

*Anathema! An Experiment in Game-Based Learning Combining Assassin's Creed:
Odyssey and Primary Texts in the 9th-grade Classroom*

This paper documents my efforts to integrate the popular and historically grounded 2018 video game *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey (AC:O)* into my 9th-grade Latin curriculum. My goal was to leverage the breathtaking visual design of the game into an interactive lesson on ancient primary texts, material culture, and politics. This presentation is meant (1) to introduce people to the game's several strengths (and some flaws) as a potential teaching tool; (2) to demonstrate the introductory lesson I designed to familiarize students with the archaeology of ancient Olympia utilizing Pausanias' *Description of Greece*; and (3) to outline the board game I created to encourage students to adopt an embodied, interactive, and engaged approach to ancient history.

AC:O was created by Ubisoft Québec in consultation with Stéphanie-Anne Ruatta, an ancient historian who worked full time with the production team from 2016 until after its initial release in fall 2018. The game is set during the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and allows players to learn, to some extent, about the war itself, and to interact with famous characters of the period. The game overlays its Ancient Greek setting with more typical elements of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise: a hero born of a particular lineage (traced back to Leonidas, no less!) researches powerful ancient artifacts in an effort to keep them out of the hands of an evil secret society. As a potential tool for allowing students to investigate the history of the Peloponnesian War, I admit the game leaves me disappointed. Where it truly shines, however, is in its stunning recreations, in full color, of the living, vibrant ancient sites of Delphi, Olympia, and the Athenian acropolis, among others.

AC:O is an open-world game, meaning it allows players to travel freely on foot from Amphipolis in the north to Sparta in the south; by ship, players can sail to Lesbos, Kythera, Chios, Crete and at least a dozen other islands. Along the way, players can stop at faithfully reconstructed cities, temples, sanctuaries, and monuments. Because the heroes of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise are all gymnastically adept, the player can climb on the heads of statues for a stunning view of an entire bustling *polis*, or scramble up the Ionic columns of temples to look in detail at brightly colored pediments and coffered ceilings. Unfortunately, not every detail in the game is meticulously accurate or site-specific— but my feeling is that the game gets enough right to offset some of its more generic design features. Most importantly, I think, it allows players to gain an embodied understanding of the history they are studying.

The lessons I designed to introduce students to the archaeology and politics of Olympia begin with a game play session. One student acts as “player” while the other students receive a blank map of Olympia and are asked to read out loud selections from Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* Books 5 and 6, and to identify the buildings on their map as the player discovers them. The player and spectators use Pausanias as a tour guide to investigate the buildings and monuments within the virtual *altis*, to recognize their possible significance, and to consider the intended impact the sights made on ancient visitors. Because Pausanias’ description of Olympia is massive and filled with historical and mythological details that are largely confounding to 9th graders, these readings are edited and focused to highlight the experience of an athlete-pilgrim as he would have travelled from Elis to Olympia to the stadium. Crucially, I leave in anything Pausanias mentions about the political context of the various dedications, such as when he mentions that the Temple of Zeus was built with the spoils of the Elean victory over Pisa (5.10).

The second phase of this project takes the form of a board game I invented, called *Anathema!* The game builds upon students' new understanding of the "spatial politics" of the sanctuary, to borrow a phrase from Michael Scott's 2010 book on Delphi and Olympia. This highly competitive turn-based strategy game puts students in the role of ancient *poleis* seeking to send an athlete to win at Olympia in 456 BCE. Their athletes' chances of victory are determined by how they spend a limited budget and resources to erect monuments.

My overall goal is to use the two games, *AC:O* and *Anathema*, to engage students with immersive experiences involving active problem solving and interdisciplinary investigation of the ancient world.

Bibliography

Scott, Michael (2010) *Delphi and Olympia: The Spatial Politics of Panhellenism in the Archaic and Classical Periods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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