Child's Play: Encountering the Ancient Greek World in Modern Video Games

This paper explores the reception of the ancient Greco-Roman world in the video game franchise *Assassin's Creed* (*AC*), focusing on how such games personalize the reception of the ancient world for each individual user. The move from static page or even scripted film to role-playing games has given new opportunities for contact between modern viewers and ancient materials. The appearance of the ancient Greek world in such a widely used, popular medium highlights the importance of critical classical reception in portraying and analyzing the messages this virtual environment conveys about the ancient world and our current knowledge of it. While there are many moments in the games which betray a Eurocentric stance, I argue that the visual narrative of the *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* Discovery Tours contribute to a multicultural, multi-ethnic view of the ancient world that marks a distinct break with traditional media representations of ancient locations and peoples.

In 2018 and 2019, the creators of *Assassin's Creed* released educational modules called "Discovery Tours" for their popular video games *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, set in Ptolemaic Egypt, and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, set in Greece during the Peloponnesian War. These Discovery Tours were meant to offer the complex, multi-layered virtual worlds of *AC: Origins and AC: Odyssey* as educational experiences without the time pressure, conflict, or violence of the original games. These educational modules are marketed as tools for instructors of students in elementary through high school and were developed with children in mind as the audience. By adding tours on different aspects of ancient life, using historical characters such as Aspasia as guides, and allowing users to explore the environs of the city and landscape through free movement, *AC: Origins* and *AC: Odyssey* Discovery Tours give a uniquely immersive

experience of daily life in the ancient world fit for young audiences, who, as digital natives, often spend more time playing video games than reading books.

In the Discovery Tour modules of *AC: Origins* and *AC: Odyssey*, the user is invited to explore the space and history of Ptolemaic Egypt and 5th century B.C.E. Greece, respectively, from the perspective of characters from those time periods. The physical representations of characters as bronze-skinned, the focus on the activities of everyday life, and the vibrantly colored monuments and statues in the urban environments challenge modern audiences' assumptions about the people, places, and aesthetics of the ancient world in large ways and small. Moreover, since one of the two default avatars is a woman named Kassandra, an armored Spartan who acts and speaks almost exactly like her male counterpart, the game visually promotes the idea of female agency in the viewer's consciousness, making *AC* more accessible and welcoming to girls and young women.

In this presentation, I explore the potential interplays between the game platforms, with their static information, and the game players, who are given almost complete agency to interact (or not) with different aspects of the virtual world to create a personalized experience of ancient Greece and Egypt. Role-player games like *AC: Origins* and *AC: Odyssey* push the limits of classical reception, as it has been traditionally conceived, and decentralize knowledge of the ancient world in a way that is both challenging and provocative to other forms of reception because such games are targeted directly to children and young people as educational technology and allow them to have almost complete control over the experience. A user, for example, can choose not to learn anything about the Acropolis or Athens and center their wanderings and exposure to the ancient world to Olympia or the silver mines. Each time students and children

play with the *AC* Discovery Tours, they re-create the ancient Greek world for themselves, curating an encounter that is uniquely their own.