Digital games in Classical classrooms:

VR kottabos, the Royal Game of Ur, and pedagogical horizons

Video games in multiple forms are part of a robust debate on critical digital pedagogy at all levels (Arbuckle 2021; Champion 2015; Bourgonjon et al 2010; Secci 2019). Commercial successes such as *Assassin’s Creed, Civilization, Total War Rome, Age of Empires* and *Apotheon* make abundant use of the narratives, names, and places of the ancient Mediterranean world; archaeogames offer players the opportunity to apply archaeological methods to digital reconstructions of excavated spaces, from Catalhuyuk to Rome, or to fantasy worlds constructed for those activities (Rollinger et al 2020; Graham 2014). The caveats regarding such games for classroom contexts are abundant: they include the intersection between gaming and violence, the misrepresentation of archaeological sites and historical periods, and the modeling of inappropriate archaeological ethics, from looting to destruction. Even within archaeogaming, the artificiality of the in-game environment can mask the unevenness, partiality, and complexity of ancient materials; the invisible hand of the designer may occlude the player’s awareness of these distortions, and the digital media itself may be complicit in an unintentional usurpation of indigenous pasts (Winter 2021). The pedagogical potentials, however, are significant. Such games can intensify student engagement with ancient literary and archaeological evidence and focus their critical lenses on the technology-antiquity interface. Effective assignments direct students to triangulate their in-game experience with the ancient texts they study and translate, archaeological reports and artifacts explored in person or through museum and excavation websites. These correlate with McGonigal’s arguments for the intensified focus, heightened optimism, and productivity which are part of the draw for the thousands of students who may, by the time of their high school graduations, have spent as many hours gaming as they have in the classroom (McGonigal 2011). There are also uniquely productive intersections between the experiences of game play and the more nuanced formulations regarding antiquity. Games engender narratives which are polyvocal, emergent and adaptive, in contrast to the literary canon from which ancient myths and narratives are primarily taught. The creation of a narrative, moreover, whether an explication of an ancient text, or the human story behind material remains, is fundamental to both philological and archaeological scholarship. Such conceptual frameworks move the relevance of digital play beyond the search for ‘easter eggs’ in electronic form – a properly modelled cuirass, or an aptly represented monument - and into a more nuanced discussion of the relationship between the literary, mythic and lived worlds of antiquity.

Two new games, produced as a part of a collaboration between the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship (ECDS) and Department of Classics at Emory University and Kennesaw State University’s Computer Game Design and Development program, open fresh pathways for digital play in the Classical classroom, as students engage in games played from Athens to Sumer. *Kottabos VR*, a digital realization of the popular drinking party game, and *The Royal Game of Ur*, a virtual recreation of the board game known from Sumer to Crete, Cyprus and Asia Minor, will be released on Steam in Spring 2024. The interpersonal scale of the game closes the gap between modern players and ancient lived experience, and reduces the distortions attendant on larger scale games. Players encounter multiple ancient texts appropriate to exclamations of triumph and defeat. Our experience to date highlights the critical value of post-play debriefing as used in serious games for military and business contexts. These suggest the extent to which the students find themselves asking questions not raised through traditional sources alone, and manifest a creation of community through game play which offers an especially welcome resource for students who had multiple semesters restricted solely to online learning.

Works Cited

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