as games continue to draw on a diverse range of influences, this will remain true.

Athena wins: *Psycho Soldier*, *King of Fighters* and beyond

Less than a year after *Athena*, SNK redesigned their mascot more radically than any developer before or since, which is long overdue for scrutiny. The follow-up game, *Psycho Soldier*, features the psychic 'Athena Asamiya' (hereafter Asamiya) in an altogether darker, near-future setting.[48] It was moderately successful with critics and players, but like *Athena*, its theme and style were more innovative and impactful than its gameplay – and entirely focused around the female protagonist. *Psycho Soldier* made history as the first game containing a whole digitized song.[49] That song was the linchpin of both character-design and marketing: Asamiya is a pop-idol schoolgirl who destroys aliens. As with *Athena*, there is no in-game plot exposition, but according to the arcade flyer and manual,

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Asamiya and 'Player 2' bandmate Sie Kensou fight the Shige/Sigma monsters who have devastated the world.[50] Most still assume that SNK's linking of *Psycho Soldier* with *Athena* was a superficial and desperate rebranding exercise,[51] but this is incorrect. I shall reveal overlooked connections between the two projects, which have broader implications for what a classical heroine meant in 1980s Japan.

It is important to recognize *Psycho Soldier* as evidence that Princess Athena not only reflected but also shaped SNK's approach towards character design and the combining of multiple influences, including mythological fantasy. Although neither game contains staff credits, I have identified three individuals connecting their design and marketing teams.[52] This continuity explains how the two games formed a franchise, despite having no unifying narrative. I mentioned earlier that the original Athena (hereafter 'Princess Athena') has an ambiguous status, whether god, part-god or mortal. The introduction of Asamiya the psychic schoolgirl greatly complicated this question. Is she Princess Athena's descendant, reincarnation, reinvention or just namesake? SNK have commented sparsely and inconsistently over the years, confusing players and commentators to this day. This is just one of several ways that *Psycho Soldier* followed the path laid by *Athena*.

SNK used various marketing strategies to link *Athena* and *Psycho Soldier*, but especially the catchy *Psycho Soldier* theme. Despite being absent from *Athena*, the song featured in its television commercials together with original anime sequences. The home- console version of *Athena* was launched at a joint event with the arcade *Psycho Soldier*, and every *Athena* cartridge came with the *Psycho Soldier* song on cassette. It is astonishing how much content Princess Athena generated within a year. There was manga artwork in the strategy manual and magazine advertisements; anime in the commercial; an entire semi-sequel game; even a pop song. Princess Athena was now a 'media mix' phenomenon.[53]

Despite the obvious differences, *Psycho Soldier* has definite thematic links with *Athena* (1986) that deserve recognition. In broad terms, the pairing of Greek myth with science fiction did have parallels in 1980s Japanese gaming,[54] and I have mentioned that *Saint Seiya* reincarnated the goddess Athena as a psychic teenager.[55] However, we can identify five specific overlaps in content and gameplay. First, players collect upgrades in both by destroying enemies and stone blocks. Second, after defeating each boss, Asamiya plummets down to the next stage: six stages descend from a devastated city through sewers, caverns, a watery Atlantis, fossils and lava, and eventually the alien-infested core and final boss.[56] In her game, Princess Athena plummeted into the start, then every new World; her Final World was almost a rehearsal for *Psycho Soldier*, since after defeating each boss she dropped downward. Third, Asamiya's strongest form is a golden phoenix that breathes fire, corresponding to Princess Athena's golden armour and Fire Sword. Fourth, Asamiya wears school uniform in *Psycho Soldier*; the extra-life item in *Athena* was, incongruously, a school uniform.[57] Finally, the (third) Atlantis level recalls elements of *Athena*'s (third) World of Sea. The scenery features columns and cracked stone blocks, while its 'Lagos' enemies are gill-men and fish, and its boss 'Lagos Agon' also a skeletal-looking fish. The wall behind it features two apparently ancient female statues holding swords: after victory, Athena walks past the second with sword downward, as if

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symbolizing peace. Although 'Titan' in *Athena* was enigmatic in a different way, these unexplained women keep Athena's ancient background an open question.

Most critics and reviewers note the stark differences between Princess Athena and Asamiya,[58] but none have realized that Asamiya had an independent model. This insight will be crucial for understanding how 1980s Japanese developers like SNK selected and handled source materials from other media, and consequently how Greek mythology influenced *Athena* and its legacy.

Our starting point with Asamiya is the broadening 1980s popularity of magical battling schoolgirls in fiction, and teenage pop-idols in general. A direct comparison can be drawn with a non-classical 1986 game, *Valis: The Fantasm Soldier*.[59] In both *Psycho Soldier* and *Valis*, schoolgirls fight monsters with supernatural weapons. More importantly, *Valis* directly imitated the movie *Leda: The Fantasy War* (1985).[60] *Valis* resembles *Leda* in not only plot and title,[61] but even the protagonist's name: the schoolgirl in *Leda* is Yoko and the one in *Valis* is Yuko. Likewise, the protagonist's name is what betrays *Psycho Soldier*'s direct inspiration: the popular 1985 TV show *Sukeban Deka* was about a uniformed schoolgirl named Saki Asamiya.[62] Saki fights criminals using her steel yo-yo: this arguably inspired the 'Psycho Balls' spinning around Asamiya in *Psycho Soldier*, which can be launched as weapons.[63] The *Sukeban Deka* connection may help to explain why Athena became a pop-idol who sang the game's theme: the original *Sukeban Deka* actor, Yuki Saitō, was a pop idol who sang the show's theme.[64] These insights have profound implications for SNK's original decision to create *Athena* using Greek mythology. As I have shown, reinventing Princess Athena as Asamiya embedded her deeper in the fabric of 1980s Japanese culture than most have realized. On the one hand, this took her further away from the classical elements lending distinctiveness to the original game; on the other hand, it followed where that very inspiration led.

A third era for SNK's Athena character began in 1994, when Asamiya joined the roster of the fighting game *King of Fighters*. She became a staple, featuring in over two dozen *KoF* games, besides numerous smartphone tie-ins.[65] Asamiya even starred in a 1999 sci-fi spin-off with tie-in television show.[66] Meanwhile, Princess Athena was independently revived in *Athena: Full Throttle* (2006), a direct smartphone sequel to *Athena* (1986), in which she drags her magician servant Helene through another forbidden door.[67] However, Princess Athena has frequently co-starred in *KoF* games, usually as Asamiya's helper or momentary guise.[68] Asamiya's hair colour subtly erodes the distinction between the two, being usually *Athena* purple instead of *Psycho Soldier* pink. One striking portrayal of their relationship is Asamiya's Neo Max move in *KoF XIII* (2010; see Figure 1.2). This summons six Princess Athenas holding various weapons from *Athena* 1986 (the mace bears its logo.) The player's combo length determines their armour colour, blue up to gold – but the longest combos earn Athena's red bikini. This overwrites the original upgrade system with a gaze-centred logic, making Princess Athena's vulnerable bikini now her 'best' outfit: Athena herself is now the prize. Her celebrity status outlived her original story, although the idol Asamiya can still revisit the classical world.[69]

To sum up: SNK created *Athena* (1986) in response to contemporary interest in Greek mythology, co-opting several girl-centred sources. Recent manga-anime franchises had

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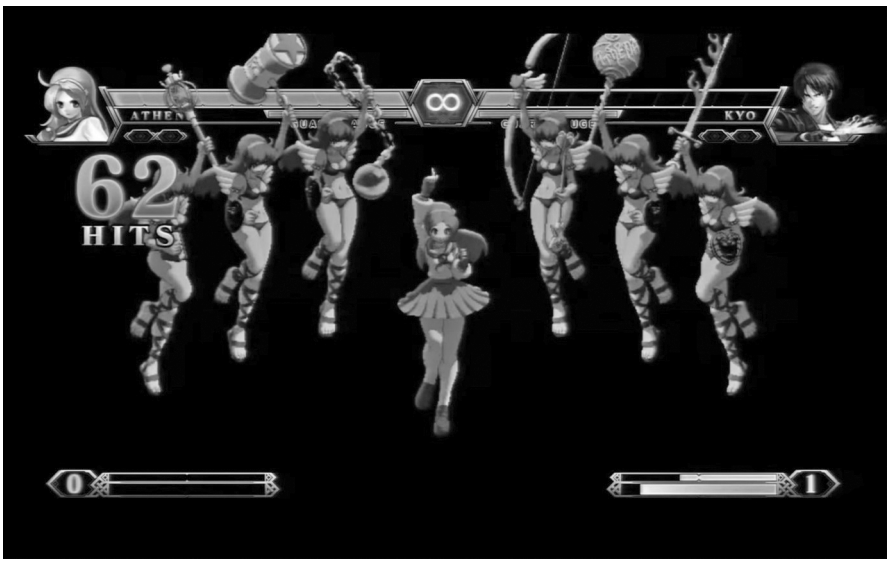


Figure 1.2 Asamiya's Neo Max move in *King of Fighters XIII* (2010).

used Olympian goddesses as characters, lending currency to the Athena name. *Alice in Wonderland* contributed the game's scenario, its longer title, and perhaps its enemies; *Urusei Yatsura* contributed a bikini and brightly coloured anime hair. The next year, *Psycho Soldier* co-opted *Athena*, in turn. This created the semi-combined Princess Athena-Asamiya who endures in *King of Fighters* to this day. Asamiya's pop-idol dimension was functionally compatible with Princess Athena, because it expanded an already playful and eclectic 'media mix' phenomenon. Like many characters and themes in digital gaming, Asamiya is an unexpected limit case for classical reception.

Conclusions

Digital gaming in the 1980s generally objectified women and cast gamers as violent male heroes,[70] suiting all-too-established stereotypes about classical antiquity. SNK's *Athena* is therefore a powerful counterpoint to Nintendo's *Kid Icarus* – and most 1986 games – in using Greek myth for a girl-centred story. *Athena* was typical of 1980s Japan in approaching Greek myth playfully, yet broke new ground with its female protagonist. Furthermore, *Psycho Soldier* (despite permanently complicating her already ambiguous identity) made Athena the first multi-game female 'mascot'. In this sense, Athena paved the way for playable women in future decades like Lara Croft or *Soul Calibur*'s Sophitia, who focalize far richer engagements with Mediterranean antiquity.

By studying *Athena* as text-in-context, approaching its sources genealogically, I have shown that its Greek myth is not simply 'Western', but echoes Japanese appropriations of Western motifs. The result is cumulative, not systematic. I have argued that the goddess

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Athena also suited a fashionable character-type: the brave-but-naive supernatural warrior schoolgirl. I have shown specific parallels (of different kinds) with two better known 1986 franchises, *Saint Seiya* and *Kid Icarus*. Some of *Athena*'s content derives from myth-based visual sources like *Clash of the Titans*, *Little Pollon* and even *Devilman*, alongside non-mythical influences like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Urusei Yatsura*. In turn, *Psycho Soldier* draws on *Sukeban Deka*, though I have also revealed internal links with *Athena* (such as the phoenix powerup and Atlantis stage). Athena's next great reinvention in *King of Fighters* forged new links. SNK transformed their 'Athena' character so radically that she became an important, decades-long story about antiquity and gender in digital gaming in her own right. *Athena* (1986) opened the door.

Notes

1. For surveys of classical receptions in gaming, see Secci (2019) and Alexander Vandewalle's database at *Paizomen* (2021). Critical assessments include Mcmenomy (2015), Garfield and Manders (2019), Rollinger (2020c) and Clare (2021).
2. Besides common features of 1980s platformers (cartoonish graphics, themed stages), *Athena* and *Kid Icarus* also share RPG-style upgrade systems. I discuss specific similarities (involving items and enemies) below.
3. Consalvo (2016: 4): '"Japanese games" [. . .] have increasingly become convenient signifiers that push us to reify cultural origins and ignore or downplay other factors, including industrial histories [. . .] and the changing political and social context in which games are made, sold, and played.' See also Hutchinson (2019).
4. Notably *Computer Space* (1971), *Space Wars* (1977), *Space Invaders* (1978), *Asteroids* (1979).
5. Arcade flyers called Ms. Pac-Man a 'femme fatale' who 'dramatically swoons'. Toru Iwatani designed *Pac-Man* itself (1980) with cute characters to attract women (*Wired* 2022)
6. Most prominently, *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988) includes Princess Peach among four playable characters. Two semi-mythological examples are Namco's Babylonian-themed *Return of Ishtar* (1986), starring Princess Ki with her rescuer as sidekick, and *Maze of Galious* (1987), in which Popolon and the rescued Aphrodite collaborate to rescue their baby.
7. The earliest human female protagonist was 'Billie Sue' in *Wabbit* (1982).
8. Some games definitely targeted girls: in *Girl's Garden*, Sega's monument to benevolent sexism (SG-1000 1986), Papuri collects flowers to keep her boyfriend. By contrast, *Baraduke* (1985) and *Metroid* (1986) reveal their space-suited protagonists as women in twist endings. On femininity in the *Metroid* franchise, see Roberts (2012). In 1986, British (male) gamers played the first all-female beatemup, *Legend of the Amazon Women*: a woman fights modern-day jungle Amazons, wearing minidresses, who captured her infant daughter.
9. Most 1980–7 ancient history games are turn-based strategy on home computers, e.g. *Tyrant of Athens* (1982), *The Fall of Rome* (1984), *Annals of Rome* (1986). Two 1984 Japanese arcade games have sports-themed Roman settings: Taito's fencing game *Great Swordsman* and SNK's racing game *Gladiator 1984*.
10. In *Heracles No Eikou* (1987), Heracles rescues Venus from Hades; in *Altered Beast* (1988), the Beast Warrior rescues Athena from an underworld-usurping Sorcerer; in *Battle of Olympus* (1988), Orpheus rescues Helene from Hades; in *Phelios* (1989), Apollo rescues Artemis from Typhon.

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11. On female character-types in Japan, see Napier (1998).
12. For more on this, see Castello and Scilabra (2015), who discuss Pollon ('Poron'), *Saint Seiya* and more.
13. *Metamorphoses* aka *Orpheus of the Stars* (dir. Masunaga 1977, reissued as *The Winds of Change* 1979). Athena features in two episodes, 'Aglauros' and 'Medusa'.
14. The manga *Arion* (アリオン) by Yoshikazu Yasuhiko ran in *Monthly Comic Ryū* during 1979–84. The anime movie (dir. Yasuhiko) came out in March 1986.
15. For an overview of the franchise, see Wolff (2018).
16. The original title *Mythology of Light: Palutena's Mirror* refers to the Mirror Shield, although the English title is somewhat appropriate: Pit's assistant fellow soldiers were originally called Icaros, making Pit an 'Icaros', too.
17. The underworld section's boss is 'Twinbellows' (i.e. Twin-berus), a two-headed Cerberus.
18. After a 1991 sequel (*Kid Icarus: Of Myths and Monsters*), Pit joined the roster of *Smash Bros. Brawl* (2008) and its sequels. He starred in *Kid Icarus: Uprising* in 2012. On how the Athena character evolved, see below.
19. Irem's *Kid Niki*, Nintendo's *Kid Icarus* and Sega's *Wonder Boy* and *Alex Kidd*, all appeared in 1986.
20. '1986 was a real turning point for SNK, in a number of ways' (Nakai 1996: 113).
21. This chapter discusses the arcade version. Micronics' Famicom/NES version removed or changed various elements. Home computer versions differed further.
22. There are around fifty obtainable items, including thirteen weapons and nine armour upgrades (Kalata 2018a). For comparison, *Super Mario Bros* (1985) has five.
23. *A.S.O./Alpha Mission* (1985; see Nakai 1996: 113). On the RPG-style upgrades, see also Anon. (1993). The planner was Kōji Obata: credits hidden in the ROM file for the NES version of *A.S.O.* include his nickname, 'Mr. Oba' (https://tcrf.net/Alpha_Mission_(NES), accessed 14 April 2021).
24. Nakai (1996: 113).
25. This continued from SNK's first release *Ozma Wars* (1978) to *Vanguard* (1981), *Mad Crash* (1984) and *Alpha Mission* (1985).
26. This title appeared on Japanese arcade flyers, 1986 industry sales charts in *Game Machine* (issues 291–5), and even the back of the 1987 Famicom box as *Athena's Wander Land* (*sic*).
27. The manga *Urusei Yatsura* ran in *Weekly Shonen Sunday* (1978–87). Fuji Television broadcast the anime (1981–6). One previous arcade game, *Time Gal* (Taito 1984), imitated Lum with Reika, a time-cop with bikini and green hair.
28. According to the manual, the three ranks are Shiva's, Leda's and Ide's Mirrors. This implies that Athena has fellow goddesses with personal mirrors. The hi-score names are Athena, Ida, Shiva, Python, Madillo and Shacho.
29. All item and character names are from SNK's arcade manual. See also: https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/アテナ_(ゲーム) (accessed 25 May 2021).
30. Both games feature flying snakes and teleporting wizards as minor enemies.
31. *Athena* launched in August (*Game Machine* 1986: 5), *Kid Icarus* in December.
32. On the Pegasus Wing/Wings of Pegasus in particular, compare the taming of Pegasus in *Glory of Heracles* (1987) and 'Wings of Pegasus' ability in *Battle of Olympus* (1988). The extensive influence of Harryhausen's creatures on digital gaming, especially through *Clash of the Titans* (1981), is overdue for scholarly investigation.

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33. Without the lamp, Athena enters a random World, potentially preventing completion.
34. This Harp is a permanent version of the 'K' (Keep?) Slate, which prevents item loss on death.
35. In *Clash of the Titans* (1981), Athena, Aphrodite and Hera give Perseus gifts. Most obviously, 'Palutena' (Pallas Athena) confers Pit's treasures in *Kid Icarus* (1986). In Irem's *Youjyuden* (also 1986), the warrior rescues a statue of Minerva (aka Athena), once again a patroness-damsel. In Konami's *Knightmare* (again 1986), according to the manual, Hera helps Popolon to rescue Aphrodite.
36. In the abovementioned *Arion* franchise, the Olympian gods are called Titans. Shakespeare's Titania might also have influenced the name.
37. Another example is *Kid Icarus*, set in 'Angel Land'.
38. For example, 'Ryukaon' could be inspired by the wolf-headed man in Goltzius' *Lycaon of Arcadia* (*c*. 1590).
39. For Medusa's concept art, see *Famimaga* (1987: 73) and *Gamest Mook* (1996: 146).
40. I use SNK's own English transcriptions of the boss names, listed e.g. under track 2 on *SNK Game Music* (G.M.O. Records 1987).
41. The mer-men are 'Dagos', apparently named after the Semitic fish-god Dagon. In *Psycho Soldier*'s Atlantis level (discussed below), the mer-men are 'Lagos', an obvious point of connection.
42. The buildings-on-clouds trope began with 'Jack and the Beanstalk' in Disney's *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947). World 2-1 of *Super Mario Bros*. (1983) imitates this: a beanstalk leads up to solid clouds.
43. SNK's later *Time Soldiers* (1987), notionally organized by era, shows a comparable mix of classical and non-classical bosses: 'The Age of Rome' has a three-headed dragon, Medusa, a Minotaur and Anubis. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this comparison.
44. E.g. Kalata (2018a) and Bundy (2020: 35).
45. The cape(?) at Dante's shoulders may visually echo Xenon's bat-wings. Xenon had already influenced the final boss of *Ghosts 'n Goblins* (1985): Astaroth, ruler of Demon World, is colossal and horned with a face on his torso.
46. This title acknowledges in turn that Nagai's inspiration was Doré's 1832–3 engraving of Satan for Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
47. When Calibos loses his left hand in *Clash* (1981), the metal fork replacement is on a socket with studs around the wrist.
48. Japanese often renders 'psychic' as 'psycho'. For example, Psychic-type moves in Pokémon include Psycho Boost, Psycho Cut and Psycho Shift.
49. It is tempting to see another influence here from the *Urusei Yatsura* television show, besides Princess Athena's bikini. *Urusei Yatsura* was the first anime with a pop-song theme; *Psycho Soldier* was the first game with a pop-song theme.
50. According to the flyer, 'Breaking of the seal by enemies causes darkness to cover the world.'
51. Bundy (2020: 38) falsely claims that SNK wanted to reinvent Athena after 'a huge negative response'. As I write, the Asamiya Wikipedia page contains further false and unsupported claims that some audiences, and SNK's own staff, regarded Princess Athena negatively.
52. Both games were planned by Kōji Obata, with promotional artwork by 'Rampty' (ランプテイ), who illustrated both manuals, plus *Psycho Soldier*'s flyer; Toshiyuki Nakai, who designed all characters in *Athena*, promoted *Psycho Soldier*. Nakai (1996: 113) mentions his own role and (anonymously) Obata's.

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53. On Japan's 'media mix' evolution, see Steinberg (2012). The *Athena/Psycho Soldier* phenomenon represents a high-water mark, together with *Wonder Momo* (February 1987), which playfully satirizes the new celebrity of game heroines: Momo is an actress playing a superhero onstage.
54. The science-fiction settings dominating early video games kept looming large. *Wings of Ares* (1986) combines futuristic elements with Greek myth. Nintendo's 1986 platformers *Kid Icarus* and *Metroid* shared their game engine, several designers and 'metroid' enemies. Earlier text adventures incorporated ancient settings using time-travel technology (e.g. *Time Zone* 1982, *Lords of Time* 1983). I thank the anonymous reviewer for this observation.
55. The *Saint Seiya* manga appeared in January 1986; it reached TV on 11 October, two months after *Athena* and five before *Psycho Soldier*. Saori Kido is conceivably SNK's conceptual bridge from *Athena* to *Psycho Soldier*.
56. Its name 'Shige do Dabid' is enigmatic, but 'David' is definitely male.
57. *Athena*'s few other modern-world elements all appear in World of Air. Its backdrop features motorcycles and an aeroplane. I also discovered an 'Easter egg' in the Final World's World of Air section: hidden in the rocks beyond Khimaira are a face with sunglasses and the initials V.G.L, indicating SNK's newsletter *Video Game Land*, edited by Kasatoshi Yoshino (Thorpe 2018: 22).
58. Kalata (2018b) offers the best available comparison of the two.
59. *Mugen Senshi Valis* (1986).
60. *Genmu Senki Leda* (dir. Yuyama 1985).
61. The titles match in both sound and sense (*Genmu/Mugen* = Fantasy/Dream, *Senki/Senshi* = War/Warrior, *Leda/Valis* = proper name).
62. Shinji Wada's manga spanned 1975 (pilot issue), 1976–8, 1979–82.
63. Series 3 (broadcast from October 1986) introduced a psychic villain named The Emperor, who conceivably influenced *Psycho Soldier* (March 1987).
64. Saitō's rock single *Shiroi Honō* (*White Blaze*).
65. See: https://snk.fandom.com/wiki/Athena_Asamiya#Game_Appearances (accessed 20 May 2021).
66. *Athena: Awakening from the Ordinary Life* (1999), an RPG with puzzle elements. Kei Ishibashi starred in 13 episodes of *Athena* (TV Tokyo, 1998).
67. See: https://snk.fandom.com/wiki/Athena:_Full_Throttle (accessed 20 May 2021).
68. Across eleven games (2000–18), Princess Athena has been a hidden boss, playable character, Asamiya's 'Another Striker' and alternative costume, and featured in Asamiya's moves and backgrounds. In *KoF '97* (1997), the 'SNK Heroes' ending shows Asamiya in Princess Athena's bikini: her shocked expression marks this as a meta-textual joke.
69. In *King of Fighters 2002: Unlimited Match* (2009), Asamiya's stage contains an amphitheatre and a colossus of the goddess Athena. Inscriptions say 'King of Fighters' in Greek.
70. See Bryce, Rutter and Sullivan (2006), Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun (2011) and Richard (2012).

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