PAEDAGOGUS

VIDEO GAMES AND CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

ABSTRACT: *A number of currently popular video games focus on the ancient world, and the experiences that the generation of students now entering high school and college have had playing such games is enormously important in shaping their view of ancient Greece and Rome. The purpose of this article is to suggest ways in which video games might be used as a tool for teaching about the ancient world. We look specifically at three games:* Rome: Total War, Glory of the Roman Empire, *and* CivCity: Rome, *and assess the pedagogical potential of each.*

Video games have become one of the basic forms of mass communication. This is evident from the sheer scale of the video-game industry. Video-game sales (hardware and software) in the United States alone totaled over $20 billion in 2009. At current rates of growth, video games will soon be a bigger business than movies.[1] Nonetheless, for classicists, these numbers are not in and of themselves important. What is important is that video games are the medium through which a large and growing percentage of students get their primary exposure to the ancient world. For these students video games have now assumed the role that movies used to play. In other words, the modern-day equivalent of *Cleopatra* or *Spartacus* is not the film *Gladiator*, but one of the many current video games based on classical antiquity.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon classicists to take video games seriously. For those of us who grew up at a time when Pong (the first widely distributed video game, released in 1975) was all the rage, the idea of taking video games seriously does not necessarily come naturally. Video games have, however, changed radically in the past thirty years, and classicists' attitudes must change accordingly. The purpose of this article is to offer a brief introduction to the current state of video games and to suggest ways in which they might be used as a tool for teaching about the ancient world.

Video games are typically broken down into four basic categories: action/role-playing, strategy, simulation, and casual. Role-playing games require the player to take on the identity of a specific character who must master a set of skills in order to advance through a series of challenges in a predetermined storyline. Action games are designed to test the player's reaction time and ability to think quickly. This usually involves solving problems, undertaking exploratory missions, and a great deal of violence. Although these are technically two different types of games, they are increasingly becoming hybridized. Strategy games require deliberate thought and planning in order to achieve a goal, which is usually either gaining control of territory through diplomacy, trade, and gathering resources, or defeating military foes in battle. Strategy games are of two types, depending on whether game play is turn-based or real-time. Turn-based (or segmented) strategy games take place in sequence between players who have defined periods to make decisions. Real-time (or simultaneous) strategy games compel players to react promptly to changes as the game evolves without any breaks. Simulation games attempt to mimic real-world situations as realistically as possible. These often include games where one can fly airplanes and operate other, similar devices. The final

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[1] The NPD Group, "2009 U.S. Video Game Industry and PC Game Software Retail Sales Reach $20.2 Billion" (Jan. 14, 2010). Accessed from http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_100114.html.

category is casual games, which are very easy to play, requiring little in
the way of cerebral or physical reflexes. They include puzzles, word games,
and card games.[2]

We have provided at the end of this article a list of widely played video
games with classical content. It is noteworthy that in the past five years
alone more than forty video games that draw heavily on the ancient world
have been released. Those forty games include titles such as *God of War* that
have sold well over a million copies in the United States alone.

While most if not all of the currently available video games based on
classical antiquity could be used for pedagogical purposes, we will, in the
interests of brevity, focus here on three games that have great potential as
teaching tools. The first is *Rome: Total War*, a strategy game with both turn-
based and real-time sections. In the turn-based part of the game, the player
attempts to become ruler of the Mediterranean world in the late Roman
Republic by efficiently allocating financial and military resources. In the
real-time part of the game, players fight historical battles from both ancient
Greek and Roman history, including Carrhae, Raphia, and Cynoscephalae. It
is in this mode that *Rome: Total War* finds much of its use to classicists.
Each battle begins with an introduction that lays out the historical context.
The game then reproduces with considerable accuracy the topography of
the battle site as well as the disposition of the opposing armies. Once the
battle has begun, the player has the opportunity to zoom in and out of the
battlefield and to see the action unfolding from above or to see what hand-
to-hand combat would have looked like in ancient times.

There are a number of potential pedagogical uses of *Rome: Total War*. The
game can be immensely valuable in helping students visualize battlefields
and see how different units would have moved and fought. It can also be
used as the basis of several different kinds of compare-and-contrast exer-
cises. An obvious example is to have students read the ancient sources for a
battle such as Granicus, fight that battle in *Rome: Total War,* and then write
a critique of the historical accuracy of the *Rome: Total War* version. One
might also use the variable possible outcomes of fighting battles in *Rome:
Total War* to prompt students to consider the extent to which our narrative
histories of the past are overdetermined. The past as we have it was just
one potential outcome of many and that outcome did not seem inevitable
to the people living through it. The experience a student has in losing the
Battle of Granicus to the Persians can be a salutary reminder of this aspect
of studying the ancient world.

Glory of the Roman Empire is a turn-based strategy game in which the
player's objective is to expand a village into a large city by careful manage-
ment of resources such as money and labor. This city-building game has some
realistic features, including historically accurate depictions of buildings. This
game, however, is of pedagogical interest primarily because it includes an
option to play in Latin. This means that the instructions supplied on-screen
and by a narrator are given in grammatically sound Latin. Players thus have

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[2] Attempts to find stable categories in which to place video games have raised
many of the same issues as genre has in literary studies. See, for example, T. Apper-
ley "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres,"
Simulation and Gaming 37 (2006) 6–23. Some of the best definitions and discussions
of different video game categories can be found in the relevant articles in Wikipedia.
Digital sources are frequently more valuable than print when it comes to video games
because the issues evolve with blinding speed. For further information, see appendix.

the unique opportunity to improve their Latin while playing a video game! Further, it serves as a reminder to students that Latin was a language spoken and used in everyday life in the ancient world. Among the numerous pedagogical possibilities offered by this game is asking students to gloss a series of screens from the game and create vocabulary sheets.

CivCity: Rome is another turn-based, city-building strategy game. Here again the player focuses on gathering resources and building a city. What makes *CivCity: Rome* of interest to classicists is that buildings are represented in great and largely accurate detail. Buildings can be viewed from various angles and heights, and the player can remove roofs and see interiors. This makes it much easier for students to visualize what many different types of ancient buildings looked like in their original form. The game also provides a "civilopedia" on different aspects of Roman daily life. For example, players can go to the dining room and learn about Roman feasting. For *CivCity: Rome* and for other video games one might also consider asking students not just what is there, but also what is *not* there. For example, one might ask students what would need to be included in a video game if the goal were to reproduce with some accuracy the realities of everyday life on a small farm in the ancient world.

One significant possibility for the future is regular and active involvement of classicists in the production of video games, something which would likely result in games with much enhanced pedagogical potential. Once a video game has been released, it is frequently possible for users to modify it by writing new computer code. These modifications ("mods") are typically written by teams of volunteers who are passionate about the original game and seek to improve it. An immediately relevant example can be found in *Rome Total Realism*. This game is a modification of *Rome: Total War* that was developed by a group of *Rome: Total War* players who were unsatisfied by that game's historical inaccuracies and unrealistic battle schematic. Among other changes, *Rome Total Realism* provides a more accurate picture of the ancient battlefield, stressing the importance of topography and the relative strengths and weakness of specific military forces. Opportunities exist for classicists to become involved in writing modifications for *Rome: Total War* and other classically themed video games and to thereby take an active role in shaping students' impressions of the ancient world in an entirely new way.[3]

Regardless of how one approaches the subject, there can be no doubt that video games are valuable not just because of their educational utility, but also because many students find them to be very engaging, much more engaging than a textbook or even a movie. Video games are, but should not remain, an invaluable and underutilized tool for stimulating students' curiosity about the ancient world.

Dartmouth College   PAUL CHRISTESEN
                                        paul.christesen@dartmouth.edu
University of Pennsylvania   DOMINIC MACHADO
Classical World 104.1 (2010)   dmc@sas.upenn.edu

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[3] For more information, go to http://www.rometotalrealism.org/index-2.html.

APPENDIX

Widely Played Video Games with Classical Content

I. Role Playing/Action Games

God of War, God of War II, and God of War III (year released 2005, 2007, 2010; Playstation 2/3; Sony Computer Entertainment America). In this game the player assumes the role of Kratos, a man who initially is a dedicatee of Ares. After Kratos scorns Ares, however, the war god forces him to solve different puzzles and fight a variety of opponents. After Kratos overcomes those obstacles, he meets Ares in a climactic battle and, if victorious, is crowned by Athena as the god of war. *God of War* is often referred to as a "hack and slash" game because the player slays hundreds of enemies with a sword. It is, as a result, close to being a pure action game, although there are some design elements typically found in role-playing games.

Titan Quest (year released 2006–2007; Windows; THQ). In this game the player begins by assuming the identity of one of a number of different characters. The character then enters a world in which communication between humankind and the gods has broken down. Beginning in the small village of Helos, the player travels the roads of Greece, fighting an assortment of monsters (including centaurs, satyrs, and gorgons) that are ravaging Greek towns. Throughout the game, the player must fight with famous figures from mythology such as Nessus in order to learn why communication between the gods and humankind has been disrupted. While the game begins in Greece, players later travel through Egypt, Babylon, and China. After defeating all the monsters in the game, the player's character ascends Olympus and receives thanks from Zeus.

II. Strategy Games

Age of Mythology. Four versions have been released, *Age of Mythology* [=*AoM*], *AoM Collector's Edition*, *AoM The Titans*, *AoM Gold Edition* (year released 2002–2004, Windows, Ensemble Studios). This is a real-time strategy game, in which the player takes on the role of one of three civilizations (the Greeks, the Norse, or the Egyptians) and competes against eight other societies. The game begins in the Archaic Age. By gathering resources and constructing buildings, the civilization advances to the Classical, the Heroic, and finally to the Mythic Age. By progressing through these periods, each civilization's level of technology increases and new buildings and military units become available. The ultimate goal of the game is to conquer the other civilizations.

Rome: Total War. Four versions have been released. *Rome: Total War* [=RTW], *RTW Barbarian Invasion*, *RTW Gold Edition*, *RTW Alexander* as well as several versions of the *Rome Total Realism* mod (year released 2004–2010, Windows, Sega of America).

III. Simulation Games

CivCity: Rome (year released 2006, Windows, 2K Games).

Glory of the Roman Empire. Four sequels have been released, *Imperium Romanum*, *Imperium Romanum: Emperor Expansion*, *Grand Ages: Rome, Grand Ages: Rome—Reign of Augustus* (year released 2006–2009, Windows, CDV Software Entertainment AG).

For more information about these and other games, go to www.mobygames.com.