

Ästhetiken und Genres / Aesthetics and Genres



Transformations of Heroic Aesthetics

Cinematic Forces in Video Games

Alexander Vandewalle

Abstract

There is no denying that popular cinema has historically exerted a powerful influence over the medium of video games. Scholars have previously drawn attention to the reuse of epic, Hollywoodian film aesthetics in video games set in classical antiquity, but to which extent are these visual conventions in fact representative of antiquity games in general? In addition to games inspired by these epic conventions, this essay discusses alternative sources to the aesthetics of heroes in antiquity games, including Japanese anime, animated pottery art, and video games themselves. The goal of this reflective essay is not to discredit epic cinema from its transmedial influences, but to broaden the scope of the aesthetic inspirations that have captivated ludic reimaginings of Greco-Roman myths for decades.

Contemporary heroes come in many shapes and sizes, and in a variety of media. While the other contributions to this volume examine various approaches to the aesthetics of heroes and heroism within different media, it is also important that we reflect on how these aesthetic forms and concepts transfer beyond media borders, and take on new life in different contexts. This chapter will therefore explore how cinematic aesthetics have migrated to video games, which have acquired a very prominent place in contemporary popular culture and whose ties with cinema have been the subject of much discussion.

The influence of cinema on video games has historically been well-attested and well-studied. Scholars have for example examined how video games borrow conventional aesthetics¹ or techniques of representation² – such as the increased use of voice acting³ – from the medium of film. In historical game studies (i.e., the academic field that studies “those games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it”⁴), it has additionally been argued that games that recreate historical settings – such as World War II – often draw on cinematic forms of realism – films depicting World War II – to have the player believe that

¹ E.g., Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.: *Understanding Video Games. The Essential Introduction*. New York / Abingdon³ 2016, p. 207.

² E.g., Felix Schröter: “Don’t show it, play it!” Filmische und nicht-filmische Figurenkonzeption im Computerspiel, in: *Rabbit Eye. Zeitschrift für Filmforschung* 5, 2013, pp. 22–39.

³ Jens Eder / Jan-Noël Thon: *Digitale Figuren in Kinofilm und Computerspiel*, in: Harro Segeberg (ed.): *Film im Zeitalter Neuer Medien II. Digitalität und Kino*, Munich 2012, pp. 139–182, here pp. 161–162.

⁴ Adam Chapman: *Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, New York / London 2016, p. 16.

they are immersed in a (recognisable) historical setting.⁵ However, the relationship between the two media has not always been easy: the use of cinematic video clips in games, for example, which are known as ‘cutscenes’ and constitute one of the most ubiquitous forms of filmic influence in games, proved especially controversial in the early days of the field of game studies. The “non-interactive” nature of these clips,⁶ which effectively deprives the player from being able to play, was seen as a form of “cinema envy” intended to “compensate for game design incompetence”.⁷ There were some, however, who considered them in a more positive light: in his *In Defense of Cutscenes*, Rune Klevjer drew attention to the narrative efficiency of cutscenes and the various functions they may perform, such as allowing players to survey an entire map before playing, providing context for a gameplay situation, rewarding players for completing certain challenges, etc.⁸ Nowadays, the use of cutscenes has become a conventional and deeply ingrained formal aspect of video games. Contemporary games such as *God of War* (2018, Santa Monica Studio) seamlessly transition between cutscenes and gameplay, while others such as *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018, Ubisoft Quebec) require the player to make choices within the cutscene.

David Serrano Lozano has also drawn attention to what he considers to be the “unequal” relationship between film and games, by pointing to the disproportionately large frequency with which films have been turned into games as compared to the relatively small number of games adapted into films.⁹ Even when games are transformed into cinema, the resulting adaptation is usually ill-received.¹⁰ However, the inequality of this relationship seems to be increasingly fading: a recent interview with Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm, revealed that current *Star Wars* storytelling in film and television is influenced by video games rather than the other way around.¹¹ As video games continue to expand their presence in popular culture, we may subsequently have to re-evaluate the relationships between media as they were traditionally assumed.

⁵ E.g., James Campbell: Just Less than Total War. Simulating World War II as Ludic Nostalgia, in: Zach Whalen / Laurie N. Taylor (eds.): *Playing the Past. History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, Nashville 2008, pp. 183–199, here p. 186.

⁶ Chris Crawford: *Interactive Storytelling*, in: Mark J. P. Wolf / Bernard Perron (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Abingdon / New York 2003, pp. 259–273, here p. 211.

⁷ Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.: *Understanding Video Games* (Fn. 1), p. 208.

⁸ Rune Klevjer: *In Defense of Cutscenes*, in: Frans Mäyrä (ed.): *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, Tampere 2002, pp. 191–202, here pp. 194–195.

⁹ David Serrano Lozano: *Si vis ludum para bellum. Violence and War as the Predominant Language of Antiquity in Video Games*, in: Irene Berti et al. (eds.): *Ancient Violence in the Modern Imagination. The Fear and the Fury (IMAGINES)*, London / New York 2020, pp. 151–160, here p. 152.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; see also Mark McPherson: *Pixels to Premieres. A History of Video Game Movies*, published independently 2017, p. xi.

¹¹ Ben Travis: Kathleen Kennedy Says *Star Wars*’ Storytelling Is Influenced By Video Games – Exclusive, *Empire*, 9 June 2022. www.empireonline.com/tv/news/kathleen-kennedy-says-star-wars-storytelling-is-influenced-by-video-games-exclusive/ [18 July 2022].

Ever since classical reception in video games emerged as a new field of research, cinematic elements or influences have also received attention. Similar to how others have stressed the importance of *Clash of the Titans* (1981, Desmond Davis) for cinematic antiquity, for example, scholars have examined how the film influenced classically inspired video games.¹² Dominic Machado specifically analysed the use of cutscenes in *Total War: Rome II*'s (2013, Creative Assembly) recreation of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest.¹³ Most recently, Ross Clare investigated the initial *God of War* trilogy (2005–2011, Santa Monica Studio) and on the basis of this analysis conceptualised an “epic game tradition” as a series of games “wherein central tenets of the epic film tradition are borrowed and altered to fit the interactive process”.¹⁴ This tradition is characterised by a language of ‘epicness’, grandeur and scale that recalls similarly epic films such as *Gladiator* (2000, Ridley Scott), *Troy* (2004, Wolfgang Petersen), *300* (2006, Zack Snyder) or *Clash of the Titans* (2010, Louis Leterrier).¹⁵

Yet, while this epic mode of cinema has certainly provided fertile inspirations for video games, we should also question the extent to which these epic films are in fact influential for the wider whole of classically inspired video games. To be clear, it is never Clare’s claim that ‘all’ antiquity games are epic games, and since it is both impossible and undesirable to generalise, we should perhaps reflect on different aesthetic forms within antiquity games that are not as easily explained by reference to blockbuster Hollywood cinema.¹⁶ This essay aims to build on the aforementioned research by examining various additional aesthetic traditions found in these games, with a specific focus on their heroes. While there is no denying that antiquity games often model their content after cinematic conventions, to what extent must we consider the heritage of video game heroes as defined by the epic traditions of Hollywood cinema?

¹² See for example Stian Sundell Torjussen: “Release the Kraken!” – The Recontextualization of the Kraken in Popular Culture, from *Clash of the Titans* to *Magic: The Gathering*, in: *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 11, 2016, pp. 73–85; Pierre Cuvelier: *Le Choc des titans et ses répliques. Diffusion et réappropriation ludique de nouveaux types figures mythologiques dans les arts visuels*, in: Fabien Bièvre-Perrin / Elise Pampanay (eds.): *Antiquipop. La référence à l'Antiquité dans la culture populaire contemporaine*, Lyon 2018, pp. 311–328.

¹³ Dominic Machado: *Battle Narratives from Ancient Historiography to Total War: Rome II*, in: Christian Rollinger (ed.): *Classical Antiquity in Video Games. Playing with the Ancient World* (IMAGINES), London / New York 2020, pp. 93–105.

¹⁴ Ross Clare: *Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames. Representation, Play, Transmedia* (IMAGINES), London et al. 2021, p. 57.

¹⁵ Rainer Rother: *Der Antikfilm*, in: Brodo Traber / Hans J. Wulff (eds.): *Filmgenres. Abenteuerefilm*, Stuttgart 2004, pp. 31–42, here pp. 35–36, uses the term “Schauwerte” (the ‘worthiness of being seen’) to refer to conventional elements of classically inspired cinema with similar spectacular characteristics (e.g., opulence or nudity).

¹⁶ Throughout this essay, I will use the term ‘antiquity game’ to describe any (in this case, video) game set in (historically) ancient times, or in a mythological storyworld based on ancient stories.

In accordance with the concept of the volume, this study will primarily be concerned with what Dunstan Lowe has called “hero-based games”, or games that are “typically more narrative-driven and [focus] on an individual protagonist, usually in a mythological or fantasy context”.¹⁷ Examples may be found in “platformers, Role-Playing Games and arcade-style ‘action’ games among other styles of play”.¹⁸ By extension, this means that the so-called “empire-building” games – strategy games or city-builders – will not be considered.¹⁹ We will first examine relatively overt aesthetic borrowings from films, in line with the epic mode discussed by Ross Clare. Secondly, we will move onto other cinematic traditions that cannot be classified as easily under the header of (Hollywood) ‘epic’. Thirdly, we will venture beyond cinema altogether and discuss influences from within the medium itself, reflecting its own developments to understand the full complexity of video game receptions of ancient heroes. Finally, we will examine cases in which notions of ‘aesthetics’ become much harder to apply, and which seem specific to the game medium. The purpose of this argument is by no means to disclaim the impact of popular film, but to raise awareness of the fact that video games are perhaps more aesthetically diverse than is often realised.

Like many of the films discussed in this volume, my examples depict heroes from Greco-Roman mythology. What, however, do we mean by ‘hero’ in the context of Greco-Roman antiquity games? We may of course concentrate on established mythological characters such as Achilles, Hercules, Odysseus, Theseus and others. Yet by comparison to, for example, most contemporary popular cinema, games have been strikingly productive in creating original, ‘new’ heroic characters: Kratos from *God of War*, Fenyx from *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (2020, Ubisoft Quebec), Arkantos from *Age of Mythology* (2002, Ensemble Studios), Iola from *Olympia Rising* (2015, Paleozoic), Pit from *Kid Icarus* (1986, Nintendo R&D1 & Tose) or Cassandra from *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* all have no direct parallels in classical literature.²⁰ The fact that popular games seem to present more of these original heroes than contemporary films may perhaps be explained through the developers’ intention to have the playable character or avatar act as a (relatively) blank slate which players can subsequently customise to their liking.²¹ Examples of ‘original’ heroes of course also exist in other media –

¹⁷ Dunstan Lowe: *Playing with Antiquity. Videogame Receptions of the Classical World*, in: Dunstan Lowe / Kim Shahabudin (eds.): *Classics for All. Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2009, pp. 64–90, here p. 68.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ While players may choose to play as either Cassandra or Alexios (sister/brother) in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, this essay will use Cassandra’s name since she counts as the canonical character in the lore of the series. It is also important to point out that *God of War*’s Kratos is not the same character as the Kratos from Aischyl. *Prom.* (Lowe: *Playing with Antiquity* (Fn. 17), p. 85).

²¹ See Richard Cole: *Cassandra’s Odyssey*, in: Jane Draycott / Kate Cook (eds.): *Women in Classical Video Games*, London et al. 2022, pp. 191–207, here p. 196.

such as Heron in *Blood of Zeus* (2020–, Netflix) – but it seems to be an especially pervasive trope in games. We will therefore also take these new heroes into account for the following discussions.

Cinematic borrowing in the epic game tradition

As Ross Clare notes, popular notions of antiquity – which exist beyond the representational media in which they are constructed by artists, and from which they are reconstructed by audiences – oftentimes draw inspiration from an aesthetic of ‘epicness’.²² Ancient Rome is frequently infused with grand architectural splendor, and ancient Greece with monsters of myth.²³ The transmediality of these conceptualisations of the ‘ancient’ means that such visual languages may transfer themselves beyond a given medium, and find their way into video games as well. One may argue that in Lowe’s aforementioned “hero-based games”, it is this concept of ‘epicness’ that has proven to be one of the most dominant, if not the most dominant, aesthetic styles entirely.²⁴

A first, perhaps ‘obvious’ case of the borrowing of cinematic epic aesthetics happens in games that serve as tie-ins to other, similarly epic media. As described above, it is often the case that games are created in conjunction with high-budget films – like *Disney’s Hercules* (1997, Eurocom) or *Clash of the Titans* (2010, Game Republic) – or even television series, as attested by the *Xena: Warrior Princess* (e.g., 1999, Universal Studios Digital Arts) and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (e.g., 2000, Player 1) games. Though not an official tie-in, *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance* (2003, Acclaim Studios Manchester) takes much inspiration from the film *Gladiator*. These are examples that often quite literally utilise the same epic aesthetics as the original films, and actively involve the player as the co-creator of spectacle and destruction.²⁵

Yet this style is also present in some of the most prominent antiquity game series, which are not explicitly connected to specific texts of cinema or television. One might think of the *God of War* series (2005–), well-known for the brutality and the violence with which its hero, Kratos, fights his way through the Greek – and, more recently, Norse – pantheon(s).²⁶ Ross Clare describes the epic character of the series, drawing attention to (among others) its spectacular environments,

²² Clare: Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames (Fn. 14), p. 36.

²³ On these tropes in cinema, see Irene Berti / Marta García Morcillo: Does Greece – and the Cinema – Need a New Alexander?, in: Irene Berti / Marta García Morcillo (eds.): *Hellas on Screen. Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth*, Stuttgart 2008, pp. 9–20, here pp. 11–13.

²⁴ Lowe: *Playing with Antiquity* (Fn. 17), p. 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–52.

²⁶ E.g., Alan Garfield / Amy Manders: Video Games, Homer to Hesiod. What Ancient Greek Content Do Video Game Players See?, in: *Proceedings of the 2019 11th International Conference on Education Technology and Computers*, New York 2019, pp. 190–195, here p. 192.

revenge quest, muscular protagonist, and balletic action.²⁷ This, he argues, is reminiscent of films like *Gladiator* or *Spartacus* (1960, Stanley Kubrick) – we could add *300* as well.²⁸ The *God of War* games employ a style that is very similar to epic cinema, and its hero-protagonist exhibits these same epic aesthetic features. Such aesthetics can also be found in examples such as *Warriors: Legends of Troy* (2011, Koei Canada). There, the blood of the thousands of enemies slain by the player-hero will often splash across the screen – similar to *300* or *Spartacus* (2010–2013, Starz).²⁹ Although there is an option to disable excessive blood effects, it never fully leaves the gameplay experience.

Transmedial influences like these may also exert themselves on the level of gameplay or gameplay animations. Both *Warriors: Legends of Troy* and *Achilles: Legends Untold* (2022, Dark Point Games) borrow the same neck-stabbing sword animation that *Troy*'s Achilles uses to kill Boagrius (00:08:20; Netflix version).³⁰ Similarly, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* allows players to equip and use a 'Sparta Kick' ability, inspired by *300*'s famous 'This is Sparta!' scene. These examples draw on iconic scenes from cinema to evoke a similar experience, and in doing so create heroes that both aesthetically and agentially remind audiences of equivalents in other media.

Other traditions

The above examples concentrated on rather direct aesthetic influences, stemming from traditional Hollywood conventions. Of course, not every Achilles in mythological video games can be as easily traced back to epic popular cinema. In this section, we will identify two other traditions that may to some degree be considered pervasive in antiquity games, starting with aesthetics inspired by Japanese art and cinema. Since the Japanese video game industry – primarily driven by Nintendo – is one of the biggest and most important game sectors worldwide, it should be no surprise that it has influenced the aesthetic creation of mythological heroes in video games as well. However, it is particularly noteworthy that these visual styles have also made their way into the North American game sector, from which the following examples originate. A second, perhaps more unexpected influence to be discussed here is the cinematic animation of ancient pottery and vase art, which has resulted in some of the most visually interesting antiquity games.

The Japanese animation studio Studio Ghibli has been cited as one of the main inspirations for the game *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, which sends players on

²⁷ Clare: Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames (Fn. 14), pp. 39–45.

²⁸ See also the contribution by Silvester Kreisel in this volume on the revenge quest in *Gladiator*.

²⁹ Clare: Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames (Fn. 14), p. 36.

³⁰ Troy. USA 2004. Dir.: Wolfgang Petersen. www.netflix.com/title/60034571 [21 February 2023].

a mythological adventure on a mythical island called the Golden Isle.³¹ Founded in 1985 by film directors Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata (among others), Studio Ghibli is one of the most renowned Japanese animation studios, famed for anime classics such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988, Hayao Miyazaki) or *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988, Isao Takahata).³² *Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s game director, Scott Phillips, hinted in an interview that it was exactly this “painterly style – realistic but with stylised proportions and visuals” that the team wanted to apply to Greek mythology.³³ The game's art director, Thierry Dansereau, describes the game as having “vibrant and saturated colors, along with stylized materials and architecture, to create a truly fantastical world that will please a wide audience”.³⁴ Concept artist Asim Steckel has cited the work of Japanese artist Kazuo Oga, who has also worked with Studio Ghibli, as “a great inspiration”.³⁵ Primarily, the game designers seemed to have been most impressed with Studio Ghibli's use of colour, environment design, and stylisation. The latter may also be observed in the aesthetics of the game's protagonist, Fenyx, who is more cartoon-like than the characters from *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* which was released by the same studio two years earlier.³⁶

We may also see such Japanese aesthetics present in *Divine Knockout* (2022, Red Beard Games), a spin-off of the online game *Smite* (2014–, Titan Forge Games). *Divine Knockout* uses the same mythologically diverse characters from *Smite* – including heroes such as Hercules – but presents them all with so-called ‘chibi’ appearances.³⁷ *Chibi* is a specific style of Japanese drawing that, briefly put, foregrounds characters of small stature and adorns them with over-sized heads. Such aesthetics are not found in the more realist Hollywood epics, and are therefore a visual conceptualisation of classical heroes that should be ascribed to a different tradition.

Lastly, no discussion on Japanese aesthetics in Greco-Roman antiquity games would be complete without the mention of *Hades* (2020, Supergiant Games), one of the most successful antiquity games in recent years.³⁸ In it, players act as Zagreus and attempt to escape the Greek Underworld in search of Persephone. *Hades* recreates the characters of ancient myth – some of whom are heroes like

³¹ Dansereau in Ian Tucker (ed.): *The Art of Immortals Fenyx Rising*, Milwaukee 2021, p. 6; Steckel in *ibid.*, p. 49.

³² For a full introduction, see James Rendell / Rayna Denison: Introducing Studio Ghibli, in: *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 4.1, 2018, pp. 5–14.

³³ Phillips in Sam Loveridge: *Immortals Fenyx Rising* dev comments on *Breath of the Wild* comparisons, Gamesradar, 11 September 2020. www.gamesradar.com/immortals-fenyx-rising-dev-comments-on-breath-of-the-wild-comparisons/ [18 July 2022].

³⁴ Dansereau in Tucker: *Art* (Fn. 31), p. 6.

³⁵ Steckel in Tucker: *Art* (Fn. 31), p. 34.

³⁶ As an example of *Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s aesthetics (provided with scholar commentary), see www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZO_JW1OUuSw [21 February 2023].

³⁷ As far as the Greco-Roman characters are concerned, *Smite* currently offers *chibi* skins (i.e., alternative appearances; see below) for Arachne, Hades, Janus, Medusa, Thanatos and Zeus.

³⁸ *Hades* was for example nominated for Game of the Year at the 2020 Game Awards.

Achilles, Patroclus, and Theseus – with a similar anime art style which has been praised by critics and fans alike.

A second tradition in games that is distinctly different from the epic Hollywood style may be found in the visual animation of ancient vase and pottery art. The source of this inspiration of course significantly predates cinema and at first glance appears to fall outside the scope of this volume. Examples of this phenomenon, however, also occur in recent cinema, such as *Disney's Hercules* (1997, John Musker & Ron Clements) and its songs of the muses (e.g., 00:00:55–00:02:37; Disney+ version).³⁹ Other examples of animated pottery can be found in animation film, for example the Russian short film *Olympians* (1982, Fyodor Khitruk), and music videos like Lizzo's *Rumors* (2021), featuring Cardi B, through which the style may have entered the popular imagination. In several of these examples, the ceramic figures “come to life” and move beyond the fixed borders of the vase.⁴⁰ Greek vases and other ceramics often appear in video games as well, from *God of War* to *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and *Hades*. Usually their sole purpose is to be destroyed by the players, who may receive certain items or rewards when doing so.⁴¹ Yet ancient vase art can also influence the game's entire aesthetic.

A first case in which this style is prominent is *Apotheon* (2015, Alientrap), a title widely recognised for its visual aesthetics. *Apotheon* is set after the end of Hesiod's Iron Age at a time when the gods have abandoned Earth. The game revolves around the (original) hero Nikandros, who is summoned by Hera and given the task of toppling the Greek gods one by one, before defeating Zeus and creating a new world. The entire game is represented in the style of Greek vase art – although certain levels are painted in different colours than would be the case on a Greek vase – and Nikandros is modelled after a black-figure vase character.⁴² Again, this is a radically different aesthetic style compared to the one found in previous examples.

A similar approach is taken by *Warriors: Legends of Troy*, a simulation of the Trojan War in which the mythological backstory is recounted through cutscenes often employing a style inspired by ancient vase art. These ‘cinematic ceramics’ inform the player of the backstory (Paris bringing Helen to Troy, etc.) by slowly scrolling across a vase painting, usually one depicting both the Greek and Trojan heroes of the war. In the very first cutscene, these paintings tellingly fold through

³⁹ *Hercules*. USA 1997. Dir. John Musker / Ron Clements. www.disneyplus.com/movies/hercules/2e02rZ2TfE0f [21 February 2023].

⁴⁰ Clare: Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames (Fn. 14), p. 58.

⁴¹ Dunstan Lowe: Always Already Ancient. Ruins in the Virtual World, in: Thea Selliaas Thorsen (ed.): *Greek and Roman Games in the Computer Age*, Trondheim 2012, pp. 53–90, here p. 71; Clare: Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames (see Fn. 14), p. 49.

⁴² Christian Rollinger: Battling the Gods. An Interview with the Creators of “*Apotheon*” (2015) Jesse McGibney (Creative Director), Maciej Paprocki (Classical Scholar), Marios Aristopoulos (Composer), in: *thersites* 7, 2018, pp. 11–29, here pp. 21–22, DOI: 10.34679/thersites.vol7.89.

the screen like film strips.⁴³ Especially interesting is the fact that the names of the depicted characters such as Odysseus and Agamemnon appear alongside them, as is often the case on actual ancient pottery. While this style is not used during the actual gameplay levels (or during other cutscenes that are more immediately related to the levels themselves), its application between missions is nonetheless noteworthy and representative of this style as a whole.

Finally, we might think of *ESCAPE: Ancient Greece* (2022, ScoutingNate), which was created during a game jam competition (the Godot Wild Jam #42) which lasted from February 11th to February 20th, 2022. In game jams, indie game developers are given a very limited timeframe during which they create a game from scratch. The theme for this game jam was ‘Ancient’. Developer ScoutingNate designed a result with gameplay similar to *Super Mario Bros.* (1985, Nintendo R&D4): the player-character jumps across platforms and defeats enemies – for example by jumping on them – in order to reach a certain goal. What is interesting here is that the gameplay is set on a revolving vase, standing on top of a column, which turns right in accordance with the player’s horizontal progression through the game. The protagonist, an unnamed hero described only as a ‘Greek Warrior’, is dressed in black, red/orange and white colours, reminiscent of ancient pottery. The rather specific context from which this game emerged might be the best example to illustrate just how efficient this aesthetic style is: in a pressing timeframe, it was the game designer’s first choice to evoke an ‘ancient’ atmosphere.

Beyond cinema

According to Lars Konzack, such a “referentiality” as seen above in relation to film is intrinsic to the medium of games, yet films are not the only source of inspiration that games draw from.⁴⁴ Over its still relatively short history, video games as a medium in its own right have developed specific aesthetic formulae and conventions which may prove equally influential during the production process of classical heroes in games.

In the early days of game design, the technological possibilities to create fully-rendered and believable characters were more limited compared to current game systems. Nevertheless, game designers succeeded in the creation of captivating game characters with only a small amount of pixels. Figures such as Mario or Link (*The Legend of Zelda* (1986, Nintendo R&D4)) quickly became iconic and remain so to this day. Their pixelated appearances will evoke nostalgic feelings

⁴³ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=4S9pSnzhkCc [21 February 2023] for a compilation of every cutscene in the game. For the film strips, see 00:01:10–00:01:20.

⁴⁴ Lars Konzack: Computer Game Criticism. A Method for Computer Game Analysis, in: Frans Mäyrä (ed.): Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings, Tampere 2002, pp. 89–100, here p. 96.

in many players, and this specific aesthetic form is still used today to create compelling games (especially in the indie sector).⁴⁵ *Olympia Rising*, for example, has the player take up the role of Iola, an original heroine on a quest from the fields of Asphodel to Olympus. She is presented as a pixelated sprite in the vein of 1980s game characters. This art style is completely different from the ones that were previously discussed, and may also be found in other antiquity games such as *Okhlos: Omega* (2016, Coffee Powered Machine) or *Kronos: Titan of Time* (2022, RazoSoft).

At other times, inspiration or borrowing between video games can be more direct. In addition to Studio Ghibli, one of *Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s most relevant influences is another video game: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017, Nintendo EPD). *Breath of the Wild* is also an action-adventure role-playing game, often lauded as one of the best video games of all time and considered as a leader in open world design. *Immortals Fenyx Rising* borrows many elements from *Breath of the Wild*, including its general cartoon-like style, the incorporation of technology such as machines and lasers in a relatively natural environment,⁴⁶ and a lush yet ruined world built around an ominous mountain.⁴⁷ The main character, Fenyx, also shares several aesthetic features with Link, the protagonist of *Breath of the Wild*: both are presented by their respective camera viewpoint as small or tiny, and they lack the physical prowess, musculature, or glorious grandeur that we may expect from a traditional hero. Their smallness is emphasised, especially in contrast with in-game structures (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s enormous god statues, *Breath of the Wild*'s Sheikah Towers), or their respective villains: both the Greek antagonist Typhon and Calamity Ganon, *Breath of the Wild*'s villain, are considerably larger than the heroes who oppose them.

To give one final example of borrowing between games: in *Smite*, one of Hercules' playable skins – alternate appearances that may be unlocked either by completing in-game challenges or by purchasing them with real-world or virtual money – is called 'Vanguard'. The latter is described by the player-made *Smite Wiki* as "based on a Knight in an RPG [role-playing game]".⁴⁸ The skin transforms Hercules into a medieval(-looking) knight, and highly resembles armour from games by the studio FromSoftware, known for the *Souls* series (2009–) and

⁴⁵ See Jesper Juul: *Handmade Pixels. Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*, Cambridge / London 2019, pp. 7–8.

⁴⁶ The "inevitability of technology even in scenarios of relative harmony between humankind and nature" (Dani Cavallaro: *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, Jefferson 2006, p. 7) has also been considered as an important aesthetic element in the work of Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki.

⁴⁷ See Lowe: *Always Already Ancient* (Fn. 41), for a discussion on ruins in antiquity games.

⁴⁸ Anon.: Hercules, *Smite Wiki*, smite.fandom.com/wiki/Hercules [18 July 2022].

Elden Ring (2022).⁴⁹ Here, the aesthetic appearance of the classical hero is shaped first and foremost by game genre conventions.

The above examples show that understanding self-referentiality within the medium, as well as independently developed gamic languages of representation, is a key factor in understanding antiquity game aesthetics.

'Aesthetics'?

Finally, we may ask ourselves if questions of 'aesthetics' still apply to heroes who are presented in so-called first-person video games, where the camera coincides with the eyes of the embodied avatar, or games that immerse players in virtual reality (VR). In *Theseus* (2021, Sisi Jiang), players adopt the role of the eponymous hero as he leaves the labyrinth after a five-year relationship with Asterion.⁵⁰ As players, we experience the game from a first-person perspective, meaning that we see what Theseus sees. When we move the camera downwards, however, we do not see a body: the player's avatar is invisible, or "implied".⁵¹ On an aesthetic level, we may reasonably ask ourselves what Theseus here 'means' in the context of the game: if there is no body to see, is there a body at all? What would another agent in the world see if they were to look at us? A fully anthropomorphic entity, or a floating head (i.e., the camera)? A solution may be to project our own identity on the character, but we are never explicitly asked to do so, leaving us in doubt about the aesthetic dimensions of such characters.

Journey of the Gods (2019, Turtle Rock Studios) is a VR fantasy game that does not present Greco-Roman mythology *per se*, but includes elements associated with it, such as the ability to throw lightning bolts as a divine power. In this case, players physically inhabit the game protagonist's body: our arms and legs are the hero's arms and legs. As Feitscher explains, corporeality is an important aspect within conceptualisations of the heroic. The archetypal hero is characterised by exceptional physical strength, which often receives special attention in representations of heroism across different media.⁵² Here, however, the character's corporeality is transferred onto the player – regardless of their own physical appearance – meaning that their own bodies become aesthetic elements. To dis-

⁴⁹ Specifically, a parallel may be drawn between with the Faraam set from *Dark Souls 2* (2014, FromSoftware). I am indebted here to William Farley for his extensive knowledge of FromSoftware games.

⁵⁰ See six6jiang.itch.io/theseus [21 February 2023] for further information about and images from the game.

⁵¹ Peter Bayliss: Beings in the Game-world. Characters, Avatars and Players, in: Proceedings of the 4th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment: IE2007, Melbourne 2007, pp. 1–6, here p. 2.

⁵² Georg Feitscher: Corporeality, in: *Compendium heroicum*, 2022. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/ke1.0.20220823.

cuss the aesthetics of ‘the’ hero therefore becomes exceptionally difficult, as the hero appears differently depending on who plays them.

While the VR example may seem like a technologically advanced case, which it surely is, games do not have to immerse us in virtual reality for us to challenge the idea of aesthetics. In the 1981 Atari 8-bit game *Minotaur*, developed by Steven Cavin, both Theseus and the Minotaur are represented as square dots in the corner of a 2D labyrinth that is viewed from a top-down perspective. The labyrinth itself is similar to those that may be found in traditional puzzle books. Players may find themselves anthropomorphising these abstract dots, mentally stylising them into the mythical characters, but are by no means specifically invited or required to do so. Ultimately, a simple square may be the perfect symbol for why we should recalibrate our thinking about heroic aesthetics in cases such as these.

Conclusion

When we study the reception of classical antiquity in popular culture, we need to be aware of the fact that a medium’s conventions do not exist in a cultural vacuum. They can migrate, inform, inspire, and eventually take on a new life in other contexts. This study started with relatively direct examples of how cinematic heroic aesthetics are transferred to the medium of video games, especially in the epic game tradition. With every step of analysis, however, the straightforwardness of this influence became increasingly challenged and complex, forcing us to also ponder other filmic traditions, specific video game innovations, or to question the aesthetical dimension of some types of game heroes altogether. This does not mean that we need to negate the influence of Hollywood film when it comes to games: regardless of the aesthetic style, most hero-based games still exhibit spectacular gameplay that is similar to the type of action found in popular cinema. At the same time, we need to be aware that other sources of inspiration exist.

Above all, this essay offered a framework and several categories in which we can (re)consider the relationship between games and film, both acknowledging and nuancing the well-studied affinities between them. Games have begun to challenge the traditionally assumed hierarchy with film. The aesthetic dynamics described above will certainly continue to evolve, and prove increasingly important for the growing academic efforts to study (classical reception in) video games. At some point, we may potentially even start seeing classically inspired films modelled after ludic paradigms, as has already been the case in other contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how these representational mechanisms operate today – to be able to comprehend how both media will continue to play with one another in the future.