

Games and Ancient War: Serious Gaming as Outreach and Scholarship

This paper considers the utility of approaching the study of Classical warfare through the lens of games. I explore the way that games allow even beginning practitioners of Classics to conduct valuable experiments related to historical contingency and counterfactual eventualities. In addition, I discuss the utility that a gaming approach has to encourage beginners to take seriously their potential to contribute to scholarly discourse on ancient war. Finally, I consider the potential of war gaming as a conduit for engaging new audiences in the study of Classics and Classical reception.

War games have been used as predictive tools by military leaders since at least the early 19th century (Harrison and Kirschenbaum 2016). Less well-trodden is the idea of using games as reconstructive tools in academic military history, although the ancient historian Philip Sabin has done excellent work on this topic (Sabin 2007; 2012). From this point of view, the promise of war gaming lies in its potential to transform the study of ancient military action from one in which the scholar passively reads about martial history into an experience, in which the scholar must enter the battlefield, make decisions, and engage actively with historical scenarios (Christesen and Machado 2010).

Despite our natural scholarly reservations about introducing frivolity into our pedagogy, and the general association of games with frivolity, there are clear advantages to using games to explore ancient war. First, it allows the historian to treat the ancient battlefield as a laboratory, in which different inputs can lead to counterfactual outcomes, allowing the historian to systematically consider the causality of different elements in precipitating a battle or war's outcome. Second, it allows a new kind of source criticism, because realistic simulations may reveal the impossibility of accounts presented by ancient historians. Finally, it encourages

outsiders to engage with the ancient past in serious ways that traditional approaches to the Classics do not allow. While many beginning Classicists will struggle to internalize methods and theories of ancient history in a short period of time, a game-based approach allows them to wear the hat of an ancient historian with a low barrier to entry and with the potential to generate transformative revelations about military history. For these reasons, it is clear that games in general, and wargames in particular, have the potential to transform the relationship of the academic establishment to beginners like students and the public from a one-way transmission of knowledge to a dialogue in which expertise transfers freely in two directions.

Bibliography

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