Characterization of Greek Mythological Characters in Video Games

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Abstract:

Video games are increasingly seen as an important and expressive medium for the "reception" – that is, the imagination and subsequent representation (Hardwick, 2003) – of the past. Games like Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018, Ubisoft Quebec), God of War (2018, Santa Monica Studio), or Smite (2014, Titan Forge Games) introduce players around the world to various aspects of antiquity, history, and mythology. This lecture will present the findings of a recently completed PhD project on games, characterization, and Greek mythology, and introduce a postdoctoral project that takes these conversations in new directions. After a theoretical introduction to characterization in video games, I explore how mythological games such as Smite, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Immortals Fenyx Rising (2020, Ubisoft Quebec), the God of War series, or Theseus (2021, Sisi Jiang) treat the characters from Greek mythology. This investigation leads to various modalities of Greek mythology reception in games that parallel the diversity of mythological storytelling in antiquity itself, and illustrate the heterogeneity of contemporary mythological games. Next, I discuss what is arguably the future of Greek mythology (and its characters) in the realm of gaming. As traditional models of game production are increasingly challenged in the 2020s, and game design tools ever more accessible to a wider audience (Keogh, 2023), it is increasingly often independent developers that take center stage in the game industry. These important developments also have large consequences for the reception of the past: indie games like Hades (2020, Supergiant), Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical (2023, Summerfall Studios), or the forthcoming Mythwrecked: Ambrosia Island (forthc., Polygon Treehouse) all feature representations of Greek mythological characters that exhibit a diversity regarding gender, sexuality, race, body type, (dis)ability, and more. Games thus have the potential to drastically reshape the

popular perception of the ancient world, as they move from predominantly stereotyped (Lowe, 2009), male (Ciaccia, 2022), and violent (Serrano Lozano, 2020) texts to more inclusive versions of these stories. In doing so, they take up their own place next to more established media like literary novels and poetry, where similar processes have operated for a longer time (Guest, 2022; Klooster, 2023). As such, this lecture not only examines how video games have already treated the narratives known from Greek mythology, but also casts its gaze forward, and investigates which versions of the past are seemingly on the horizon.

References:

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Kurzbiographie:

Nach seiner kürzlich abgeschlossenen Promotion zur Charakterisierung griechisch-römischer mythologischer Figuren in Videospielen wird Alexander Vandewalle ab dem 1. November 2024 als Postdoktorand an der Universität Gent tätig sein. Dort widmet er sich der Rezeption griechischer Mythologie in Indie-Spielen, insbesondere aus der Perspektive von (Gegen-)Hegemonie. Zuvor hat er zu Themen wie der Charakterdarstellung in Videospielen, Spielanalyse-Methoden, Spielerfahrungen in historischen Videospielen und verschiedenen Aspekten der Rezeption der Antike in Spielen – darunter Mythologie, Ästhetik, Intertextualität, Epigraphik, pädagogische Anwendungen und haptisches Feedback – veröffentlicht und Vorträge gehalten. Darüber hinaus hat er sich mit großen Medienfranchises wie Star Wars und dem Marvel Cinematic Universe beschäftigt. Er ist der Entwickler von Paizomen (www.paizomen.com), einer im Aufbau befindlichen Datenbank für Videospiele mit Bezug zur klassischen Antike, und moderiert ferner regelmäßig Archäo-Gaming-Livestreams auf Twitch in Zusammenarbeit mit der Save Ancient Studies Alliance.